

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

February 1, 2015



(grace) the stuff of life

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Discussion Guide

A Life Sustained by Grace

Ephesians 1.3-6; Ezekiel 36.25-27

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Are you a person who is pain-tolerant or pain-intolerant? Could you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Using the notes, explain the context of suffering and 2 Corinthians 11-12.
- Read 2 Corinthians 12.7-10 aloud. Read the text once more slowly, allowing your group members time to soak on what is being said.
- What effects did the experience of suffering have upon Paul? Seek to find as many as possible.
- What is the typical Christian reaction to the experience of pain and suffering? Why might this be so?
- In what ways, if any, is Paul's reaction different?
- What might have made Paul able to respond as he did to the experience of pain and suffering?

- Where or in what ways are you experiencing pain and suffering right now? In what ways are you responding? Could you elaborate?
- What might it mean for God's grace to be sufficient for you in this time? What effect, if any, might the presence of God's grace have upon your response to your experience of suffering?
- Conclude your time together with prayer for one another. You might consider praying not for the release from suffering as if it was something terrible, but if necessary for suffering to do its work so that you might experience the fullness of God's grace.

Context and Background

Suffering

The topic of suffering is not one of the highest popularity in Christian circles. Most often, suffering is eschewed as something to be avoided, a sign of God's judgment or a visible marker that something is wrong, something which should be fixed. Some followers of Jesus go so far as to teach that true followers of Jesus will not suffer but that faithful followers will experience lives of ease and blessing.

The reality is that, in this life, we will suffer, especially those who follow Jesus. Suffering is part of the experience of living within a world marked by Sin (Genesis 3.17-19). Suffering has natural, supernatural, and human origins. One might experience suffering as a result of the physical ravages of time and disease. Some suffering issues forth from the ramifications of decisions made by others or by ourselves. Finally, some suffering has spiritual causes, some spiritual attack in nature and some intended and sent by God. (See Job and 2 Corinthians 12.7.) Jesus taught that his disciples were not immune to the experience of suffering because they lived within the world (John 16.33). Likewise, he taught that due to the choice to follow him, his disciples would experience additional suffering (Matthew 5.10-12; 10.16-42, esp. 24-25). However, Jesus taught that his disciples need not fear the experience of suffering (John 16.33).

In light of Jesus' teaching that his disciples not fear suffering, many of his followers readily embraced suffering. While one can see this in the willingness to experience martyrdom within

second-Century Christianity, this trend can be seen within the pages of the New Testament. James, the brother of Jesus, taught that Christians were to count it as joy when they experienced trials (James 1.2). Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples, taught that one should rejoice in the experience of suffering (1 Peter 4.12-19). Paul, Jesus' most prolific disciple, boasted in the weakness he experienced in suffering (2 Corinthians 11.16-12.10).

These followers of Jesus were not deluded masochists, but they understood the necessary role suffering played in the life of the follower of Christ. First, they understood that following Jesus really did result in suffering brought on by religious people (Matthew 10.24-25), but they were willing to undergo this because in suffering they experienced life as Jesus did (Romans 8.17). Paul went so far as to state that in sharing the life of Jesus, he did not just want the experience of power but the experience of Christ's sufferings because then he would fully know the resurrection power of God in his life (Philippians 2.10-11). Second, the early followers of Jesus understood that suffering made room for the power of God to come to the fore in their lives (2 Corinthians 12.8-10). The temptation is always to rely on one's own strength and power, but suffering removes one's strength forcing him to rely fully upon God's grace. Finally, these early disciples understood that suffering was not the final word for them as to their worth or standing within the Kingdom of God. They knew that in God's sight they were blessed because they were willing to bear shame heaped upon them for the cause of Christ (Matthew 5.10-12; 1 Peter 5.12-19)

The Text

2 Corinthians 12.8-10: *Embracing suffering*

The letter of 2 Corinthians reveals Paul to be in a heated debate with the church at Corinth. It appears that the congregation had become enamored with some of the teachers who had followed Paul, men they called Super-Apostles (2 Corinthians 11.5), men who were claiming to be greater and more wise than Paul. In short, these men sought to lead the Corinthians into much of what was causing disorder among them when Paul wrote his first letter (1 Corinthians 11-14). These men may be the ones who were behind the

original problems within the congregation. In seeking to bring order to the Corinthian congregation, Paul must literally fight for them to recognize his authority as an apostle. While Paul could challenge these men on their apostolic credentials, he chooses to base his apostolic authority upon his weakness rather than his strength (2 Corinthians 11.16-12.10).

