

God's Purpose in Our Pain

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

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How privileged we are to hear from the living God through His living Word. Take your Bible, if you will, and turn to the twelfth chapter of 2 Corinthians and I want to read for you verses 7 through 10 which will provide the text for our study in the Word of God...2 Corinthians chapter 12 beginning at verse 7.

The Apostle Paul writes, "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 weakness, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties for Christ's sake for when I am weak, then I am strong."

At the heart of this passage is the statement in verse 9, "My grace is sufficient for you." The word grace is a magnificent word in the New Testament, it's the Greek word *charis* it is used a hundred and fifty-five times. And it should be used frequently because we live in grace. It is grace below us, above us, before us, behind us and beside us. It is grace in which we stand. This marvelous word refers to divine favor, to divine blessing, to divine benefit. It refers to that which God has given to us in Christ not because we earned it or deserved it, but because He willed to give it. And all of God's gifts to His children are given by grace. Everything we have in our salvation from beginning to consummation is by grace. We do not earn our justification, it is a gift of grace. We do not earn our sanctification, it too is a gift of grace. We certainly do not earn our glorification, it is the culminating gift of grace which then allows God to show us everlasting grace through all eternity. In the book of Ephesians, both in chapter 1 and chapter 2, reference is made to the riches of His grace, even to the surpassing riches of His grace. The word surpassing, *hyperballon*, hyper super. That is to say it is an exceeding, abundant, lavish extension of grace.

All of this, of course, is in and through Jesus Christ. One of the most wonderful statements about Jesus Christ in all of Scripture is given us by John in his gospel, chapter 1 verse 14, where he says of the Lord Jesus, "He was full of grace...full of grace." That wonderful fact is followed by an even more wonderful statement, "And of His fullness have all we received and grace upon grace." He is full of grace and we receive out of that fullness grace upon grace upon grace upon grace. We accumulate grace every moment of our Christian experience. Grace that comes from the abundance of God's supply and never diminishes that supply at all. Luke said that the early Christians, according to Acts chapter 4, were experiencing abundant grace. I mentioned earlier, Paul says in Romans 5:2, "We stand in grace," that is to say our very life is lived in an environment of grace. In Romans 5:17 Paul says, "God gives us an abundance of grace." James says, "We have received a greater grace," that is to say greater than we can comprehend. And Peter, not willing to be left out, adds, "We have

been given the manifold, or multi-faceted or multi-colored grace of God."

Grace is always spoken of in terms of lavishness, of excess, of fullness, of richness because we need so much grace. And God gives enough and more than enough and the supply is never ever diminished. From all of that you get the distinct idea that God doesn't skimp on grace. That He doesn't dish it out in a miserly fashion. In all areas, His benevolent kindness is lavish as He dispenses grace.

Maybe the best summation of that is found earlier in 2 Corinthians. If you go back to 2 Corinthians chapter 9 and verse 8, you read there these words, and this comes not only by direct revelation through the Holy Spirit to the mind of Paul as he wrote, but also corroborated by Paul's own experience, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you that always having all sufficiency in everything you may have an abundance of grace for every good deed."

Now the extent of this grace is indicated by the grandiose terms that are used. Not just grace, but all grace. Not just all grace, but all grace abounding. Not occasionally but always, having all sufficiency in all things. You have an abundance for all good deeds and good works. The lavishness of this grace is again brought to our minds in the language that is used in that verse. It is grace that saves us. It is grace that sanctifies us. It is grace that gives us understanding of the Word. It is grace that gives us wisdom to apply it. It is grace that gives us the power to overcome temptation and sin. It is grace that allows us to obey the Lord. It is grace that enables us to serve and to minister. It is grace that carries us through suffering with endurance. It is grace that lifts us above disappointment and pain. That is why this grace is called the surpassing grace of God in you...the surpassing grace of God in you, 2 Corinthians 9:14. What a profound promise of God that all the grace and more is available to us.

