

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

**SERMON SERIES:** Where is God When It Hurts?

**SERMON TITLE:** How Does Faith Help?

This morning we finish a four part sermon series based on Philip Yancey's book *Where is God When It Hurts?*<sup>1</sup> The question for today is: How Does Faith Help?

Now to be honest with you, in my experience, faith doesn't always help. I have known people who had faith in God, but then abandoned their faith when suffering became too great. I have known people whose lives were blessed with profound spiritual experiences, but then found their faith insufficient for sustaining them in times of crisis.

For example, I once met a family who were members of a non-denominational, charismatic church in West Texas. The mom and dad had given their lives to Christ. They had both had numerous ecstatic experiences of God's Spirit, and they were diligent in doing all that they could to see that their three girls came to faith for themselves. But then, disaster struck. One daughter was diagnosed with cancer. Countless prayers for healing were raised to God on her behalf, but she died nonetheless. And then, a second daughter was diagnosed with cancer. Countless prayers for healing were raised to God on her behalf, but she too died.

In the shock—in the grief—in the anger and in the pain—faith in God began to crumble for the survivors of this family. Then the final blow came when the mother was diagnosed with cancer. Many who knew her or knew about her, raised countless prayers for healing to God on her behalf, but in time, she too succumbed to the disease and what little remained of her husband's faith and her daughter's faith, died too. They could no longer see a purpose in seeking God through their pain, so they simply turned away. And who knows? If I had been in their shoes, I might have done the same thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Yancey, Philip. *Where Is God When It Hurts? A Comforting, Healing Guide for Coping with Hard Times*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, MI, 1990.

So from what I know of this family, their faith—in circumstances of their suffering—was more a hindrance than a help when the crisis came. Why? Well, I don't know for sure, but I've got a hunch. It occurs to me that sometimes our trust or faith in God is constrained by our expectations. If we trust God to keep us from suffering, or to end our suffering quickly once it has already come upon us, then we've set ourselves up for disillusionment when life turns out differently—and life does turn out differently—and when it does—this kind of faith doesn't hold up well.

But does faith have to be a hindrance? Well, I don't think so. Faith can help when suffering comes, but it's more a matter of trusting God with whatever life brings rather than hemming God in with a set of expectations that can't stand up to the hard realities of life.

Does this mean we shouldn't pray for an end to suffering or for healing to take place? No. We should pray what's in our hearts openly and honestly—but then we should leave the rest to God—and trust God with whatever comes.

Now I've learned something about how faith can help in times of suffering from Paul's story. Many interpreters believe that the profound spiritual experience Paul describes in the opening verses of this morning's text actually happened to him. He writes about it as if he's referring to someone else to avoid boasting about himself. But then he gives himself away and says: *Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.*

Now isn't that interesting? This profound spiritual experience of being caught up in Paradise, did not immunize Paul from suffering. In fact, this *thorn in the flesh* served to bring Paul back down to earth.

What was this *thorn in the flesh* that tormented Paul? We're not told. All we know is that it tormented him and he wanted to be rid of it—so he prayed what was in his heart: *Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me.* But the affliction remained.

So what did Paul do? Did he renounce his faith? Did he turn away from God? No. He stayed open. He kept listening. And in the midst of his torment, he heard God say to him: *My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.*

How did Paul “hear?” I don't know. But in whatever way that discernment was reached, the insight came to him—as an act of grace, if you will—that helped Paul find the strength and power to carry on. And he found this power, not in the ecstasy of his vision and revelation, but in the weakness of his suffering. Paul concluded: *Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.* It seems to me that Paul's faith helped him endure his torment. It seems to me that Paul learned to trust God with whatever life brought his way.

I've also seen how faith can help in suffering through the experience of a dear friend named Harold. Harold was a member of the Hilda United Methodist Church when I was the church's pastor. Harold was a man with a deep faith that had been tempered by various hardships through his life including combat in Vietnam. He was a loving man with a servant's heart. And when it came to profound spiritual experiences, Harold had had his share.

But then, his health took a turn for the worse. The diagnosis was prostate cancer—an aggressive form—that threatened Harold's life. We prayed for him that this cup of suffering might be taken from him. He would come to the altar rail of the Hilda Church. We would gather around him and lay hands on him and we prayed for him—beseeching God to heal him.

Harold spent the last weeks of his life in intense pain, relieved only by the medications he received. The pain caused by his cancer was heightened by a severe blood clot in his leg.

But here's the deal: Through his suffering, Harold's faith was evident for all to see. There was a peace at the center of this man's life that was so appealing. It was clear to me that he trusted God with whatever life brought his way—even if it was suffering. He said to me on more than one occasion as I visited him in the hospital, *Pastor, all I want is for God's will to be done.* He spoke these words with a calm determination. I could see the power of God's grace at work in this man even as his body wasted away. Faith was not a hindrance to Harold, but a help.

So in my time of suffering, what will my experience be? I don't know. The longing of my heart is that faith will be a help and not a hindrance. My deepest desire is for a faith that keeps seeking God no matter what life may bring. My only hope is to trust God with whatever comes my way. How about you?