

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

How God Uses Suffering, Part 2

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Code: 47-84

As we come to this wonderful time in the Word of God together, I want to draw your attention back to the text of 2 Corinthians chapter 12. Although we certainly could spend much more time on the text, we'll...we'll end our brief series on verses 5 to 10 this morning. Second Corinthians 12:5 to 10 is in a larger context of this epistle where Paul is giving his apostolic credentials and we've entitled this particular three-part series, "Power in Weakness."

As we approach this text, one phrase, one expression in the text stands out and it's in verse 9, "And He has said to me, My grace is sufficient for you." And by way of introduction, let me just start with that word "grace" and then we'll get in to the text itself. This is a magnificent Greek word used 155 times in the New Testament. The word in the Greek is *charis* and it basically means a favor bestowed, it means a generous gift given. That is its sort of normal common meaning.

But in the sense of the New Testament in its redemptive sense, it means a favor bestowed and a generous given...a generous gift given by God to people who are totally undeserving and unworthy. It is God's favor, God's goodness, God's generosity to provide for those who are unworthy of that provision. It starts at salvation and it goes right on forever because it tells us in Ephesians that through the ages to come God will show the riches of His kindness in His grace toward us. grace starts in a very general sense. Theologians call it common grace with the rain falling on the just and the unjust and God giving us life and breath and families and the joys of life and the beauties of life and just life itself...that's common grace. Then grace reaches a completely and wonderful proportion when it saves us and we go from common grace to the uncommon grace of salvation and we are given salvation, forgiveness of all of our sins, all the blessings that are God's and the heavenlies are then bestowed upon us and held for our disposal. That goes on through sanctification and on through glorification. God is generous to undeserving sinners. He is generous to those who are in Christ from the time of their salvation forever and forever.

This grace is a dynamic force. It is a dynamic force by which God applies to us everything we need...to save us, to keep us, to enable us, to deliver us, to sanctify us, to glorify us. We were saved by grace, Ephesians 2 says, through faith, but it is God's grace that just initiates there and sustains all the way through all of eternity. Every benefit in life, every benefit in eternity is by God's grace. And this great redemptive aspect of grace comes only to those who know Jesus Christ. It is faith in Jesus Christ that brings us into God's uncommon grace, into God's special saving grace and eternal grace. When we think about the Christian faith, we could sum it up in the word "grace." That's why this church is called Grace Church. No word more clearly sums up the message of our faith than grace. And no word sets us apart from all other religions of the world than grace, for all others have

inherently in them some attainment of salvation through some human achievement, religious or moral, or a combination of both. But ours is a grace religion, ours is a faith that includes the concept, the overriding concept that we deserve nothing and yet God gives us everything. Because of His goodness He bestows on us eternally favors undeserved.

One of the most wonderful statements ever made about our Lord Jesus Christ was the inspired word by John the apostle in John 1:14 when John said of Jesus, "He was full of grace...He was full of grace." We shouldn't be surprised by that since He was God incarnate and God is a God of grace. If God incarnated Himself and came into the world, we would expect Him to be full of grace. Or the wondrous fact that His being full of the attribute of grace was followed by an even more thrilling reality in two verses later, John 1:16, it says of His fullness, "Have all we received and grace upon grace." God is grace, Christ was full of grace and when Christ comes into our lives we receive grace upon grace upon grace. That is to say those of us who know God through faith in Jesus Christ are the recipients of the out-pouring of God's continual blessing and favor. We accumulate grace. We accumulate it moment by moment by moment by moment all through our lives and even on into the glories of eternity. No wonder Luke, writing about the early Christians in Acts 4:33 says they were experiencing abundant grace. And Paul writing to the Romans in chapter 5 verse 2 said we stand in grace. In other words, he was saying it's as if grace is the environment in which we live, the air we breathe. We have received, according to Romans 5:17, an abundance of grace, and Ephesians 1, as I told you, and 2 talks about the riches of His grace. James adds that whatever great need we might have, God gives us a greater grace. And Peter calls it the multifaceted, many-colored, multiplied, manifold grace of God.

