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

How God Uses Suffering, Part 1
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:7-8
Code: 47-83

Open your Bible, if you will, to 2 Corinthians chapter 12, back to this most notable, most wonderful, most rich portion of Scripture that we began last Sunday. We've entitled this section, "Power in weakness," 2 Corinthians 12:5 to 10, "Power in Weakness."

As we learned last time, life is painful. Some years ago a rabbi wrote a book called *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. And he asked the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people." A better question is, "Why do bad things happen to everybody?" Because that's how it is in life. Fallen people in a fallen world have to deal with difficulty.

We talked about the fact that life is painful and it's painful in many ways on many fronts. But we also suggested that the greatest pain that we feel is that inflicted on us by other people. And the closer they are to us and the more we love them, the greater their ability to inflict pain on us. And we're made for relationships by God. We're made to enter in to intimate relationships and therefore we have a high degree of vulnerability.

That is precisely where we find the apostle Paul when he wrote 2 Corinthians, he is hurt and he is hurt profoundly and he is hurt deeply, deeply enough to describe himself in chapter 7 of this epistle as depressed. I really believe that it was the...it was the point of Paul's deepest, personal disappointment. It was his deepest personal pain. He was being betrayed by the Corinthian church where he had spent nearly two years in which he loved so dearly. He was being betrayed by them because they had fallen under the influence of false teachers who had lied about Paul and taught a false gospel and other lies and these Corinthians had betrayed Paul, turned from him, were beginning to embrace the false teachers and Paul was crushed.

In fact, he describes this in verse 7 of our text in these words, "There was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me." And I told you last time that this assault by the false teachers on the Corinthian church which resulted in their betrayal of Paul is here described as a "thorn in the flesh." He further describes it as a messenger of Satan. The messenger is the word *angelos*in the Greek, it means angel, and an angel from Satan is a demon and so he's telling us here that this terrible, terrible betrayal by the Corinthians, this defection from the true gospel and the truth that he had taught them, this was all being orchestrated by a demon. Demon-inspired false teachers had come into that church and perpetrated this terrible, terrible mutiny. And the effect of it was to buffet me, he said, and that's the word torment. Paul was personally tormented by the problems in the

Corinthian church. Because he loved God so much he didn't want to see God dishonored, because he loved the gospel so much he didn't want to see it misunderstood, because he loved the church so much he didn't want to see it torn up and divided, because he loved those people so much he didn't want to see them fall victim to lying false teachers.

So as we saw last time, this was like a stake just driven right through Paul, it was just impaling him, the pain and the suffering were so profound. And I suppose in his own mind he looked at Corinth as one of his crowning achievements, having spent, as I said, nearly two years there and had such tremendous effect and blessing and impact. And here it all seems to be falling prey to this demon-inspired group of false teachers and has resulted in a betrayal of him by his own beloved people whom he himself had led to Christ. He can't get any lower than this. No physical pain can match this. No economic deprivation can match this. No travel difficulty can match this. No shipwreck can match this...no whipping, no stoning, no lashing by the Jews can match this pain.

So here we find Paul at his deepest hour of suffering. And therefore we would expect to learn the most about how to handle suffering. If we can find a man in his most profound time of suffering, that's the place to learn the lessons because they'll be more clearly indicated in that environment, and that's exactly what happens.

Now Paul knew that God had allowed this to happen. And that was the amazing part. Sometimes bad things happen to God's people because God allows them to happen. He has a purpose in them and that purpose is to bring them to some spiritual level beyond where they are.

Verse 7 says, "There was given me a thorn in the flesh." This, by the way, was a gift...however an unsolicited one, it was a gift, then it was really from God. We know that because in verse 8 he asks the Lord to remove it. God had allowed this to happen, as we saw God allowed Satan to assault Job, God allowed Satan to assault Peter. For His own purposes God will allow the devil to do His work. And in the end it will effect the divine purpose.

