

Paul—Deep Processing

Introduction

Do you know someone who has quit the full time ministry? Have you ever felt like quitting the full time ministry? Did you know that there is a large dropout from full time ministry? Well if ever a Christian worker had reasons to quit, it was Paul at the time he wrote 2Co. He was in his mid-fifties and had over 20 years of tough ministry experience behind him.

Here is what he faced. Paul's first letter to Corinth was probably written at Ephesus.¹ Shortly after writing it, he was forced to flee because of the hubbub caused by the shrine makers honoring the goddess Diana.² Paul went on to Troas to revisit churches in Macedonia. He intended to travel south to Corinth and visit churches in Achaia.³ He did eventually get there and stayed about three months.⁴ It was in the interval between leaving Ephesus and reaching Corinth that he wrote again to the Corinthians. At the time he was going through deep processing. What he was going through was enough to make any Christian worker give up?

What was he facing? No news from Titus.⁵ He had sent Titus to Corinth to deal with some of the problems there. He was anxious about what was happening there. He describes this time in Macedonia as a time when he had *no rest within and deeply troubled from without* as well. The church at Corinth appeared to be in revolt against his leadership. The churches in Galatia were falling away to another Gospel. He had narrowly escaped with his life from the uproar in Ephesus. In addition to disappointment and apprehensiveness, Paul had a physical illness which was almost fatal. Paul described it in his own words,

8 I want you to know, dear Christian friends, of the very trying experiences⁶ which we faced in the province of Asia. I was overwhelmed,⁷ beyond my ability⁸ to cope with it. I thought⁹ I was going to die. 9 I concluded¹⁰ that I would die. 2Co 1:8,9.

But look at what he learned.

But as a result I learned not to trust myself but to rely on God, who can raise the dead. 10 He delivered me from that tremendous near death experience. He continues to deliver. He will do so in the future too! 11 You play a part in this by praying for us. As a result, because many prayed, many will give thanks to God for his answered prayer—our safety.¹¹

¹ See 1Co 16:8.

² See Ac 19 for the vignette.

³ See Ac 20:1,2.

⁴ See Ac 20:3.

⁵ See 2Co 2:13.

⁶*Trying experiences* (SRN 2347) represents the same Greek word used several times in 2Co 1:3,4 and often translated as tribulation or affliction.

⁷*Overwhelmed* (SRN 5236) is a translation of a word meaning excessively so (**KJV** beyond measure).

⁸*Ability* (SRN 1411) is a translation of the Greek word, power.

⁹*Thought* (SRN 1820) is a very strong word meaning despaired or to be destitute. It probably would not be too strong to say Paul was depressed.

¹⁰*Concluded* (SRN 610) represents the noun word usually translated as *sentence* or *judgment*. Hamel comments: 2Co. 1:9 ... the meaning is "on asking myself whether I should come out safe from mortal peril, I answered, I must Die." Paul was in deep trouble.

¹¹ Paul recognizes an important dynamic. *Transparency and vulnerability, in sharing by a leader, allows others to identify with and pray more fervently and with understanding for God's answers.* By this sharing then, God receives much more praise and honor because many are partnering with Him. Prayer backers make a big difference in the life of a leader who can share openly with them. Many leaders fear sharing vulnerably and openly. They miss out on one of God's resources for them. Paul models here the kind of open sharing that leaders need to do. See **Article**, *Daniel—Leaders and Prayer Backing*.

This experiential acknowledging of total dependence on God in a deep processing situation is usually a turning point in this shaping activity by God. Paul was at death's door. To all outward appearances his life and work were coming to an end—and not on a good note. His life, his work, and the fate of the potential of the worldwide movement of Christianity in the Gentile world all hung in the balance. Probably never before had he felt himself so helpless, so beaten down and disconcerted, as he was on that journey from Ephesus to Macedonia. He was laid up sick, unto death, and awaited Titus, not even sure he would last long enough to see Titus. And Titus came. And the news was not all good. For whatever Titus shared prompted a further letter to Corinth. Paul's apostolic authority was in question and with it the whole of the future ministry to the Gentiles. So I do not overstate it when I say Paul knew about deep processing.

