

Hard-pressed Thankfulness

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

November 24, 2019



Please read 2 Corinthians 4:7-18 before going any further in this transcript.

Sometimes being thankful is easy; but sometimes we are hard-pressed to give genuine thanks to God when we're going through difficult times. 2 Corinthians talks a lot about hard times. The reason for this is that it tells us about the life of the Apostle Paul. In fact, 2 Corinthians contains more details about the life of the Apostle Paul than any other NT book.¹ Paul lived an incredibly adventurous life of faith; but Paul also lived an incredibly difficult life of faith. Consider his summary in 2 Corinthians 11:24-27. Paul shares that "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 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, 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. 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." Despite living a godly life, Paul went through more than his fair share of hard times. But Paul isn't whining about his suffering; far from it! Paul actually finds ways to be thankful for his suffering. Let's keep this in mind as we consider this idea of "Hard-pressed Thankfulness." Please turn in your Bible to 2 Corinthians 4:7.

1. Hard-pressed thankfulness finds power for hard times. Paul begins in 2 Corinthians 4:7-9, "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." Paul doesn't pretend that he's happy about the hard times that he's endured. It doesn't feel good to be hard pressed. And Paul was perplexed by all this: God, what are You doing? Despite being perplexed though, Paul chooses to follow Jesus. He does this in full light of the reality of life's challenges. In other words, he keeps a realistic perspective, but also a godly perspective on his suffering.

Paul is well aware of human weakness; he, and each one of us, are like jars of clay. Rather than challenging us to toughen up, Paul teaches us to accept our own human frailty. Paul sees human frailty as an opportunity to reveal God's power. At first glance, verses 7-9 might make it sound like Paul was boasting about how tough he was. But upon reflection, we come to realize, that Paul was boasting in the power of God.² This is even more obvious later on in 2 Corinthians, in the account of Paul's thorn in the flesh. Paul recounts this for us in 2 Corinthians 12:8-10, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 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. 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." You see, Paul wanted God to help him! He pleaded with God 3 TIMES to take it away; "pleeeeeease Lord, take it away!" But God's answer was "trust in my all-sufficient grace, trust in my perfect power." Probably not the answer that most of us are looking for.³ But Paul? Paul accepts this answer. In fact, he not only accepts God's answer, he BOASTS about it. He even goes so far (and this seems like crazy talk!), he even goes so far as to DELIGHT in it. In other words, Paul has matured in his faith to such a degree, that he has learned to be thankful for hardships and difficulties. He has learned that his human weakness allows Christ's power to rest on him. Paul isn't giving an excuse here, for WHY God hasn't healed him; rather he is giving the reason for why God chose NOT to: "so that Christ's power may rest on me." Only a fully devoted follower of Jesus, could make such a boast, could express such

¹ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1950.

² Consider 1 Corinthians 1:25-31.

³ Consider Jesus own words in Matthew 26:38-42.

genuine thankfulness during such a hard time. Hard-pressed thankfulness finds power for hard times, but it also finds something else...

Last week, during one of my quiet times with God, I began reading a devotional by George Scipione.⁴ His opening phrase SHOCKED me. Here's what he wrote: "Don't waste your suffering." I was so shocked by this that I went back and read it again, "Don't waste your suffering." Needless to say, George had my full attention. What in the world was he driving at? As I read through the rest of what he'd written, I found myself agreeing more and more with what he was saying. Here's how I would say it in my own words:

2. Hard-pressed thankfulness finds purpose for hard times. In other words, rather than wasted times, hard times can be useful times. Hard times teach us, to trust in God's greater purposes. In Isaiah 55:8-9 God says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." This relates directly to questions around why God allows suffering. We'll answer part of that question in the rest of this sermon. But if you'd like to learn more about "WHY God allows suffering," check out the footnotes in this transcript.⁵

All of this got me thinking, so I brainstormed a list of some ways that hard times can have greater purpose. We only have time for 4 of them. The 1st way that hard times can have greater purpose is that...

1) They can help us learn obedience. Hebrews 5:8 says that Jesus, "learned obedience from what he suffered."⁶ Perhaps you have had a faith experience like mine. I can remember back in my college days how boldly and confidently I professed my full obedience to God: "I will follow you anywhere you want me to go. All the days of my life, I will surrender to Your will!" I declared this while I was attending a private Christian college on the shores of Lake Johanna. There I was comfortably nestled in, safe and secure in my middle-class Christian bubble. My greatest struggle, my deepest hardship... was getting my homework done on time. I had NO clue! I had little concept of real-world struggles. But then, my wife Debbie and I had our first miscarriage and we lost our baby. I wasn't quite as ready to follow God anywhere, as I thought I was.⁷ But Debbie and I learned a lot about trusting God in those days. As we suffered through that hard time, we learned a whole new depth of obedience and intimacy with God. And *perhaps*, that was part of His purpose. A 2nd way that hard times can have greater purpose is that...

⁴ "SHEEP e own eh" George C. Scipione, *The God of All Comfort* article in *Tabletalk* magazine, August 2019.

