

Strand #2 (Companions) – Team Paul

The early church's most effective early leaders were strong in weakness...together

It's not something that you would do every day.

If you had a free hour, it probably would not be among the top three ways you'd choose to spend that 60 minutes. In fact, of all the things you could do with your time or your energy, this might be the very last thing that you'd want to do.

Even so, if you chose to do it, it wouldn't be very difficult to pull it off.

"Hey, Pastor Staff...what are you talking about?" I'm talking drawing up a comprehensive list of the most difficult things that have happened to you in your life. Have you ever done that? Probably not...but you could. You may not have that list on any sheet of paper, but there's no doubt that list is hanging out somewhere in your heart.

A list of your most tough *tough stuff*. What would populate your list?

- An extended period of illness or incapacity
- Children who stopped following the Lord
- Unexpected financial set back
- Sudden loss of a job, perhaps a career
- Rejection by your family over your commitment to Christ
- The loss of a child, or a spouse, or a parent
- A deeply disappointing local church experience
- A very difficult, unhappy or even abuse-riddled childhood
- Sexual harassment, perhaps even an assault
- Your parents' divorce...or your own
- A false accusation that some were eager to believe
- The betrayal of a friend; the unfaithfulness of a spouse
- A consequential accident with long-lasting impact
- A period of deep personal doubt or loneliness, or depression

That clicked off in less than a minute. Your list is hanging out somewhere, in here. Tough stuff.

Why am I having you think about these things in this worship hour? This fall, the Holy Spirit has been asking us "Who shares your tough stuff?", and the reality is that every disciple – even the most dedicated – gets knocked off-stride and derailed by tough stuff. We struggle with it. Often, we don't get why it's happening. And we feel alone, and disoriented, in the middle of it.

QUESTION: If my heart purposes every day to love & follow Jesus and represent Him well—but there's tough tough stuff going on—how can I handle it well?

Is there any helpful example in our Christian living manual, the New Testament, to keep my compass pointing N in the tough stuff?

This morning, I'd like to draw upon the example of the Paul, Jesus' Christ's apostle, who not only experienced his own list of tough stuff (and we'll look at it), but shared why it was happening, and modeled how to handle it well. Paul's experience is described in a very personal letter that he wrote to the Corinthian Church; it's the one of Paul's letters many of us never read, to our loss. In it, the Holy Spirit speaks to us through Paul this important truth --

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What can we learn from Paul and his team of ministry companions) about they WHY of tough stuff in the life of a Christian committed to serving Jesus? If you're unfamiliar with Paul, he¹

- grew up in Tarsus (north of Palestine) in a strictly religious Jewish home
- his father was a master craftsman in leather and in making Tarsus' famous "black tents" used by caravans, nomads and armies all over Asia Minor and Syria...but was also a Roman citizen and with his wife, were dedicated religious Pharisees.
- Young Saul likely memorized the Hebrew text of the Sacred Law, learned to read its Greek translation known as the Septuagint, and was sent to Jerusalem as a boy to learn from the greatest teachers in Israel, including Gamaliel
- As a rising star in Judaism, Saul learned to hate those who had defected from the Law to follow a recently crucified, self-proclaimed Messiah named Jesus. He helped as a Jesus-follower named Stephen was thrown down on the Rock of Execution and brutally stoned to death.
- "Breathing out threats and murder," he secured papers to travel to distant cities to arrest, beat, and destroy Christians until...
- Until Jesus stopped him at noon on the road to Damascus and demanded to know, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting ME!?" He met and saw the risen Messiah...only to be blinded by the glory.
- From that day on, Saul became Paul and began serving the Lord Jesus Christ with his life and his words and his energy and his passion.
- The Holy Spirit would use Paul to found churches all over the Roman empire, and personally write 13 of the New Testament's 27 books, and deeply influence Luke, who wrote ¼ of the N.T.

