

How the Gospel Transforms Suffering

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[0 : 00] I don't know about you, but these past two years have been pretty tough overall for us. I think in part, whatever we may have going on in our own lives, it feels like I feel these days like I am simply bracing myself for the next announcement of some massive global event that we're going to be learning about in history class for the next five generations.

It just feels like every so often, it's just like another thing and another thing and another thing. It's been a tough couple of years, and I know personally, not only for us, but for many of you, you have lots of things going on in your own lives that sort of add to that kind of personal suffering.

And that's part of the reason why we've been in this series looking at 2 Corinthians, which is all about how the gospel transforms power and weakness and how the gospel addresses suffering, transforms the way we think about suffering.

In this passage that we're going to look at this morning, look at what Paul says in chapter 4 verse 16 about his own suffering. He says this, Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

I read that several times and I thought, how in the world is something like that possible?

[1 : 32] How is it possible to, on the one hand, be wasting away? I feel like over the last couple of years I've aged at least 10 years. How can you be wasting away, decaying, breaking down, entropy, and at the same time being renewed?

New life, new vigor. How is that possible in anybody's life? And I think this is something that probably every single person in this room would love to be able to say is true about their own life. You know, I'm wasting away by all appearances, everything's breaking down, but I'm actually experiencing new life. I feel more alive than ever. I would love to be able to say that. How is such a thing possible?

And that's what we're going to focus on this morning. The answer is quite simply this, that the gospel has actually transformed the role of suffering in Paul's life. It hasn't taken it away.

It has transformed Paul's relationship with suffering and weakness. And specifically, what we're going to see is that the gospel has given Paul three things. It's given Paul a new paradigm for suffering, an entirely new paradigm.

[2 : 39] It's given Paul a new pattern for suffering. And then finally, it's given Paul a new promise for suffering. All of this he finds in the gospel. So let's pray, and then we're going to look at 2 Corinthians chapter 4 together.

Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that, oh Lord, if these were merely words, or if we were merely here to hear human wisdom, then woe be unto us.

Lord, but our great hope is that you're a living God, and that you're here, and that you speak, and that your Holy Spirit is already at work in us. Lord, your Spirit is here. And we pray we all need your word to be not simply a written word, but a living word, a word become flesh.

Lord, we need the word become flesh this morning. And we pray that in your Son's holy name.

Amen. So first of all, a new paradigm for suffering.

The default paradigm for most people when it comes to suffering and how to make sense of suffering and weakness is to assume that suffering is a kind of indication of failure in life.

[3 : 53] Something has gone wrong. You have messed up somehow. Even irreligious people tend to think when things are really bad, what have I done to deserve this?

Is God angry with me? Has God abandoned me? And so what we typically think is that life is about climbing a ladder towards success. If you do the right thing, if you work hard, if you live a good life, good things will happen to you, and God will bless you, and you will be prosperous and successful.

And this was the paradigm of the first century leaders in the church in Corinth that came in after Paul left. And this is why they are so critical of the Apostle Paul.

They're essentially saying this about Paul. They're saying, don't listen to anything that guy says, because it is very obvious that God is not with him.

People would say, how do you know God is not with him? And they would say, well, look how much he suffers. Look how much he suffers. Look at how weak he is. How could God possibly be with and love and bless somebody like that?

[5 : 05] Here's Paul's own description in chapter 11. He says, five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned.

Three times I was shipwrecked. A night and a day I was adrift at sea. It just goes on and on and on. We're going to preach on it, so I'll just leave off there. So you can imagine these leaders, you know, first they point to Paul and they say, no wife, no kids.

He spent time in prison. All kinds of horrible things have happened to him. And then over here you got Ted. Look at Ted. Right?

Ted is 6'3". Ted's got a full head of lustrous hair. Ted lives in a nice house with a harbor view. Ted has a lovely wife. Ted has eight adorable children.

They all play musical instruments and speak multiple languages. Right? Ted's never been beaten with rods. Ted's never been shipwrecked.

[6 : 11] Ted owns a 50-foot pleasure yacht. Ted's never been shipwrecked. Ted's never been shipwrecked. And since Ted started preaching, attendance at the church has doubled. And you can imagine these people saying, which one of these guys do you think is blessed by God?