And from just those few Scriptures you get the idea that God doesn't skimp on it, don't you? When it comes to grace for salvation, when it comes to grace for sanctification, grace for service, grace for suffering, there's plenty of it. In all areas of life His kindness abounds, His benevolence abounds, His goodness abounds. This is contrary to the gods of the pagans who are best indifferent and must be coddled and cajoled and appeased so that they don't destroy their subjects. Our God is a God who by nature is gracious, who had incarnated Himself in the Lord Jesus Christ who was full of grace who comes to live in our lives and pour out upon us grace upon grace upon grace upon grace.

No where is it more magnificently summarized than in this very epistle, 2 Corinthians. Go back to chapter 9 for a moment and verse 8. This is the greatest statement on the sufficiency of grace made anywhere in the Scripture. Notice its comprehensiveness. Second Corinthians 9:8, "And God is able," that is He is powerful, "enough, He is capable to make all grace abound to you that always having all sufficiency in everything you may have an abundance for every good deed." The superlatives here are almost overwhelming, all grace, all sufficiency in all things always and an abundance for all or every good deed.

God has the ability to pour out enough grace so that it literally overflows you and always you will have all sufficiency for all the issues of life and an abundance of grace for every good deed. You have all the grace available you need to believe. You have all the grace you need to remove your sin and apply the righteousness of Christ to you. You have all the necessary grace to understand the Word.

You have all the necessary grace granted to you to apply the Word, to overcome temptation, to triumph over habitual sin. You have all the grace necessary to endure suffering and disappointment and pain and sorrow. You have all the grace necessary to obey the Lord, all the grace required to serve Him effectively and powerfully, all the grace necessary to worship Him in truth and in spirit. No wonder verse 14 of 2 Corinthians 9 calls it the surpassing grace of God, I love this, in you.

When you became a believer, the floodgates of grace were open. Grace for everything is poured out on you and continues and will continue to do that. It's no wonder the hymn writer in looking for an adjective to describe it came up with "Amazing Grace."

Now against that background of this great sufficient grace in our text, the question is posed, "Is there sufficient grace to help us in every issue of life?" And Paul is finding out in our text, as we remember, that indeed there is. Life is filled with trouble, isn't it? Life is filled with difficulty. Life is filled with pain and sorrow and suffering. There are fears that abound in life. A lot of people made much out of the book written by Rabbi Cushner(?) called *When Bad Things Happen To Good People*. I'm going to write a book and the title of it is going to be *Bad Things Happen To Everybody*. Why sort out good people? Bad things happen to everybody because we are bad people living in a bad world. This is fallen humanity in a fallen environment. Obviously things go wrong, they go wrong all the time. God has given us the grace to save us. God has given us the grace to sanctify us. God has dispensed to us the grace that will bring us to eternal glory. God has given the grace to serve Him and proclaim His truth. The question here is, has God given us the grace to handle the sufferings of life? That's the issue.

We find Paul in this text at the low point of his life, depressed. He says he is in chapter 7, depressed, heart-sick, heart-broken, betrayed by the people he loved the most. And we pointed out the fact that the deepest pain in life comes from people and the closer we get to people and the more intimate we become with people and the more we love them and the more devoted to them we become and the more of our hearts we give them, the more potential there is for them to hurt us deeply. There's nothing as profound as being wounded in the house of your friends. Far greater than any economic pain or physical is that pain of unrequited love and betrayal.

And that's where Paul was. The Corinthian church had turned on him. They had betrayed him. They turned away from his love to them and were abusing him, following false teachers and believing lies about him. And his heart was broken and it was effecting the joy of the church and affecting the witness of the church as well. And so there was that suffering as well because he cared so deeply about the work of the church. And we find him at this point in his life where he's really at the bottom and he can't seem to do anything about it. And therein is the right place to ask the question...did he find sufficient grace for his trouble? Was God's grace sufficient in the deepest pain of his life.

