

SERENDIPITY #2
THE VICTORY OF DEFEAT
II Corinthians 1 - 7

I. Introduction.

A. Waterloo: a defeat or a victory?

The answer depends on your perspective... which side you are on.

B. A new understanding of Victory.

Conversion to Christ caused a radical in the way Paul viewed victory.

B.C. Victorious Life	A.D. Victorious Life
- Being the conqueror	- Being conquered
- Taking captives	- Being a captive
- Coming out on top	- Coming out on bottom
- Winning	- Being defeated
- Destroying the enemy	- Loving the enemy
- The end (winning) justifies the means	- The means is just as important as the end
- Getting my way	- Getting His way
- I lose when I win	- I win when I lose

How did such a radical transformation occur?

II. A Painful Letter.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church is different than his other letters. There is more autobiographical data here than in any of his other writings. In fact, much of the letter reads almost like a journal, giving expression to Paul's inner thoughts, struggles and hopes.

The first seven chapters are filled with references to difficult circumstances associated with life in general... and the Christian life in particular. Paul's vocabulary expresses a sobering reality: trouble (1:4; 4:17; 6:4; 7:4), suffering (1:5,6,7), hardship (1:8; 6:4), pressure (1:8), death (1:9; 4:10-12; 6:9), distress (2:4; 6:4), anguish (2:4), perplexed (4:8), groaning (5:2-4), hunger (6:5), harassed (7:5), conflicts (7:5), fears (7:5), sorrow (7:7-11), etc.

Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult – once we truly understand and accept it – then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.

Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead, they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy. They voice their belief, noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, their tribe, their class, their nation, their race or even their species, and not upon others. I know about this moaning because I have done my share.

Life is a series of problems. Do we want to moan about them or solve them? (M. Scott Peck. The Road Less Traveled. 1978. p. 15).

As we examine the first seven chapters of II Corinthians, we discover some of the inner transformation that was occurring in Paul to enable him to come to the serendipitous discovery that victory comes through **defeat**.

A. The Triumphal Procession (II Corinthians 2:14-16).

¹⁴ *But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.* ¹⁵ *For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.* ¹⁶ *To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? (II Cor. 2:14-16).*

1) The Victory Parade.

The term used in verse 14 is a technical term that describes the victory parades in Roman cities when a general returned after a great victory in battle. Though there is some dispute about the exact order, the parade normally included:

- Government officials (senators, mayor, public officials....).
- Trumpeters.
- Religious officials (priests with censers full of incense).
- Wagons carrying the spoils and plunder of war (gold, silver, fabrics, art work, ceramic ware, etc.).
- The victorious Roman army (rank after rank). The crowds would cheer for joy.
- The triumphant general (in his chariot or on his horse) dressed in purple, crowned with the wreath of victory, carrying Roman scepter with the eagle on top.
- The captives, prisoners of war, in rags and chained together. The crowds would hiss and hurl insults. They were being led to the coliseum where they would be killed to entertain the masses.

a. What is very clear in the text:

- The conquering general is **Jesus**. He has won a great victory. He is displaying his conquests to the watching world.
- As believers in Jesus Christ, we are also in the procession.
- It is a **great privilege** to be in this parade. "Thanks be to God!"

b. What is not so clear: where's Waldo? (Where am I in this parade?)

The most popular answer to this question has been that Paul pictures us among **the victorious soldiers**. We won! The parade is in our honor. Victory means I am cheered by a friendly crowd and get to enjoy the spoils of battle. "Thanks be to God!"

2) A closer reading of the New Testament gives a radically different answer. Two passages are especially significant.

a. Colossians 2:15.

¹⁵ *And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, **triumphing over them** by the cross.*

In this passage Paul is crystal clear: to be led in triumphal procession means to be the one **who has been conquered**, not the one doing the conquering! To be led in this parade means that one lost the battle, not won it! (In this case, that refers to the demonic powers.)

b. I Corinthians 4:9-10.

⁹ *For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of **the procession**, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ...*

Here there is no doubt where Paul sees himself in the procession: at the end among the prisoners of war condemned to die.

- Paul had been in the enemy army, opposing Christ. But his rebellion was crushed. And now, he is a **captive of Christ**.
- This is a hostile crowd.
- His life will be sacrificed in honor of the victory won... and in recognition of his own defeat.
- Paul sees himself as a **trophy of grace**. Look what God did!
- Thanks be to God!!!