Now let's apply that in a very common category...the category of suffering. Job was obviously correct when he said this, "Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward." In other words, as inevitable as it is that sparks off a fire go up, so inevitable it is that people are going to have trouble. But it is equally true for believers that our sufficiency is from God, 2 Corinthians 3:5. We will have trouble. Jesus said it in John 16, "In this world you will have trouble. But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." Or, "My grace is sufficient for you." As we read in this passage. All the necessary resources are available to us. In fact, the throne of heaven to which we go for everything we need. The throne to which we go for our salvation when we fall before God and bow to Him and confess and repent of sin and embrace Jesus Christ and ask God for Christ's sake to save us. That throne, the throne that we go to for wisdom and understanding and learning the Word of God, the throne we go to for sanctifying power and mercy, the throne we go to seek the will of God, to know His mind and to find His direction, the throne we go to for hope for the future, the throne is called the throne of grace.

Thrones were not normally places of grace in the ancient world when monarchs ruled. They ruled from fear, and terror, and threat and wielding the power of death. But the throne of heaven to which the penitent sinner comes and the believing saint comes is a throne of grace, where abundant grace is always dispensed to give help to us in our time of need.

The question then is when we go through the deepest and most profound of all our troubles in life, is there sufficient grace? Well the answer just from the general discussion we've already had is certainly a clear yes, but maybe we could look a little more deeply into that reality and find in this

some profound wisdom and help. So let's turn back to our text, 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 7 to 10. This is one of the most powerful passages in all of the New Testament. In fact, the whole section from chapter 10 through the end of chapter 13 is the most emotionally charged passage that Paul ever wrote. Here, more than anywhere else, more extensively than anywhere else, more deeply than anywhere else, the Apostle Paul lays his heart open. Here you really see the heart of this man. And his heart is bleeding profusely at this point. He is under assault, he is under attack from enemies. And it is devastating to him. This is the severest blow that his ministry has been dealt. His integrity is called into question. His honesty is disputed. His authority is denigrated. His teaching is despised, and all of this by some false teachers who have come to this Corinthian church with one objective, to teach satanic lies...to corrupt the church, to undo the work that God had begun. To bring it to a halt, to crush that church.

Now in order to gain a hearing, these false teachers have to destroy the people's confidence in Paul. He has been the founder of the church, the pastor of the church. Spent nearly two years there. Has written extensively to them, prayed for them. He has made a major investment in their lives in order for that to be brought to an end and that church to lose its impact in that wretched city of Corinth, there must be a loss of confidence in Paul. And so before they teach their damning lies, they put on a campaign to destroy him. They attack him every way they can. They attack him even physically, they say his presence is contemptible, he's ugly, unimpressive, has no persona. His speech also is uninteresting, boring. He is both boring and ugly. If you're handsome you can get away with being boring for a little while. If you're ugly you can get away with being interesting. But if you're both boring and ugly, you have a problem. They said that he had lied about his credentials. He had no apostolic credentials. He had falsified the history of his ministry. He had a secret hidden life of shame. He was in the ministry for money and favors from women. They said everything wicked you could say, lies upon lies upon lies. And the sad reality is that the Corinthian church were swayed by this, bought into it, listened to the false teachers, gave the false teachers a place in their lives. Paul made a short visit. Somebody stood up when he was there, confronted him to the face, accused him to the face. Nobody defended Paul when he was there and he left with a broken heart. He writes back, trying to defend the legitimacy of his apostleship and his character. And that's the purpose of this epistle. But he writes from a profusely broken heart because he has been wounded in the house of his friends. He has been betrayed by the people he gave his life to. If you drop down into that twelfth chapter just a little bit further, you will see that he asks the question in verse 15, "If I love you the more, am I to be loved the less?" Is this what I get for my increase love for you, a diminished love for you? This is heartbreaking stuff.

Paul knew about service. And he knew about suffering. Go back to chapter 11, for a minute. In chapter 11 he said, "I've been through a lot." Verse 23, "Far more labors, far more imprisonments than the false teachers," he's comparing himself with the false teachers. This is evidence of his legitimate apostleship, his suffering. The proof of his legitimacy was not his success but his suffering because he was invading the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of darkness was reacting. I have been in far more labors, far more imprisonments...imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews 39 lashes...five times he received what Jesus received in His scourging by the Romans. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. A night and a day I spent in the deep. I've been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren. I have been in labor and hardship through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst often without food in cold and exposure...physical dangers. All having to do with his physical life.