Many would say today...Well, if you're really talking about deep issues, if you're talking about the deep pains of life, the depressions of life, the deep profound disappointments of life, the deep anxieties of life, you certainly don't want to give shallow answers. And I would agree with that. Some would suggest that when you get to the deep things you have to turn away from the Scripture because the Scripture is only good for the light touch, if you want the deep things to be dealt with

you've got to turn to psychology, and psychiatry and therapy and counseling and even medication. You have to fill in the lack in our Christian life with some human insight and your human wisdom. Sad to say, as bizarre as that sounds, most churches have bought into that. Most evangelical churches have bought into the idea the serious problems that Christians have are beyond the realm of the spiritual, they're beyond the realm of the power of God, they're beyond grace, they're beyond divine grace and they require human technique. Human technique, for the large part, invented and defined and basically altered over the last hundred and twenty years. Psychology is offered as the source of power in solving the deep problems, while divine grace is adequate only for the shallower ones. You have to turn to some human source for the deep things and you can turn to God for the shallow ones.

You know, it was interesting this week, I was reading in a Christian periodical that came out, an article advocating psychology as the necessary source for solving the problems of Christians. And in the article they attacked me in a...and, of course, in some periodicals being attacked is an honor because you don't want to be particularly identified with it and so they said, and it was kind of interesting the way they said it, they said, "John MacArthur has written a book called *Our Sufficiency in Christ* and in it he says that Christ is sufficient for all our needs and that the Word of God is sufficient for all our needs." And I forget the exact words, "And the Holy Spirit is sufficient for all our needs. And all that we ever need is available to us in Christ and through divine grace." And then their response was, "Can you believe anybody would say something like that?" They didn't even try to argue with it, they just said, "How archaic is this guy and where did he come from? Where has he been for the last 30 years?" They just quoted me without comment, like people would say...Wow, what kind of bizarre belief is that?

Pastors and Christians who give people the Bible and call them to prayer and to intimacy with God and to the resources of God's grace are even thought to be potentially dangerous and maybe even liable. That's why I was sued for clergy malpractice, a ten-year lawsuit that ran from 1980 to 1990, some of you don't know about it. I was sued for clergy malpractice because a young man had taken his life in a suicide and the family sued me and sued Grace Church, obviously all lawsuits have money as their ultimate end, but the lawsuit was based upon the fact that in ministering and preaching and speaking to this young man and giving him biblical truth to apply to the problems of his life we had exacerbated his precondition and driven him to suicide and were therefore guilty of clergy malpractice.

Well happily, by the goodness of God, and the sensibility of the court system all the way to the California State Supreme Court which ruled in our favor and finally the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the decision of the California court. Whatever the court said isn't the issue, simply to say that there's a whole community out there who believe that if you try to solve people's deep problems with the Word of God, you're a threat to society. Now that may be the worst of it, on the other hand, the best of it might be churches that believe only shallow things can be dealt with by divine grace, deep things need human wisdom. How strange is that?

Is the Word of God so insufficient which Word is perfect, totally transforming the whole person, according to Psalm 19? Is the wisdom from above which confounds all the wisdom of man and calls it foolishness so insufficient to call upon that foolishness to help it? Is the Lord Jesus Christ in whom we are complete, in whom we have all things that pertain to life and godliness and have become partakers of His own divine nature and possessors of all His fullness so insufficient that He can't provide what we need? Is the Holy Spirit who has filled us with might in the inner man and given us all the fullness of God so we can do exceeding abundantly above all we can ask or think so weak and insufficient as not to be able to help us cope? It's unthinkable. Is the package of spiritual resources we have received in salvation which enables us to do everything in which we are strengthened unto all things in Christ unable at any point in our lives? And what does human wisdom add to us? When Paul said, "Our sufficiency is from God," was that just ignorance? Was he wrong? Was that foolishness? When he said in 2 Corinthians 3:5, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves but our adequacy is from God who also made us adequate," was he wrong?

Are we not adequate for every issue of life in the grace of God that is lavishly poured out on us? What a tragic delusion in the world but what an infinitely more tragic delusion in the church. And what an affront to our God and our Christ and our Holy Spirit and the Word. Truly, to borrow the words of Galatians 5:4, "We have fallen from grace." What fools people are in their troubles not to realize there is a throne of grace where we can go in time of need to find help, Hebrews tells us.

Where did Paul go in the time of his deepest depression, his greatest sorrow? Let's go back to our text. Let me read verses 7 to 10. "And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelation, 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. 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'm strong."

