

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Life’s Curriculum”
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
July 22, 2018

Our family tried something new this summer. All four kids joined the swim team at our neighborhood pool. We’ve never done that before, but we’d heard how good it can be for the kids and for the family as a whole.

So, every day this summer Noelle and Elijah got up early and rode their bikes to swim team at 7:30. I was so proud of them for doing it so consistently and working hard.

And every day Brandt and Theo went at 10...

We weren’t really sure how that was going to work at first.

Brandt and Theo didn’t really know how to swim without their floaties, and they were supposed to get in the water with 20 other kids their age... and let’s just say that the first day Mom and Dad were more nervous than the kids.

But when we got there, it was a beautiful thing to watch. They had just a few coaches and a lot of teenage volunteers... and they all lined up in the lane. Then each kid got a kick board and started kicking... and were passed down from adult to adult and it really was a sight to see... but that was just the first day.

Pretty soon they were separating kids based on their abilities. So, kids in one lane kept working that kickboard, and kids in the next lane were working on using their arms, and kids in the next lane were swimming the whole length of the pool.

There was something similar happening with Noelle and Elijah’s age. Some were in one lane learning how to do a better freestyle stroke, some were in another lane learning back, and breast, and fly....

And when you’re there at swim team practice, watching all these different levels at the same time, you start to notice that there is a basic progression they work the kids through.

There’s a pattern... to learning how to swim. A curriculum that takes the kids from fear and nervousness in the water... to being competitors in every stroke.

Through playfulness and games, through a little prodding at times, the coaches are teaching every age to kick their feet, to use their arms, to breathe in a certain way... to use their bodies in a particular way.

It’s happening for all of them, at every age, in every stage, because if you want to learn to swim then that’s what it takes.

There’s a curriculum. There’s a pattern.

And it’s not just true for swim lessons, is it?

Every teacher does the same kind of thing. Whether you’re a coach or a classroom teacher... there is a curriculum you use... a thoughtful approach to teach what needs to be learned.

The Apostle Paul found that this is true of our lives as well.

Life is a great teacher.

And the narrative of your life, the bends in the road, the story that you are living, is offering you a particular curriculum. A curriculum that's been shaped just for you.

For Paul, he hints at the mystical experiences that he's had. We already know he had a vision of Christ on the road to Damascus. That's his conversion story that is told in Acts.

But here in this letter, he seems to be hinting that that's not the only vision that's come his way. There have been other mystical moments where he's been caught up in the very presence of God and has seen things that are beyond words.

But he's also been given something more than visions. He's been given a thorn in the flesh. We don't know what this "thorn" is, but we do know that it has tormented him for some time now.

It's put him on his knees in prayer multiple times.

It's frustrated him.

It's probably driven him crazy... and angry and anxious... all kinds of other emotions. And we know that it has been a kind of curriculum for Paul... teaching him what he needed to learn.

He calls it "a messenger of Satan" sent to torment him... which leads me to a rabbit trail ... but I think it's worth chasing: ***The thorns in our flesh, the suffering that comes our way, the loss, the failure, the hurt, the death, the divorce, the depression... they are not from God.***

We need to take a clue from the apostle on this one.

These things are not God's will... or ***God's doing.***

We know this by looking at Jesus.

Jesus was always the source of life, and healing, and wholeness... never the source of suffering and death.

So, Paul has got it right on. Wherever there is darkness, or pain, or suffering of any kind, they are an expression of evil in our world. They come from the source of death, not the source of life.

God doesn't send them.

But the difficult truth is that God doesn't always take them away either... which is what we'd really like to happen. We'd like for God to protect us from the hurt, from the loss.

In fact, sometimes we pray and live as if our faith is somehow going to always keep us from all harm.... We pray asking God to protect us and our loved ones... and we need to pray that. ***It's right for us to do so.***

In some mystical way, I believe that our prayers actually do matter, that they open up new possibilities, enabling God to work in our lives and in the world in ways that before weren't possible, or open.

But sometimes we begin to think that God is a kind of bodyguard whose job, or whose purpose is to protect us and our loved ones... and we wonder if God doesn't do that, then what good is God to us?

Or we try to make a sacred bargain with God that goes something like this: *If I promise to believe in you and do what you say and pray enough, then you have to promise to keep me and mine safe and happy. Ok? Ok.*

And then along comes some great darkness into our world and we blame God for not keeping up God's end of the bargain. Or we blame God for sending this evil into our lives.

That's where Paul's story is so important for us... because the apostle had learned that this thorn in the flesh isn't from God. It's from the Evil One...

But the apostle has also learned that even though God didn't send it, God can use it to be a kind of redemptive teacher for you and in your life.

That's what that famous passage in Romans 8:28 means, "God works all things," the good and the bad... God works all these things together "for the good of those who love God."

This little rabbit trail is one we really need to remember when suffering comes our way. God doesn't send it... and God doesn't always take it away. But God can work it together for good; God can redeem it so that even the suffering becomes life-giving. Even the suffering can be part of the curriculum,

helping us to grow and to see
and to become who we are created to be.

Which brings us back to the main path we're following today. You see, the thorn in Paul's flesh has become a "curriculum" for him...

helping Paul to learn, and know, and live some things that he needed to learn if he was going to keep growing up, spiritually speaking.

Through Paul's pleading, and praying, and meditating,

asking it to be taken away,
he doesn't hear a "yes" or a "no."

Instead he hears something deeper,

something more important... and more life-giving than what he was seeking:

"My grace is sufficient for you," God says. Know that.

"My grace is sufficient for you." Trust that.

"My grace is sufficient for you... for my power is made perfect in weakness."