Now the question is...what does God accomplish in the life of His own through suffering? Why did God allow this? Why would God allow a demon-inspired group of false teachers to go in and tear up a church? Why would God allow that? We would assume today that if that ever happens that's the devil, that's Satan, that's demons operating on their own and against the will of God. But not in this case and not always. God is allowing this to happen. Why? Well, I'm going to give you five reasons why God allows suffering in your life and mine. Five reasons, and they are formidable, practical, powerful reasons. And I really believe they will become an anchor for your soul in trouble. I'm going to give you some of them this morning, and the remaining ones next week.

Number one, God uses suffering to reveal our spiritual condition...our spiritual character. God uses suffering to reveal our spiritual character. You really do not know the truth about someone spiritually

when everything is going well, right? It doesn't surface because basically they appear to be at peace and happy and with a measure of joy and satisfaction and fulfillment in life because superficially and on the surface everything is okay. Then when things begin to go wrong, reality begins to surface as to their spiritual condition. And the worse things get, the more their spiritual character is un-bared. When you strip away the blessings, and you strip away the successes and you strip away the prosperity and you strip away the health and you begin to peel it all back, then you're going to find out what somebody is really made of spiritually.

God wanted to accomplish that in the life of Paul because the truest crucible for testing one's genuine spiritual character is the severest trouble. And it was very important to God that the character of Paul be manifest. Paul himself, you remember, wanted to establish his integrity, he wanted to establish his credibility. He wanted the Corinthians to know he was faithful, he was godly, he was not sinful as they were accusing him of being. He wanted them to know the real quality of his spiritual life and there was no better way for that to surface than in the midst of this deep, deep suffering.

Now I need to take you back to the beginning of the chapter to get into the flow where this point is made. Go back to verse 1 for a moment. You remember that Paul has been forced into a boasting mode because he is forced to demonstrate his superiority over the false teachers, or false apostles, as we've called them. He has to demonstrate that he is their superior in every way. And so he's been forced to boast and he doesn't like it. He's given long, long disclaimers about how distasteful it is to him, but he's forced to have to do it. It is foolish to do it, it is fleshly to do it and he has to do it. So he says boasting is necessary though it's not profitable, but I'll go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. That's the most notable verse, as I've pointed out to you earlier, he says...Look, I don't like this, I don't like boasting, I don't like comparing myself with somebody else, you've forced me into it, I don't like to talk about visions and revelations because it's not profitable, it's not helpful is literally what the Greek says, it's not useful, but you have forced me to this. And then in verse 2 he recites this incredible vision referring to himself in the third person because of his humility, he says, "I know a man...meaning himself...in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up into the third heaven." Verse 4 says caught up into paradise, same thing. Paul says...All right, you want to talk about visions, I went to heaven...that's right, I had my own personal trip to heaven, it happened 14 years ago and I've never referred to it, never written about it in all these 14 years, never brought it up until now and you've forced me to do that. I don't know whether I was in the body or out of the body, I don't know the nature of the whole thing, God knows. I heard inexpressible words, I heard what I heard and saw what I saw but I can't translate it into an earthly language, and even if I could, verse 4 says, I wouldn't be allowed to.

Now why does he bring this in? He's in the middle of talking about all his suffering and all of his pain, and in chapter 11, you know, starting in verse 23 clear to verse 33 it's all about suffering and suffering and suffering. And starting here in chapter 12 and verse 5 it's all about weakness and suffering again. And why does he throw that thing in? Well because that was a big deal to the Greeks and the false

teachers had no doubt come in and claimed visions and claimed revelations because the Greeks believed that those who were truly representatives of the gods had experienced mystic visions, they had had transcendental experiences...like many people today. The Corinthians and the Greeks were enamored by folks who said they had a vision of God. Some of the people even tried to induced those visions through drunken orgies and the idea of being drunk was somehow that in your drunkenness you could...you could get outside yourself and be elevated to this great vision of God. Not long ago Timothy Leary was advocating the same thing through drugs, that you can get high and discover God. That was exactly what the Greeks thought...mystic visions, mystic revelations, transcendental spiritual experiences were what set apart the great religions leaders from the crowd. The Corinthians were swept away by these claims, and there they were groveling before these lying braggarts.

