

## How and Why God Loosens our Grip

### 2 Corinthians 1:8-10

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Sometimes God unusually blesses a message to the preacher and to the people. Based on the response I have received, it would seem that last week's message on "Living Life with a Loose Grip" was one of those times. I was planning on returning this weekend to our 1 Corinthians series but after hearing from so many and knowing there is much more to say, I've decided to spend another week on how to live life with a loose grip. It's a week old and some of you weren't here last week. So let me give you the Cliff notes version.

There are two ways to live – with a firm grip and with a loose grip. By "grip" I am referring to the grip we have on the self-management and control of our lives including all the categories of our lives: self-identity, relationships, career, marriages, children, families, health, and anything else that is important to us. Do you have a firm grip or a loose grip?

Life happens. As life veers in directions that we don't like or that threaten our grip, we feel inward crisis. *God, what are you doing? Why are you going in this direction?* Our fleshly response is to get fearful, angry, bitter, and violent when life begins to arch in a threatening direction. We grip tighter and refuse to let anyone else including God have control. Who wins? Ultimately, not us – ever. Death comes to all of us and I've never seen a corpse with a firm grip. Eventually all the temporal things we live for and fight for are given up forever. We looked last week at Acts 20:24 (NIV) – *However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.*

Paul makes a stunning statement here about what is and what isn't valuable to him. He compares the value of his life to the value of fulfilling God's call on his life, *testifying to the gospel of God's grace.*

<b>No Value</b>	▶	<b>His life</b>
<b>Ultimate Value</b>	▶	<b>Complete the Gospel Mission</b>

These are in a zero sum relationship with one another. I compared it to a teeter-totter. **The more I value Christ and what He is doing through his gospel, the less I will value my right to management my own life.**

The ultimate example of this is the life of Jesus Christ. He was the one person who would have lived forever if He chose to, but instead He chose to die willingly for us. *Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!* (Luke 23:46) He completely surrendered everything personally desirable to the will of the Father in order to glorify the Father and redeem humanity from our sins. Christ had the ultimate loose grip.

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*For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. (2 Corinthians 1:8-10)*

The spiritually ambitious among us might think it would be great to be an Apostle. It's not really. All but one of the 11 Apostles who were with Jesus died as martyrs. Here we have the Apostle Paul's autobiography of what his life was like. Unlike major corporations and world governments, the perks of being a leader in the church are trouble, difficulty, and struggle. If all we knew was the bio on the Apostles, we would conclude suffering is foundational to Christianity. Add Christ and no wonder the emblem of Christianity is a cross.

Here is a glimpse into apostolic pain. Paul is describing a really tough time in his life and ministry. This is refreshing. Our heroes were discouraged. Our heroes were despairing. Our heroes were just like us. Listen to the adjectives in this passage again: *Affliction. Utterly burdened. Beyond our strength. Despair.* He goes on to say in verse 9 that from his perspective, he had a death sentence. Paul thought his life was over. Behind these English words are Greek words even more descriptive. For example, *burdened* (βαρέομαι). The word was used for a ship with too much weight where the waves are starting to swamp it. If you've watched the show *Deadliest Catch*, they occasionally show a fishing trolley in a Bering Sea storm. Sometimes the weight of the ship is too much and the ship is swamped. The ship is "burdened." *Beyond our strength.* To say, "I don't have the power for this trial. This is more than I can handle." Overwhelmed and under-powered.

*Despair* (ἐξαναπέω). There's a word we don't enjoy. It means, *destitute of resources, to renounce all hope.* Paul wasn't an apostolic robot. Like us, if you cut him, he bled. He was normal and human with all the normal human emotions and struggles.

"OK, Pastor Steve, we get it. We can relate. What's the point?" The point is that Paul saw something in the midst of his emotional ship swamped despairing of life trial that got him through it and will get us through it as well.

### **To get us to let go of self-reliance and rely on Him**

*But that was to make us rely **not** on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.* (Verse 9)

One of the biggest struggles we have when something valuable to us is threatened is, *Why is this happening? Why is God allowing this? What good could there be in it?* We try to put parameters on acceptable divine answers to those questions. Our parameters typically are: 1) personally desirable outcomes, 2) things will be better for me on the other side of this, 3) people will admire me for my faith in suffering, 4) God will reward me for this with things I want, etc. As long as God meets those requirements, then I'll have a good attitude. If not, then I will be mad and bitter and question God's love.