Which one of these guys do you think God is with? Right? And people say, oh yeah, well it's pretty obvious. Right? So this is their paradigm. If you suffer, it means you are a failure.

It means God is angry at you or that He has abandoned you. Successful people are the opposite. Successful people have obviously done something right.

That's why God is blessing them. And this is essentially what we call the karma paradigm of suffering. The karma paradigm. Now most religions and worldviews assume a kind of karmic structure to the world.

Right? They say that ultimately good things are going to happen to good people. Bad things are going to happen to bad people. Even the kind of new age movement that talks about manifesting. Right?

[7 : 14] It's very popular these days to hear about if you want a good life, manifest it. Send out those vibes into the universe and the universe will return unto you those good vibes which have become reality.

Right? This is just another version of the same old story of karma. Right? Whatever you put out into the world will eventually come back to you. And so what they're assuming based on this paradigm is they're assuming that when they make all these accusations toward Paul, what Paul's going to do is he's going to respond the way probably I would respond.

Probably many of us in this room would respond. Paul is going to respond by doing a number of things. He's going to minimize his failures. He's going to justify himself. He's going to explain why actually all of this and that and the other wasn't his fault.

That it was stuff outside of his control. And then he's going to try to draw their attention to all of the successes in his life. Well, look, I actually did this and that and the other. And look, I'm not that bad of a guy. I haven't failed that much.

In fact, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Right? That's what we would do. Defend, justify, minimize all of the things. But that's not what Paul does. Essentially, Paul says this, your whole paradigm, your whole paradigm is wrong.

[8 : 25] Your whole paradigm is wrong. And then he probably would have said, you know, I used to have the same paradigm because he did. Paul used to operate with the very same set of assumptions that these guys are operating with.

He used to be, you know, back when he was a Pharisee, he used to be very successful, very ambitious. He had all of the trappings, the kind of outward symbols of success. Back in the day, in Paul's young life, people would have looked at him and said, you know, that guy, God is with him. God is blessing him. Right? He would have been more like a Ted in many people's eyes. And then one day, this successful, ambitious, just kind of impressive young man is on his way.

He's on the road to Damascus. And he encounters the risen Jesus Christ on the road. And everything changes. Because on the one hand, Jesus is the full embodiment of God's glory. That's what this passage means in verse 4 when it says that he's the image of God. He's the image of God. He's all of God's character in the flesh.

[9 : 31] Jesus is so blindingly glorious that Paul falls to his face and is struck temporarily blind because of the glory. But on the other hand, Jesus, Paul knows, has suffered more than anybody.

Jesus has been humiliated. He's been mocked. He's been tortured. He was executed like a common criminal. And this completely turns everything upside down for Paul's paradigm of suffering and success, of blessing and curses.

Because the default paradigm that said if you suffer, it means you're a failure and God has abandoned you, can't be right. That can't be true. Because Jesus is God in the flesh and yet Jesus endured suffering and death.

God in the flesh who fails and is weak and suffers. How can those things coexist? And so a new paradigm begins to emerge for Paul.

This new paradigm says suffering is not evidence that God is far away from us. In fact, suffering is a place where we can actually draw very, very close to God.

[10 : 46] In fact, suffering may be the times in our lives when we are able to experience the most intimacy with God. More than any other time in life. Why?

Because our God is a suffering God. He knows what it's like to suffer. So a new paradigm begins to emerge. This is why, by the way, Paul is able to say, starting in verse 8, we are afflicted in every way but not crushed.

Perplexed but not driven to despair. Persecuted but not forsaken. Struck down but not destroyed. If your paradigm of suffering, if you look at something horrible going on in your life or the lives of others, and your paradigm says, well, this must be evidence that either God is angry at me or punishing me or has abandoned me or there is no God.

If that's your paradigm, some version of that, then when you are afflicted, it's going to crush you. When you're perplexed, it's going to drive you to utter despair.

When you're persecuted, you're going to believe that you've been forsaken. When you're struck down, when daily life strikes you down, it might destroy you. Because not only do you have the suffering that you're dealing with, but you have this cosmic paradigm of meaning that says, not only are you struggling this day in this particular situation, but also it means God has abandoned you.