This is a monumental passage here. We find Paul in his deepest disappointment. Here we find Paul with a broken heart, in pain and sorrow and depression, rejected, betrayed, maligned, suffering from supernatural attacks on what was most precious to him, the church, particularly the church at Corinth. You remember the false teachers had come in. He defines all of that in verse 7 as a thorn in the flesh, literally the word "thorn" is a stake, he was impaled by this thing, it was just rammed through him, impaling him. And what was it? He defines this thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan, that's another word for a demon, an angelos of Satan, Satan's angel, a demon. A demon had moved in to some false teachers, brought the false teachers into the Corinthian church and they had created this terrible betrayal and this mutiny in Corinth. They were tearing up Paul's church. They were trying to destroy his reputation. They were maligning his character. They were assaulting his people. They were starting to destroy the effectiveness of that church, potentially its witness. And Paul saw this as a thorn in his flesh. It was something that was just ripping into him because of his great love for the

church and the people in it.

I remind you in verse 7, "There was given me," and I told you it was given to him by God. And I remind you that most people want to wander through life thinking that God brings all the good times and the devil brings all the bad times and don't understand that the bad times come at the will of God just like the good times. And the bad times are by God's design and far more productive than the good times. There was given me by God this...this demon-inspired conspiracy that just ripped and tore me like a stake driven through my flesh to buffet me. The word "buffet" meaning to punch. This thing was hammering on me. God had brought this.

You know, people, you need to understand this. There is this idea in Christianity today that if you have a problem it needs an immediate solution and you've got to run somewhere and get it fixed. Counselors' offices are full of people who want quick fixes on the issues of their dilemmas...people who are suffering from being hated or rejected or abused or misrepresented or maligned or betrayed or unappreciated or whatever it might be. And all these human problems of unfulfillment and dissatisfaction that create all these problems with people are brought before the counselor in this passion to get them all solved.

But the right perspective is to understand that in the midst of life this is part of it and don't look for a quick solution. But try to discern what God is doing in the midst of it. And don't assume that the devil brought it independent of the allowances of God cause God has purposes in our suffering. And sometimes God's purposes are really amazing. It's hard to imagine in one way that God wanting to achieve something in the life of such a special man as Paul would allow one of His own beloved churches to be torn up to achieve that. It doesn't seem rational to us that God would allow this discontent and this chaos and confusion in the church at Corinth so that He could accomplish something in Paul's life. But in fact that's exactly what happened.

Now it isn't that God didn't love Paul. He loved him greatly as He loves all His own. It isn't that God was indifferent to Paul, not at all. In fact, our dear Lord Jesus Himself after He had already gone to heaven and taken a seat at the right-hand of God came back to earth to visit Paul three times, and one time took Paul to heaven to see him there. So He came down to visit him three times and took Paul to heaven once to confirm His love and to strengthen Paul for the immense amount of suffering he had to endure. He appeared to him on the Damascus road face-to-face, made him blind. And then He took him to heaven. And then He appeared to him in Acts 18, just in the moment of Paul's suffering when he was starting the church at Corinth, Acts 18. And then He appeared to him again in jail. And the Lord came to him in powerful, unique unequalled encounters.

And the Lord was personally involved in Paul's life to shape him into the man he ought to be. But it was...it was not that that did the work of shaping Paul. It wasn't the Damascus road vision and it wasn't the vision that he had when he went to heaven as noted earlier in the same chapter. It wasn't the vision in Corinth. It wasn't the vision in jail later on. What really made Paul the man he was were not those high and elevated, holy and glorious experiences of the risen Christ. What made him the man he was was suffering and pain. The Lord came to Paul to shape and mold that man into the man He wanted him to be through his suffering and his pain. God does not want you free from suffering.

He does not want you free from sorrow and pain. James says count it all joy when you fall into various trials cause trials have a perfecting work. Peter says after you've suffered a while the Lord will make you perfect. God has called us to suffering. It was even Jesus Christ Himself who became obedient through His sufferings, who was perfected through His sufferings.

And that's what we learned in verses 5 to 10 here. Through the suffering and the terrible depression and sorrow of unfulfillment and broken heartedness in which Paul was literally being shaped, he learned five great lessons and that's what we're looking at. Remember lesson number one, God uses suffering to reveal our spiritual condition.