Paul says...Okay, so I had that kind of vision, a real one, not a false one, not a fabrication, not a figment of imagination, not a satanic counterfeit, I had the real thing, I went to heaven and came back. Now I told you, what good did that do? I don't even know what condition I was in when I went and came. I don't know if I was in the body or out of the body. I don't know. It's indescribable and it's incomprehensible. I can't say anymore then I went and came back and that's all I know. And it was personal, it was only me and nobody else. It's not repeatable, it's not reproducible. It was 14 years ago, it happened once, God allowed it to happen to give me a vision of heaven to sustain me in my suffering.

The Lord knew that Paul was going to suffer more than any man in redemptive history and other than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and as a result he needed to be sustained with a hope for glory and so God gave him a glimpse of glory to show him what was waiting him. So that when he said, "For me to depart and be with Christ is far better," he knew exactly what he was talking about cause he had been there. God gave him that vision to sustain him in his suffering, but it was for that moment and that moment alone and only for him and it was indescribable, incomprehensible, inexpressible, personal, not repeatable, not reproducible and not even permissible. He couldn't even talk about it. Furthermore, it wasn't verifiable, it wasn't...there was no way to verify it. So what are you going to do? He's going to say...Well I went to heaven and such and such, and this is my experience. And all the false teachers are going to line up and say...Well, we went there too. How you going to verify anything? Can't verify anything.

And then what it does personally is it tends to produce pride. And Paul knew that. It tends to produce pride. You've been to heaven and back? That could make the best of men proud. So Paul in verse 1 says this isn't helpful. It's not helpful to you for all the reasons I've just given. It's not helpful for me because it just feeds my pride. So let's get off the subject.

Verse 5, and that gets us in to our text. "On behalf of such a man will I boast," I'll talk about the man who went to heaven. I'll talk about him. He's referring again to himself in the third person as he has, expressing his humility. I just want you to know this. "On my own behalf I will not boast except in

regard to my weaknesses." What are you saying, Paul? I'm saying...Look, it is true, I went to heaven, I have a right to say it, it happened, it can be acknowledged, it was amazing, it was spectacular, it was incredible, it was a one-of-a-kind experience, it was a great privilege that I was allowed to go. But you need to know this, I was passive in the entire thing. I was passive. I don't even know what state I was in. I didn't seek it, I didn't make it happen. I didn't deserve it. I didn't produce the effort. It wasn't some honor. It wasn't by virtue of my merit. It was something God did and that's it. And it really doesn't say anything about my life at all. I can speak of it but not on my behalf...that is to say not as if my power or my will or my merit or my work contributed to it. All I can speak about is my weakness. I mean, all I've ever contributed to is weakness. I'm just an ordinary man. That's all I have to bring before you is my weakness. That's it.

And, you see, that was such a powerful thing because it was true, he was weak, he was human. He said his speaking was unimpressive, and his presence was unimpressive, his...he was no orator, he was simplistic and all he ever talked about was this crude message of the cross and he didn't come in the wisdom of man and so forth and so on. He was just...he was just a plain, ordinary, weak man. But, you see, therein was the real explanation because how else then could you explain his immense impact except for the fact that it was God through him? It couldn't be explained by Paul. You couldn't say...Well, no wonder he's had the effect he's had, he's a...he's a powerful presence. No...no wonder he's had the effect he's had, he's a profound gifted thinker and speaker, he's an articulate orator, his rhetoric is without equal. No wonder he sways the masses.

But all of that just wasn't how it was. He was just a weak and simple man and there was no explanation for him except God coming through him. Verse 6 he says, "If I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth." Am I going to be a fool like them and lie? If I do speak I'm going to tell you the truth and the truth is I did go to heaven, that is the truth, I'm not denying it. That would be false humility. I'm not going to stand here and be falsely humble like some fool. I will speak the truth but I restrain myself. And here's why...the end of verse 6, here's the key..."So that no one may credit me with more...here it is, folks...than he sees in me or hears from me." Boy, that is so critical...so critical. His enemies have claimed to have visions. His enemies have claimed to have revelations. And Paul just says, "I will not build my apostolic defense on that stuff, it is not repeatable, it is not reproducible, it is not explicable, it is not verifiable, it is not helpful. And anybody and everybody can claim to have all kinds of visions and who is going to know? If I have to base my defense on an unarticulated, unexplainable, unrepeatable, unverifiable, spiritual experience, I'm in bad trouble. I'm no better than all the charlatans and all the fakes who do that all the time."