[12 : 07] That's going to crush you. But Paul is able to endure all of these things because he recognizes them as opportunities to draw close to Jesus.

So however bad it might get, he has Christ with him. And then Paul begins to see a new pattern emerge in his life as he tries to make sense of his suffering.

Here's the new pattern. The gospel says this. The gospel says that the reason that there is suffering in the world, the reason that we are all, as he says, wasting away is ultimately because of evil. It's because of human sin. It's because of our rebellion. And he says the God of this world, which is his reference to Satan, has blinded us to the glory of God. So we've sinned, we've turned against God.

That has given power to the God of this world who has now spiritually blinded us. We cannot see what is true, what is real, what is glorious. We're blinded to it. And here's the thing.

[13 : 11] Often the God of this world uses the trappings of success. Right? Right? Things like wealth or money or status or all of the things. Uses those things to blind us to the truth of the gospel.

But then the gospel says that the true God sent his son, Jesus Christ, into the world in order to suffer and die, not just for the sake of suffering, but in order to atone for sin and set free those of us who are enslaved to sin.

Right? To open our eyes, to make it possible for us to see the glory of God. Right? And then after three days after he dies, Jesus then rises again to life in all of his glory.

So Jesus comes to set the world free through his death and resurrection. That's what the gospel says. And then Jesus says, everyone who comes to me in faith and repentance needs to be baptized.

Paul himself was actually baptized after his conversion. And what baptism does is to actually spiritually join us to Jesus. Paul often describes baptism as a death and resurrection.

[14 : 21] We're baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection. So when we are baptized, it is though we die with Jesus and are raised to new life in him. So this is essentially what the gospel says.

Now here's the thing. Here's what Paul realized. Since we are spiritually joined to Jesus, even though death and resurrection were one-time events in Jesus' life, because of that spiritual union, the death and resurrection of Jesus are relived again and again and again in our lives.

Right? So even though there were one-time things in Jesus' life, the death and resurrection of Jesus become a pattern that are relived again and again and again in the lives of Christians.

It becomes a pattern that we cycle through again and again and again. This is what Paul means when he says in verse 10, we are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. In other words, the normal Christian life repeatedly reenacts the death and the resurrection of Jesus, again and again and again.

[15 : 49] There's a guy who's written a great book on this named Paul Miller. Actually, Jeff Simpson gave me this book, and he said, you know, this is one of the best books I've ever read on sanctification. I finally got around to reading it, and I have to agree, it's phenomenal, and it's all built around this idea.

What Paul Miller calls this cycle of death and resurrection in the Christian life is the J-curve. It's the J-curve. And he says essentially this, this, you know, Jesus dies and rises from death.

That was Jesus' J-curve. And then when we're baptized, we die with Jesus and rise to new life in Him. Most people think it stops there. But he says, no, actually what Paul is saying is, for the rest of our lives, we continue in this pattern of death and resurrection.

That's how we experience union with Christ, and it's how we become more like Christ. And this can play out in many different ways, but according to Paul Miller, it always includes three things.

Number one, we enter into some kind of suffering.

Some kind of suffering where evil, the flesh, sin is weakened in us or killed in us. And then number two, by grace, sinful parts of us are put to death.

[17 : 02] And then number three, we emerge from that experience with new life, with deeper faith, with a little more maturity, a little more conformed into the image of Christ.

And by the way, this can happen with different kinds of suffering, because not all suffering is the same. I can just illustrate with a few examples of the ways I've experienced this in my own life. First example, sometimes we suffer because we are trying to address evil somewhere in the world.

Right? That's a kind of suffering. Years ago, I was in graduate school, and I was working at a residential treatment facility for victims of abuse, and I became completely burned out.

And I had a massive crisis of faith. And it was largely because I was spending so much time in the face of just such tremendous, overwhelming evil.

And it just sort of began to break everything apart in me. And I felt a huge disconnect. And eventually, I came through it, but what I realized after the fact is that that was a kind of a mini death and resurrection that I went through.

