

Sermon for Sunday, April 30, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"TURNING PAIN INTO PROFIT"  
II Corinthians 12:1-10

Text: "...but he said to me 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." II Corinthians 12:9

One of the fundamental questions that each of us must face is the problem of pain. When sickness, tragedy, hurt, suffering and death strike at us or the ones we love the most, how shall we understand it? How can we understand a loved one snatched away in the full bloom of life? How shall we comprehend a little child, filled with the innocence of tender years, smashed lifelessly to the pavement by a drunken driver? How can we make any sense out of disease that seems so uselessly to catch up some person in the throes of pain that cripples or destroys life?

Shall we pray about these things? Shall we take these awful tragedies to God and ask him to mend them? Shall we cry out to catch the attention of a remote God to the terrible fact that human lives are broken, human hearts are weeping, human aspirations are trampled in the dust? And if we, in our distress cry out to God, what shall we do if he does not answer? If the heavens remain undisturbed and there is no response from God, what then? Will not our last illusion, our fondest hope, our ultimate recourse be smashed and destroyed? If God does not answer us when we cry out in the darkness of hurt and pain, shall not God then be dead and we--lonely and desperate men--be forced to walk alone?

St. Paul knew what pain was. He knew the searing, burning agony that raced along the nerves to wrack the human body. He knew what it was to toss sleeplessly at night with the hurt so deep that he longed for the dawn. St. Paul tells us he had a thorn in the flesh. The English translation does not really capture the picture of pain that Paul tries to convey to us. Literally the Greek means "I was given a stake in my body." Like the hands of Jesus, given up to the hammered spikes, it was as though a great nail had been driven into quivering human flesh.

The Bible says, "Three times I besought the Lord about this...." I think it means more than the fact that St. Paul mentioned this to God on several occasions when he happened to be praying. Rather it seems to mean that in three great, critical moments indelibly imprinted upon his life, when the pain seemed more than he could bear, he made great pleading, special prayers to God about his suffering. Surely, those three times must have stood out starkly in his mind as moments when he pled with God, when he besought him with tears, when he begged for mercy, when cried out for compassion. Yet, in spite of all this, he was not healed.

Had you been St. Paul, what would you have done? He tells us in another place that because he preached the gospel he was stoned, whipped, scourged, persecuted, imprisoned, reviled, shipwrecked. Was not this enough to suffer? Was not this enough to bear? Must he also have this stake, this spike in the flesh to torment and afflict him? Had I been St. Paul, I think I would have been like Job's wife. I would want to shake my fist at heaven, curse God and die.

But what did St. Paul do? When he besought God for healing and health and it did not come, did he rebel against an unjust providence. No. He said, "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Isn't that incredible? When you have a desperate need, when you cry out for assistance, and when your pleas go unanswered, do you feel like gladly boasting? Do you feel like rejoicing then? You know you do not! How astonishing it is, then, to meet these words, "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses...."

How shall we explain this marvelous faith? How shall we comprehend this astounding trust? It would be worth a great deal in our own times of pain and hurt if we knew, would it not?

Let me suggest that first of all Paul knew God personally. Paul had a personal relationship with Jesus. For many years Paul had searched for God. His search had led him from his home in Tarsus of Asia Minor to Jerusalem where he began his studies to become a rabbi in the hope of finding God. His search there was fruitless and there was a hunger in his heart. One day with warrants in his pockets to arrest the Christian, he set out in frustrated anger to Damascus to persecute those Christians and as he journeyed toward Damascus, suddenly there on the road his search ended. The Bible says, "Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him." In that dramatic experience he came face to face with the living God. "Lord," he said, "who are you?" Back came the reply, "I am Jesus...." In the years to follow he was to come to know Jesus as his personal friend and God as his loving father. Again and again they were to come to him in his moments of crisis, in his moments of decision. See how it works. One day he stood on the sea coast looking across the Aegean Sea to the mainland of Europe and he wondered what to do. And there as he stood, the Bible says, "And a vision appeared to Paul in the night, a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" The bringing of the gospel to the shores of Europe has proven to be one of the most decisive and formative events in the history of the world. Again, when Paul came to Corinth, he was rejected by the people and it seemed his message was doomed to fail. Yet, in his moment of despair, disappointment and discouragement, God came to him again and said, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you...." Then, late in his ministry when he was being carried prisoner to Rome, that tiny ship of ancient days was caught helplessly in the mighty grasp of a great storm. Fear and terror gripped the hearts of all aboard, but to Paul came a loving Father who said to him, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you."