But then in verse 28 he says, "Apart from such external things, or actually beyond such external things, far more painful than anything afflicting my body there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches." the churches had a far greater ability to wound him than the world did. Why? Verse 29, "Because who is weak without my being weak?" When you're weak, I feel the pain. "Who is led into sin without my intense concern? When you're spiritually weak, when you're following a pattern of sin, this is agonizing to me." One thing to have your body wounded, it's something else to have your soul wounded. The deepest pain, the greatest trouble in human life comes in the soul category. It comes in the category of relationships. He knew about shipwrecks and floggings and beatings with rods and narrow escapes from criminals and thieves. He knew about all kinds of terrors. He knew about pain, being put into stocks with his legs and arms stretched as far as they could and then being locked in stocks and left there for days with muscles knotted and aching. He knew about filthy stinking jails and foul food. He knew about tortures of all kinds. But beyond that was the agony of his soul in dealing with people...people who disappointed him, people who rejected him, people who turned against him, people who failed him, wounded him, betrayed him, misunderstood him, turned on him. And the more love he invested in them, the greater their potential to harm him. So again I say, the deepest pain, the greatest trouble in human life apart from one's personal guilt is the pain that comes to us from our relationships, the pain that people inflict on us. No disease is as painful. Now you can die in peace as a believer with the worst disease, held up and surrounded by the loyal love, compassion, sympathy and care of those who love you, but to be healthy and whole and to be rejected, to be maligned, to be falsely accused, to be misrepresented, to be betrayed, to be hated...this wounds the soul.

So here is Paul in his deepest pain, wounded in the house of his friends, wounded by the Corinthians who have believed the lies about him. This is his deepest trouble. This is his most taxing moment in ministry life. How's he going to react? How's he going to get through it? What's he going to do in the midst of being unloved, unappreciated, untrusted, maligned, his integrity called into question, his credentials mocked, his authority degraded? What's he going to do?

Well, in the midst of this suffering he learns four profound lessons and he gives them to us here. And listen, folks, if these are good for the deepest suffering, they work for every other lesser category. These principles operate at all levels of suffering, right down to the very depth. This dear sacrificial selfless humble apostle is being when he writes this repeatedly battered and abused in the church to which he gave his life, his heart is shattered, he is at the bottom and he finds the answer in the deepest moment of suffering. And if it's good for the deepest, it's good for all the shallower experiences of suffering, as well. Four lessons.

Lesson number one, God uses suffering to humble His children. Verse 7, "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." Unmistakably clear. The reason for his suffering is to keep me from exalting myself. Paul was a believer, he was the noblest of Christians, he was the most mature of Christians, and yet pride still remained in his unredeemed flesh. He still had the body of sin attached to him. Pride was still a problem. And it would raise its ugly head at the most spiritual moments around his many revelations. And it's not talking about the epistles that he had been inspired to write, it's talking about actual divine revelations in which the Lord Himself was revealed to him. He had four personal visions of the Lord, four personal appearances of Jesus in his life, the first being on the road to Damascus. And there were others recorded in the book of Acts, and they are not at times when Jesus appeared and

he was among a group that saw it, they were personal appearances, only to him and no one else was having those appearances. These are stark in their uniqueness, bold. They do not happen to anybody else. Why? Why does the Lord need to appear to him personally so many times?