If Paul ever felt like quitting, and I am sure he did, this Corinthian thing was top of the list for quitting time. If he wasn't gray headed before I am sure he had gray hairs after this thing. Now listen carefully. This was Paul's finest hour. Two other times run a close second: the Philippian epistle—he is isolated and in jail. 2 Timothy—he is in jail and awaiting death, near the end of his life. But this is his finest hour. What you are in deep processing is what you really are!

Definition Deep processing refers to a collection of process items which intensely work on deepening the maturity of a leader. The set includes the following process items: conflict, ministry conflict, crisis, life crisis, leadership backlash and isolation.

Paul knew what deep processing was. He also knew the benefits of it.

Deep Processing—Some Shaping Activities

While God may use a number of things to take a leader deep with himself, several occur so often with leaders that they can be labeled and described. Six common deep processing items are given.

Definition The conflict process item refers to those instances in a leader's life-history in which God uses conflict, whether personal or ministry related to develop the leader in dependence upon God, faith, and inner-life.

Definition The ministry conflict process item refers to those instances in a ministry situation, in which a leader learns lessons via the positive and negative aspects of conflict with regards to: 1. the nature of conflict, 2. possible ways to resolve conflict, 3. possible ways to avoid conflict, 4. ways to creatively use conflict, and 5. perception of God's personal shaping through the conflict.

Definition Crisis process items refer to those special intense situations of pressure in human situations which are used by God to test and teach dependence

Definition A life crisis process item refers to a crisis situation characterized by life threatening intense pressure in human affairs in which the meaning and purpose of life are searched out with a result that the leader has experienced God in a new way as the source, sustainer, and focus of life

Definition Isolation processing refers to the setting aside of a leader from normal ministry involvement in its natural context usually for an extended time in order to experience God in a new or deeper way.

Definition The leadership backlash process item refers to the reactions of followers, other leaders within a group, and/or Christians outside the group, to a course of action taken by a leader because of various ramifications that arise due to the action taken. The situation is used in the leader's life to test perseverance, clarity of vision, and faith.

Paul and Deep Processing

Paul faced all of these kinds of deep processing—these shaping activities of God which make a person of God. How did Paul face these kind of shaping activities and not give up? Let me suggest several undergirding values that made the difference. They are contained in the following verses.

1. 2Co 4:1

1 Because God in His mercy has given me this ministry, I am not going to become discouraged and give up.

Let me paraphrase it emphatically.

Therefore since God put me in this ministry I am not going to quit!

2. 1Co 9:24-27

24 Don't you know that those in a race all run, but only one wins the prize? Run in such a way that you will receive the prize. 25 And everyone who competes¹² for the prize exercises real discipline¹³ in order to be ready. Now they do it to win a fleeting prize.¹⁴ We do it for an eternal prize. 26 Therefore I, personally, run my course with definite purpose, to win—to finish well. Thus I box making my punches count. 27 So I discipline myself and exercise strict control, lest after preaching to others, I myself should become a loser.¹⁵

3. 2 Co 12:9

9 His answer was, "My enabling presence is all you need. My power shows forth much stronger in your weakness." So you can see then, why I boast about my weaknesses. Christ's power will work through me. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

4. Acts 26:15-20

"Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. 16 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. 17 I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them 18 to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' 19 "So then, King Agrippa, **I was faithfully obedient to this heavenly mandate.** 20 First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds."

Let me suggest four reasons why Paul persevered in ministry. The first two are from the human side. Paul took responsibility. The last two are from the divine side. Paul counted on God taking responsibility too.

¹² The word translated as *competes* (SRN 75) is the word from which we get our word agonize. It means really struggles (to get ready and participate). Present day marathon runners do train this rigorously.

¹³ The word translated as *Exercises real discipline* (SRN 1467) means to practice self-control. It described athletes who were preparing for the Olympic Games. Such an athlete abstained from unwholesome food, wine, and sexual indulgence.

