Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Purpose of Pain
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:5-7
Code: 47-82

For many years now we've been studying 2 Corinthians. And we did have a few interruptions, one whole year of interruptions when we were dealing with the anatomy of the church. And we have finally come to what is my favorite section in this whole epistle, chapter 12 verses 5 to 10. I've been waiting for a long, long time to get to this passage and I'm so thrilled at what is here. I actually am struggling in my heart to say it all. I feel like I have far too much to say than I can say and I'm afraid it might just come rambling out in some random fashion without enough structure for you to be able to grasp it, so I'm going to go slowly and hope we can stay contained in this wonderful text.

Now having said that I will admit we're not going to get very far into it this morning because I want to lay some ground work. Some of the things I say will be repetitious but I want you to understand that I really believe in the future the messages that I give on this portion here will be a self-contained unit that will go far and wide. You know that what I preach here winds up going out on radio all across the world and winds up on tapes in various places, but I'm quite sure this is going to have a very important place in the future in regard to our ministry of teaching God's Word because it deals with something that is absolutely universal. It isn't because the oratory is at all notable, it isn't because of anything particular that I might say, it is because of the nature of this text that addresses the universality of human trouble. As it says in the Bible, "Man is born unto trouble," as Jesus said, "In the world you will have trouble." It just goes with life. Whether you're rich or poor, you have trouble. That's just the way it is. We are fallen creatures and we live in a fallen world. Sin has dealt us a near-fatal blow. Personally it is dealt our universe a near-fatal blow. We are personally unable to extract ourselves from a universe of trouble, fallen people in a fallen world. Emotional trouble, marital trouble, domestic trouble, physical trouble, economic trouble, it just goes on and on. And it's...it's a part of life. We're usually in or just emerging from or anticipating trouble. That's how it is in this world.

Now there are a lot of ways that we can talk about trouble and how we deal with it and what God intends to accomplish in our lives through it. But I don't think there's any better passage than this. And we're going to see that as we go through it. And the reason this is such a formidable passage dealing with trouble is because in it we meet a man, namely the apostle Paul, who is, I believe, experiencing the deepest pain of his life. Apart from the remorse over his own sin, apart from that trouble which we inflict upon ourselves because of our own iniquities, apart from personal shame, personal guilt, personal anguish over personal sin which he had already dealt with by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, this is, I believe, Paul at the depth of human pain. And so this is where you're going to

learn the most about how to handle the severest trouble. I don't think there's any passage in Scripture better able to teach us the purposes of God that unfold in our trials.

Now this, I believe, was Paul's deepest pain because I believe the deepest pain we ever feel is inflicted on us by other people. You can talk about physical problems. You can talk about economic problems. You can talk about the problems of life that come and go in just the normal circumstantial difficulties and they bring us a certain measure of trouble, a certain measure of pain, a certain measure of suffering and anxiety and things like that, but nothing is as painful as the suffering that we endure at the hands of people. And the closer we are to them, the more intimately involved with them, the more we arm them with an arsenal to inflict pain on us. We all know that.

A few summers ago I was reading the biography of Jonathan Edwards. Jonathan Edwards was probably the greatest theologian America has ever known. Some would say he's one of the three greatest writers America has ever known in any field of endeavor in writing. He was a genius. He had an immense mind. He had a vast grasp of theology, brilliant in his ability to articulate that both with pen and voice. Jonathan Edwards is known in American history as the great theologian of the Great Awakening, the Great American Revival. It was he that God used to preach those years of the Great Awakening to turn the hearts of thousands from sin to the Savior. His sermons are so profound that they're still read for their profundity. His books are still read because of their theological value.

But Jonathan Edwards though known as a great theologian and a great mind and a great writer and a great, great preacher was by definition a pastor. And he pastored a church in North Hampton, Massachusetts for 22 years. And it was during those 22 years that the Great Awakening occurred so he was pastoring right through the Great Awakening and basically preaching to his own people week in and week out these profound messages, powerful messages, life changing, nation changing messages. Twenty-two years those people came Sunday after Sunday and sat at the feet of Jonathan Edwards.

