

LESSONS FROM PAUL'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY: WHAT HARDSHIP CAN TEACH US

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If you are a person who prays, here's a question for you to think about. Do you pray most fervently when you're feeling thankful, or do you pray most fervently when you want something from God? I think of prayer as conversation with God. Like conversations with people, sometimes it's more formal, and sometimes it's more casual and ongoing. But the times when I find myself saying out loud, with passion, "Thank God," tend to be the times when I'm grateful for a good outcome to something about which I've been worried. You felt a lump, but it turned out to be nothing. You thought you offended someone you care about, but your relationship is ok. Your car starts spinning on the ice and you nearly collide into the car next to you, but you're able to maintain control just in time. Thank God.

It is those moments when we are at the very edge when we reach out for God's hand. Lying in bed at night, suddenly wide awake, every anxious thought you manage in daylight hours leaps into the front of your mind. The "what ifs". Concerns for each of your loved ones - their pictures parade before you. Anxiety about money. Fears about our political climate. Fears about our climate. And then you pray. Please, God.

When we feel ourselves at the edge, at the margins of life, where we realize that there is so much we can't control, it is then that we tend to grasp for God, the one to whom people have turned in all times and in all circumstances. Not the God who performs magic tricks, who will make all bad things disappear, but the God whose presence we long for, whose strength we draw upon.

When we read about the spiritual journeys of people through the ages, we see this commonality. People reach out for God when life is most difficult. The experiences in life that test our courage also open us up, make us more vulnerable, and more receptive to learning. Most of us can look back at the challenges we've faced and see that those events were character-forming for us. Our faith muscle develops through the daily practices that are spiritually nourishing, but that faith muscle is also developed when we face a crisis, ask ourselves the hardest questions of life, and come through as more resilient people.

Working with people in life's most difficult moments is part of ministry. I have been with people as they have learned about a diagnosis, or a death by suicide, the loss of a job, the loss of a child through miscarriage, the end of a marriage, and other crises. One of the first thoughts many people express is disbelief. I hear comments like, "This wasn't supposed to happen" or "I never thought this would happen to us." It's a natural sentiment for most people.

What's interesting is that the Bible actually tries to prepare us to not be surprised when obstacles come our way. When you read the Bible, you see all kinds of tragedies, and they happen to people who are good and they happen to people who aren't at all good...we see injustice, slavery, abuse, murder, disease. The lament psalms are heartfelt cries from people complaining about what they're going through, pleading with God not to forget them, begging God to intervene on their behalf. Of course Jesus faces harassment, persecution from religious and political authorities, and a gruesome death. We could learn from the Bible to expect hardship, but it seems to be human nature that we don't.

Paul is a vocal and active proponent of the Christian message in a time when those authorities were still very suspicious of it. His travels and speeches landed him in prison. He also writes about being shipwrecked, being robbed, spending night without food and water. Our passage for today is a portion of a letter Paul writes from prison to the church in Philippi, what would now be in Eastern Greece. This passage is one of my favorites of all of Paul's writings. I usually read it from the New Revised Standard Version. Today we're using the Common English Bible, and I like the new angle these words give.

Each of the three sections of this passage give encouragement to us when we're facing something hard. First Paul reminds us that the habit of prayer is one that brings peace to many people:

“Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! ⁵ Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. ⁶ Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. ⁷ Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.”

If you turn to prayer during a crisis, it's usually easier if you have built that prayer muscle before the crisis occurs.

Paul then gives a list of virtues – this kind of list of admirable traits would have been familiar to his Greek audience.

“From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. ⁹ Practice these

things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.”

Intentional character development builds a foundation that will strengthen us and equip us to face difficulties. Focusing on justice and truth helps us to see more opportunities to increase those virtues in the world.

Finally, Paul writes more personally:

“I have learned how to be content in any circumstance. ¹² I know the experience of being in need and of having more than enough; I have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance, whether full or hungry or whether having plenty or being poor. ¹³ I can endure all these things through the power of the one who gives me strength.”

What Paul learns through persecution and imprisonment is that his true life is his inner life. His inner life is so strong that no matter how bad his outer circumstances are, they do not shake his will or his faith.

A more contemporary example of a similar learning is the story of Sheryl Sandberg who is the chief operating officer for Facebook. She was 45 and her husband 47, seemingly healthy, when he suddenly died while they were on vacation. I don't endorse her because of her work on Facebook, but I do find her writings about grief to be helpful. She wrote a book, called Option B, about her experience on the grief journey. She doesn't categorize lessons, but I extrapolated these learnings from her book:

1. Hardship can teach us that we need others.

Not only is it ok to ask for help, but it is essential to our humanity.

2. Hardship can teach us that the “things” of this world do not protect us from pain.

Sheryl Sandberg has a net worth of over a billion dollars - she had access to the finest therapists, spas, and luxury getaways, and certainly her personal tragedy did not cause her financial stress as it does many people. Yet she was devastated by the loss of her husband and the challenge of how to help her children cope well.

3. Hardship can teach us about our inner resources, especially resilience.

“Resilience is the strength and speed of our response to adversity, and we can build it. It isn’t about having a backbone. It’s about strengthening the muscles around our backbone.”

4. Hardship can teach us empathy.

Sandberg learned early on that the death of her husband was the elephant in the room for her friends and coworkers. No one would talk about it and that made her grief more painful. She then realized that she’d done the same thing to people over the years. We don’t know what to say, we’re afraid we’ll say the wrong thing, so we don’t say anything. But she broke the cycle.

Before her husband died, they had planned a trip with his college roommates. The trip took place two months after her husband died, and she thought about skipping it. But she went, hoping it would be comforting to be with his close friends, who were also grieving. She writes this, “Most of the trip was a blur, but on the last day I sat down for breakfast with several of the roommates, including Jeff King, who had been diagnosed years earlier with multiple sclerosis. Dave and I had discussed Jeff’s illness

many times with each other, but that morning, I realized that I had never actually spoken with Jeff about it.

“Jeff,” I said, “how are you? I mean, really, how are you? How are you feeling? Are you scared?”

Jeff looked up in surprise and paused for a long few moments. With tears in his eyes, he said, “Thank you. Thank you for asking. And then he talked. He talked about his diagnosis and how he hated that he had to stop practicing medicine. How his continued deterioration was hard on his children. How he was worried about his future. How relieved he felt being able to talk about it.”

The painful experiences of our own journeys can help us be more loving with one another, for none of our journeys will be pain-free.

We worship a God who knows what our journeys are like. We follow Jesus, whose own journey involved loneliness, betrayal, humiliation and physical pain. We are not alone. God will equip us to face the challenges of our lives with courage.