⁵ The devotional I was reading gave 3 key reasons for suffering. Here are some thoughts on **WHY we go through hard times:**

1. We live in a fallen world. Romans 8:20-21 says, "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." Verse 20 is a reference to mankind's fall into sin. In other words, Adam and Eve not only brought a fallen state upon themselves, but they brought it upon the entire human race. And, not just the entire human race, but the entire creation. The impact of sin entering this world was MASSIVE. When God punished sin in the garden, it was His will, for a time, to subject this world to frustration. This fallen state of affairs is a key reason why there is so much suffering in our world. Adam's choice brought in sickness, disease, pain, and suffering of all kinds. (See Romans 5:12 as well as Genesis 8:21, Psalm 51:5, and Ephesians 2:3.) Therefore, some of the suffering that people go through in this life, has nothing to do with our personal choices and everything to do with Adam's choice. For the time being, we are subject to the rules of living in a fallen world. Verse 21 reassures us that this suffering does NOT last forever nor does it leave us without hope. There is a time coming when all creation will be liberated from this bondage to decay. When our fallen world will be brought into freedom and glory. At God's final judgment, there will be an incredible transformation. This world will be judged, liberated from its bondage to sin, and made new again. Humanity will be finally & fully redeemed through Jesus. (Romans 8:29-30. Some theologians refer to this as our final glorification. See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology, 2nd Ed.*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998, pp. 1008-1013.) You see, God has scheduled a future time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. (See 2 Peter 3:13, Revelation 21:1, and Isaiah 65:17. Put another way, "The physical universe is not destined for [final] destruction (annihilation) but for renewal." *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1903, footnote on Romans 8:21.) Thank God that this fallen world is only temporary! (Consider Romans 8:18 and 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.) Another reason WHY we go through hard times is that...

2. We make sinful choices. Some of our suffering comes as the result of our own poor choices. "Sin always has results." (George C. Scipione, *The God of All Comfort* article in *Tabletalk* magazine, August 2019, p. 65.) We are reminded in Hebrews 12:7, 10-11, "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ...God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." God loves us so much that He will drive us toward repentance. Praise God for His amazing grace and immense patience with us! Another reason WHY we go through hard times is that...

3. We are targeted by the devil. By the mere fact that we bear the title "Christ-follower," we are targeted by our enemy, the devil. He hates Jesus and he hates anyone associated with Jesus. 1 Peter 5:8-9 warns us to, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings."

⁶ Consider Philippians 3:10-11.

⁷ Consider Luke 9:57-60 and Matthew 26:33-35.

2) They can bring God glory. Jesus teaches something very interesting in John 9:1-3, “As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” This idea really turned the disciples’ perspective upside down. This man’s blindness was not the result of some kind of bad spiritual Karma. Nor was it simply the result of living in a fallen world. Rather than viewing a physical malady or a sickness or disease through a fatalistic lens, Jesus challenges us to consider how these kinds of hard times, can display God’s glory. Jesus reveals the potential for deeper purpose and meaning to the struggles that we are facing. Even if our physical healing NEVER comes in this lifetime, we can bring God glory in and through our suffering and our struggle.⁸ Another way that hard times can have greater purpose is that...

3) They can mature us. Check out these incredibly challenging words from James 1:2-4, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” Brother or Sister in Christ, as we are “becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus together,” we WILL face trials of many kinds. Our faith is going to be tested. But that testing is like melting down gold, it removes the impurities and the imperfections.⁹ This testing matures and completes us. It grows us up in our faith. So even though it’s painful, we can be thankful for the Christian maturity that it brings us. A 4th and final way (for now anyhow) that hard times can have greater purpose is that...

4) They can teach us to be holy. Sometimes the hard times that we are going through are the result of our own bad choices. We are reminded in Hebrews 12:7, 10-11, “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? ...God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” As God’s children, He loves us so much that He will drive us toward repentance, drive us back to Himself. Even if that takes some tough love, some tough disciplinary action. We can give thanks for this: for God’s amazing grace and His incredible patience with us! Well, these are just a few of the ways that hard times can have greater purpose in our lives.

Before I wrap up, let me ask you a question: have you ever said these words? “All we can do is pray.” Yeah, me too. I heard myself say it again just a few weeks ago, “all we can do is pray.” Something really bothered me about hearing those words come out of my mouth. Really, that’s it? All we can do is pray? Just suffer and pray? Now, I’m not suggesting that I don’t believe in the power of prayer. Absolutely I do. But sometimes when we pray and we get the sense that God is saying “no” or “not this time,” we can become rather fatalistic: “Well, it looks like it’s just not in God’s timing right now. I guess that “all we can do is pray.” We should pray, and keep praying; BUT there is SO MUCH MORE that we can also do. The next time you find yourself going through a hard time, and you hear yourself or someone else saying, “all we can do is pray,” I urge you to look for greater purpose in your suffering. A greater purpose like one of the 4 we just talked about:

- Learning to obey God more fully.
- Seizing the opportunity to bring God glory.
- Growing into a more fully mature follower of Jesus.
- Learning greater holiness.

Amen. Go with God.

*This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on November 24, 2019 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

⁸ Check out the song “Even If” by Kutless.

⁹ See 1 Peter 1:6-7 and Romans 5:3-4.