At the end of the 22 years the church voted to remove him as pastor, kick him out of the church. And they did it. They took the greatest preacher in American history, certainly one of the godliest men the world knew at the time, and they threw him out of the church. And they did it not because he deviated in any pattern in his life and became less than a model of Christian virtue, not because he somehow fell off into some heretical viewpoint, not because he became cantankerous and bitter and maybe hostile toward his people. No. They put him out of the church because he insisted that before a person could join the church and take the Lord's table, he should have made a public confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Pretty basic, and for that the people who had sat at his feet for 22 years threw him out of the church.

You conclude from that that some of them hadn't been listening for a long time. Sin can be very obstinate. Here was this great preacher without a pulpit and they wanted to make sure he didn't get one so they destroyed his reputation everywhere so that no other church would take him. And they lied about him. The people to whom he had given most of his life, 22 years of intense study, 22 years of passionate preaching and pastoral care did everything to destroy him that in the end no church would take him and he was given an assignment to be a missionary to about fifteen Indians, to which he spent the rest of his life communicating the gospel in about second-grade terms.

Eventually there was a school in New Jersey called, "The College of New Jersey," which later became Princeton University. The College of New Jersey remembering the greatness of the man in the past invited him to be the president and he refused. Such a humble and broken man he felt himself utterly inadequate and unqualified for such a responsibility. He had become so meek in his mission work that he didn't feel himself worthy. He repeatedly refused and finally they almost forced him to take it. He took the responsibility, became that president. Within six months was in heaven.

It was just, to me, unthinkable that a congregation of people could do what they did to that man. He was a broken and humbled man for the remaining years of his life. It reminded me of one day when I was in London and a friend said, "I want to take you to the tomb of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, it's kind of hard to find but I think you'd enjoy seeing it." So we wandered through the typical London traffic and went through some little neighborhood streets and finally found our way to a cemetery and went into the cemetery and started hunting around for Charles Haddon Spurgeon's tomb. We finally found it in an obscure place, basically in the back of some warehouse, just sort of stuck there. And I was reminded that Charles Spurgeon is a forgotten man in England but there was a time when he was the greatest preacher in the world and some would say he still is because the best preachers are still preaching his stuff.

He was a great man, a great mind. He built the largest Baptist church in the world in London. Every ship that left London for the years of his ministry, they said, took his sermons and dispersed them worldwide. God used him in an incredible way. It was said that his church was to packed and could seat 4,000 people, it was so packed that sometimes he would just ask all the people inside to go out, all the four thousand inside could go out so that the four thousand outside could come in and sit for a change. And he preached and he preached and God blessed him.

The Baptist Union had a meeting and they decided to vote him out of the union. They wanted to get rid of him because he stood so truly for the Word of God. They took a vote and it was hundreds and hundreds of votes against him, and a handful for him. It's amazing the pain that friends can inflict. He was crushed, Spurgeon was. Went to the south of France, lost his health, never was the same again.

The potential to devastate people is great when you're close to them. I remember years ago I think I had been at the church six or seven years, I walked into a staff meeting, maybe more, maybe ten years, I walked into a staff meeting...it's good that I can't remember, isn't it?...and I said...I said, "I just want to tell you guys," these are the pastoral guys that I discipled and nurtured and kind of brought up to serve along with me, I said, "I just want you to know how much I love you guys and how grateful I am that you're my friends." And immediately one of them said, "If you think we're your friends, you've got another think coming, buddy." And a mutiny occurred at that moment and they basically attacked me and all left. I was stunned, to put it mildly. I didn't know if I could recover. I didn't understand it. I was devastated. I was shaken.

Each one of those men in the years since has come back and sought restoration and forgiveness and every one of them to a man has confessed they didn't even know why that ever happened. There was no reason.

I speak many times in many places. One of the places I speak often is the great Moody Church of Chicago, right in the middle of downtown Chicago is the Moody Church, seats about forty-five hundred. It's always packed for the great founders week and I had the opportunity to go there on many occasions and speak and it's a joy to do that in that great city. I had been sick this occasion, a few years back, in fact I had gotten stuck in one of those really old motels. And I was sick for three days and I know it was old because it had orange shag carpet, so you know it hadn't been refurbished...it hadn't been refurbished in a long, long time. I'm sitting in this...this dank old place somewhere in Indiana sick as I can be and I have to prepare this message to give at the Moody thing. And I'm feeling weak and I'm not feeling well and I'm just asking the Lord to help me and just give me the strength to do this. And I finally get...somebody drives me up to Chicago and I get there and I approach the great auditorium in the evening to preach and it's in the middle of winter that founders week occurs, and so it's February and it's very cold and all these people are hurrying into this great church to fill it up. And I come in, and as I go toward the door a gentleman hands me a piece of paper, and I notice every one is getting them that goes in. And I took it and said, "Thank you." And I looked at it and it said, "The heresies of John MacArthur." And I immediately thought, "Well I certainly ought to know what they are," I mean, the heresies of John MacArthur. I got in and I looked around the audience and I realized every single person in there had them. There was...it was an all-out attack on me by a man whom I knew to whom I had given a very special gift and consideration in providing the opportunity for his son to go to the Master's College, provided a scholarship for him.