So Paul was a precious and prized servant of the Lord Jesus...and yet his life was FULL of tough

stuff. So, what answers might Paul offer us about handling well the tough stuff...from 2 Corinthians?

It starts right off in chapter 1, where Paul's life examples how

It takes *tough* tough stuff
TO TRUST COMPLETELY ON GOD
(not relying on ourselves) 2 Corinthians 1

2 Corinthians 1:8 For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of **the affliction we experienced in Asia**. For we were so **utterly burdened beyond our strength** that **we despaired of life itself**.⁹ Indeed, we felt that **we had received the sentence of death**. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.¹⁰ He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us. On Him we have set our hope that He will deliver us again.¹¹ You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

Please notice the phrases

- ✓ the AFFLICTION we experienced in Asia
- ✓ UTTERLY BURDENED beyond our strength (“like a beast of burden crushed beneath too heavy a load” - R.V.G.Taskerⁱⁱ), or “utterly without a way of escape, utterly at a loss”ⁱⁱⁱ
- ✓ We DESPAIRED of life itself
- ✓ We felt we had received the SENTENCE OF DEATH

Good grief! What happened? The reality is we don't know. Nothing recorded in the book of Acts seems to fit Paul's description here, or fit something known on the timeline of Paul's life.^{iv} Scholars -

- ♦ “impossible to identify the nature of this experience”
- ♦ a severe, extended illness, (or) a deep depression he could not shake
- ♦ “In the absence of any precise information, a form of persecution due to mob-violence, somewhere in Asia but not necessarily in Ephesus, is probably the best conjecture we can make” (Tasker, 43).

Whatever it was, it happened to Paul and his team (note: “we”). And, whatever it was, it was very bad. Very tough.

But there was a reason. Start in the middle of verse 9 -- ***But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.*** As you let that sink in, mind if I ask you something? Have you learned yet not to rely on yourself, but rather *to completely* (singularly!) rely on God...the only One who can raise back to life that which is dead?

- Some of you are in a marriage today that is dying. It is being crushed by the burdens of selfishness and pride and “we'll do it our own way, thank you, we do not need God.” And if you keep on going like this, someday you'll just quit in failure. You're relying on yourself; you've not come to the place where you are humbly relying completely on God who raises the dead.
- Some of you are navigating on your own a life that is actually dying. “I'll do it my own way, thank you, I don't need God. I'll work out my own success.” Keep going like you are, and you

may reach your finish line with all kinds of possessions and toys and perhaps even a large bank account...and it will mean nothing. LeBron James once said that he woke up the next day after winning the NBA title and said, "Is this all there is?"

Jesus said it, and we all *kinda* believe it...but some of us don't. He said, "for without Me, you can do nothing" (meaning: you can accomplish nothing of eternal significance and value).

Paul said, "This was very, *very* tough, *tough* stuff...like nothing I'd faced before. Why would God put that in my life? For us to learn to rely *completely* on Him for whatever is next...and not on ourselves. He alone can raise the dead, and (vs. 10)...and "He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us. **On Him** we have set our hope that He will deliver us again. 11 You also must help us by prayer..." Ah, a cord of 3 strands.

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In our weakness, He will teach us to rely on Him.

***It takes *tough* tough stuff
FOR THE GOSPEL'S LIGHT TO SHINE***

(not promoting ourselves) 2 Corinthians 4 (cf. Chpt 6,11)

³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. ¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ¹² So death is at work in us, but life in you.

One of the most important lessons we learn when we take a good, close look at the lives of Paul and his ministry companions is one so many of us are also learning. We want so much for someone we know – a spouse, a relative, a child, a neighbor, a colleague,

One dear member in our Connect Group just lost a sister to death by cancer after months and years of praying and lovingly trying to share the good news of Jesus with her. It was so tough, and so

painful to see this beloved relative refuse to believe time and time again, refuse to even listen.