[18 : 10] It was a death and resurrection. And what I can tell you now is that that experience put to death some of my spiritual pride. And it put to death a more simplistic faith.

And I think it greatly expanded my understanding of God's sovereignty and God's love and mercy. And it actually gave me a little more compassion for other people who struggle with doubt in their own faith.

Because I'd been there. So it was a kind of a death and a resurrection. Now, sometimes we suffer, not because we're trying to address evil out in the world, but because evil is done to us.

Years ago, I was talking to a colleague. I was sharing some ideas with that colleague. And then that colleague went and wrote an article that was widely circulated and didn't credit me.

And I was furious that I didn't get the credit that I believed I deserved. And I resented it. And I wanted the credit. And I was going into that death and resurrection cycle once more.

[19 : 15] Right? And then over time and prayer, I began to kind of wonder, why am I really doing any of this? Am I doing this for God's glory or am I just doing this for a little glory myself?

Am I doing it for God's kingdom or am I doing it to get some recognition? And I spent a lot of time looking at Paul's words in Colossians 3 that we should do all of our work as though we are working for Jesus alone, not to get recognition from the people around us.

And it kind of set me free from that resentment. Again, a death and resurrection. And I give you one final example. Sometimes we suffer not because we're trying to address evil in the world or even evil is done to us. Sometimes, if you're anything like me, most of the time we suffer because of evil in us.

That's the real cause of most of the suffering in my life. I'll give you one example from early in our marriage. I had a problem with sarcasm. Grew up in a very sarcastic family.

I mean, I still have a problem with sarcasm, but by God's grace, I think it is decreasing. But it was really bad in the early years of our marriage. And so what I would do is when I would get angry or upset, instead of just directly stating my feelings or my needs, which happens in healthy marriages, I would use sarcasm.

[20 : 30] And my wife did not grow up in a sarcastic family. She's not used to sarcasm used in an angry way. And so when I would have angry sarcasm as my unhealthy way of expressing negative emotions, it would really hurt her.

And then I would be in this situation where I would actually feel better because I had kind of released some of that anger. And then she would be deeply hurt because the sarcasm cut like razor blades.

And then I would begin to realize this is going into the death and resurrection cycle again. I began to realize, oh, so here I am using sarcasm and expressing myself in ways that make me feel better, but I'm actually hurting the person that I love so that I can feel better.

And I realized that's a profoundly unloving thing to do. It's in fact the opposite, I think. It's the polar opposite of love. And so I had to begin to repent of those things. And I had to ask Laura to forgive me for those patterns that I was reliving in our marriage.

And then I had to ask the Lord to forgive me for hurting the person that I love. And over time, those death and resurrection experiences have begun to alter and shift the patterns of how we handle conflicts.

[21 : 42] And now we can handle them in more direct, healthy ways. Right? So the implication is this. Different kinds of suffering, different kinds of J-curves, to use Paul Miller's language, nevertheless, this cycle is playing out again and again and again.

And practically speaking, this can become a kind of pattern for life. It's like a road map that gives meaning to much of the suffering that we experience from day to day.

So you can look at past suffering in your life. Maybe some of you are doing that right now. Or you can look at present suffering in your life. Stuff that's happening right now.

And it could be something major like a crisis of faith that I shared about. Or it could be something as minor as being stuck in traffic 15 minutes late to where you're going and furious at the person in front of you.

It could be anything. But what we do is we look at the suffering and then we think about the death and resurrection of Jesus, carrying around the death and resurrection of Jesus in our bodies as Paul says, and we begin to ask ourselves diagnostic questions.

[22 : 48] What inside me is being spotlighted by this particular suffering? Is it my need to be in control? Is it my need for recognition? Is it my need to be right?

Is it my need to be comfortable? What is blocking me from greater trust or greater faith in the Lord? What is the thing that is keeping me from getting there?

What needs to be put to death in me right now? What do I need to let go of? What do I need to turn away from? What truth do I need to embrace about God?

In the midst of this suffering, right? These are the questions that we can begin to ask ourselves in the midst of the struggle. So just to summarize where we are so far, the gospel has given us so far two things.