And you ask yourself...why...why do people do that? You ...you expect the best and so you pour your life into people and you get as close as you can to them and your love is genuine and they have the potential to inflict on you deep pain...deep pain.

I would remind you as married couples, you have the potential to inflict the deepest pain on your partner because your partner loves you. And typically it's true that married couples talk to each other

worse than other people talk to each other. I guess you think it doesn't hurt, but it does. Your children have an immense capability to inflict pain on you, don't you...don't they, because you have invested so much love in them as well as to bring you such joy and exhilaration.

The deepest pain in life is inflicted by those for whom we care the most and that is exactly what Paul was going through when he wrote 2 Corinthians. He loved that church greatly. He had an immense capacity to love people and he had loved them into the Kingdom. He'd love to them with the gospel, he'd love them right into salvation, as it were, and then he had nurtured them and taught them. And then the false teachers came into the Corinthian church, as you know, and started lying about him and discrediting him. And they passed out their little papers that said the heresies of Paul, and the people all bought it. They all believed it. And he was just devastated. He was depressed.

It was in that very pain that we really find out how to deal with trouble. And that's why this passage is so critical. We resent the suffering and we resent the pain and it isn't pleasant until we understand what God is accomplishing by it. I might be so bold as to say this, but I have learned in my life that the greatest time of spiritual development for me are in the greatest times of pain. I've learned to embrace the pain because I can see in it the hand of God. No text of Scripture more powerfully unfolds the purpose of God in our pain than this text before us. That's why it's so important for me to take my time going through this because I want it to be so helpful to you and to many others.

Now this is one of the most powerful texts in the Bible and it is set like a diamond in a setting that is also very special. The setting is 2 Corinthians 10 to 13, that passage may be the most emotionally charged passage Paul ever wrote. And we've been going through it so you know that. So here in this emotionally-charged passage is set the jewel of this tremendous text that shows us what God is endeavoring to accomplish in our suffering. Here Paul lays his heart wide open. His integrity, his character, his virtue, his honesty have been called into question by his enemies. His love and loyalty have been assaulted. His leadership, his wisdom have been questioned and undermined. His motives misrepresented as wicked and selfish. And it hurts.

Paul knew about suffering. You remember back in chapter 11, he knew about what it was to be shipwrecked and to spend 24 hours floating around in the deep hanging on to some piece of wreckage. He knew what it was to be whipped five times with 39 lashes. He knew what it was to be three times beaten with rods. He knew what it was to be in jail. He knew what it was to be stoned and left for dead. He knew all about physical suffering.

But this was worse because, you see, even beyond the physical suffering, chapter 11 he says, "There's the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches." What concerned him more than his physical pain was the emotional pain that was inflicted upon him when things didn't go well in the church because he was so devoted to them. He says in verse 29 of chapter 11, "When they're weak, I'm weak. When they're led into sin, it becomes my...it becomes a fire in my heart, it burns me." He

was so involved with his people. I mean, he knew what it was to be in a stinking filthy jail. He knew what it was to eat the putrid food of people who are incarcerated in that time. He knew what it was to be put into stocks and stocks in those days you didn't just hang your hands through and your feet like this, they were stretched to the extremity and put in the farthest possible position and held there with the muscles taut and the legs in the same position and left for days like that. He knew what it was to suffer physically.

But no suffering was as severe to him as the care of the churches. When the church was weak, he felt the weakness in his own heart. He empathized so deeply with them. And when they were led into sin, he burned inside. People inflict the greatest pain. They can disappoint. They can reject. They can abuse. They can fail. They can wound. They can betray. They can turn on the one who loves them the most. And the deepest griefs in life they will inflict. No disease is as painful as false accusation or rejection or misrepresentation or hated or betrayal.