For him to establish his apostleship on something that nobody could know really happened would be to open the door to every deceiver to do the same, claiming similar mystical experiences and authority therefore to speak for God. So Paul just placed no value on that at all. Boy, that is really important to hear, isn't it? It's not the proof of anything. It's not the proof of anything. Furthermore, Paul doesn't say it made me closer to God. He doesn't say it made me more spiritual, to go to heaven

and come back, or it made me more knowledgeable of theology. He doesn't say it made me more godly. He says what it tends to do is make me more...what?...more proud.

So, end of verse 6, here it is, "I don't want you to credit me with anything other than what you see in me and hear from me." Boy, I'm telling you, folks, there is the acid test. You say you're a spokesman for God, you say you're a man of God, you say you represent God, you say you come with the authority of God, don't tell me about your visions, let me see your life and hear your words. That's the criteria. Nothing ambiguous about that. That's verifiable. What can be seen in his life and heard in his words was the proof of who he was. When these supposed men of God, these supposed prophets and seers of our day come along and tell us all about their visions, the right response is fine, there's no way to verify any of that, let me follow you around and watch your life and let me hear you speak, let me hear the words that comes from your lips and let me measure them against the Word of the living God. That's the issue.

Visions...not helpful. Spiritual experiences that are unrepeatable and unverifiable...not helpful. And they're not worth the least simple righteous act and word. So Paul is trying to show them who he is by his life and the Lord is then saying...Okay, if you want your life to really manifest your true spiritual character, I've got to put you through some suffering cause then the truth will really come out. Nothing in life is more effective in revealing what a person really is spiritually before God than trouble...trouble. The greater the trouble, the truer the test of character. Paul then is plunged into the deepest trouble, the deepest sorrow, the severest pain and is therefore seen to be the man of God in the most clear sense.

You see, what you really are shows up when everything goes wrong, doesn't it...when Satan has just driven a stake right through your heart, torn up your most precious treasures, wounded you in the area of what is most important to you. And what was most important to Paul was the truth in the church and the people he loved. And when Satan was ripping that to shreds, that was his deepest pain. And it was the perfect environment to find out his spiritual character...how did he act and how did he speak in the midst of that? You see, modern false teachers, they want people to believe they're spiritual and they want people to believe they come from God and they speak for God and they have divine authority and they teach the truth because they have had visions and revelations and because they're prosperous and powerful and popular and draw big crowds. Let me tell you, be suspicious of those people. Real spiritual power and real spiritual authority and genuine spiritual integrity looks ordinary, looks weak, looks unimpressive but when you look closely, what you see and hear is the evidence of genuine spirituality. Be suspicious of the people on parade. The real spiritual power comes in very ordinary packages and you scratch your head and say...I don't know how God works through him, he's so ordinary.

So Paul's crushing thorn was exactly the right circumstance to demonstrate his true character and he simply calls on the Corinthians and says...Just look at my life and listen to my words and make your

judgment. Are these the words of a godly man?" They would have heard many of them. The first epistle, 1 Corinthians, and even before that a letter he wrote them, and after 1 Corinthians he wrote them another letter called the severe letter, and now he wrote them 2 Corinthians, that's four letters. And nearly two years of dialogue and a visit in between in which he personally spoke with them, they had plenty to see and plenty to hear.

Trouble will test your character. And that was good for Paul because he was trying to demonstrate to them how pure his life really was and nothing would show it better than the immense suffering the man was under even when he wrote 2 Corinthians. And it wasn't just the suffering from the Corinthians, as we've learned going through the whole epistle, there was all kinds of other stuff in his life that threatened his very life as he woke up every day realizing he could be killed by his enemies. So God allows suffering to manifest our character, our spiritual character.

I realize in my own life that God has those purposes. I realize that I can't expect you to trust me just because you see me preach, you need a closer look, you need to see my life and the life of any shepherd or leader or pastor. You need to hear my words when I preach, but you need to hear my words when I'm not preaching. And you need to see what happens in my life when I face suffering and difficulty and trial and tribulation and disappointment. That's all part of the revelation that builds trust. Your trouble will manifest your spiritual condition. And that's not only good for everybody to see cause they can see the reality of your character, but it's good for you to see cause you can see the weaknesses there and know where you need to be strong.

