



GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

October 2, 2016

Discussion Guide

Myth of Flawlessness

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 state they have held back.)

GETTING STARTED:

10 MINUTES

- Do you feel that the presence of brokenness in one's life is negative? Could you elaborate?
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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, discuss the background of Paul's second letter to Corinth.
- Read 2 Corinthians 12.1-10 aloud. Pause and read the text once more.
- What reasons does Paul have for boasting about his weaknesses (broken areas) rather than his greatness (put-together areas)? Seek to find as many as possible.
- Do people typically boast about the weak areas of their lives? Could you elaborate?
- What might be areas of weakness (brokenness) in your own life? Would you consider boasting about them to others? Could you elaborate?
- React to the following statement: "Our brokenness makes room for others to see God's grace." In light of what Paul says, how might or how might this not be the case? Have you ever experienced this in your own life? Could you explain?
- How might the truth that God can use our brokenness change how we feel about our broken parts? The broken parts of others? How might this influence how we function as the Church?
- Consider closing in prayer, asking God to shine the light of his grace through the

cracks created by our brokenness.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

PAIN AND SUFFERING

The presence of pain and suffering is common to the experience of life. However, much debate has been had over its meaning and causes, as well as how much pain and suffering a person should endure. The most common assumption made when one undergoes the experience of pain and suffering is that something is wrong and that the experience of pain must be resolved as soon as possible. This assumption can involve the identification of causes outside the person such as the wrong-doing of others or it can involve the identification of wrongdoing by the one who is suffering. Scripture bears witness to both causes, the first an issue of injustice and the second an issue of judgment or chastisement for sin (Job 4.7-9; Zechariah 12; Psalm 94.12-13; Hebrews 12.6). The resolution of the first is found in a call for justice and the second, in a call to repentance and return. While the sources of the painful experience might differ, the underlying cause in both is the same, the presence of wrongdoing. Therefore, the experience can be resolved with the rectifying of behavior. Because pain and suffering can be caused by wrong-doing, some people develop a firm link between the two, assuming an almost mechanical cause and effect relationship in every instance of suffering; that is, the experience of suffering indicates that someone has engaged in wrong-doing. Thus, when one undergoes an experience of pain, the natural response is to seek to rectify behavior. However, sometimes there is no behavior to rectify or the rectification of such does not resolve the experience of pain. This is because the experience of pain and suffering is not always brought about by wrongdoing.

In Scripture, we discover that pain and suffering can come as an experience intended by God. In such cases, God deliberately allows/sends(?) painful experiences in order to further his purposes in the life of his people. These purposes can involve the humbling of his people (2 Corinthians 12.7), the refining of their faith (1 Peter 1.6-7), their sanctification (1 Peter 4.1-2), or a place in which they grow so they might better minister to others (2 Corinthians 1.3-4). In these cases, the experience of suffering is not something

which needs to be resolved, but an experience in which one is offered an opportunity to grow and develop insofar as they receive the experience in faith. In these instances, the presence of pain is nothing short of God's offer to lavish his grace upon his people (2 Corinthians 12.7-10) as they imitate the very life of Christ (1 Peter 3.17-18).

The difficulty in responding to the experience of pain and suffering comes when one tries to determine the cause, as the cause, in many ways, determines the response of those who undergo the experience of suffering and those who support this person. As can be seen in the case of Job, when the cause is wrongly determined, relationships can be damaged and one's faith can be traumatized, particularly when one is falsely accused of wrongdoing. Perhaps the most judicious approach regarding suffering involves the slow process of discernment before one reacts. This discernment can and should be done on both the individual and corporate level. On the individual level, one might hold the experience of pain before God, honestly explaining the effect it is having upon oneself. Next, this individual might open himself to God revealing any wrongdoing which needs to be addressed through confession and repentance. The person might then move about their life over the next several days listening to what God might say through Scripture, other believers, books, or any other means he might choose. On the corporate level, the individual might surround herself with three to four believers with whom she is close. After a time of prayer in which they admit their dependence upon God, the friends might ask probing questions of the one who is suffering, questions involving the state of her soul, her spiritual practices, and her daily life. These questions are not to be accusatory but open questions allowing for the person to bring their life into the light of loving community. Should nothing come to light which needs to be addressed on both the individual or corporate level, the one who is suffering might assume that God has good purposes for the experience. He might then join with others in asking God to lavish his grace in such a way that the one who suffers might grow and God might be glorified. None of this precludes the seeking of medical attention or psychological help when necessary. However, one need not endure the shame or guilt of wrongdoing, but rather know God has deeper purposes so long as the experience of suffering remains.

