

What are you like when it comes to suffering? And by suffering, I don't mean something dreadfully serious, I mean when you bang your hand on something or similar minor injuries? I have to admit I'm not that great with pain. But Alison's family, the Campbells have always had a high pain threshold. I can remember when I was first dating Alison, that I was recommended to go to their dentist with a little filling I had. I can remember sitting down on the dentist's chair as he came towards me with a drill. So in a panic I stopped him in his tracks and asked him what he was going to do. He explained that he had to remove the decay on the tooth before having to fill it. At which point I asked, "Will you not be giving me any anaesthetic?" - To which he replied, "Oh the Campbells never need it". To which I said, "Well I'm not sitting here with you coming towards me with a drill without you first numbing my mouth".

I know it's a silly story about avoiding pain, but it's a very natural thing to react to. And throughout life we experience pain, but not just physical pain. We experience emotional pain and so we combat it by sometimes avoiding relationships. We experience spiritual pain and so we sometimes avoid talking about those things because we don't want others to know our inner issues .

In scripture if there's anyone who could be called an expert (if that's the right term) in suffering, it would probably be Paul. He experienced some of the most intense moments of persecution that anyone could go through.

But what's amazing about him, is that he says that suffering isn't to be avoided but to be embraced. Paul doesn't try to dodge it, he actually boasts in it. In Romans 5:3-5, Paul writes, "*Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope*". In 2 Corinthians 11:23-30, Paul provides a list of his own sufferings and trials as a testament to his dedication and faith in Christ.

So as we look at this passage, a little bit of context. Paul & Barnabas have been in Lystra. He heals a cripple and then all the people consider him as some kind of deity so they begin to sacrifice things before him. And then in verse 19, some Jews come from Antioch and they persuade the crowd to go against Paul & Barnabas. And it's probably after he is knocked out unconscious after stones have been hurled at him that they drag him outside the city thinking that he's already dead.

Now you might wonder why the Lord doesn't intervene. Paul's face is probably full of blood – he has no strength left to stand. Imagine the deep pain and anguish he is feeling? And with God's grace some disciples come round him, get him fixed up and then instead of running as far away as possible, the text says that Paul goes back into the city. He gets everything sorted, before him and Barnabas head to Derbe. Derbe is the farthest he goes to on his journeys. Now if you look at the map of Paul's missionary journey you would see that it would be very easy from Derbe to just head back to where he started from in Antioch, Syria because it would be a complete loop that he has done. But in verse 21 it says that they return to Lystra, Iconium and then Antioch (but that's not the same Antioch as where he started from, it's Antioch in Pisidia). In other words he's going back to the people he's visited. In all three of those cities he faced persecution – they were actually driven out of

these cities. And yet they have the boldness to go back. Would it not be so much easier to avoid the persecution and go straight home? Of course it would, but for Paul & Barnabas there's more work to be done in those cities. Their first time in those places was to evangelise, but now they come back to disciple, to shape and nurture the believers. Verse 22 says they returned, *'strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith'*.

If these young believers have seen what's happened to Paul and Barnabas, wouldn't it be easier to just pack up and say "well it was good while it lasted". But Paul and Barnabas knew that for such young Christians this could break them early on in their faith, and so it was necessary to return and strengthen them to stay their ground, even in the face of opposition and persecution. And how does Paul strengthen them? Well he doesn't say, "if you follow Jesus you are going to be blessed with all the riches in this life – you're going to get a new job and a new house. Life will be so much easier if you follow Jesus". No he doesn't say any of that, does he. There's a good chance that these young believers can see the effects that the persecution has had on Paul. He stands before them and says this, *"We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."* He's saying this isn't going to be easy – suffering goes with the territory – we must go through it to enter the Kingdom. Folks, suffering and being a Christian are inseparable. We need to know there will be pain when we choose to follow Jesus. But opposition will come to try and make us take the easy road.

For some of you in your life there will be times of persecution and opposition where you will want to just call it a day. Jesus said that the only way to the Kingdom of God will be through him, but he said it was through the narrow gate. It's not going to be the easy road. So Paul is in these churches to encourage and strengthen them, but to make it clear it will be hard. But the point of Paul's approach and others isn't to find a way of making us feel better, but rather to change how we all approach the road of suffering. Because we have to experience it then we have to change how we see suffering. As we worship a suffering saviour this will change how we view suffering.