¹⁴ *Prize* (SRN 4735) the wreath or garland which was given as a prize to victors in public games.

¹⁵ This whole context, 9:24-27, is promoting one of the important enhancements that helps leaders finish well. Discipline in the life, is one of five enhancement factors that have been identified with effective leaders who have finished well. All kinds of disciplines, especially spiritual disciplines, will be needed and used with purpose in order to continue toward the finish. Paul is in his 50s here, a time when leaders tend to plateau. Disciplines are needed. See **Articles**, *Finishing Well—5 Factors Enhancing; Spiritual Disciplines*.

1. He had a sense of responsibility.

I Because God in His mercy has given me this ministry, I am not going to become discouraged and give up.¹⁶ 2Co 4:1

2. He was Disciplined With A Purpose. He wanted to finish well.

Listen to my paraphrase of 1Co 9:24-27. It was the motivational secret underlying one great leader's sustaining his life and ministry.

I am serious about finishing well in my Christian ministry. I discipline myself for fear that after challenging others into the Christian life I myself might become a casualty. 1Co 9:24-27.

Paul was aware that many did not make it. He was in his 50s; a time when Christian leaders tend to plateau. He didn't want that. So he did something about it. Did it work? More on this later.

3. He counted on Experiencing The Grace Of God.

There are three great leaders during the Church Era of leadership: Peter, John, Paul. All three knew this under girding principle. Their final words confirm it.

But grow in the **grace** and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen. 2Pe 3:18

The **grace** of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen. Rev 22:21

The Lord be with your spirit. **Grace** be with you. 2Ti 4:22

It is interesting how each of them came to the same inescapable conclusion. You will not make it in the Christian life without grace. Now grace as described here is not unmerited favor—not referring to our standing before God. It is referring to an enabling energy of God.

Definition **Grace** is the inspirational, enabling presence of God in a life which encourages one to persevere in Victory throughout life's circumstances.

So Paul was not just talking lightly when he said in 2Co 12:9,

9 His answer was, "My enabling presence is all you need. My power shows forth much stronger in your weakness." So you can see then, why I boast about my weaknesses. Christ's power will work through me. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 2Co 12:9.

You will not make it apart from knowing and counting upon this grace. The third reason Paul profited from deep processing and made it through it was that he knew how to experience the grace of God, that enabling presence of God.

4. He had a strong Sense Of Destiny Integrated Into A Life Purpose.

So then, King Agrippa, I was faithfully obedient to this heavenly mandate. Ac 26:19.

But the most important reason for not giving up, not dropping out of ministry, not quitting: a strong sense of destiny that imparted a **life purpose**.¹⁷ His life was tightly integrated, that is, extremely focused

¹⁶ This is one of Paul's stronger expressions of his personally embracing the stewardship model. His call from God, his anointing by God and his sense of destiny are behind these words. See *Stewardship Model, Glossary*. See **Articles**, *Entrustment—A Leadership Responsibility*, *Jesus' Five Leadership Models: Shepherd, Harvest, Steward, Servant, Intercessor*.

around a solid life purpose. In a nutshell, Paul had a sense of destiny. And that destiny focused his life and enabled him to make it through deep processing. Notice his triumphant finish.

6 As for me, I am ready to be sacrificed. The time for me to depart this life is near. 7 I have run a good race. I have fulfilled my God-given destiny.¹⁸ I still have my faith intact. 8 And now for my prize, a crown of righteousness. The Lord, the righteous judge, will award it to me at that day. And not to me only, but unto all those who eagerly await his return.¹⁹ 2Ti 4:6-8.

A Major Insight—Paul’s Inner-Life Attitude

Paul had a particular attitude about deep processing which made all the difference in his life and ministry. I have labeled it a *Sovereign Mindset*.

Definition A sovereign mindset²⁰ is an attitude demonstrated by the Apostle Paul in which he tended to see God’s working in the events and activities that shaped his life, whether or not they were positive and good or negative and bad. He tended to see God’s purposes in these shaping activities and to make the best of them.