It's a paradox at the heart of our faith and our spiritual journeys. God's grace is sufficient, and God's power is made perfect in our weakness, in our deep vulnerability.

It's what we see in the cross, and it's what has come to be called the paschal mystery. It's the kind of thing that doesn't make sense, but it has been discovered over and over again by all the saints

who have leaned into God's grace in the midst of suffering and found a deeper kind of power at work there...

And the truth is... it was what ***Paul most desperately needed to learn.***

He was, after all, a big shot in the early church. Success seemed to find him wherever he went... which meant he was also probably prone to a bit of arrogance and pride.

As a young adult, Paul was a passionate Pharisee, leading the charge to purify his religion by getting rid of all these Christians... Paul was in the limelight. A natural leader.

After he converted and spent a few years learning about Jesus, he was one of two men chosen at Antioch to be messengers of the Gospel... again picked out of the crowd, thrown into the limelight.

He was a prolific writer and a mystic. He was the father of so many churches and so much of the New Testament. It would be easy for all this to go to his head! For him to start to believe how great his is...

But along comes this thorn in the flesh and Paul begins to learn some things that his soul really needed most, namely that God's power is not about him and his abilities.

God's power is made perfect in weakness,
not in our strength and our success.

This is the deep and profound truth that Paul needed to come to know, and it's no coincidence that this is the same deep and profound truth that life was teaching him.

Life has a way of doing that if we're paying attention to it.

What we need most comes our way.

The world is a great teacher. Life—your life—is a great teacher.

***** [PAUSE]

One of the things I've noticed over the course of this swim season is how each kid needed different approaches to nudge them along. They don't all respond the same.

Some need extra patience.

Some need to be pushed.

Some need playful games. Some need a high-five every time they do something right.

So, the coaches, the best coaches, like the best teachers, learn to approach each of these kids in a unique way... even though there's a basic curriculum.

The coaches all have the same goal: for the kids to learn to swim.

But they also keep coming up with creative ways to get the kids where they need to go... to become the swimmers that *they all want to be*.

In the same way, there is no one-size-fits-all program for your wholeness and redemption. Yes, there are spiritual patterns and truths, and we're going to explore those patterns in August. We're going to be looking at the story of Job, and how we as a church can help cultivate the spiritual journey along the way, from birth to death, in all the different seasons of life.

But before we do that, we need to know that God who created you...
and knows you...
is creating for you a specialized curriculum... one that's got your name on it.

[Pause, then playful]

Now, we can get a little silly with this, and some do... Not everything that happens in your day is God trying to teach you something. Sometimes people get a little too simplistic with this. When they have a bad day, they'll say something like, "Well, the Lord's really teaching me patience."

There is a random quality to what happens in our world, right? As Jesus said, "It rains on the just and the unjust." Not everything that happens is cosmic justice. Not everything that happens is even God's will, as we said earlier.

But "everything belongs," to use Rohr's phrase.¹

All of it... the trials and the celebrations...

the successes and the failures... they all belong.

They all can be held and redeemed. It's all part of the curriculum to help you become all that God's created you to be.

Spiritual teachers sometimes call this "Synchronicity."

It's a way of recognizing that though the world is random, your life is not. Things in our story have a way of coming together. There's a kind of sacred timing at play.... as if the Divine sent out a cosmic memo and the universe got it and is responding in some ways.

Knowing this, we can start paying attention...

and looking at our lives

and the events in our lives with a kind of curiosity...

with a wondering about what is being offered to you now.

What is being created in you now?

When you learn to trust that you can be, and you are being led,

then you begin to be open to where the spiritual realm is flowing in your life... where the vertical and horizontal are intersecting... and then begin to respond to it.

As one spiritual teacher put it, "It's like there's a flow in life and you start perceiving in what direction it's moving, and you start working with it rather than against it" (B. Burleson).

That's what Paul is doing as he works with this thorn in his flesh. He begins to understand the grace that it is offering him... the redemption that can flow to him through the stuff of his life.

And as he lives with it and into it, his pride is changed to humility;

his charisma is channeled into the flow of God.

It's why he can say from the deepest place, "When I am weak, ... then I'm living in the deepest strength... then I am strong."

¹ Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*, Revised ed. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003).

That kind of seeing doesn't just come to us in the snap of our fingers. We don't ask great questions and have them served up to us fast food style, or in a microwaved dish of spirituality.

No, it takes time.

It comes in the midst of a life that is seeking diligently,
that is learning to purify the heart... so that we'll have **"eyes to see and ears to hear,"**
as Jesus puts it.

For Paul, it comes through pleading with God through prayer... and he begins to see that he is being led to something. The flow is being revealed to him. Something is being communicated.

The good news is that this is true for all of us.

We are in communion with God. Something deep is being communicated to us through our lives. Something we need to know, or to be, or to awaken to.

So, begin to watch for where it is coming into your life.

Maybe there is a specific person or friendship that you're being drawn to...

or a book you're supposed to read...

or a new season of life coming your way...

or a suffering you're invited to endure.

It's spiritual formation with your name on it.... It's part of your redemption. It's part of the curriculum to teach you how to swim.

So, don't miss it.

Don't doddle around on the edges.

Jump all the way into the deep waters.

Amen.

Silent Reflection:

The Divine is Someone who comes to us in the sovereign freedom of his love. Grace does not come to order. We can only prepare ourselves to receive it, making ourselves attentive to the possibility of a meeting.

~Olivier Clement

O God, teach me to seek You, and reveal Yourself to me when I seek You,

For I cannot seek You unless You first teach me,

nor find You unless You first reveal Yourself to me.

Let me seek You in longing, and long for You in seeking.

Let me find You in love, and love You in finding."

~Ambrose of Milan