So here is Paul then in the midst of this deep trauma of betrayal. And we would expect in the deepest pain that we would learn the greatest lessons that could apply to any lesser pain. And that is exactly the case. Here is a man in the agony of being unloved, unappreciated, untrusted, his affection is called hypocrisy, his love is unrequited. It is a very, very painful time. And he focuses on it starting in chapter 12 verse 5. "On behalf of such a man will I boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast except in regard to my weaknesses, for if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish for I shall be speaking the truth, but I refrain from this so that no one may credit me with more than he sees in me or hears in me. And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason to keep me from exalting myself there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me to keep me from exalting myself. Concerning this, I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me and He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses that the power of Christ may dwell in me, therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties for Christ's sake for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Obviously Paul found his strength in the midst of his deepest pain. That's what we're going to learn about in this text. There's so much here. This is so rich. I wish we had three hours in a row to just go right through it. I'm going to have to ask you to try to file these things in your mind so that you have them captive as we'll have to pick this up next week, and maybe even one more time.

When a faithful man, a faithful woman, invests a whole life and all energy and love and affection and everything they have sacrificially into someone else and they turn on them, that's a crushing experience. And that's exactly what Paul was going through.

Now he defines his trouble in verse 7, and we're going to look at this and this is probably about as far as we're going to go, but let's look at it. Let's look at how he defines his trouble. Verse 7, in the middle of the text, and the rest of the text we'll talk about and how it expands on this. But starting in verse 7 he says, "There was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me." Now this is very, very important.

Now there has been an awful lot of discussion about this passage of Scripture because it's kind of a unique one. Paul says, "There was given me a thorn in the flesh," and people say..."Wow, that's...that's an interesting metaphor, but what is he talking about here?" And you can read, I'm telling you, you can read *ad infinitum ad nauseam* and you will get endless viewpoints of what this is. It amazes me. In fact, I guess I had forgotten how many viewpoints there are so I spent some time this week just looking up what everybody says about this. What was bothering Paul? What was his thorn in the flesh?

Here are those things that have been suggested. This is a compiled list. That the thorn was headaches, carnal lusts...these are various options from various writers. Carnal lust, that is he was battling with some...some lust that he couldn't control, ophthalmia, eye problem, epilepsy, malaria, malta-fever, loss of hair...it's a problem, but I don't think it reaches quite these proportions...hysteria, hypochondria, gallstones, gout, rheumatism, sciatica, gastritis, leprosy, lice in the head, which is not a problem if loss of hair is the problem, deafness, dental infection, neurasthenia, stuttering, etc. Wow. And you know as well as I do that if speculation about this is that wide, they're all wrong.

I mean, if there's not information in the text to nail it down and you can go from that range...from one end of that range to the other end, you know they're all just grabbing air. The list alone cancels itself out.

What is he talking about here? What is this thing called a thorn in the flesh? Well...well, let's break it down a little bit. The word "thorn" for example, the word thorn is not confined to the meaning of a thorn on a rose bush. When you think of a thorn you immediately think of a little thorn on a rose bush. You're out there cutting the roses, or you're putting them in the little jar, or whatever, with the water, and one of them pricks you...look, Paul is not saying that the deepest pain of his life, the greatest agony of his life, this tremendous thing that he's going through is like sticking his finger with a thorn on a rose. That's trivial. That isn't what he's talking about. He's not saying, "I had so many revelations, so many visions and the Lord had to humble me and the Lord had to make me weak and I prayed that...so the Lord stuck me with a little thing right here on my hand. I don't think so. Whatever this is, it's a lot bigger than that. In fact, the word literally means a stake...s-t-a-k-e. It's talking about a long shaft of wood sharpened at the end like a pencil, used for the express purpose of either making a fence or impaling someone. Such stakes were used literally to drive right through someone's chest. That's what he's talking about...a sharpened wooden shaft to impale someone. He said, "I'm going

through some right now that is like having a stake driven right through me."

