

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF PAUL AND THE PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED OF TODAY!

“HIS SERMONS WERE OVER THEIR HEADS. HIS OPINIONATED VIEWS ALIENATED HIS COLLEAGUES. COWORKERS FOUND HIM BOASTFUL, EVEN ARROGANT. A PHYSICAL DISABILITY DROVE HIM TO OVER-FUNCTION IN MINISTRY. THE FIRST TWO CONGREGATIONS HE PASTURED REJECTED HIS LEADERSHIP, AND, UNABLE TO STILL THEIR INTERNAL STRIFE AND BICKERING, HE WENT ON TO A THIRD. BY SOME MEASURES OF SUCCESS, HIS MINISTRY WAS A FAILURE. THIS WAS NO MYTHICAL PASTOR. THIS WAS THE APOSTLE PAUL.”

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INTRODUCTION: THE IMPACT AND MEANING TO MY LIFE

I decided that in beginning this paper I would first approach the impact to which Paul's letters had on me when reading them in regards to physical suffering or disability. Living with a physical challenge myself, and facing the many challenges of life in a wheelchair has given a unique perspective into how I would view Paul's discourse in speaking to those who face these challenges today. More so, it is the message I see him speaking in his letters to the Corinthians that I see needing to continue in our society today.

Reading the letters myself has been of great encouragement in how I am to approach life and his words have become a bit of a foundation to which I hope my attitude would prevail. For this reason in this paper I would like to write Paul's discourse in the form of wording it through his own present tense. I hope that through this approach any readers who would face the sufferings or physical challenges of this world would find this paper equally constitutional and declarational as I have in writing it.

PAUL'S DISCOURSE

The physical challenges of this world are far from few as they come at us from all sides. We may face many dangers and challenges by the people and places of this world but they are no different from the many challenges to which I have faced within my own life. "I have traveled many weary miles. I have faced danger from flooded rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the stormy seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be Christians but are not." (2 Cor. 11:26)

"Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, so that the life of Jesus will be obvious in our dying bodies." (2 Cor. 4:11) Both Christians and physical structures may tell us we have no place in this world but it is our actions and the way we live our lives today that will show our place in this world and the next. In the words of Richard J. Foster, "Joy, not grit, is the hallmark of holy obedience. We need to be light-hearted in what we do to avoid taking ourselves too seriously. It is a cheerful revolt against self and pride. Our work is jubilant, carefree, and merry. Utter abandonment to God is done freely and with celebration. And so I urge you to enjoy this ministry of self-surrender. Don't push too hard. Hold this work lightly, joyfully. The saints throughout the ages have witnessed to this reality.... You know, of course, that they are not speaking of a silly, superficial, bubbly kind of joy like that flaunted in modern society. No, this is a deep, resonant joy that has been shaped and tempered by the fires of suffering and sorrow; joy through the cross, joy because of the cross."

"I think you ought to know, dear friends, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and completely overwhelmed, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we learned not to rely on ourselves, but on God who can raise the dead. And he did deliver us from mortal danger. And we are confident that he will continue to deliver us." (2 Cor. 1:8-10) Our vision of God's kingdom is centered not upon the mortal dangers and temporary sufferings of this life such as our physical challenges but, on the far greater vision of

an eternal spiritual and physical growth in a world that is present but has not yet come to full revelation.

Maltbie Babcock brings a definition to our physical challenges and our focus on the world to come when he wrote, "Present suffering is not enjoyable, but life would be worth little without it. The difference between iron and steel is fire, but steel is worth all it costs. Iron ore may think itself senselessly tortured in the furnace, but when the watch-spring looks back, it knows better. David enjoyed pain and trouble no more than we do, but the time came when he admitted that they had been good for him. Though the aspect of suffering is hard, the prospect is hopeful, and the retrospect will start a song, if we are "the called according to his purpose," in suffering."

It is easy to become distracted and blinded from this vision when we face our present physical sufferings but these temptations are no different than those faced by others with unseen disabilities in the world of the psychological or spiritual forces. "The temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it." (1 Cor. 10:13) Our temptations in our sufferings may be different than those faced by those with challenges in a psychological or spiritual condition and so also God's offer of a way out and deliverance will also be different and diverse in nature.

However different our salvation is in relationship with Christ we are still equally united with one another. "If one part suffers, all parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad." (1 Cor. 12:26) It is in overcoming this temptation to draw boundaries between one another that we see God's kingdom coming to fruition in the unity of our faith as a community that reflects the greatness and power of God. In submission to one another's weaknesses and the lifting up of God's empowerment in each one of us we become strong and great in his glory and name.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer enriches the qualities of our Christian community when illustrating that, "In a Christian community, everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. Only when even the smallest link is securely interlocked is the chain unbreakable. A

community which allows unemployed members to exist within it will perish because of them. It will be well, therefore, if every member receives a definite task to perform for the community, that he may know in hours of doubt that he, too, is not useless and unusable. Every Christian community must realize that not only do the weak need the strong, but also that the strong cannot exist without the weak. The elimination of the weak is the death of the fellowship.” “All praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the source of every mercy and the God who comforts us. He comforts us . . . so that we can comfort others.” (2 Cor. 1:3-4)

“Since I know it is all for Christ’s good, I am quite content with my weaknesses and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Cor. 12:10) The illusions of words such as handicapped, disabled, and crippled have no authority over us. The false depictions of our inabilities and dictations of our not being able to participate in all aspects of community, employment, and social involvement have no power as to our human identities.

Kay Arthur encourages us with the witness that, “So many times we say that we can't serve God because we aren't whatever is needed. We're not talented enough or smart enough or whatever. But if you are in covenant with Jesus Christ, He is responsible for covering your weaknesses, for being your strength. He will give you His abilities for your disabilities!” It is with this vision that I can take comfort in the knowledge that today I am weak in the grips of physical disability but, tomorrow I am strong. Today’s present subjective illusions have become tomorrows empowered objective realities. Praise God!