In the way in which we understand that there was a purpose in the suffering of Jesus, then we have to discover what the purpose is in our suffering.

So let's think for the rest of our time, what the purpose of suffering may be. But as I look at these I think it's really important to note that suffering never originates from God. God is holy, God is without sin, God breathes life into us, not death. He walks with us through the suffering if we acknowledge him to help. Hope that comes from suffering when we turn towards the Lord. And so we can find a purpose through God in the midst of what suffering we experience. So here's a few reasons :

Firstly, we suffer so that we may eventually comfort others as they go through suffering. 2 Cor 1:3-5 Paul writes this *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵ For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ"*.

Our suffering equips us to comfort others in the same way that God comforted us in our time of need. Paul never says “Your suffering isn’t that bad. It could be worse”. He never downplays it, does he. And yet we at times do. I was with someone this past week who is extremely ill, and from his sick bed, he said to me “There’s other people worse than me”. And whilst many may say that, it’s really important that everyone in their time of suffering, knows the comfort of others. If today you are suffering, please don’t bypass the comfort and prayer of others just because there are others who you think are worse than you. If that is you, please give permission for others that have gone through times of suffering to journey alongside you. There will be people who simply want to comfort you as they have seen God comfort them.

The second reason we suffer, is so that others may see God working in us. Let me read from 1 Peter 5:8-9, “*Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.* ⁹ *Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings*”. Stand firm in the faith. I said earlier that it would have been so easy for Paul to take the easy route home, but he didn’t. He set an example for those young believers of his trust in the Lord. There are many pitfalls that we can fall into in the middle of suffering – we can give up, and even give up on God. According to Peter one of the strategies to fight the devil is knowing that you are not on your own in your suffering. God has not abandoned you. There is someone out there, there is likely someone this morning here, who needs to see how you have trusted in the Lord in the midst of suffering. It’s not about putting on a façade to show people that everything is ok. It’s not ok. People need to see the real side of things so that they have permission to suffer and not put on some brave face. But what brings hope is when they see us cling to the Lord, that our dependency is on how God works in us, that we cling onto God’s promises when life is caving in.

And then finally the reason we suffer is to display our greater dependency on God. Let me read from 2 Corinthians 12:7-9, Paul says, “*in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.* ⁸ *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.* ⁹ *But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* Paul is saying that the purpose of his suffering was so that the attention moves away from himself and moves towards God’s resources. There’s a suffering that we can experience where we recognise that we’ve nothing left in our tank to give, we’ve exhausted our resources. You see your suffering doesn’t care about you. But while it doesn’t care for you, your heavenly Father does care for you, and he has resources to plant in you as you depend more on him. And while you are at the end of your rope, Jesus comes and says “Come to me all who are weary and heavily laden and I will give you rest” I have the resources you need. So when the walls come crashing down, God gives us the power to endure. This is why Paul boasts in his weakness, because if he is weak then this demonstrates a greater dependency on God and he gets the Glory”. And Paul inevitably knows that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us through Jesus’ second coming (Romans 8:18).

I started out this talk with a story about the Campbells and their pain thresholds. I’m going to finish with a story about Alison. When Josh was being born there was real trauma with his delivery, but even though it was so difficult for Alison, there was so much blessing when we

could hold Josh in our arms, and the same was the case with Nathan. Whilst as a man I dare to ask the question, How do all of you women endure the pain of child birth? Well it's because of the joy that comes next. Pain in life will happen, but can we see beyond to the joy of glory that is to be revealed. We must remember what Paul says in this passage, "yes we walk through trials, but let's not forget that from this we enter the kingdom of God". That's Paul's main point. Yes you will go through persecution, yes this life stinks, and yes we have to walk through it, but eventually we know that those who live in Christ will walk into the Kingdom of God. We know the ending. We know the destination. We can endure all things because the treasure at the end of the road is far greater than the troubles we face on the journey.

How wonderful the day will be when Jesus returns to gather us into the promised Kingdom, and how much sweeter will that life be in having dealt with the pain here and know the peace that is to come in God's presence. One second of glory will far outweigh a life of suffering. If you are struggling today, you have to know that if you are in Christ, God doesn't waste your sorrows. All of the pain doesn't go to waste. All of those tears are not ignored. If you need any more proof then look no further to the cross where Jesus endures all the pain in order to obtain your salvation. He experienced the greatest suffering to gain the greatest reward. And he invites you to come to him with your burdens and he will give you rest.