Now he defines exactly where this thing is going, a thorn in the flesh, it says in the NAS, but the Greek says, not "in" but "for" the flesh...a thorn for the flesh. Now if you study the writings of the apostle Paul you know that he gives a very clear meaning to the word "flesh." He talks about it in Romans 7, "Flesh is his unredeemed humanness. Flesh is his sinful tendency." Even though he is a new creature in Christ, even though he's a new inner man, that new inner man recreated in Christ, that new life is incarcerated in unredeemed humanness and therein lies the spiritual struggle. And you know what happens? The flesh rises up and demands its moment in the sun and demands its way and so the flesh then, that unredeemed humanness, not just your physical body, but all your impulses that are sinful, all the propensities that are sinful, that becomes the beachhead where temptation lands. He had natural human impulses and propensities. And the Lord was using this tremendous suffering literally to impale his otherwise proud flesh.

In fact, it says, "There was given me," and I think it's only fair to conclude, "There was given me," has to mean God allowed this. After all, verse 8 it says, "Concerning this I entreated the Lord." He went immediately to the Lord to ask the Lord to remove it so it was pretty obvious that the Lord had allowed it. I don't think he's talking about anything physical here. All the physical things were over back there in chapter 11 verse 27 and then he moved beyond those to talk about his care for the church. I don't think he's talking about some physical pain, some disease, some illness whether it would be a serious illness or a rather trivial one, or some have suggested, or anything in between. I don't think that the idea is physical, I think it makes it very clear something is by the purposes of God literally being rammed right through his sinful tendencies.

You say, "What's he talking about?" Well he tells you right there in verse 7, we'll say about this less time...next time, to keep me from...what?...exalting myself. The man had been to heaven, folks, the man had been to heaven and back. That's enough to exalt anybody. The man had planted churches all over everywhere. His success was beyond imagination. Everywhere he went two things started, a church and a riot. He was beloved by everybody. He was the spiritual father, grandfather, or uncle of everybody that was converted in the Gentile world. I mean, the man's influence was staggering and he was still human. And there were tendencies in his humanness to be proud. And God had just taken a stake and just rammed it through his otherwise proud flesh. He was going through a crushing, devastating blow.

You say, "Well that still doesn't tell me what the thorn in the flesh is?" Well it says what it is. I don't know how people can miss this. "A thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan." There it is, that is...that is the defining phrase, "A messenger of Satan."

Now the word "messenger" in the Greek is the word *angelos*, from which we get the word "angel" in English. So you have to do here with an angel. It refers...it always refers to a personal being. It could refer to a human being if so interpreted in Revelation 2 and 3, or it might always refer to an angelic being. In this case it is an angel not from God but from Satan. Now you give me another name for an angel from Satan. A demon...a demon is what he's talking about.

You say, "You mean the demon was the thorn?" Yeah. By the way, the Old Testament uses the term "thorn" in the Septuagint four times, three times it refers to a person. So Paul may have been borrowing on a rather traditional use of the term "thorn" to refer to a person. It's not far fetched to say that today. Don't we say that in English? You know, that person is a real thorn in my side? Well there was a person who was a...who was driving this stake right through Paul's heart.

Well, you say, "Who was the person?" Well it was a...it was a demon...it was a demon. You say, "You mean to tell me Paul had a demon?" There's nothing in the context to indicate Paul had a demon...nothing. In fact, a demon, listen carefully, a demon would not seek to humble Paul, right? A demon would seek to...what?...exalt him. A demon would not seek to drive a stake through his unredeemed flesh, a demon would seek to drive a stake through his spiritual life. No, this is not a demon in Paul, Paul was a godly man, a virtuous man. There's no physical illness mentioned here and there's no indication that Paul had a demon. What you have here, I believe, very clearly is this, the whole context is about the false teachers. And I think what Paul is saying is...Look, the whole enterprise of the false teachers who come into Corinth is basically under the influence of one of Satan's angels. And that demon, ripping and tearing up the church, God was using to drive a stake through Paul's otherwise proud flesh.

So if you have had many visions and revelations, you may have to expect some stakes to be driven through your flesh. We'll say more about that next time.