God uses suffering to reveal our spiritual condition. We saw that in verses 5 and 6. I won't go over it again, simply the fact is if somebody wants to see what you're really like and the truth must be known, then let them see you in your deepest sorrow, in your greatest pain and suffering. And therein will come out the character that is really there. So it was time for Paul to demonstrate his credentials. The Lord wanted the world to see what this man was made of, every reason then to cause him to suffer because it was in suffering that the truth would be manifest. What you are comes out in suffering. And Paul says you can look at me, in verse 6 at the end of the verse, and you can judge me and credit me with what you see in me and hear from me. That's the proof of the pudding. In the midst of the sufferings, what kind of man do you see.

Secondly, God taught him that He uses suffering to humble us, verse 7. Twice he says to keep me from exalting myself there was given me this thorn in the flesh. Paul, as he says in Colossians 2, would not take his stand on visions like so many do. He said...I did go to heaven, I did have a vision. I went to heaven, I came back from heaven but that's not helpful because all that does is puff up my pride. And so the Lord has to bring along these terrible thing in my life to humble my otherwise proud heart. God wants us meek and God wants us humble and He will even use Satan and his demons if necessary. And He will even use trouble in the beloved church if necessary to humble His servant. So when you're going through suffering, remember it is here that your spiritual condition is manifest. It is here that you can come to grips to what you really are in Christ and deal with it. And it is here that others can see the true character of your faith. Remember also that in your suffering you are humbled, you are broken. You become contrite. And when you become broken and contrite, of course you become useful to God. He gives grace, He says, to the humble.

Thirdly, Paul learned that God uses suffering to draw us to Himself. Verse 8, what did he do? He went to the Lord three times to pray. He drew into the Lord's presence, to call on the Lord to deliver him from this. And this is the right place to go. What lesser sources do men find when they can go to the living God? He faced many trials. He knew where to go. He went to God. It's the right place to go. That's the only place to go because therein could he find the strength and wisdom necessary.

That leads to the last two points which we'll make this morning. Point number four, God uses suffering to display His grace...God uses suffering to display His grace. Now we're in to verse 9. "And He has said to me, My grace is sufficient for you." "He has said," by the way, is in the perfect tense which means it was a set answer. He went three times and three times he got the same answer. "Paul, I hear you, I know you're asking for the thorn to be removed. I know you're asking for the messenger of

Satan to be removed. I understand all of that. I'm sorry, however, I'm not going to do that, I'm just going to turn up the grace." Standing answer. God answers not by removing the pain, because the pain was productive...not by removing the trouble because the trouble was productive. It really showed the true man and it humbled him and it drew him to God. And so God says I'm not going to remove that, the process isn't over, but what I am going to do is increase the grace so that you can endure it.

He gave relief. God gave relief not by removal but by sufficient strength to persevere through the necessary humbling process. In those times is when God pours out the greater grace. In those times sometimes you find yourself with an exhilarating joy. I can't...I can't say it any better than to say it in the way that it's in Acts 16 where Paul is in stocks and his arms are stretched and his legs are stretched and the muscles are taut and locked in these stocks, and he's kept there in excruciating agony. And Paul and Silas are in that condition and you go into the jail and you hear them doing what? Singing...singing. Why are they singing? Because they have been given sufficient grace to endure it...sufficient grace. And you're never going to know that grace if you don't have the exigencies that call for it. You're never going to know that grace and you're never going to know the joy of that grace and the exhilaration of that grace until you have to have that grace.

Sure, from a human standpoint Paul says...Get that stake out of my flesh, get that agony out of my heart. It's depressing me and it's crushing me and it's breaking me. And God says...I'm not going to get it out of there, I'm going to leave it there, I'm just going to crank up the grace and in the midst of the grace you're going to give Me glory and you're going to endure and people are going to see the greatness of your God and the strength of your faith.

First Corinthians 10:13 remind you of this. "There is no trial that will ever come upon you but such is as common to man. God is faithful who will never let you be tempted above that you are able and will with the temptation make a way of escape." But the Lord will bring trials into your life that you can endure. He will give you the grace to endure them so that in the enduring you experience the great grace. What an exhilarating, what a joyous, joyous experience that is.