THE TEXT

2 CORINTHIANS 12.1-10: *BOASTING ABOUT SUFFERING*

Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth is his most personal letter to the congregation and his most difficult to interpret. Much of the difficulty arises from a definite switch in tone in the midst of the letter from warm and conciliatory (2 Corinthians 1-9) to combative (2 Corinthians 10-13). Many suggestions have been offered as to why Paul's tone changes so suddenly, but the most persuasive seems to be that Paul received a negative report regarding the congregation as he was penning his letter. Rather than starting over, Paul chose to continue his letter, picking up with this most recent information.

The negative news which Paul received seems to involve a move within the congregation to defer to a new set of leaders whom Paul terms "super-apostles," men who seem to discredit Paul's identity as an apostle or legitimate leader within the church. The nature of the discrediting statements do not seem to involve theology as Paul is perfectly capable of mounting a theological defense but he does no such thing in these last chapters of the letter. Rather, it appears that the nature of the disagreement involves Paul's experience of suffering. It seems that this new set of leaders regularly boast that they are true leaders (in contrast with Paul) because of their greatness which involves an absence of suffering, strong financial support, and spiritual visions. In order to regain his influence within the church, Paul resorts to "similar" boasting, though he does so in a tongue-in-cheek manner demonstrating that the only matter worth boasting about is the experience of suffering.

In chapter 12, Paul engages in this tongue-in-cheek boasting with regard to a vision which he had. With his mentioning of his vision, Paul steps onto the playing field of his opponents, but the manner in which he boasts demonstrates he refuses to play by their rules. This is seen from the beginning as Paul relays his experience in the third person, thus distancing himself from the experience. While this vision had a profound impact on Paul's life, he wants to distance himself from it in such a way as to demonstrate that the vision itself is not what matters.

The vision Paul relates involves him being caught up by God into the highest level of heaven, which

in Jewish thought was the third level (Testament of Levi 2.7-10; 3.1-4). Paul is very clear that he is not certain if his experience was simply a vision or whether it was a bodily experience. What he is certain of is that he did not seek out this experience but was sought out by God. In this vision, Paul heard the conversation of heaven which was beyond words and which Paul was forbidden to relate. Paul notes that if he were like his opponents, he would boast about such an experience as it would make him appear to be great. However, he is not like his opponents. Though he has had a vision, equal to or greater than their own, Paul chooses to boast about his weaknesses. Here Paul is not necessarily referring to bodily weakness but to areas of his life or experiences which reveal he is not whole. One of these areas involves the aftermath of this great vision.

After his experience with God, Paul might have been tempted to declare himself to be a great person having been chosen for such an experience. However, in order to keep Paul from focusing upon his own excellence, God chose to afflict Paul with a thorn in the flesh. The most accurate translation probably should be that of a "stake" in his side. The reference can be to something physical, but it need not be. What Paul does make clear is that this affliction is like a demonic messenger which physically beats him. Much debate has been had as to the nature of this God-given torment. The earliest suggestion by the Church Fathers was that of Paul's opponents who constantly dogged him. More recently, the common interpretation has been that of a physical ailment such as bad eyesight, though others have suggested things such as depression, anxiety, despair, and sexual temptation. In the end, we do not know the exact nature of Paul's affliction. What we do know is that it was apparent to both Paul and others. This was an area in which Paul, the great apostle and healer, was himself not whole. Paul felt this area of brokenness was so severe that it hindered his ministry. Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, he pleaded three times for God to remove this affliction (Matthew 26.36-46). However, God refused. Instead, God invited Paul to view the experience of suffering as an invitation to experience his grace; that is, God invited Paul to view this area of brokenness as something which made room for the expression of his gracious power. Over a span of 14 years, Paul had found this to be the case. Therefore, he chose to boast about this specific