You see, what Scripture is saying is that the whole deceptive infiltration into Corinth with all its lies about Paul and with its false gospel was the work of a demon, probably a demon who had taken over the ring leader of the Corinthians conspiracy. Just to show you, go back to chapter 11 for a moment, verses 13 to 15, and this kind of sets the ground for this. Second Corinthians 11:13, "For such men are false apostles," he's talking about the false teachers who have come into Corinth, "They're false apostles, they are deceitful workers, they are disguising themselves as apostles of Christ and we shouldn't be surprised, no wonder even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." So that's what you have, some demon masquerading as an angel of light. In other words, bringing the light of truth, supposedly. Verse 15 adds, "They are disguised as servants of righteousness." They come in, they say they have the truth, the light of the truth of God. They say they are the truly righteous servants of God. And the fact is, they are false and deceitful and they are just following the path that their father, the devil, has set for them, they are disguised but they are demonic. He's simply talking here...and go back to the text...he's simply talking about the demon who was leading the whole Corinthian

escapade. That's what was in his heart. Satan's demon was behind it all.

Shouldn't be surprised. You remember 1 Timothy 4? Paul writing to Timothy says, "When people fall away from the faith, it's because they pay attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons." And then in verse 2, "Propagated through hypocritical liars," so you've got that sequence, as you know, doctrines of demons are basically the concoction of Satan and his kingdom of darkness to lie. You have the truth of God and you have all the lies that Satan propagates in order to confuse people, deceive them and damn them. Those demonic lies come through seducing spirits that work on hypocritical false teachers who propagate them and lead people astray. That's exactly what happened in Corinth. They were assaulting the gospel and to do that they had to assault Paul because they had to destroy his credibility so they could teach error and be accepted. It was all a hellish, demonic, satanic enterprise, as all false teaching is. This was the assault from hell.

And you know, he says this, "This thing happens," back to verse 7, "to buffet me." Buffet me...that word means torment. You say, "You mean to tell me...you mean to tell me God is tormenting Paul? God is allowing Paul to be tormented by a demon?" Exactly. We have a lot of foolish people running around today talking to demons, supposedly casting demons out, telling demons where to go and what to do and all this. And even if they could command them, and they can't, they might be trying to chase away the very ones that God had brought. Better stay out of that realm. There are times when the Lord not only uses demons to achieve His purpose in the life of a believer, but He'll even use Satan himself. You say, "You're kidding!" No I'm not. I'm not kidding at all.

You remember Job? One day Satan came into heaven, according to the book of Job, comes before God. He says, "God, You have a lot of fair weather friends, the only reason all those people are faithful to You and worship You and give You honor is because You boss them all the time, they're all rich and happy and that's why they are faithful to You. And if they weren't, they would turn on You so fast, You just hold them because You bless them."

Satan was trying to say that saving faith was fickle. Satan was an Arminian. Satan was saying, "Look...not an Armenian, for those of you who don't know what I'm saying here, it's not an Armenian, it's a brand of theology...but Satan was saying...I can break saving faith, I can destroy saving faith. Saving faith is not permanent, it doesn't last, it's...it's only good as long as You're blessing them." And God wanted to prove to Satan that saving faith was permanent, right? That those who believe are granted a faith that cannot be destroyed, no matter what we suffer, so God says, "Okay, I'll make My point, I'll show you that saving faith is permanent. See Job, My faithful, godly servant down there, go do whatever you want to him and let's see if he turns on Me."

So Satan, you can just see him licking his chops and rubbing his hands together as he exists God's presence and starts to move toward Job. He goes down and, I mean, literally all hell broke loose,

devastation beyond belief. He kills all of Job's family, except his wife...and I know there were days when...well, I don't need to finish the sentence, you understand it already, I can tell...because she always had the wrong answer for everything and that was part of the suffering, you know. But anyway, then he...he kills all the...all the crops and then he kills all the animals and the guy's lost everything, absolutely everything in his whole world is gone and then he gets these terrible kind of cancerous open sores and he sitting in a pile of dirt scraping scabs off him with a broken piece of pottery. And this wealthy, prosperous, middle-eastern mogul is reduced to rubble and his faith never wavers. And he says, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."