Over one hundred years ago, a blind Scottish preacher named George Matheson wrote a great hymn that captures the reality of Paul's serendipitous discovery.

*Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free.
Force me to render up my sword, and I shall conqueror be.
I sink in life's alarms when by myself I stand;
Imprison me within thine arms, and strong shall be my hand.*

TABLE TALK

1. Is your understanding of Victory B.C. or A.D.? When you became a Christian, did your understanding of victory change? Why? or Why not?
2. It's one thing to be a POW. It's another thing to be thankful for being a POW! Why was Paul so grateful to be a captive of Christ and put on display?
3. Are you sure you want to join this victory parade??? How do you join a parade like this?
4. How does one join the triumphal procession?

III. A Theology of Suffering.

Once Paul discovered the victory that comes through defeat and had joined the victory parade, he was positioned, for the first time in his life, to develop a **theology of suffering**. Although we should not expect to find a fully developed theology of suffering in these seven chapters of II Corinthians, we do find five basic ingredients that are indispensable.

A. The Purpose of Suffering (II Corinthians 1:3-11).

³ 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 have received from God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. ⁶ If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.

⁸ We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. ⁹ Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, ¹¹ as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. (II Cor. 1:3-11)

This passage underscores four great purposes in suffering:

- 1) Suffering teaches the one true source of **comfort**: God alone.

...who comforts us in all our troubles... Just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. (vv. 4-5)

In verses 3-7 the same root word is used ten times. It comes from the Greek word *parakletos* (*para*, "alongside," and *kaleo*, "to call.") It can be translated: comfort, console, encourage, exhort. This term is used by Jesus as a name for the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26:15; 26:16:7).

When tragedy strikes, we need someone to come alongside and put an arm around us, to be there, to listen, to help. This is comfort. It is much more than **sympathy**. Comfort can be given without words. God's presence, even in silence, is enough. He is there as the *Parakletos*, the Father of mercies, the God of all comfort. This makes all the difference.

- 2) Suffering prepares and equips me for **ministry to others**.

- *Who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God (v. 4).*

- *If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation... (v. 6).*

The best training for effective Gospel ministry comes not from seminaries or Bible schools but from God's **school of suffering**. Because God's grace has been working **in** these people, God's grace can now work **through** them.

No one can comfort a parent who has lost a child quite like another parent who has lost a child. No one comfort a divorcee, or someone who has lost a job, or is facing cancer, or experiencing financial disaster quite like someone who has experienced these traumas and found God's grace was sufficient. Those who have experienced God's comfort are best able to offer it to others. They are the most effective **ministers**.

- 3) Suffering produces **endurance**.

The word "patient endurance" literally means to "**abide under**." Anyone can trust in God in the good times. The real test comes in suffering and loss.

- 4) Suffering teaching us the true meaning of **faith**.

*We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered...under great pressure... we despaired even of life... But this happened that we might **not rely on ourselves** but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us. (vv. 8-10)*

We tend to forget how weak and helpless we really are. When suffering comes, we are reminded of how much we desperately need God! In this sense, affliction is a wonderful **gift of God**. *It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. (Ps.119: 71).*

B. The Power of Suffering (II Corinthians 4:7-12).

⁷ *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.* ⁸ *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair;* ⁹ *persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.* ¹⁰ *We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.* ¹¹ *For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed **in our mortal body**.* ¹² *So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. (II Cor. 4:7-12)*

1) Jars of clay.

Paul compares human life to a clay pot, an earthen vessel. By this, Paul reminds us that we are **fragile** and **flawed**. But if we are believers in Christ, we carry a priceless treasure in these jars of clay: the Holy Spirit, the grace of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

2) Power in the pots!

The container is important only because of what it contains. Perfume may be in a crystal vase or a styrofoam cup. What matters is what is on the inside. Our humble and broken condition only accentuates the power of the One living within us!

Very often the aroma of Christ in a believer's life is released only when the container is **broken**. Don't hide the cracks in the clay! Be real. Let your weaknesses show. Don't pretend to be something you're not. The cracks in the jar permit others to see what is inside. For this reason, **cracked pots** often make better ministers than fine china!