Yes, Paul knew God; knew him as a loving Father, a dependable friend. I want to say to you this morning that such an experience is a divine possibility for you and me. God can be as real to you and me as he was to St. Paul. This may come in a sudden experience as it did to Paul on the Damascus road. When St. Peter, led by the Holy Spirit, went to Caesarea to preach to the Roman Cornelius, we are told that as he preached, "The Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word." Yes, a sudden conversion. Again, our experience of God may come quickly as it did to the Philippian jailer who, under sudden and deep conviction, cried out, "Men, what must I do to be saved." On the other hand, this experience may come slowly and gradually. Remember Nicodemus came to Jesus by night and he said, "Rabbi, I know you are a teacher sent by God" and Jesus said to him, "Nicodemus, you have to be born again." We don't know what happened to Nicodemus for all that time until at the end and he comes to the cross to take down the broken body of Jesus to help bury him. We know then that somehow in the interval that Nicodemus has become a believer.

The full implications of our faith may come slowly as they did to young John Mark. You will remember that under the leading of the Holy Spirit, Barnabas and Paul had set out on the first missionary journey. They came to the coast of Asia Minor and if you know the terrain over there, the place where they were landing was a marshy area and malaria was rampant and John Mark got cold feet. He turned and went back home. It took Paul a long time to forgive him and yet, in years to come he is Paul's closest companion, unafraid for Jesus' sake to face imprisonment and death. In between something had happened to his heart.

I believe that you and I can know God, too. I think God can be as real and vital to us as he was to Paul. It may be a sudden coming or a gradual realization, but God loves us this morning and he wants to come into our lives.

So, the first thing I want to suggest is that Paul knew God personally as a friend and loving companion. If we are to handle trouble we must have the same relationship. Secondly, I would like to suggest that because Paul knew God this way, he knew that pain did not come from God. He saw in his suffering an evil thing. It was not constructive, it was destructive. It was not good, it was bad; it was not wholesome, it was unwholesome. Out of the knowledge that such things were not of the loving God he knew, St. Paul called his suffering a messenger of Satan. I think you and I need to remember this. When disaster comes, when pain descends in sickening waves, when suffering is an awful agony, to ascribe it to God is to commit a terrible sin. It is to blame God for what is basically evil and bad. It is to ascribe to God that which is against human welfare and human happiness. It is to make God out as a heartless tyrant to whom the title of "loving Father" is a hallow mockery. It is to make God less compassionate, less loving, less kind than is man himself. Pain, suffering and all that goes with it is not God's design for human life.

So, because Paul knew God personally as a loving Father, he knew that pain was not of God. But I would like to suggest thirdly that Paul did not believe that God was helpless in the face of his suffering. No, God was not a helpless lackey in the hands of a ruthless power that drove spikes into Paul's flesh. Do you see? He understood that pain and suffering were not the creation of God maliciously poured out upon helpless men, but he also understood that it could not come without God's permission.

We need to remember that God does not create nor wish for us our hurts, our agonies, our sufferings, our broken hearts. These things are, to use the biblical term, "messengers of Satan." They are evil and bad. Yet, having said that, we must go on to say that God is not helpless in the face of them. God is not a powerless pawn in the face of such evils. Instead, God takes our agonies and pains and hurts-- and within his divine providence, within his loving and holy purpose, he uses them for our ultimate good. Thus St. Paul could cry out, "All things work together for good to them that love God." He could say "In all things give thanks."