Deuteronomy 33:26 puts it this way. "There is none like the God of Jeshurun, or the God of Israel, who rides the heavens to help." Joshua 1:9, "Be strong and courageous, don't tremble or be dismayed for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." God will always be there, He'll always be riding to your help, ready to just unload gushing grace so that you can endure whatever it is that you're suffering.

I read earlier Isaiah 42, I want to read a couple of verses out of a subsequent chapter, Isaiah 43. Listen to this. Verse 1, "I have called you by My name, you are Mine, God says. When you pass through the waters I will be with you and through the rivers they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire you will not be scorched, nor will the flames burn you for I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, your Savior." God doesn't promise no waters and no rivers and no fires, He just promises to be there when we're going through. And the grace is there poured out on us in abundance. In 1 Timothy 1:14 Paul says, "The grace of our Lord was more than abundant." Wow, more than abundant.

Now, folks, get this would you, please? Here is the cornerstone of Christian living. It is simply this, listen carefully. You will have trouble. In this life it is inevitable and it is useful because it produces the evidence of your true spiritual condition, humility and intimacy with God and allows God to put Himself on display in His grace. This is the cornerstone of Christian living, folks. You will have trouble. God does not promise to remove it but He does promise to pour out enough grace to endure it.

The word "sufficient" there in verse 9 is *arke*, it is enough. You'll have enough grace. You will have trouble, you will have difficulty, you will have temptation, you will have pain and disappointment, but God promises not to take away all that. See, that is the current temporary lie that God wants your life to be happy, and peaceful and comfortable and successful and satisfactory and prosperous and it's the devil who wants all the bad stuff. You want to know the truth? It's the devil who would like to make your life prosperous and successful and happy and tranquil because then you wouldn't need God and you wouldn't have to thank Him for anything. The prosperity message is the devil's message. God's message is a message of suffering and grace. God wants us humble and He uses suffering to humble us. God wants us intimate with Him and He uses suffering to make us intimate with Him. God wants our testimony made manifest. He wants our character on display and He uses suffering to reveal it. And the greatest testimony a Christian's ever had in history is when they're persecuted. And the persecution of the saints, the blood of the martyrs becomes the seed of the church. God will crank up the grace in your life and He'll crank up enough grace for you to be able to endure.

The song writer put it this way, "He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater. He sendeth more strength when the labors increased." In other words, you get as much as you need and more. "To add affliction He addeth His mercy, to multiply trials is multiplied peace. When we have exhausted our store of endurance, when our strength has failed as the day is half done, when we reach the end of our hoarded resources, our Father's full giving has only begun. His love has no limit, His grace has no measure. His power, no boundary known unto men for out of His infinite riches in Jesus He giveth and giveth and giveth again." God just wants to flood you with grace and there's always plenty.

In His inimitable way, Charles Spurgeon was riding home one evening after a heavy day at the church, a day full of work and hardship and some disappointment. He was feeling depressed. And his biographer says he thought about the verse, "My grace is sufficient for you." And in his inimitable way he immediately compared himself to a little fish in the Thames River apparently lest drinking so many pints of water in the river each day it might drink the Thames dry. And feeling insecure in that event only to have Father Thames say, "Drink away little fish, my stream is sufficient for you." The biographer says, and then he thought of a little mouse in the granaries of Joseph in Egypt, afraid it lest might also die by daily consumption of the corn it needed it feared it might exhaust the supply of all the corn in all of the silos and starve to death. And when Joseph came along and sensing the mouse said, "Cheer up, little mouse, the granaries are sufficient for you."

There again he thought of himself as a man trying to climb to the tops of the Alps. Reaching the lofty summit and dreading to take a breath lest he might exhaust all of the oxygen in the atmosphere only to hear the creator say, "Breathe away. old man, my air is enough for you. There's enough and more

than enough and plenty.

And you're never going to know it, and you're never going to know the exhilaration of it and you're never going to know the thrill of it unless you can just rest in the suffering and let God pour out the grace. And you find yourself singing at the strangest places and times and you'll find a peace in your heart that knows no explanation and you find a joy that's disconnected from your circumstances because this grace is an energy that transforms. It's not in itself a static gift. Grace is an energy that chooses you. It's an energy of being flooded with blessing from God that alters your thinking...changes you, transforms you.