C. The Future of Suffering (II Corinthians 4:13-5:10).

¹³ *It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak,* ¹⁴ *because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence...*

¹⁶ *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.* ¹⁷ *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.* ¹⁸ *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

(5:1) Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. ² *Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling,* ³ *because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked.* ⁴ *For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.* ⁵ *Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*

⁶ *Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.* ⁷ *We live **by faith**, not **by sight**.* ⁸ *We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.* ⁹ *So we make it our goal to please him, whether*

we are at home in the body or away from it.¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. (II Cor. 4:13-5:10).

- 1) In Christ, our sufferings now should be seen as:
 - a. External (4:16). It only affects the **container**, not the contents.
 - b. Light (4:17). No big deal.
 - c. Momentary, temporary (4:17-18).
 - d. A reminder that we are **not home yet** (5:6-8).

- 2) In Christ, regardless of what tribulations come in this world, I can hope for:
 - a. A bodily resurrection (4:14).
 - b. Eternal glory that far **outweighs** all earthly troubles (4:17-18).
 - c. A new home (dwelling place) in heaven prepared by God (5:1-4).
 - d. New clothing to cover my shame... forever (5:1-4).

- 3) Paul's new concept of victory transformed how he thought about the future.
 - a. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the **deposit** that guarantees all that God has promised for the future (5:5).
 - b. Here, on earth, I'm **homesick** (5:6-8).
 - c. Faith "sees" the future... and therefore lives for it (5:7).
 - d. The goal of living today is to please God! One day soon we will stand before Him and give an account (5:9-10).
 - e. Conclusion: **Don't lose heart!!!** (4:1, 16).

- 4) Story of missionary couple returning to the United States after years of service in Africa. On board the same ship was Teddy Roosevelt returning from a safari. Teddy received a hero's welcome: crowds, bands, reporters, etc.

"It isn't fair," the missionary said to his wife. "Mr. Roosevelt comes home from a hunting trip, and the whole country is out to meet him. We get home after years of service, and nobody was there to greet us." His wife knew the right answer: "Honey, we aren't home yet." (*Be Encouraged*. Victor Books. 1984. Warren Wiersbe. p. 126).

D. The Badge of Suffering (II Corinthians 6:3-10).

*³ We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. ⁴ Rather, as servants of God **we commend ourselves** in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; ⁵ in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; ⁶ in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; ⁷ in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; ⁸ through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; ⁹ known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on;*

*beaten, and yet not killed;¹⁰ sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.
(II Cor. 6:3-10)*

Whenever Paul was forced to defend himself and set forth the basis of his authority and the validation of his ministry, he did not refer to: educational degrees, family pedigree, titles, positions, references, life experiences, etc. Rather, he referred to the things he had suffered for Christ... and for others. These were his apostolic credentials. This was the **validation** of his ministry. (See also II Cor. 11:22-30).

E. Good Grief (II Corinthians 7:8-10).

*⁸ Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—⁹ yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow **led you to repentance**. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. ¹⁰ Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. (II Cor. 7:8-10).*

1) Two kinds of sorrow:

- Godly sorrow – positive consequences
- Worldly sorrow – negative consequences

From the outside, it may be difficult to determine which sorrow is being experienced. They often look alike. Is this genuine grief over sin (a broken and contrite heart) or simply the result of wounded pride and not getting my own way?

2) Suffering's Greatest Benefit.

The greatest spiritual benefit of suffering is that it can lead to repentance. There is no value in **suffering itself**. Those who think this way only show that they are morbidly "religious" or perhaps even masochistic. The only thing redemptive in suffering is that it leads us to turn from sin, humble ourselves, deny ourselves, and surrender control to Jesus Christ, trusting him completely with the outcome.

3) Abraham Lincoln was our greatest president. Most historians would also agree that he also had one of the worst marriages of all our presidents. Could there be a correlation between faithfully enduring the pain of a bad marriage and leading the Nation with strength, compassion and moral character?

TABLE TALK

1. Describe your "theology of suffering." How has this study changed your thinking?

2. Today we have looked at five ingredients of supreme importance in developing a theology of suffering:
 - a. The purpose of suffering – enables us to minister to others.
 - b. The power of suffering – it reveals Christ in me, a "cracked pot."
 - c. The future of suffering – the weight of coming glory far exceeds any light, temporary problems I may currently be experiencing.
 - d. The badge of suffering – my truest credentials of my participation in the Gospel are the sufferings I've experienced with and for my Lord.
 - e. Good grief – suffering leads to humility, brokenness and repentance.

3. Describe how these ingredients need to be incorporated into your life. Be specific and relate your comments to an area of your life where you are currently experiencing pain.