brokenness and to embrace the experience of pain and suffering because in these experiences he found himself strengthened by God's grace.

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

I want to be fixed. I have areas in my life which haunt and trouble me. Every day, in one way or another, I come face to face with these areas, as do others. Just this past Thursday, I was having a conversation with a dear friend when I suddenly became defensive and standoffish. In that moment, one for which I later apologized, we both experienced one of those broken areas of my life. Every time this happens, I am reminded of how much of a mess I am, how great my need for redemption is. This is the good part. However, there is a dark part. The dark part is that in some of these areas, I don't seem to be getting any better. There are some parts of me that seem to stay just as broken as they have always been. While God is working on so many other areas, he seems to be leaving some alone and it is very frustrating. I reason, if God is redeeming and transforming me, shouldn't God be transforming and redeeming all of me? At times my frustration moves into shame. I feel worthless as a person and a pastor. How can someone like me lead others? I am a terrible person because I am still so broken. For many years I have labored under this shame which has often led me to places of despair and depression. However, more recently, I am finding that God is stripping away those layers of shame. Has he now decided to fix me? Quite the contrary. I am still as broken in these areas as ever. What is changing is how I understand these areas. I am coming to understand that sometimes God has reasons for leaving pieces of me broken. It doesn't feel good. It is really disturbing, but God has a really good reason, a reason which has everything to do with his grace and glory. I like to think of these areas as windows. You see, God lives deep inside me. When God leaves broken areas, there are cracks and holes through which he can shine out. These broken areas should keep me from serving or relating or ministering, but they don't. Somehow I move forward, and the only way that is possible is God has done it by his grace. If God fixed all my cracks, then when people saw me all they would see was me and not the God who lives in me. They would think I was wonderful and put-together and over time I might begin to think the same thing. But, so long as I have cracks, people see both God and me. They see what God can do through someone like me. I don't love

my cracks. I don't like what they represent. I know that one day God will mend them, but for now, I am thankful that God shines through my cracks.

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

We are all a mess. You are a mess. I am a mess. We are all in need of God's grace, in need of his transformation and redemption. But, what happens when we open our hearts and hands to receive God's grace and we stay a mess? What then? Does this mean we have not received God's grace? Have we done something wrong? Are we off in the weeds on our journey of faith? Not necessarily. Sometimes God leaves people like you and me a mess; that is, sometimes he doesn't fix everything on purpose. Why not? Because God has a purpose for our mess. What you and I see as brokenness and mess, God views as wonderful opportunities to demonstrate that he is working in and through you. You might think of these areas like windows. They allow people to see that God is in you. If God closed all the windows, fixed you all up, all people would see is you, not the God who is living within you. God leaves some things not fixed on purpose, so people can see that the one who is moving, ministering, serving, helping, and healing is none other than him, not some well-off put-together person. Simply put, our mess makes room for God's grace. This doesn't mean we celebrate our mess or reveal in it. No. We ask for God's full redemption, but until that comes we do not have to hide in shame, believing our mess disqualifies us in some way. No, it is our brokenness which we show others that allows others to see that God is real and working in this world. This week, consider pondering the areas in which you remain broken. What feelings do these areas bring to you? Ask God to reveal how he might use these areas to demonstrate his presence in your life to others. Consider how this changes, if at all, your feelings about these areas. Consider journaling your thoughts and prayers to God



SENIOR
PASTOR
BLAKE
SHIPP

 twitter.com/blake_shipp

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