

The Answer to Prayer We May Not Want to Hear

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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How many of us learned to trust our mothers because when we cried out in pain they miraculously healed us? How many of us learned to trust our mothers because when we cried out in pain they were always with us?

And what about God? Did we come to trust him because he did a miracle, or because when we were not healed he was still with us?

We all pray and ask God to do what we want. Sometimes God seems to do exactly as we ask—or at least things turn out the way we hoped. But often things do not turn out as we hoped. Often nothing changes. So, we asked, who messed up? Did I ask wrong, or did God fall down on the job? There may be better ways to ask that question, and I think Paul's story helps us get started.

The last part of Second Corinthians is pretty strange. Many scholars think that chapters 10-13 were originally a separate letter sent before the rest of what we call Second Corinthians. In those chapters Paul is locked in verbal combat with people he calls "super-apostles," spiritual show-offs who had taken over his church in Corinth. They said that Paul wasn't much of a preacher, that he wasn't that good-looking, that he didn't really have spiritual power like they did. So Paul gets into an awkward sounding bragging match with them, saying basically "I hate to brag, I really do, but you are forcing me to do this, so here goes." The section we read in chapter 12 begins with one of those brags. I had a vision 14 years ago—or maybe it actually happened—and I was taken up to heaven into God's presence, no kidding. I heard things that no human being has been permitted to hear, and I am not permitted to repeat them. The subtext, of course, is: therefore you ought to listen to me as someone who knows what he's talking about!

But then Paul shifts gears, because it fits in with what he really wants to say about his authority. He knows that his authority doesn't flow from his personal power or his great spiritual experiences. His authority as a pastor really flows from sharing the suffering of Jesus; it doesn't come from his strength but from his weakness. Paul tells a story. Just about the time I had that tremendous spiritual experience and was on top of the world, God decided to bring me down to earth so he gave me something painful to deal with. Has that ever happened to you? Just when you were up, something happened.

Paul calls it "a thorn in the flesh"—you could translate it a *stake* or a *splinter*—but the point is that it was something that caused him pain all the time. He says God gave it to him, but that it was also "a messenger of Satan." When something happens to us we want to say that God did it or that the devil did it, but maybe it's smarter to assume that it could be both and we can never really sort it out. When Jesus died on the cross it was clear that evil people did it and that the devil had a part in it, but at the same time it was God's plan all along. The suffering we endure—even at the hands of evil people—may still be sent to us by God so that we can learn something.

What in the world is this thorn in the flesh? Bible scholars have been arguing about that since the first centuries of the church. Most assume that it was something physical—epilepsy, eye disease, malaria, migraines, who knows. Some think that the thorn was the presence of enemies who followed him around and drove him crazy. Some think that the thorn was a

temptation that Paul really struggled with and couldn't seem to shake. I lean toward the physical, but maybe it was supposed to be ambiguous so we can all identify with it. We all have something that gives us pain, something that nags, that we just can't shake. We've all asked God to get rid of it.

So Paul asked, too. Three times things got so bad that he got down on his knees and begged Jesus to do something about it. "Please take it away! I can't take it anymore!" This is a brave piece of honest memoir here, a kind of un-bragging, confessing. I begged Jesus to do this for me, but he refused. A part of Paul has got to be thinking, "and I know this is going to give you sob's another piece of ammo to use against me." But by this time Paul has made the connection between his own weakness and the fact that Jesus was "crucified in weakness." Weakness is not just his own little problem. It's the secret to how God makes himself known.

Here is the answer Paul gets to his prayer, his begging Jesus to take away the source of his pain: "My grace is sufficient for you." My grace is enough. You can get by on grace and nothing else—no miracle, no relief, just me and my presence. That's how my power works—in weakness.

I want to think a while about that phrase "my grace is sufficient." I'm not sure that the word "grace" is what I want to hear when I'm hurting. Like most Protestants, I associate grace with being saved "by grace and not by works." Grace is a theological concept, kind of abstract. God's undeserved favor. It also carries an aroma of Calvinism, that God somehow chose us and that ought to be enough. Paul, Jesus says, you should just be glad that I saved you and called you to be an apostle and stop whining. I don't think that's what really going on here.

It helped me to remember that Paul is Jewish. The nearest word in Hebrew to the Greek word for grace, *charis*, would be the Hebrew word *hesed*. That's the word that is chanted in Psalm 136, "His steadfast love endures forever." *Hesed* is the word that Miles Coverdale couldn't translate into one word in English so he invented the word loving-kindness, which the King James then picked up. *Hesed* means the kind of love you have for someone you are bound to by a covenant, so there is an element of loyalty to it. Sometimes it's translated "faithful love." Usually the NRSV renders it "steadfast love."

36 times in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, you see "steadfast love" and "faithfulness" together. They are a couple. When God reveals his nature and his name to Moses in Exodus 34:6 he says that he is "Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious...abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Several psalms use the same line: "Your steadfast love reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds" (e.g. 36:5). Psalm 100 ends "His steadfast love endures forever and his faithfulness to all generations." In Hebrew that pair—steadfast love and faithfulness—is *hesed* and *emet*.