Guess what happens? Life turns in directions that cannot produce what we define as personally beneficial results. Things happen that are irrevocable and unchangeable. "All the king's horses and all the king's men can't put it back together again." *Why would you allow these things to happen? I see no good in it.*

*To make us rely not on ourselves but on God.* Paul saw a divine purpose in his affliction. Do you hear Paul saying, "That affliction was good for me"? "Those despairing moments, they were good for me." Wait. Wasn't violence done against him? Wasn't injustice done against him? Yes. How can this be good? The injustice and violence and back stabbing and slander itself wasn't good, but the fruit it bears in us, is. Consider the cross. Ultimate injustice produced the greatest good ever.

What is plain is that God has different goals for us than we have for us. God knows that for His glory and our good, He has to root out of our hearts and minds the lie that we are in

control; that we are self-capable, self-sustaining, and self-reliant. We may think we are just like the rooster who may think his crowing raises the morning sun. Cause and effect. When life is good we want to think it's cause and effect. The effect I see and feel in my life is blessing and success and peace. My heart assumes this happens because God is happy with me and is blessing me because He is happier with me than the others around me who aren't as blessed as I am. When the sun shines on us we assume we are doing something right.

God loves us enough to show us how stupid we are. If you were God, how would you go about loosening your people's grip on their lives, stuff, ambitions, idolatrous relationships, overinflated sense of self? *I think I would give them more and more of stuff, more and more blessings. Continuous and unending blessings and sunshine.* All sun makes a desert. Everything wonderful makes a desert too. Every time Israel prospered as a nation, they forgot about God. Why? *Who needs God? Look what we have.* I remember hearing a local politician say to me, "Why do I need God? I am the \_\_\_\_\_." (He stated his political position.)

*But that was to make us rely **not** on ourselves but on God (Verse 9).* When life is loosening my grip on things I don't get to keep in eternity, I can know that God is at work in me and I can know that it is good for me. Rather than asking for pity, we should probably say, "Everyone, I am learning to trust in God more and God thinks I need that!"

I was talking with a couple here last week. The husband has worked at Dawn foods for eight years and just found out that his days are numbered there with the plant closing. There's some anger in the community about it and their tax abatement and all the rest. This couple wasn't angry at all. "We want to apply our faith to this." You know what I took from that? His job and the security of a steady income wasn't something they were gripping too tightly. Did they know that before the trial? No. The trial has unveiled it for their encouragement and our admiration.

### **So we can live what we believe**

*But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. (Verse 9)*

Interesting little phrase...*on God who raises the dead.* Wouldn't just ending at God be enough? Why add His resume of resurrection? Why add His power to raise the dead? Notice the sentence structure. The carry over verb is *rely*. The context is trial and despair. The purpose of the affliction is to teach us to rely on God...the natural question is, *How do I know He is reliable?*

*Who raises the dead.* Notice the tense of the verb "raises." We would expect it to say, *who raised the dead*, i.e. raised Jesus from the dead. That is true and the resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of our hope. God accepted Jesus' sacrifice in our place and on our behalf. God raised Him to life for our justification (Romans 4:25). He raised Jesus, but this says *raises* present tense, *the dead*.

The fact that God has done it in the past is not necessarily a comfort to me in my present distress. I don't live in the past and I am not Jesus. I need to know about His intent for me today. Why is God painfully loosening my grip? Why does He use what I deem unpleasant circumstances to do it? Why is it almost like I am dying to this relationship, job, financial security, good health? *So we can live what we believe.* If God raises the dead physically, that means He can raise me from the emotional death this trial is requiring. Did you get it? *If God can raise the dead, then God can raise me.* It's an argument from the greater to the lesser. If

God can do the greater (raise the dead), then He is reliable to do the lesser (raise me from my despair, raise me from my hurt, raise me from my loneliness, my loss, my despair).

