

The Trials and Tribulations We Face

As I write this sermon in an empty church in the middle of the night, I can't help but think about how difficult this last week has been. Besides the plague the world is suffering, I had to deal with a computer issue yesterday that resulted in me wiping my hard drive and reinstalling the operating system from scratch. It took me the entire day to reset everything—I missed the Church get-together and I missed the deadline for this sermon.

While I waited for my dear computer to be reborn, I popped on Netflix to distract myself from my nervous fidgeting and ended up watching a nature documentary where David Attenborough described the ecological devastation he has witnessed in his own lifetime.

I turned that off and went online to read the news and current affairs—social media and whatnot. I saw articles about America veering towards democratic collapse; New South Wales' government facing inquiry and prosecution over allegations of corruption; Kevin Rudd's crusade to have the Murdoch media empire investigated by a Royal Commission. It's all a lot to take in.

So I checked in with my friends and family to see how everyone else was doing. My grandmother's cat had to be put down; my mother had to fail one of her students; a dear friend of mine lost their job. It seemed to be a rather miserable week for many of us, and the plague was not even the worst offender.

The Necessity for God in Times of Strife

It's in times like these that we often find ourselves crying out to God the most. It is only natural to seek comfort during hardship, and unfortunately common to forget about God when things are going well. Last time I gave the sermon at Upwey, I spoke about the act of lamenting in worship. Lamentation as a whole exists solely *because* of hard times.

God isn't a piggy bank of comfort we only need to talk to when things are down—far from it—we should all make a concerted effort to praise him when everything in our lives is fine. But still, imagine, for example, a perfect utopia where nothing bad ever happens. If there was no pain, suffering, or death, would there even be a need for God?

This question raises the interesting theological dilemma, that God is seen to be greater; more powerful; more worthy of adoration, by sheer contrast to the darkness in the world around us, than he would be otherwise. In fact, this leads to an unusual paradox where we may be *grateful* to God for the trials and tribulations in our life that lead us *to* God.

It's not an uncommon story. I have heard many a preacher speak about how they don't regret the harshness of their early lives, because it was their failed marriage/drug addiction/abusive parents/etc. that led them to cry out to God in the first place.

The Weaknesses of Paul

This gratefulness for hardship was probably first experienced in a Christian setting by Paul, whose entire life and ministry as the champion of Christ we know him as today, was

constantly plagued by trials and tribulations that make my week look like a walk in the park by comparison. But despite the devastation that Paul endured, he came out the other side boasting gladly of such struggles.

As he describes in 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul notes how God's "power is made perfect in weakness" (ESV). This may seem paradoxical, but what it means is that God can comfort *because* of hardship; God can heal *because* of brokenness; God can forgive *because* of sin.

It's just like Jesus said in Mark 2:17 and Luke 5:31: "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do" (NLT). Without sickness in the world, there would be no need for the divine 'doctor' that is God.

George Guthrie made the comment in the Baker Exegetical on 2 Corinthians that Paul talks about his own ministry as being fuelled by that same "power" of God. All the miracles; sermons; salvations—the life work of Paul as one of the greatest Christian evangelists of all time—it is all a result of God's power, and therefore made "perfect in weakness."

That's why Paul goes on in verse 9 to talk about boasting gladly of his weaknesses. He recognized that his entire ministry practice existed only *because* of those hardships, and that God's light shone ever more brighter to him because of the darkness he faced in the world around him.

But not only that, Paul comments that his acceptance of his hardships is what allows "the power of Christ [to] rest upon [him]" (ESV). It seems logical that if Paul were to take a stance of opposition to the situations he found himself in, he may resent God for it, and distance himself from God.

(As a side-note: this Greek word translated as "rest," is only used this one time in the New Testament. It's related to the word for a tent, especially the tabernacle, as in the Old Testament. So just as God dwelt in the tabernacle, Christ now dwells within us in the same way.)

By accepting his weakness, Paul can accept that what he needs is not for the thorn in his side to be taken away (vv. 7-8), but simply to accept the grace of God. That is why God told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you" (v. 9).

This is something Paul also attributes to Christ in the next chapter, in 13:4, when he says that Christ "was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God."

It was the tragedy of Christ's crucifixion; his weakness before his accusers; the hopelessness of his burial, that made his resurrection by the power of God all the more glorious. When we accept our hardships, we emulate Christ, and when we overcome those hardships, we reveal the power of God at work in our lives and bring him glory.

And that is why Paul is "content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities" (v. 10). Some versions say he "delights" in his weaknesses! He was *grateful* for his trials and tribulations!

Imagine, when we come out the other side of this plague, we can be grateful for the experience having brought us closer to God; having made God shine ever brighter against the backdrop of darkness.

But not only does Paul delight in his hardships, he does so "for Christ's sake"! It is for the purpose of glorifying God and revealing Christ to the world, that he proclaims loudly (boasts) to his audience of how much he has endured by the power of God; how much trouble God has carried him through; how much sin and suffering God's grace has overcome in his life.

Because Paul's strength is not found in his own abilities, but in God's, it is the trials and tribulations Paul faced that lead him to God, taught him to be reliant on God, and encouraged him to shout to the world what God had done for him.

Paul's weaknesses revealed God's power—the same power that enabled Paul to spread the Gospel across the world. Paul's struggles directly led to his success in ministry, and so Paul says to conclude this passage, "When I am weak, then I am strong."