That pair appears in one place I can think of in the New Testament that is very revealing. John 1:14(TNIV) says "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only [Son], who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Full of grace and truth. Truth is the rendering for *emet*, faithfulness, in the sense of always being true to his promises. And *hesed*, steadfast love, John renders as grace.

It helps me to think that when Paul hears Jesus saying "My grace is enough for you" his Jewish ears hear him saying "My steadfast love is enough." Psalm 63:3 says, "The steadfast love of the Lord is better than life." The book of Lamentations, in the midst of descriptions of Jerusalem that sound like Port-au-Prince, says "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end." All of that history of *hesed* reverberates in Paul's soul when in the midst of his pain he hears Jesus say, "My steadfast love is enough for you."

That's the answer to prayer that we may not want to hear. We would of course prefer to hear God say, "Your wish is my command." But God is not a genie and prayer is not magic. Sometimes God eventually gives us what we ask for, and then some. But sometimes God seems silent. The answer here to Paul is not "No." The answer is not "Wait." The answer is "My love is enough." Maybe this was the moment when Paul became convinced that nothing in heaven or earth could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. "My steadfast love endures forever."

Becca and I saw Michael Feinstein perform in New York. He was an assistant to Ira Gershwin, and he says that Ira wrote these words for his brother George after he had died, words to a melody George had left behind, and I can hear Jesus singing them to Paul:

The Rockies may tumble, Gibraltar may crumble,
They're only made of clay,
But...[my] love is here to stay.

Whatever you are facing this morning—whatever sickness, whatever grief, unemployment and financial stress, whatever conflict and opposition, whatever pain from whatever source—it may be that what Jesus is saying to you is "My love is enough." Enough. Whether he fixes the problem or not, his love is still enough. What you really need is not the fix; what you really need is having him with you. Mother Teresa said, "You will never know that Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you've got."

We all like testimonies of miraculous healing. Dave Dravecky had one of those testimonies. Do you remember him? He pitched for the San Francisco Giants in the late 80's and they discovered a large tumor in his pitching arm. He was a Christian with great faith, and sure enough the cancer treatment was very effective and Dave Dravecky made a well-publicized comeback to the major leagues. But not too long after that he was pitching and his arm broke with the force of the pitch. Then while the Giants were celebrating winning the pennant a teammate hit his arm accidentally and broke it again. The doctors looked at his arm and they found that the cancer was back. After two more surgeries, the arm continued to deteriorate, and they decided to amputate his pitching arm.

I remember watching Dave Dravecky at a press conference in 1991. He stood there with his left sleeve hanging limp at his side. He said, "I can't deny that this has been painful...As I speak to you I feel pain, and it's coming from my left hand." It was that phantom pain from a limb that isn't there. I thought to myself, "This guy must *really* be disappointed with God after making such a big deal about his healing."

But Dravecky continued. Looking into the crowd with a clear gaze he said, "Without Jesus Christ I could not have endured what I endured. It's not that I am holding onto Jesus, but Jesus is holding on to me." I thought, "Wow, that is so much more profound than all the testimonies of 'God gave me that touchdown.'" Later Dravecky wrote in a book about his experiences, "I have learned that God's silence to my questions is not a door slammed in my face. I may not have answers. But I do have him."

His grace is sufficient. His love is enough.

When we sing *Amazing Grace* we may think of John Newton the author and how grace saved him from a life as a sea-captain carrying slaves. But of course *Amazing Grace* is not just about how grace led him to believe. It is about the grace that saw him through many dangers, toils, and snares in his life as a believer, and how grace will ultimately lead him home.

John Newton, later a Baptist preacher and anti-slavery crusader, had a dear friend named William Cowper. Cowper was a kind of pre-romantic nature poet who struggled with mental

illness. At several points he became psychotic and several times he attempted suicide. But he was a believer in Jesus who worked with Newton to produce in 1779 what was the first book of popular hymns in English, a radical step away from just singing the psalms. William Cowper wrote hymns like “There is a fountain filled with blood” and “God moves in mysterious ways” and “Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings; it is the Lord, who rises with healing in His wings.”

I love the words of this terribly honest hymn by Cowper:

I asked the Lord that I might grow
in faith and love and ev’ry grace,
might more of his salvation know,
and seek more earnestly his face.
‘Twas he who taught me thus to pray,
and he I know has answered prayer,
but it has been in such a way
as almost drove me to despair.

Almost to despair, but not quite. Perplexed, as Paul said, but not in despair. What we learn at the brink of despair is that Jesus’ love is enough for us. That is usually the only place we *can* learn it: almost in despair.

There is an answer to prayer that we do not want, but it may be the answer that we need more than anything: My grace is sufficient for you. My steadfast love is enough.