Number two, God allows our deep pain as His way to reveal our spiritual character or our spiritual condition...secondly, God uses suffering to humble us. God uses suffering to humble us. And that's what was happening to Paul. He...Paul's greatest success was the building of these churches. I mean, this was sort of like his life work. This was his monument to his faithfulness and the excellence of his ministry. He had built the Corinthian church and now the whole thing is just starting to collapse. This is a very humbling experience.

But Paul needed it. Verse 7, and this is explicit, "And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason explicitly, to keep me from exalting myself there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me...and in case you missed it...to keep me from exalting myself." He says it twice.

Sometimes when you think about the apostle Paul we think about a man who would seemingly be impervious to our normal struggles with the things like pride, right? Not so. I mean, you can just imagine the scenario, can't you? Paul is talking to one of his co-workers and he says to him..."How were you converted, brother?"

"Oh it was wonderful. I heard you preach, Paul, one day and you preached the gospel and the Lord turned my heart and I believed."

"Really. Well, you know how I was converted? I was on my way to Damascus one day and heaven opened up and a great light blinded me and I fell to the ground and the Lord Jesus Himself, the risen exalted Lord came down and stood by me and spoke to me."

"Really?" Make the guy feel a little shabby, right? I mean....

"Yes, and then I was blind and then the Lord spoke to me again and told me He called me to be a light to the Gentiles and it was quite a thing. And then He took me off to the Nabatean Arabia for three years and He was sole teacher. No man taught me my gospel, the Lord Himself taught me. How about you? Who taught you?"

It's a little intimidating. And you can imagine there's a little dialogue about missionary strategy and Silas is there and maybe Timothy is there and they're saying...We need to go into this town and here is the strategy we need. And Paul says, "Well, here's the strategy I think we ought to employ." And Silas says, "Paul, I disagree, I think there's a better strategy than that, I'd like to suggest we do this." And the other one says, "Yeah, I agree with him, Paul."

"How many times have you fellows been to heaven? None? Good, we'll do my plan." I mean, just the humblest of men would be exalted with that kind of experience. Paul had not only had a trip to heaven, but he had a revelation of Christ on the Damascus road and he had a further revelation of Christ when He came to him when he was in jail in the land of Israel. He had a further revelation that God gave him when an angel joined him on a ship, the Holy Spirit came to him and testified to him about chains and imprisonment. I mean, there was just this constant flow and we're not talking about the thirteen epistles that he received by inspiration, we're talking about direct contact with heaven. And that's enough to make the best of men proud. And because of all these great revelations, he says, to keep me from exalting myself there was given me a thorn in the flesh.

You mean to tell me that this whole mess in the Corinthian church, this whole deal over there was to humble Paul? That's right. You mean to say that God would allow one of Satan's demons to go in and tear up a church for nothing more than the humiliation of its pastor? That's what happened. God's ways are not our ways, are they?

You see, Paul was a very formidable person and his humility was very important to the redemptive plan. God wanted him humble and God did what needed to be done. "For this reason to keep me from exalting myself, to bring me to brokenness, meekness, humility...which is the highest virtue...the Lord allowed this demon to send those false teachers and tear up the church and produce that betrayal." You begin to ask yourself...Do I know what I'm doing? I put my best effort into that and look,

it's all just kind of falling down and they're turning on me...and that's a very, very humbling experience. But that's the purpose of God, He wants His servants humble.

Spurgeon said, "You have two choices. You can either be humble or humbled." Trouble is a humbling, humbling thing. Job was like that. Boy, Job was just humbled to ashes, wasn't he? Just humbled to ashes. Spent the first part of his life building up this fortune, the Lord just wipes it all out, kills everybody in his family but his wife and then humbles him...just unbelievable humiliation.