Paul claims that he has suffered more than the super-apostles. Presumably these men rejected the concept of suffering, but Paul embraced it as something which made him more like Jesus and thus worthy of being recognized as his apostle. Paul, willingly, was beaten, almost killed numerous times, shipwrecked, experienced hunger and thirst, and countless rejections (2 Corinthians 11.16-33). His basic thesis is that he is weak and he is glad about it (2 Corinthians 11.30). Even the things that should make him strong and proud make him weak as a vision (supernatural experience) led not to his exaltation but to the experience of ongoing suffering sent by God himself (2 Corinthians 12.1-7). Much debate has been as to the nature of this suffering with the predominant viewpoint holding that Paul experienced some form of ongoing physical ailment. Regardless of the specific cause, Paul felt it hindered his life and ministry, and pleaded with God to remove it from him on at least three occasions. Paul may be speaking metaphorically here as the number three can serve as an allusion to an ongoing, repeated prayer. Whether three specific prayers or an ongoing prayer, the point is that Paul did not readily delight in this suffering. However, to Paul's request, God responded with a resounding, "No." He would not remove the experience of suffering from Paul because he wanted Paul to recognize that in suffering God's grace was sufficient. Paul did not need his health because he had what he needed most, God's grace. In fact, the suffering made room for God's grace to be experienced in its fullest (perfect) form. Because this was the case, Paul chose to accept his sufferings, both the ongoing physical suffering and the itinerant experiences of suffering brought on through various causes because they made room for Paul to experience grace. When Paul was weakened by suffering God's grace (power) had room to come to the fore and remain the focus. Therefore, in suffering, Paul experienced the affirmation that he was part of

what God was doing and that God approved of him, even though he was not a so-called Super Apostle!

Real life with Blake:

I don't like to hurt. I don't know anyone who does, really. The problem is that so much of life hurts. As I age, my joints feel the effects of countless miles pounded out on the pavement. I hurt. As I seek to parent my children and I recognize their failures and my own in parenting them, I hurt. As I pastor and hard-hearted religious people resist Christ and take their resistance out on me, I hurt. Because my brain doesn't make the chemicals it is supposed to make at just the right levels causing my moods to swing lower than normal on a regular basis, I hurt. The reality is life hurts. Life hurts because it is life, and life hurts because following Jesus hurts, sometimes more than others. It depends on how many religious people are around. I have spent most of my life trying not to hurt. I suppose that I always assumed that hurting wasn't normal, that it was somehow bad. I suppose on one level there is some truth to that. Hurting is a sign that something in life has gone wrong, and if it is wrong, then I need to make it right so I can stop hurting. So I have spent the better part of my life running from pain, and suffering, and religious people! I have just assumed that it is bad to hurt. In this, I am just like the majority of Americans. We are a culture who seeks to avoid pain at any cost. I am coming to recognize that pain has its purpose, and that rather than running from it, perhaps it is best to simply embrace it. No, I don't enjoy pain anymore than I did before. The difference is that I recognize that as awful as the experience of pain feels, it does something pretty wonderful in me if I will let it do its work. I am learning that pain makes room for the experience of God's grace. Pain creates a gap between my strength and my needs, making room for God's grace to rush in to fill the gap. When I don't hurt, I am tempted to make it through life on my own, apart from God. In the experience of pain and suffering, I don't have a choice but to rely on God because I can't make it any other way.

In these moments I catch a glimpse of real power, the resurrection power of God, but to see it I am learning I first have to be nailed to a cross and laid in a tomb. I have to admit that when suffering comes, my first inclination is to run, especially when I see it coming at me in the form of religious people. But, I am learning to be still and allow it to wash over me because in this I find I am most open to God's amazing grace.

Real life with you:

No one likes pain. In fact, the experience of pain can be a royal pain, one we seek to avoid. Somehow we feel that the experience of pain and suffering is wrong. At one level, the experience of pain and suffering does indicate something in life has gone wrong. However, we need not seek to avoid the experience of pain and suffering. Pain is part of the human experience, and God can use it for our good. No. Pain is not good, but good things can come out of pain. When we hurt, it is usually because we have lost strength and power. Nothing hurts quite like the realization that life is out of our control. In the midst of this loss of power, we discover that God's grace is present and this is enough. Grace becomes the stuff of life, sustaining and carrying us in our time of weakness. Apart from our weakness, we would not have relied upon grace, but our pain has given us a gift, the gift of needing grace. This week, consider those areas of your life where you hurt, where suffering has become part of your experience. Rather than seeking to devise a strategy to stop the pain, could you consider meditating upon God's words in 2 Corinthians 12.9? Could you allow God to speak to you about where he is and how he is sustaining you in your time of weakness and pain? Could you ask him for the grace to acknowledge the hurt you feel but also the gift this hurt affords you, the gift of grace?



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