Yes, Paul was in his deepest suffering, but God was using it to put His grace on display. And that turns you into a worshiper, doesn't it? And God wants you to worship Him. And you couldn't fully worship Him, you wouldn't know the abandonment of joy and the abandonment of heart that Paul and Silas knew in the jail unless you had sufficient grace in the midst of dire suffering. The people who worship God most deeply are those who have been through the deepest water and have been flooded by His grace.

One last point. God uses suffering to perfect His power...God uses suffering to perfect His power. God wanted Paul not just to be a humble man, not just to be a man of prayer and intimacy with God. Paul was not only to be a man of suffering so that God could display His grace but God wanted this man to be powerful. God wanted this man to be used to change the world. God wanted him to impact individuals and families and cities and nations. And so we come back to verse 9. "Power is perfected in weakness," God said to him. When He answered that prayer He said, "My grace is sufficient," and then the second part of it was, "Power is perfected in weakness." I not only want you to go through this so I can put My grace on display, but I want you to go through this so there's nothing of you left. I want you whittled down to nothing. I want you down...I want you down to the point where you have no self-confidence, you have no trust in yourself, you have no self-esteem in the sense you believe you're capable of anything eternal. I want you broken down. And I mean He broke him.

You go back, and we'll do this next Sunday, but you go back to Romans chapter 8 and remember Paul talking about tribulation and distress, persecution and famine, nakedness, peril, sword. And then he says, you know, they'd come after me, the angels, the principalities, the things present, the things to come and the powers, the height, the depth, and nothing can separate me from the love of God...he says in Romans chapter 8. But it had all come at him and he was basically broken down. I mean, you remember part of the accusation against him in the Corinthian church was that he was weak and he was contemptible and he lacked charm and charisma and oratorical skill and all of that. And he had been pretty well hammered down to nothing. It was the suffering that crushed out his pride and crushed out his self-confidence that made him powerful.

You see, when the Christian gets to the place where he's lost all human ability to deal with his difficulty, he's got nowhere to go...nowhere to go. When you realize you're weak, when you realize you can't fix it...Paul couldn't fix it, he couldn't fix it, he had been there, he visited, he sent people, he wrote letters, he couldn't fix it. And the rumors were getting further and further spread around about him, lies about his life that he was a wicked man and he couldn't do anything about it. And there he

was with nothing but God and that was enough. He had to trust God's power.

I mean he had been persecuted mercilessly. He had been battered and hammered. He had not only found sufficient grace but he had found that when he was finally crushed down to nothing, he became powerful. You see, when your human wisdom's out, when your human confidence is out, when your ingenuity is out, when your solutions to the problems are out, when you have nowhere to go and nowhere to turn but God, you are now in a position to be most effective. I'll put it this way. No one in the Kingdom of God is too weak to be powerful but many are too strong...many are too strong. First Corinthians 1:27, "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things that are strong, the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen the things that are not." God loves to work through nothings and nobodies and then He gets all the glory as He rightly deserves.

Paul says, "When I came to you...I was in weakness, fear and trembling." He didn't come in thinking himself some great man with some great message and some great power in his life and parading himself around as if he were. He came in fear. He came in trembling. He came in weakness. He had had visions of Christ, he had had a trip to heaven and back, he never talked about it. He just spoke of his weaknesses. But when he was no longer able to do anything, then God was able to do everything. You see, physical suffering, mental anguish, disappointment, unfulfillment, failure creates a pressure that produces power, it really does because it just squeezes everything out of us so that we become nothing but a clear channel through which the power of God can flow. Paul learned, he really did. He learned all his lessons. In the middle of verse 9 he says, "Most gladly," he's happy now, circumstance hasn't changed, nothing's changed circumstantially, but "Most gladly...he says...I'm happy now and I'd rather boast about my weaknesses that the power of Christ may dwell in me." I'd rather be powerful than anything else and in order to be powerful I have to be weak. I just want to talk about my suffering. I don't love the abuse, I know it's satanic, I don't honor that, but I do know that God is using all of this to make me the man He wants me to be and I love His grace and I love His power and I love the humbling process and I love the intimacy with Him because I understand what it produces. So, let me boast...he says. We're going to compare notes and see who is the real apostle, let me boast...I'll boast about my weaknesses. He goes back to that again as he has every time. He's done it several times, as we've noted, always wanting to boast about his weaknesses because it was in his weakness that the power of God was seen. Look at me...he's saying...you can't explain my life, you can't explain my effectiveness, you can't explain my ministry except for the fact that I am weak and He is strong because you know I'm not strong. He says I just want the power of Christ.