Why did all that...I mean, all that had to happen because God wanted to make His point, that His servant would be humbled and never lose his faith. And then, of course, in his humility Job says, "I repent in dust and ashes." He was sitting in an ash pile full of repentance, right where God wants us, isn't it? No trust in his flesh, no confidence in himself, helpless, hopeless, clinging to the mercy and grace and power of God. He was at the end of all his resources and then God opened up the floodgates and greater blessing fell on him then he ever knew even before. So God uses suffering to humble us.

And listen, folks. If need be He'll use Satan to do it. That's why it's so foolish for these people running around chasing demons, they're under the illusion that the demons respond, that somehow they have authority over demons, Christ did and the apostles did. Nothing in the Bible indicates that we do. But even if you did, you might be chasing away the demons the Lord sent. You don't understand Kingdom purposes. People running around binding Satan here and binding Satan there, unsuccessfully, I might add, it's an illusion and it might well be that if they could do that they would be interrupting the work of God. But for His own purposes allowed Satan access to His own, such as Job and Peter and in the case of Paul, too. A messenger from Satan to do what he did in that Corinthian church to bring that kind of pain and sorrow and brokenness to Paul in order that that man would be humbled.

Let me tell you something, folks. God blesses us but while you're in there praying for blessing and blessing and blessing and blessing, you better realize that the more you're blessed, the more likely you are to need to be...what?...humbled. So the backside of all this blessing you're pleading for may be painful. Now if I was Paul and I had any choice I would have said...Lord, can You do me a favor? Forget the trip to heaven and forget the thorn in the flesh, I'll just stay right where I am. The price is a little too high.

You go rushing into ministry...Oh I want success, success, success. Get ready. I look at my own life and I don't make these personal illustrations but as I look at my own life and I see God's blessing on my life, I just always walk in anticipation of a disaster, I do...I'm never surprised. I'm...you know what? I'm almost relieved when it happens because then it will get over. You know, the Lord blesses and blesses and He blesses the teaching of the Word and He blesses the church and He blesses the ministry and there are lots of things that people don't understand. People sometimes question you about this and question you about that and some things you can tell them and some things you can't.

And...and so you get attacks and you can't ever answer without betraying a confidence or undermining someone else or whatever and you just hope and pray that you can stay on an even keel and continue to be used and God blesses and blesses. And you know somewhere down the road your flesh is going to say...Look at all this success, look at all this blessing. And the Lord is going to have to send a messenger from Satan to drive a stake through your otherwise proud flesh, right? So you expect it. And it comes and it's necessary and it's sort of a sweet experience because humility is a sweet grace to taste.

Trouble does reveal our spiritual character and trouble does humble us. When the best and most beloved of our accomplishments start to fall apart and we can't do anything about it, that's very humbling and it's painful, but it's purposeful.

One more point for this morning, God uses suffering to draw us to Himself...God uses suffering to draw us to Himself. Verse 8, "Concerning this, I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me." Where did he go? To the Lord. Don't you think that might have been the purpose or one of the purposes? That's the right response. He didn't go to Timothy or Titus. He didn't go to some of his buddies. He didn't go to his friends. He didn't go to somebody with an earthly formula. He didn't find a therapy to fix his pain. He didn't look for a technique. He wasn't after human wisdom. He didn't try to find the path of comfort. When the delight of his life was gone, the joy of his service was lost, he didn't go to any human resources.

Furthermore, it's notable he didn't start messing with the demons. He didn't run over there to Corinth and start chasing that demon. He didn't bind Satan, quote/unquote, or try to cast that demon out. He just went to God, directly to God who controls men and demons. "I entreated," the word "entreated" is used frequently in the gospels for the appeals of the sick. He sees himself as a man in deep sickness here and he's crying out to God. This is a pleading, begging, crying out to God. This is too painful, Lord, please. It may well have been that he prayed some imprecatory Psalms, like, you know, kill those guys over there in Corinth...kill them, they're tearing up Your church.

He did it three times on three separate occasions. He prayed to his Lord and he asked Him to remove it, he said, "I can't take it, it's too painful, it hurts too much, I love them so greatly, I love the church, I love the truth, I love the gospel, I hate false doctrine, I hate the kingdom of darkness, I hate the demons and all their evil deception, I can't endure this, it's depressing, I can't bear this, Lord, take it away."