It's given us a new paradigm for suffering. Suffering doesn't mean that God is angry at you or that God has abandoned you. In fact, suffering, within suffering, there is an invitation to draw close to the God who suffers with us and for us.

[23 : 54] And then number two, the gospel has given us a new pattern for suffering. Suffering is part of the cycle of death and resurrection that plays out again and again and again in the lives of Christians to conform us more and more into the image of God's Son.

Now there's one more piece to this that we can't overlook. the promise. If we stop here, if we stop here and I say, Amen, go follow Jesus, here's the problem.

We might make the mistake of thinking that this is some form of stoicism or masochism that says suffering is good. We should embrace suffering. It's going to make you stronger. But that's not what we're saying. Scripture is very clear that suffering is not good. Suffering is evil. Suffering is part of a fallen world. So what we're saying is that God has the power to redeem and repurpose evil things toward His good ends, which is a very different thing to say. And even as we recognize this, we also need to hold on to God's promise that one day all suffering is going to come to an end and all tears will be wiped away.

[25 : 15] The thing that sustains Paul through all of his suffering is not simply the knowledge that it's making him a better person. That's a good thing to know. And in all ways he's seeking to be conformed more and more into the image of Christ.

But the thing that sustains Paul is the concrete hope of what he says in verse 14. He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into His presence.

That changes everything. What this means for Paul and for us is that all of the struggle and wasting away we experience is not meaningless. All the pain and stress and frustration are not happening in vain.

We're not all vanishing into a black hole of pointless suffering. Instead all of this affliction as Paul says is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

One day all of the suffering in this world is going to fade away and it will be like waking up from a dream. Have you ever had a really bad nightmare and in the midst of the nightmare it feels so real?

[26 : 38] and in the midst of that dream you cannot imagine any other reality. You are convinced that the nightmare is true and then you wake up and even within minutes of waking up even the memory of that nightmare is starting to fade and you have that moment of thinking I can't believe I thought that was real.

I can't believe I thought that was true. I can't even hardly remember it now because you are surrounded by the weightier reality of your bedroom and compared to the dream your sheets and your pillow and your room feel so substantial and that dream that fading memory feels so ephemeral like smoke clearing in a light breeze.

That's what Paul is saying here even the worst suffering right now it feels so real this is all there is it's all we know there can't be anything more real than this but he's saying one day we're going to enter into a world the new heavens and the new earth and it's going to be so much more real that this is going to seem like smoke it's going to seem like vapor it's going to seem like a dream that even as we blink our eyes in the light of God's glory fades from memory and we'll say what was I so upset about what was the thing that I was running from what was that and it's going to fade away and somehow what we encounter at that moment will in some way that goes way above my job description to explain it will somehow make sense of it and we'll say oh that's what all this was for that's the eternal weight of glory right so this is how the gospel begins to transform suffering it gives us a new paradigm it says listen the suffering in your life is an invitation don't give into that lie from the false

God of this world that God has abandoned you God is drawing near draw close to him it gives you a new pattern to see suffering as a part of this cycle of death and resurrection opening our eyes liberating our hearts reorienting our affections as we prayed earlier in the collect and then finally a new promise to see suffering is finite finite there's a cap there's a limit to embrace the hope that one day there's going to be no more suffering and all things will be made new so if we want to be like Paul if we want to begin to experience inner renewal in the midst of suffering we need to see our suffering through the lens of the gospel this is where the gospel ceases to be something that we simply intellectually assent to and then move on with our lives and it begins to be something that we work into our daily lives the lens through which we see everything mapped on to the death and resurrection of Jesus in us let's pray

Lord we thank you for your word and these are weighty spiritual topics that need more than simply discussion and slides we need your Holy Spirit in us applying these things making them real in us Lord I pray as we confess our faith and as we pray to you as we sing as we come around your table that you would make us help us experience the gospel in stereo that we would not only hear it but that we would taste it Lord that we would take it into us that we would receive the death and resurrection of Jesus through this meal into our hearts and lives Lord and I pray that this would make us a community that glorifies you Lord that you would transform our relationship with suffering that we would be people who point to you and bring glory to your name we pray this in your son's

holy name amen