

Why, God?
Corinthians 12:2-10
Issaquah Community Church
Rev. Dr. Robert Reid
July 7, 2024

How many here today remember the stories that Paul Harvey used to tell on the radio? Those who do, remember his tag line that after he came back from a commercial break, he would tell everyone.... [that's right] "the rest of the story." His son Paul Aurandt gathered many of these radio stories up in a book. One story is the tale of James Macie. Macie was born in the 18th century, but it was what we might now call "out of wedlock." They had a harsher word. The birth took place in England in 1765. His father was a married British Duke. His mother was a French woman, not the wife. That meant that Macie was a social embarrassment. So, he grew up in France and only returned to England for his education. But James Macie had to live with his mother's surname. This social stigma followed him throughout his life. The laws of England, in the 18th century, allowed him to be a citizen of England, but because he was born out of wedlock

- He could never use his true name.
- He could not enter Parliament.
- He could not hold public office.
- He could not hold any civil service job.
- He could not serve in the British army or navy.
- He could not even be a member of the church of England.

How would you feel if you were being punished all your life for something you had no part in?

His father quietly made sure he was well educated without revealing the source of Macie's financial provision. Schooled in the sciences of the day, he made a number of scientific inventions and over

the years became quite wealthy. But unlike his fellow scientists, many of whom were knighted for their contributions to knowledge, he could never be knighted because of his status. In effect, he could never receive any recognition or public merit for his accomplishments?

So, what's *the rest of that story*? Macie had no progeny when he died in 1829. So, he left his wealth to that upstart breakaway British colony that had succeeded in Breaking away from England in the war of 1812. He had never been to the United States of America, but he chose to disinherit the country that had disinherited him. He had two requests?

- The first was that the United States would use the money to establish an institution dedicated to the advancement of scientific knowledge.
- His second request was that they would name the institution by his true family name—the one that he had been denied since his birth.

And what was the name of that British Duke: Smithson. To this day, there resides in our nation's capital an institution that honors the vast cultural and scientific accomplishments of this nation: The Smithsonian... or more colloquially what we call, the *Smithsonian* Institution, the world's largest museum complex that honors scientific research. And that, as Harvey would say, was *The rest of the story*.

Do you suppose there were times in James' life that he asked "Why, God?" That he wondered why he would have to live his entire life being denied Knighthood from the King and honor after honor for all his scientific accomplishments? *Have you ever felt wronged or just helpless in the face of something that changed your life?* Things happen that we have no power over, but they forever change us. Change what's possible with the rest of our life? Maybe it's a medical setback that limits what you can do? Maybe it was a social setback that kept you from receiving a job, or a position, or some other kind of post that would have allowed you to flourish? Maybe it's a tragedy of losing a loved one that so changes your life, that you wondered how you could

even go on? Or think of how helpless so many feel right now in the daily terror of living in Ukraine, Burma, Gaza, Haiti and many South American and African nations where gang violence is making everyday life ungovernable.

If it was me, I know I would be asking “Why, God?”

In the passage we heard read today, the Apostle Paul tells us that this was his prayer at the biggest turning point of his life. In this portion of 2 Corinthians he was writing to a church in revolt by questioning whether he should remain their Apostle. A faction was challenging them to look for someone else.

- They wanted a powerful preacher like Apollos.
- They wanted leaders like the two visiting-missionaries that were receiving patronage to preach and teach in Corinth. They had credentials to prove how the other churches they visited valued their ministry. But in their preaching they admitted that they were scandalized at how often Paul got arrested, was jailed, beaten, and ushered out of town. What kind of qualifications for being an Apostle was that?

They wanted to know what proof Paul had that he was qualified to be an Apostle. They got the church to agree that Paul should submit a resume to prove he was worthy enough to be their leader.

So that's the situation Paul's in as he writes. That's what he means by saying that this idea of bragging is awkward. But they were requiring that he had....*to brag on himself!* So that's why our text begins with him saying, “If it's necessary to brag, I'll brag about my weaknesses. Cause, God knows that I'm not lying about that.” Wait a minute,

- A resume of weaknesses?
- A resume of troublemaking?
- A resume of being constantly harassed wherever he went?

What kind of resume is that? But he gives it shot.

The first resume item was a Damascus story. It was about the time when they city magistrate signed an arrest warrant for Paul. The Apostle made an escape by being lowered two stories to the ground in a basket through a window in the city wall. Anyone want to put that on your resume?

Next, he tells them that he could compete with the visionary stories of those visiting missionaries. They were famous for telling stories like John the Revelator. Vision stories of conversations with angels and seeing things going on in heaven. So he tells this a resume episode in the third person—as if he is talking about someone else’s accomplishments, but then says he *could brag about what that man saw and heard*, but he won’t. He’s not trying to compete. In fact, he says, “I’m holding back from bragging so that no one will give me any more credit than what anyone sees or hears about me.”

The third resume item is his “Why, Lord?” story. It’s the thorn in the flesh tale. He says that

- He was given this “thorn”—a physical disability in his body because of these outstanding divine revelations he had like those Revelations-like tales he just told.
- Then he says that he received this physical disability: “I received it so that I wouldn’t be conceited.” To keep him humble.
- He doubles down on this saying that this thorn was “a messenger from Satan sent to torment me so that I wouldn’t be conceited.”

Barbara and I had lunch a 4th of July celebration lunch on Thursday with our contractor who finished building our backyard deck that morning. Over lunch he asked us about this passage.

- He wanted to know whether we believed that *God sent Satan to torment Paul?*
- I asked, “Do you believe that?”