And he prayed that it might depart, "it" being that thorn, it was just a constant thing. But the Lord didn't answer yes and we'll see that next time.

You know, I think this is the...this is the very special thing that happens in suffering. He was immediately forced into the presence of God, and that's the best place you could ever be, isn't it? And

have you noticed how good times don't do that? And the severer the trouble, the more likely you are to have an increase in your prayer life, is that not true? When they take your little baby into the hospital and they tell you it could die, you get real serious about your prayer life. When you find out your teen-ager's on drugs, you get real serious about your prayer life. When you find out your life partner has cancer, you get real serious about your prayers. When you find out you're on the brink of your business going down the proverbial drain, and everything you've put into it, your life savings, is potentially to be lost, your prayer life takes another level. Well, I think sometimes that's what God has in mind.

There's not...some few years ago now that I...and I told you about this at the time...that Mark was having headaches, our son Mark was having headaches and we took him to get an MRI to find out what it was and they discovered a tumor down near the pineal gland near the optic nerve, deep inside the brain area. They sent me down to Cedars Sinai to a neurosurgeon to talk with him, Mark and I went down, and we walked in the office, really didn't know what to expect and walked in, sat down. And this was a crusty old doctor, I mean, he had poked a lot of brains, it was no big thing to him. And he had long since forgone any bedside manner. So he dismissed...he dismissed Mark from the room under the pretense of filling out some papers and he said, "I didn't want him in here to hear this, but this is probably fatal." And I was very stunned. You know, you spend so many years pouring all the best of what you have to give into the life of your young person so they can live a life honoring to Christ and that's your whole goal, and then all of a sudden you find out he's not going to have a life of any kind. And, you know, your first thought is...Lord, You want to check that list again, You sure You got the right name on this one?

And he said but in the next eight days you're going to be going over to the Frank Norris Cancer Center over at the L.A. County Hospital, USC Medical Center, you're going to go over there every day, going to be a series of tests, we're going to try to determine the nature of this tumor and we're going to put the best guys on this. And you take him over every day and at the end of that time we're going to tell you about the results.

Boy, that catapulted me immediately into intense prayer. This is my son. This is my heart. And also into fasting and prayer...I had nothing to eat for those eight days, I had no appetite. It was no sacrifice. I was just lost in importunity before the Lord and I was praying on behalf of Mark. I didn't tell him this, I just said, "Ah, they're going to test for these headaches. That's all, we're going to find out what it is." He's not dumb, he knew it was fairly serious to be going down there eight days in a row and the kind of stuff they were sticking in him and poking around and putting him under and...but nonetheless, we had these conversations back and forth, but never said what the situation was. We were very guarded and yet we enjoyed the fellowship. I thought this is probably the last I'll have with my son, so just poured all the richness I could into it and prayed and fasted through those days.

And you start out sort of praying...Lord, save him, spare him, spare him. And then a few days in you're saying...Lord, do whatever You want, do whatever You want. You're in the presence of the Lord incessantly, unbroken. Even sleep is interrupted by this. And finally at the end you're saying...Take him to heaven, Lord, get him out of here, why should he have to endure this world anyway? Take him into Your presence, heaven is a better place. And by the way, take me with him, will You? I mean, there's just this big transition that takes place. Just a shift. And you just spend all that time in the presence of the Lord. And it's just...

So on the eighth day, it was like a Wednesday evening and I was supposed to get a report on Monday, they were going to bring all the guys together and they had a whole team of experts that were involved in this. And they were going to give me this call and let me know the next day Thursday morning. So I was in my office up there and church had...closed down the office and it was just before the 7:30 events started around campus and so it was dark and I was just sitting up there. I began to feel a peace in my heart that I hadn't felt in this whole process, and actually welled up into a joy in my heart and I had released him to heaven and I had actually tried to visualize him there in the presence of the Lord. And I was at complete peace and there was joy in my heart. And I remember it was a tearful time but I was...found myself singing.