His weakness was not self-induced, it was God-given. It wasn't artificial, it wasn't a psychological game he was playing with himself. It was God-given weakness. He had been literally crushed by God so that he could be powerful. So when we have the deepest trials in life and we go through these things, you go through those times of unfulfilled relationships and broken heartedness and unsatisfied desires and we suffer from those who should love us the most, remember God is at work. The world can't fix it and probably shouldn't because God is using it to reveal your spiritual character, to humble you, to draw you to Himself, to put His grace on display and to make you powerful.

So Paul says the dominant theme of my life is suffering. Verse 10 sums it up, "Therefore...therefore...here's the summation...I'm well content with weaknesses." Well content means I'm satisfied, folks, I am satisfied. I am at peace, I'm at rest, I'm content. It's a great word...I am content. Perfect contentedness with weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecution and difficulties for Christ's sake. He's not talking about the things that come as a result of our sin and iniquity and disobedience. No. He's talking about those things that come for Christ's sake, they're undeserved sufferings and persecutions that aren't connected to our sin. He wouldn't be happy about his chastenings. He wouldn't be happy about sins. He's not saying that. He's saying I'm content with all those sufferings that come when I'm faithful to the Lord, "Because when I'm weak, then I'm strong." He wisely embraced his pain. He wisely embraced his suffering as hard as it was because it was in that weakness that Paul died and it was when Paul died that Christ really lived.

That's the way to look at life. And again I go back to the fact that this is the cornerstone of Christian living. Life is full of trouble and it's your perspective on trouble that is the bottom-line issue here. Running all over the place to have your trouble fixed isn't the answer. Being obedient to the Word of God and letting God do His perfecting work in your life, that's the answer. You embrace your suffering like Paul did. You be content with it. You be thrilled with it. You sing hymns of joy to God for it. You count it all joy because it's having a perfecting work.

A few years ago a song was written that really says it. I'll close with this. It's called "The Refiner's Fire." Listen carefully to the words.

There burns a fire with sacred heat, white hot with holy flame. And all who dare pass through its blaze will not emerge the same. Some is bronze and some is silver, some is gold and with great skill all are hammered by their sufferings on the anvil of His will. I'm learning now to trust His touch, to crave the fire's embrace. For though my past with sin was etched, His mercies did erase. Each time His purging cleanses deeper, I'm not sure that I'll survive. Yet the strength and growing weaker keeps my hungry spirit alive.

And then this great chorus...The Refiner's fire has now become my sole desire. Purged and cleansed and purified that the Lord be glorified, He is consuming my soul, refining me, making me whole. No matter what I lose I choose the Refiner's fire.

And when you can come to the point where you say that, you've reached a level of maturity and a grasp of the Christian life. No matter what I may lose, I choose the Refiner's fire. The Refiner's fire has become my sole desire because I want to become weaker so that He may become stronger. Revealing your spiritual character, humbling you, drawing you to Himself, displaying His grace, demonstrating His power, that happens through your suffering. Embrace it and let God do His refining work. Join me in prayer.

Father, give us songs in the night, give us joy in jail and give us peace and contentment in our pain knowing that You're at work teaching us these profound lessons, revealing our spiritual condition and humbling us, drawing us to You and putting Your grace on display so that we can rejoice in its exhilarating reality and bringing us to the end of ourselves so that our total trust is in You and we therefore become powerful in our weakness. O Lord, bring us to the place where we can say with the

writer of that song...no matter what I may lose, I choose the Refiner's fire, not just because of what it produces, but even the joy of going through it bathed in Your overflowing grace. And, Lord, accomplish Your good purpose in every life so that indeed as we sung earlier we might be used to bring people to the knowledge of Christ, the reason we're here to accomplish that ministry. Thank You for this morning together and we commit it to You and to the lives of all of us we ask that You would work Your work for Your glory in Christ's name. Amen.

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