Yes, Paul knew that pain and suffering and all the rest are evil and bad. But because he knew God personally as a kind and loving friend who was not helpless in the face of evil, he could accept in trust his pain because it came through the hand of God. See how it works! See Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Down on his knees he goes with his very heart breaking within him. Before him lies the rejection, the scourging, the mocking, the awful trial, the dreadful cross bearing to Golgatha, and finally the horror of the crucifixion itself. Has a God gone mad planned these terrible events? Has a beserk deity gleefully stacked painful event upon painful event? Obviously not. The cup before Jesus was prepared by human hate. It was prepared by human fear, human greed, human selfishness, human lovelessness. Yet, it was a wise and loving Father, a holy and knowing God, who placed that cup in the hands of Jesus. As he knelt in the Garden that night, he cried out, "Let this cup pass from me!" Yet, because that cup came to him through his father's hand, he reached out trustingly to take it and to drink deeply from it.

There is no real answer, no ultimate and final solution to the problem of pain and suffering in your life and mine. Yet, when we know God as our kind and loving Father, we can take the cup of pain from his hand in the confidence that it can be used for some good by him. No, we do not understand because we know pain is evil



and bad. Still, because it comes through the hands of someone we know, someone we trust, someone who loves us, we can drink of that cup.

My family and I like to travel on our vacations. We go camping and go many places. Sometimes on vacations we go through some strange city. Elizabeth is the navigator she has the maps. We will come to some big city and we will have to go through it or around it or whatever, and I will not know the way. I have never been there before. She will say turn here or turn there or go down this street and trustingly I go that direction because I know she has the map, the over view, she has the total perspective and she can see where that street is taking us. Sometimes it is not a nice street, sometimes it is through a slum section, sometimes it is a street filled with pot holes or looks like a dead end. But I know she can see where it leads us and I trust that if I follow her directions she will get us to our destination. In a far, far more profound sense, God has an over view of where life's road is taking you and taking me. The road down which he sends us may seem like a road that leads through the shadow of the valley of death, it may be a road filled with pot holes, it may be a road that is all up hill, it may be a road that looks like it ends in a dead end, but we can take that road in the trusting confidence that God will get us to our destination. We may not understand the road he calls us to travel but we travel it in the confidence and knowledge that under God it will take us to God's destination for us.

As one poet put it:

Not until each loom is silent  
And the shuttles cease to fly,  
Will God unroll the pattern  
And explain the reason why  
The dark threads are as needful  
In the Weaver's skillful hand  
As the threads of gold and silver  
For the pattern which he planned.

Yes, God wants into your life this morning. He wants to make himself known to you in love and mercy and forgiveness. Let him in! Let him into your life and then, whatever life brings, in trust and confidence you can take the cup from his hand--not because you understand--but because he loves you and you trust him.

George Matheson, who wrote the beloved hymn, "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go", was told at the age of 20 by his doctor, that he was going blind. "Better see your friends quickly," he said, "for soon the darkness will settle and you will see them no more forever." In spite of his blindness, young George went on with his studies. Had he been able to read early church history, he would have been a great scholar; had he been able to read the thinkers, he would have been a great philosopher. But because he could not see, he became instead a great man of faith. Because he knew God as a loving Father, he took the cup of blindness from his hand. He did not understand, but he trusted. Once he wrote, "My God, I have never thanked thee for my thorn. I have thanked thee a thousand times for my roses, but never once for my thorn. Teach me the value of my thorn. Show me that I have climbed to thee by the path of pain. Show me that my tears have made my rainbow." In his great hymn, in the third verse, he put it this way:

"O joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to Thee;  
I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
And feel the promise is not vain  
That morn shall tearless be."

Yes, "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Because he loves us and because we trust him, we take the cup from his wise and loving hand. We may walk for a little while in the darkness of tears, but we know the dawn is coming when tears shall be no more.

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