- He answered “Well, it’s what the Bible says!”
- So, I asked, “Does that ... make sense to you?”
- “Well, God’s in control of everything. So, I guess he’s in control of Satan, too, right?”
- I then suggested that the phrase is probably what we call an “idiom.” You know, a phrase we say usually to be a little less direct than we might otherwise be.

Now I could have said to him that I what I was kind of thinking, “Well Gary,

- “You must have bats in the belfry if you believe that!”
- Or, “I think you’re barking up the wrong tree with that idea, Gary.”
- Or, “Gary, I think that interpretation is *for the birds*.”

Now I didn’t say those things, but Barbara chimed in by asking Gary what he thought Jesus meant when he said, “Get behind me Satan!” Did he really think Peter was Satan, or was he telling Peter that he was acting like Satan trying to tempt him not to do what Jesus knew was God’s plan. I think Barbara made the point well and I didn’t have all those great idioms I just said on the tip of my tongue at the time. What I did tell Gary was that he was going to end up in the sermon today.

Paul calling a physical affliction a “messenger of Satan” was simply an idiom, a common way 1st century Jews had of saying that a disability kept a person from realizing all the potential. Most scholars believe that it was because Paul had become very myopic. It was a disability that meant that he always had to have an assistant in his travels and in his writing. And Gary said, “Oh, yeah, like at the end of letters that he dictated and then said of his my signature at the close of a letter that the assistant composed for him. See how large my signature is.” From the time that Paul was raised from the ground after his vision of the risen Christ calling him he was blind. We know that Ananias came to him and healed put some mixture on his eyes that relieved his blindness.

But that didn't mean that Paul was able to see clearly after that. In fact, he was probably quite myopic. If he was here today, he would probably be wearing a pair of what teenagers used to call Coca-Cola bottle glass lenses to see anything. And they didn't have optometrists in the first century.

What Paul is telling us here is that he was blinded after seeing Jesus on his way to arrest Christians on the road to Damascus. **He regained sight, but not like** before. During the BEFORE

- Paul was a rising star among the San Hedren Temple rabbis.
- Paul was a Hellenistic Jew from tarsus who had been thoroughly educated in the Greco-Roman schools of his day and was the star protégé of his graduate education tutelage under Rabbi Gamaliel
- His resume was stellar!!!! He was on his way to have great power within the temple courts of Judaism.
- Then he met Jesus. And was called by Jesus to serve in a revolutionary Cause—to be the new Moses of the New Covenant of the Holy Spirit for the Gentile world. That's enough to make anyone's head spin. Not the Linda Blair "Exorcist" head spin, but you know what I mean.
- On the other hand, what happened to him there, in the language of the great hymn was, "Once I was blind, but now I can see..." He could see his calling quite clearly, but everything else was kind of a blur.

Paul, says, "I pleaded with the Lord three times for it to go away." You know that those were "Why, God?" prayers.

- What Christ said in response was, "My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness."

Most people pleading with God, asking "*Why did this happen? Why didn't You stop this, God? Why weren't my prayers answered?*" want to hear that the answer is "*My power in your life is made perfect in*

weakness.” Don’t misunderstand me, *asking why* is perfectly normal. *Asking why* isn't unspiritual. However, if asking this question pushes us farther from God rather than drawing us closer, we need to hear this word of God from one who has been there, like Paul. Because what Paul learned was that rather than *ask WHY*, what God calls for from us is to *ask WHAT?* Once we realize that this is the new reality, the question God is waiting to here from us is “*Okay! What now God? What next?*”

Paul’s life had been turned upside down on the road to Damascus. From the man with all the answers he became the man who learned to trust God for answers. He adopted a Power-in-Weakness witness to Christ. He saw Christ’s acceptance of the cross as God’s cross-purpose in his own life. Jesus was the ultimate model of Power-in-Weakness faithfulness trust in God. SO, PAUL committed himself to the new reality of dependence on others in his life as Christ’s way of reminding him to be dependent on the power of the Spirit rather than his own purposes. Paul concludes his resume application to continue being their apostle by saying, “*So, I’ll gladly spend my time bragging about my weaknesses so that Christ’s power can rest on me. Therefore, I’m all right with weaknesses, insults, disasters, harassments, and stressful situations for the sake of Christ, because when I’m weak, then I’m strong.*”

Stories like those of James Macie whose legacy established the greatest museum of the advancement of scientific knowledge in the world are inspiring. But if you listened closely, his “Why God?” question was never actually resolved. His final act *was not one of humility*. It was a story of bitterness. He was bitter over a life of being blamed for what someone else did. Paul got past the bitterness of seeing his stellar resume turn to ruin, because by the grace of God he was able to move beyond *Why* to get to *What*. And he heard and took to heart

the promise of the risen Christ, “My grace is sufficient for you, because power is made perfect in weakness.”

How do we find that kind of commitment to trust the grace of God in our lives like that? We begin when the life-changing challenge is before us to understand that it is human and natural to begin by asking **Why?** Its okay to ask **Why?** But the question that God is waiting for us to ask is “**What?**” “**What now, God?**” By asking “**what?**” instead of “**why?**” we are on the way of humility rather than hubris. The Saul we see on the road to Damascus, full of himself and his career, is not the Paul we see being lowered in a basket from a wall window in the city of Damascus.

- Hubris—excessive pride and self-confidence.
- Humility—the ability to trust God enough to rise up from our **WHY questions** to ask our “What next, God?” trust.
- When we do that, for the sake of Christ,
- When we become weak in humility,
- Scripture tells us it is then *in the name of Christ* we can be strong because his grace is sufficient.

Amen? Amen.