*Notwithstanding that the resurrection is a future event, he shows that it happens every day; for when God raises up again a man whose life is despaired of, and who has been brought to the very gates of hell, He shows nothing other than a resurrection, snatching from the very jaws of death, the one who had fallen into them. -Chrystostom*

Most of us would prefer that the Christian life didn't require all of this dying to self. *Why can't we just receive salvation by faith, live our lives, die and go to heaven? I'll die to those things when I die. Why do we have to die to all these things while we're still living?* C.S. Lewis once said, *Nothing that has not died will be resurrected.* God raises the dead and He wants to glorify every aspect of our lives. But He can only resurrect what is dead and only by affliction and pain will we die to our perceived right to control our lives. So God loves us enough to orchestrate trials uniquely fitted to the idols of our hearts. None of our trials are the same because our hearts are not the same. God is all-wise in how He sanctifies and purifies each of us.

He has to get us to the point of **surrender**. When an army surrenders, they are dying to their desire to win. They are dying to their right to self-rule. Surrender is more than just giving up. It is letting someone else be in control. *Nothing that has not died can be resurrected* (C.S. Lewis). He is *the God who raises the dead*. If He raised Christ (the big thing), then we can trust His ability to raise us in the little deaths we die in the trials of life.

I read recently that Captain Sully Sullenberger retired from US Airways. You probably know who Sully is. He's the captain who piloted the airliner with no engine power down onto the Hudson River. All the passengers were saved. He became an overnight national hero. He received about every honor the government could give him. He threw out first pitches at baseball games, grand marshaled the Rose Bowl, etc. When all the hoopla was over, you know what he did? He went back to being a US Airways pilot. Imagine with me what it was like on every flight from that day on during the pre-flight announcements.

*Hello. Your flight crew today thanks you for flying US Airways. We apologize for charging you \$100 for checked luggage...you should have flown Southwest. Hi, I'm Suzy Q., your head flight attendant for today's flight. Please make sure your seats and tray tables are in their upright and locked position as we will be taking off shortly. Serving you with me today are your flight attendants Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy. Captaining today's flight is Captain Sully Sullenberger.*

What happened on every flight from the Hudson River landing on? Applause! What is every person on that flight thinking? *I guess we're OK today. Why? We know what he's done. If he can safely land a plane under no power in the middle of the Hudson River, then I think today's flight should be no problem at all. Sully! Sully! Sully! Why? He landed on the Hudson! He landed on the Hudson! He landed on the Hudson!* What do the cheers mean? *We're safe! We're safe! We're safe!*

If we believe God raised Christ, then He is a God who raises the dead. And if God raises the dead then He can raise me from the ashes my life has become. *We're safe! We're safe! We're safe!*

## **When faith in God loosens my grip, it feels like hope**

*He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. (2 Corinthians 1:10)*

Faith and hope are two sides to the same coin. They always go together. *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)* To define faith you have to include hope. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. Hope is faith's perspective on the future. Faith rests on the past and the present, but whenever faith looks to the future, now it is hope rooted in a faith resting on God's character displayed in Christ.

We see that in verse 10. *He delivered us from peril (past), and he will deliver us (future). On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.* We don't need faith for the past. The past is the past and we can't change it. I need faith for the future. Faith is established and nourished in the past. It is right and good to look back and see how God has delivered again and again.

That's one of the things I have found to be so helpful now that I have a few years and a few trials behind me. When I was in those trials, I despaired, yet in each case God brought me through. Now I am in a trial that feels the same as those. If today's Steve could go back to yesterday's Steve, I would say, *Cheer up! God's going to bring you through.* Faith believes there's a tomorrow Steve who, if he could, would come to me today and say, *Steve, cheer up! God's using this trial to do good in you.*

The old hymn says it well, *O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come.* Is God loosening your grip right now? Are you afraid to open your hand? Are you in a tug of war for control? Friend, the God you are struggling with is good. He intends everything for your good. He loves you. He has an infinite and eternal unchanging love for you. He is love; he is good. Faith rests in that. We can know God is loosening our grip when we face the prospect of loss of something valuable, and instead of feeling despair, our faith feels like hope. What does hope feel like? *We're safe! We're safe! We're safe!*

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