There were four keys to Paul’s getting and maintaining a sovereign mindset:

1. Paul recognized God’s hand in life happenings--no matter who or what the immediate cause.
2. Paul submitted to God’s deeper purposes in life happenings.
3. Paul learned and used the lessons derived from these life happenings.
4. Paul shared those lessons (and God’s provision in them) with others.

Conclusion

Some one has said, “All great leaders walk with a limp!” The allusion is to Jacob’s deep experience with God, wrestling with the Angel of God, and thereafter always walking with a limp due to the injury sustained. Now this of course is a hyperbolic description of something important. Stated in less colorful language,

God matures leaders He uses via shaping activities that deepen their walk with God and increase their effectiveness for God.

¹⁷ A life purpose is a burden-like calling, a task or driving force or achievement, which motivates a leader to fulfill something or to see something done. This is the core focal issue and around which a life is integrated over a lifetime. See **Articles**, *Life Purpose, Biblical Examples; Paul—A Sense of Destiny; Destiny Pattern*.

¹⁸ Fulfilled my destiny, literally I have finished or completed (SRN 5758) a perfect action, i.e. already done it with on going results, my course (SRN 1408). Course, used three times in the N.T., refers to life’s destiny, the pathway set before one to do. The destiny pattern usually follows a threefold pattern: destiny preparation, destiny revelation, and destiny fulfillment. This idea of already completing it is the use of a certainty idiom, the prophetic past. It is so certain that he speaks of it in the past tense as if it had already happened. See Ac 20:24 where Paul states his desire to finish his course. See also, Ac 13:25 where the same word refers to John the Baptist’s having finished his course. See *certainty idiom, prophetic past, sense of destiny, destiny preparation, destiny revelation, destiny fulfillment*, **Glossary**. See **Articles**, *The Destiny Pattern; Paul—A Sense of Destiny*.

¹⁹ Vs 4:6-8 show that Paul finished well. He is the classic case of a N.T. church leader finishing well. All six characteristics of a good finish are seen: (1) vibrant personal relationship with God; (2) have a learning posture; (3) Christ-likeness in character; (4) live by Biblical convictions; (5) leave behind ultimate contributions; (6) fulfill a sense of destiny. One of the major leadership contributions of 2Ti is this challenge to finish well, which Paul models. See *modeling*, **Glossary**. **Article**, *Finishing Well—Six Characteristics*.

²⁰ Sovereign Mindset is a Pauline leadership value seen all through 2Co. *Leaders ought to see God’s hand in their circumstances as part of His plan for developing them as leaders*. See **Article**, *Sovereign Mindset*.

These activities for the most part are not pleasant. They may involve physical suffering, or persecution, or crises in the life. In short they will force the leader to go deep with God in order to survive in ministry. Or to say it another way, all leaders will go through some deep processing as they serve the Lord. Some leaders will be repeatedly shaped with deep processing. A very few leaders will experience it to an extent not seen in ordinary leaders. Such a leader was Paul. He was greatly used by God. He was greatly shaped by deep processing.

Two common reactions by leaders in deep processing include:

1. **Turn away from God** (Well, if this is the way God is I don't need or want God!).
2. **Turn toward God. Go deep with God** (God will meet me and take me into more intimacy in this processing and I will walk away from it with God's lessons in my life. I will benefit from this!).

Don't wait till you are in deep processing to make up your mind which of these you will do. In deep processing you most likely will not be able to think clearly. Decide now, as an act of the will, that when deep processing comes, you will go deep with God. And don't forget the basic lessons Paul gives in 2Co 1:3-7, a foundational passage for deep processing.

1. God will meet you in deep processing.
2. You are helped in order to help.
3. Deep processing tests your own belief in the sufficiency of Christ.
4. Your own development through deep processing gives hope that your followers can also know the sufficiency of Christ in their deep processing.

You are modeling and never with more impact than when you are in deep processing.