

The Beauty of Brokenness

By Adam B. Dooley

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It was not my best sermon.

After being away from my congregation for six weeks, the induction phase of my son's chemotherapy ended, and we returned home from the Memphis Ronald McDonald House. Though he was now in remission, 128 consecutive weeks of treatment remained in order to prevent him from relapsing with leukemia. We were tired, emotionally spent, and fearful of what lay ahead of us.

With my pastoral duties resuming, I decided to preach through the Old Testament book of Job. What I did not anticipate, however, was the uncontrollable emotion I felt when I opened my Bible and began to speak. As an active participant in the story, the passage I read was neither theoretical nor flat. Each verse struck a different emotive cord as I shared about the inevitability of trials in a fallen world. And with every insight I explained, it seemed as though God was speaking directly to me through His Word.

That's when the tears began to flow. At first, I was embarrassed. The vulnerability of the moment left me exposed like never before, and frankly, I did not like it. The more I tried to pull it together the less composure I seemed to have. Yet, as God carried me through the message, His strength was perfected through my weakness in an obvious way. I realized, perhaps for the first time, that God usually breaks us before He uses us.

Then, in a moment of spiritual clarity, I felt unexplainable joy. Joy because the Holy Spirit was so obviously present and active. Joy because others were benefitting from my hardship. Joy because of the manifest power of God's Word. And joy because, unlike anything before or since, I needed the realities that I dared to proclaim.

Don't get me wrong – I never really doubted any of the doctrines in Scripture, but my son's cancer forced me to lean on the Lord's promises like I had not previously. When we move from merely explaining Scripture for the benefit of others to experiencing the same truth for ourselves, life changes occur.

Such is the beauty of brokenness.

Earthly pain is often God's chosen method to help live out the eternal truths we claim to believe (James 1:2-4). He sometimes uses unexpected affliction to add the depth of experience to the width of our knowledge (Psalm 147:3). Pastors in particular face the constant danger of being educated beyond their obedience level.

Without discipline, we will arrogantly project outward images of ourselves that contradict the inward realities of who we are. Even if unintentionally, we may prop up the professional holy man persona in an effort to meet the expectations of the people we serve. Hypocrisies like these will not only render us ineffective but also jeopardize the health and vitality of our souls.

Adversity usually represents a divine invitation toward greater authenticity. Tears, as unwelcome as they might be, are a powerful instrument to help us glory more in our Savior than ourselves (Psalm 6:8). The destination of obedience is often at the end of affliction's road (Psalm 119:67).

So, I no longer run from the tears. And neither should you. Today's heartache may become a future pillow with which you can comfort others who are hurting (2 Cor. 1:3-4). In His goodness, God is thoroughly more strategic with our trials than we are, often allowing His children to share with others the strength and consolation they received directly from Him. One reason every believer needs to live in Christian community is the collaborative strength we find through the shared experiences of the body.

God's preachers are not immune from the burdens this requires or the blessings it produces. The Lord instructs us to love one another (Rom. 13:8), bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2), be kind to one another (Eph. 4:32), comfort one another (1 Thess. 4:18), pray for one another (James 5:16), teach and admonish one another (Col. 3:16), and serve one another (1 Peter 4:10).

Additionally, every trial is a potential platform for your declaring the gospel and demonstrating genuine faith (Phil. 1:12-14). Though it seems counterintuitive, our most powerful opportunities to be witnesses for Jesus will often come when our lives are falling apart. Because unbelievers frequently dismiss Christianity as unnecessary at best or a crutch at worst, observing faithful saints who suffer well is a powerful jolt of reality that opens wayward hearts to the claims of Christ. When non-Christians encounter the sustaining faith of a weary saint, the result is powerfully inspirational.

Better still is the hope that our troubles are often doorways that lead to deeper intimacy with Christ as our faith is proven and stretched (1 Peter 1:6-9). Perhaps one of the greater pitfalls of ministry is losing our passion for Christ in exchange for our pursuit of ministerial success and recognition. Hardships often serve as a needed wakeup call to remind us that the great reward of our faith is Christ Himself. As he recounted all that he lost to pursue Jesus, the Apostle Paul joyfully boasted that it was all

for the sake of Christ (Phil. 3:7)
that he might gain Christ (Phil. 3:8)
to be found Him (Phil. 3:9)
that he might know Him (Phil. 3:10).

Apart from suffering, we simply cannot learn about God or relate to Him on an intimate level. Believing God is real, and present is one thing. Trusting that He is enough no matter what you face is another matter entirely. Though we are quite capable of cognitively grasping these ideas, we cannot embrace them fully until we experience their reality for ourselves. Trials force us to move beyond superficial knowledge about Jesus into a meaningful, daily walk with Him. Much to our chagrin, the power of Christ's resurrection is always preceded by the fellowship in His sufferings (Phil. 3:10)

So take heart preacher. No matter how God chooses to enter your pain and regardless of how many tears you shed, remember that He promises to wipe each one of them away (Rev. 21:4) and collects them in a bottle (Psa. 56:8). Against the backdrop of eternity, all trials are temporary. Isaiah prophesied of a day when "they will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9)."

No wonder "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Rom. 8:18)." The Lord has the final say about all our adversities. When we worship through our deepest valleys our present struggles wilt under the magnificent shadow of the future.

Behind every tear that falls and every heartache we carry, God is actively working all things together for good for those who know Him and love Him (Rom. 8:28). Even on our darkest days, we can trust that He will never leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5-6). Though life is sometimes too short to heal all our hurts, the hindsight of eternity will make all things clear.

Ironically, trials that make us doubt God's purposes on this earth will lead us to praise His plans in heaven. Tears have a way of keeping our hope anchored to a world to which we've never been.

Maybe that sermon wasn't so bad after all.

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