Then I started to feel hungry. And I wasn't sure how to break the fast. You know, I mean, you just can't go down to In and Out or something, it's just too...you know, too crass. So I was just sitting there thinking, you know, I could probably eat something and then I heard a knock at my door which really surprised me because it was about...let's see, there's about one, two, three, four sets of double doors you'd have to go through to get to where I am. The place was locked at that time and the knock at my door I'm thinking...Who is that? And I opened the door and there's a lady there and she said to me, she said, "Oh, Pastor, I hope I'm not disturbing you." I said, "No, how did you get in?" She said, "Oh, I don't know, the door was open, I just came in...I hope I'm not bothering you." I said no. She said, "Well, you know, I was just thinking about you and I saw your light on and thought...well, maybe you're hungry so I made you a sandwich." She handed me a bologna and cheese sandwich and I don't know what I said, probably something like...Ahhhhhhh...you know, just sort of a shock reaction. And I think I said thank you. That lady had never been in my office, she never made me anything, never given me anything...she's never given me anything since, to be honest with you. So I don't know what was going on on that one moment but I'm standing there looking at a bologna sandwich thinking to myself...God is so intimately involved with my prayers that when the fast is over He delivers the sandwich...that's a pretty heavy thing. And I'm not mystical, but I was overwhelmed and I thought I was eating manna from heaven.

In fact, since then bologna has a special place in my life. Man...I went back to my desk rejoicing, and ate that little sandwich. And the next morning the doctors called and said, "Well, he has a benign epidermoid," which is some kind of skin down there that's inconsequential, has nothing to do with his headaches, probably having headaches just because he's growing and because he's out in the sun

and he's working out, playing baseball and whatever. "Don't worry about it, we think he's going to be fine. The report is all good."

And all of a sudden everything changes because I've already sent him to heaven and now I get him back, you know. But I was so thrilled. I went out to school, he was out at the college and threw my arms around him and I said, told him this great news and he said, "Why do you think the Lord put me through that?" Put you through that, you didn't even know what was going on, He put me through that.

Well, he probably knew more than he said. And while we embraced there and rejoiced in the Lord, you know, I realized why the Lord put me through that because it drove me to Him. And it taught me how to intimately God is involved in answering my prayers. There's nothing more wonderful than that. It was just five years ago that I got a phone call that Patricia had a terrible car accident. The car had been going, I don't know, 55 miles an hour or so and spun and flipped and landed on its top, a little Honda, in a deep eight-foot culvert and crushed it. And she was severely injured is all I heard and she's being helicoptered to the trauma center. And I'm like an hour and a half away. And I jump in the car, and, of course, this is my love, my life, my partner, everything to me and I'm going along and I'm realizing that she could be dying and I'm praying passionately that the Lord would be gracious and spare her life and at the same time I have the thought that she might be in heaven. And I again found myself through my tears singing a hymn cause I couldn't help but rejoice if she was with the Lord, at the same time wanting to hold on.

And then, of course, when I found her, she had had all those C2 and C3 cervical fractures and broken collar bone and broken hand and all this paralysis and things like that. They said, you know, she would normally have had a less than five percent chance to live and all this. And this has amazing impact on your prayer life, doesn't it? You just...not only your prayer life but your praise life because now all of a sudden you realize what heaven means to you. Some times the Lord takes folks in those circumstances, the Lord gave me back my two. But going to the brink is great for your spiritual life, isn't it?

And I think that's what Paul wants...God wants Paul to discover. What happens to Paul in the midst of this? He goes to the Lord. And isn't that where you ought to be? You can't find a human counselor who can fix it. He went to the Lord.

When you go through the sufferings of life God has a purpose. His purpose is to manifest the character of your spiritual life to everybody around you and to you as well. His purpose is to humble you because of His multitude of blessings poured out upon you and His purpose is to draw you into the intimacy of His glorious presence. We'll save the rest for next time. Let's pray.

Father, it is with a great amount of joy and gratitude that we have looked into this passage, how instructive it is for our lives. How blessed it is to know that You have a purpose in our pain and our difficulty that could never be achieved any other way, and thus we can agree with James who said, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials." We should joyfully embrace the suffering because it has such great spiritual impact, it puts Your true saving work on display. It breaks our pride. It drives us into Your presence. What great benedictions those are. And we pray now that You'll confirm these great truths to our heart and may we live them out to Your honor and glory in our Savior's name. Amen.

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