

Pain is real. Those were the very first words spoken by the professor on the first day of class to a room full of brand new nursing students, of which I was one. Pain is real.

Now the longer I live and the more experiences I have, I do not need convincing that pain is real; of course it is. But perhaps for those 20 year old, fresh faced nursing students, it was exactly what we needed to learn and understand from the start. It was important for us to take the expression of pain at face value; never to dismiss it, or minimize it, or judge it, or worse, become immune to it - in whatever form or how often it presented itself. If we were going to be effective caregivers, we needed to be just as empathetic to the first patient we encountered as we would to the hundredth, and so on.

I never went on to become a nurse, and how thankful I am for those who did and who have. And I don't even remember the name of the instructor, who taught that introductory class. But I remember what she looked like, and I remember those words as clear as day. Pain is real. It reminds me to have more patience, especially with those who are plagued by chronic conditions and suffering.

Not only is pain real, but it is prevalent. It is physical, emotional. It is caused by illness, injury, addiction, loss, relationships gone sour, anger, violence. It is bitterness and gall. So why aren't we walking around with our chins dragging on the ground? Why, when we can't rid ourselves of pain like we can a pebble in our shoe, or by wishing it away, or even by praying it away, why are we resilient?

Of course, ours is a sanctuary full of church goers, who undoubtedly know the source of our resilience. But we can learn from the Apostle Paul, who repeatedly experienced pain and suffering and had insight into the benefits of affliction.

In about the year 55 A.D., the Apostle Paul was 49 years old. It had been 25 years since Jesus' death and resurrection. In that 25 years the disciples were dispersed, spreading the gospel and birthing the early Christian church. Their teachings were met with resistance, confusion, imprisonment, and violence, and they were martyred for their cause. It was a tumultuous era. It seems that with all the opposition, only by the grace of God did Christianity take hold. Following his own conversion on the road to Damascus at around age 27, Paul himself was immersed in teaching Jews and Gentiles about Jesus the Messiah, and he too met with violence and resistance along the way. So, by the age of 49, Paul had experienced a lot of pain. He writes in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians,

24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. **25** Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, **26** I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. **27** I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (2 Corinthians 11:24-27)

Paul brings up his suffering in this letter to the Corinthians because something else was happening that was interfering with his ministry and fracturing the Christian church. Paul had opponents. Cropping up in Corinth were Jewish Christians who criticized Paul and his demeanor. In an early Christian document titled the *Acts of Paul*, Paul is described as "A man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were far apart; he had large eyes, and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long." It is possible that this description was invented, but nevertheless, in 2 Cor. 10:10, this is how Paul's critics described him: "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person

he is unimpressive.”¹ Paul’s rivals were drawing attention to themselves, boasting of their superiority, teaching a different gospel, and claiming to have had grander spiritual visions. Paul referred to them as “Super Apostles”, but they were indeed threatening his credibility.

Now if anyone could boast of having had superior revelations it was Paul. He could have boasted like his rivals, but he wanted to set himself apart. So instead, Paul drew attention to his weaknesses, and to a gift of affliction that would turn attention not to himself, but to Christ. Paul writes:

7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

A thorn in the flesh. The word thorn can also be translated as a stake. Can you imagine? That’s a painful metaphor. And notice that Paul did not specifically identify his affliction. Scholars have speculated as to what it could have been, but whatever it was, in light of the metaphor - a thorn in the flesh - it must have caused him great pain. And should we find ourselves relating to Paul’s experience, as we are apt to do, it leaves the door open for all kinds of ailments - perhaps some from which we suffer, that we would be reluctant to name publicly as well.

Notice also that Paul pleaded three times to God for the thorn to be taken away. Only three times? No, not literally, for the expression “three times” was commonly understood to mean “repeatedly.” However, the passage does imply that Paul pleaded and then stopped; he realized his affliction would not be taken away. He accepted his condition and by doing so shifted his attention away from himself, opening himself up to receive God’s abundant, sufficient, and perfect grace. He never suggests that his affliction is punishment from God, but rather a gift, in that through his weakness, the nature of the power of God is magnified.² And is that not the story of the cross? Jesus - not some spectacle of superiority - but a man subjected to the most horrific suffering - crucified - in order to secure our salvation and reveal the saving power of God which makes us whole.

Organizational consultant and psychotherapist Todd Hall, whose life was suddenly impacted when his wife was diagnosed with cancer in 2013, disputes the myth that “suffering is something to be purged, side-stepped, or surgically removed from our lives”; and he disputes the myth that the best we can do is cope with our suffering. Dr. Hall poses instead that it is possible to do better than merely cope, that through suffering we can grow as individuals and as leaders. He cites 8 ways we can grow if we courageously face our pain:³

1. We can develop a deeper appreciation for life itself.
2. We can experience positive changes in our priorities.
3. We can experience renewed and strengthened spiritual vitality.
4. We can discover that we have increased personal strength.
5. We can develop a deeper appreciation of vulnerability.
6. We can accept our limitations.
7. We can demonstrate increased emotional expressiveness and self-disclosure.
8. We can have greater compassion, empathy and intentionality in our relationships

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-47/apostle-paul-and-his-times-christian-history-timeline.html>

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1330

³ <https://www.drtoodhall.com/post/8-ways-you-can-grow-from-suffering>

Pain is real. Yet in the midst of our deepest suffering, remember that the power of God is resting upon us; for God truly is our portion.

In closing, listen again and reflect upon the passage from 2 Corinthians 12, but this time, from Eugene Petersen's paraphrase, *The Message*:

7-10 Because of the extravagance of those revelations, and so I wouldn't get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations. Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me,

My grace is enough; it's all you need.

My strength comes into its own in your weakness.

Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.