Wow, that's the stuff of real faith. And then at the end of the book after he's gone through all of this, remember some...four of his friends came to help him? Really, no help at all. As I told you some months ago, they came and they sat with him in just empathy and didn't say anything for seven days. And that was...that was the wisest thing they did. As soon as they opened their mouth, all wisdom left and they gave him bad advice for the rest of the book. So he not only had the pain of all his suffering, but he had the pain of people giving him solutions that were inaccurate. He didn't know why he was suffering, they kept telling him it was this and it was this and it was this, there's something wrong in his life, something rotten, some sin. And he knew there wasn't any sin in his life and he didn't know the reason why and all their counsel was folly. He still in the midst of all of that never wavered in his faith. And in the end when it was all over, God never told him why He did it, God never told him about the conversation with Satan, he never knew anything about the reason...he never could figure it out and in the end this is what he said, "Before all this happened I heard of You with the hearing of my ear, now my eyes seeth You and I repent in dust and ashes." "God, I've never seen You as clearly as I've seen You in my suffering and I'm sorry if I ever uttered anything that displeased You."

It was the spiritual highlight of his life. But God released Satan to prove a point. In Luke 22 our beloved apostle Peter, Jesus goes to Peter and said, "Satan desires to have you." Satan came to Jesus...and I want Peter, I'll devastate Peter. And Peter would look like a good prospect, wouldn't he? Because he...he waffled so much. So Satan said, "I want Peter." And Jesus says to Satan...to Peter, He says, "Satan desires to have you." If I were Peter I would have said, "Well You told him no, right?" And Jesus said, "Actually I told him yes. So I've turned loose Satan on you that he may sift you. You still need some refining, Peter and it's the kind of refining that only some deep suffering will produce." Satan was turned loose on him. You know the sad story of his denial, don't you? But Jesus said, "When it's over, you're going to be able to strengthen the brethren, strength will come out of this."

There are times when God releases Satan to do his own work in the life of His people. There are times when God allows demons to go in and tear up the things that we're endeavoring to do because He has a purpose that can only be accomplished by that, and that's exactly what you have here. "There was given me," and it's important to understand that the giver was God. The assault from this demon through these false teachers was from God. God had opened the way to the demonic assault.

God had allowed Paul to be hit right where it hurt most. Today people think the only thing God does is send good angels and good experiences and comfortable things and prosperity and that's just not true. God will even use the kingdom of darkness, He'll use demons, He'll even use Satan himself if He needs to to accomplish His purpose.

Now God allowed Paul to have this pain of this terrible, terrible mess in the Corinthian church. Why? Because God was teaching Paul some lessons that only this could teach. Wow. In his deepest pain he learned the profoundest truths. There are five profound, life-changing lessons to be learned from the deepest suffering. And if you want to know what they are, you have to come back next week. I thought we might get to the first one, but we didn't make it. But I needed to set that ground work. Now you're going to have to remember this because I'm not gong to take the time to make a long introduction, I want to keep moving through this text. You're going to find in this what is most helpful in dealing with any suffering, any difficulty, any pain in your life. Five great lessons that God teaches us in our pain. And we'll start next week right in verse 5 to the unfolding of these lessons. Join me in prayer.

Lord, we feel like we fell short of being able to really open up this text and yet we trust that in Your providence and grace You'll overcome our shortcomings and minister to our hearts. Lord, just in what we've learned this morning we are already encouraged. You use not only Your own power and the power of Your Spirit and the power of Your Word, the accountability of other believers, the gifts of the Spirit, the ministries of the church to do Your work in us, but if You need to You'll use Satan and demons. And sometimes, Lord, what we want to avoid most, the deepest pain of life is the very point at which we learn the greatest lessons. It is in those times of great despair and confusion, pain and sorrow and suffering, questioning and anxiety that Your face becomes most clear to us. Lord, we know even as looking back at our conversion we came to Christ because we were destitute, we had nowhere else to turn. And it's still true, Lord, that we need our proud flesh humbled, we need the sufferings and the pain of life because of what it accomplishes in us, what it allows You to do. It drives us to You, it breaks our sense of self-confidence and makes us weak and then You can make us strong in Your strength. So many good things that come when we go through difficulty. We don't cherish that difficulty but we embrace it because we want to be what You would want us to be. We want to be like Job, if need be, at the end of everything You poured out more blessing than he ever had in the first place. You gave him a family and land and blessing and crops and animals. And Peter, You used him mightily at Pentecost to be the messenger to found the church and, Lord, You used Paul and You're still using him in our lives through his great epistles. You used him to plant many churches after he wrote this letter. So, Lord, we know that You unfold a purpose in our pain that we at the time maybe can't see, but so many good things happen. Prepare us for what lies ahead in this wonderful text and we'll thank You in Christ's name. Amen.

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