So often, our “gospel is veiled,” and we can’t remove the veil no matter how hard we try. We feel like very inadequate, fragile vessels. And in our witness, we often personally experience some very tough stuff. Paul’s description? Verses 8,9,10,11

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To engage in the battle for people’s hearts is to experience tough, sometimes very tough, stuff. Paul refers to the price tag in his life in at least two other places:

^{6:3} We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

^{11:23} Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

You and I will likely never pay the price Paul and his team paid in the battle to bring the gospel to the hearts of people, but we get what he’s talking about. If you/I are going to live for Christ and seek to bring His good news to others, it can be tough. There is a price tag. And frankly, we may feel very inadequate.

But there’s a reason for that personal inadequacy, that personal weakness. “We have this treasure in jars of clay” (2 Corinthians 4:7) “to show that the surpassing power belongs to God, and not to us.” Our weakness is God’s strength. The life and love of Jesus shining out through your cracked, broken vessel shows itself to be the very life and love of Jesus. That’s the light people *really* need to see. Again, not us, but Him.

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It takes the tough stuff to learn to trust COMPLETELY on God.
It takes the tough stuff for the BRILLIANCE of GOD'S LIGHT to shine through us

***It takes tough tough stuff of
HUMBLED WEAKNESS TO DISPLAY GOD'S POWER
(humbled in grace) 2 Corinthians 12***

⁷ So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

No matter what you may think about him, Paul was a brilliant individual. A man of extraordinary learning, incredible gifting, and privileged to see things and know things from God. He talks at the beginning of this chapter of how he was taken up into heaven to experience things (vs. 4) "which man is not permitted to utter." In all of this, he had every reason to become proud. KNOWLEDGE, as he told the Corinthians, PUFFS UP.^v

And so (vs.7) he "was given" a "thorn...in the flesh, a message of Satan to *harass* (κολαφιζω - "to strike with fist, to beat, to treat roughly") me." Why? "to keep me from becoming conceited."

I can't think of two things I'd rather NOT have happen to me (an imbedded thorn, a relentless beating). Wow...pride must be an awful thing in my Father's assessment.

Paul begged – "three times I pleaded with the Lord that it should leave." Three times my Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in your weakness."

Paul's conclusion – "I've decided to boast *all the more gladly* in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." These are such incredibly rich words. "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

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Tough stuff to learn to trust COMPLETELY on God.
Tough stuff for the BRILLIANCE of GOD'S LIGHT to shine through us
Tough stuff for CHRIST'S GRACE/POWER to flow through our weakness.

CONCLUSION

It was 39 years ago when I went to visit her in the Intensive Critical Care Unit at the Grand Forks Regional Hospital. Her name was Lois Gryte, the beloved wife of Len. For years, they had planted and harvested rich crops of potatoes near Hoople, ND. Now, Lois' body was wearing out, and she could hardly breathe.

I was a young pastor, but Lois and Len somehow had become quickly so dear to me. And so I went to visit Lois as she lay dying. Understandably, the visit needed to be brief. But I leaned over her head, prayed, and then told Lois that we loved her. She could barely speak, so compromised, so weak...but she whispered in my young ear, "May it be for the glory of God."

I had never seen some thing so powerful, someone so full of Jesus, like her. Never have since. Completely trusting in God. Completely shining with God's glory. So Jesus-strong in weakness.

Lois Gryte, living and dying to represent Jesus and His good news, struggling through the tough stuff her Father designed into her life, to make Jesus shine so brightly through her weakness. I suspect she had learned this from Paul, and lived it, as she stepped into glory.

Embrace the purposeful design your heavenly Father has for you. Live for Jesus Christ, and His good news. Pray that His life and power will shine through your *tough* tough stuff.

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ⁱ Drawn from John Pollock's book *The Apostle—A Life of Paul* (David C. Cook, 1969, 2012).

ⁱⁱ *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 1958, 1977), 42.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alfred Plummer, *II Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985 edition), 17.

^{iv} Cf. Plummer, 16.

^v 1 Corinthians 8:1