Well perhaps because of his immense suffering, because of the vilification and hatred that he experienced. Maybe he needed the strength that came from those appearances. But the downside was they could make you very proud. It would be pretty easy to say to your friends, "You know, the other day when the Lord appeared to me,...well was it that time or the time before? We were talking about...nah, I think it was the second time...let's see. No, I know when it was, it was when I went to heaven." This is a pretty big head trip and if you're having a discussion about how to do ministry and Timothy and Titus say, "this is what we need to do, I've talked to the people, this is the way to go." And Paul says, "No, I want to do it this way." And there's a little bit of a discussion...do we do it their way or Paul's way. And Paul says, "How many personal appearances with Jesus have you guys had?" Well none. "Well, we'll do it my way." That would be very easy to feel it just quietly in your heart elevated. And then there was that trip to heaven. Go back to chapter 12 verse 1, boasting is necessary. Boy, he hated to defend himself. Boasting in a good sense. Trying to defend his apostleship to the Corinthians so they'll turn back to him because he's the source of divine truth. And the false teachers are the source of devilish lies. And so he's got to plead his own case a little bit. He hates to do it. He says it's necessary, though it's not profitable, though I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I'm just going to tell you something about a vision and a revelation that I had, it's not profitable...and I'll tell you why it's not profitable, because it's not verifiable because it was personal to him and it's not repeatable. So Paul understands the weakness of this. Visions and revelations are not verifiable and not repeatable and he knows that but he says I'm going to tell you anyway. "In sort of vague terms, I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago whether in the body, I don't know, or out of the body, I don't know." In other words, I don't know what the reality was but God knows. Such a man was caught up to the third heaven and I know how such a man whether in the body or apart from the body, I don't know, God knows, was caught up into paradise and heard inexpressible words which a man is not permitted to speak." I don't know what happened, it's not profitable, and I can't speak about it. But I did go to heaven. I went to heaven. I went to heaven and I could boast about that, verse 5, but on my own behalf I'll not boast. I'd rather boast about my weaknesses. I'd rather talk about my weaknesses than boast about my trip to heaven. To heaven and back, for real? Four appearances of the glorified Lord, extraordinary stuff...too much for the remaining flesh to handle. So for this reason the surpassing greatness of those revelations to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me.

God's goal in the life of a believer is that believer's humility. Humility is the ultimate virtue. Pride is the ultimate sin. All other sins stem from pride. That's why Lucifer was thrown out of heaven, that's why Adam and Eve were thrown out of the garden. Lucifer wanted to be like God. Eve wanted to be like God. Pride always leads the parade. The greatest sin is pride, the noblest virtue is humility. To be poor in spirit, to not think more highly of oneself than we ought to think, to look not on our own things but on the things of others, to have the humble mind of Christ, to consider others better than ourselves, this is necessary, this is the purest kind of spiritual attitude. It all starts with being broken, mourning, hungering, humble. And Paul says so many revelations would make me proud.

And we all can identify with that, though we don't have those kinds of revelations. When your life is blessed, when your life is enriched by the goodness of God, it's easy to look upon yourself as if you are specially favored by God because of some merit, because of some virtue, because of some faithfulness, or some giftedness. Since God is after humility, God humbled a man who otherwise

would have been proud. And so it says He humbled me this way, there was given me by God, I will add, there was given me by God a gift...by the way, unsolicited...Paul didn't ask for it, didn't want it, didn't like it when he got it....but there was given me by God a thorn in the flesh. And by the way, Satan wouldn't want to give this, in one sense, because Satan doesn't want anything to happen in your life that humbles you, right? That's counter-productive. Satan is behind the self-esteem cult. He doesn't want to humble us, he wants us to exalt ourselves. God wants to humble us. So God sovereignly gives Paul a thorn in the flesh.

Now you think of the word "thorn," I know what you think of...rose bush, immediately. A little thing that pricks in your finger and bleed a little bit. No. The word translated thorn is stake...s-t-a-k-e, a shaft, like you would put in the ground to attach a small tree to, or a shaft that you might use to pierce somebody in a battle. What you would use to impale someone. This is not just a little prick in the finger that God has given him, this is a shaft rammed through him. In fact, the Greek text would be read this way...a thorn for the flesh, not in the Greek but for the flesh, to kill the proud tendencies of Paul's flesh. And just exactly what was it? What was it that was humbling him? What was this spear, as it were, that pierced his otherwise proud flesh? He says what it is, "A messenger of Satan....a messenger of Satan." God gave him...there was given me by God a messenger of Satan. Some people say this is an eye disease, or malaria, or whatever. It's a very simple thing to understand what it is. The word "messenger" is *angelos*...*angelos*, that's the word from which we get the English word angel. So it really is a satanic angel. What's another word for a satanic angel? A demon...a demon. There was given me by God to impale my otherwise proud flesh a demon. Does that mean Paul was demon possessed? No, not at all. Clearly not possible for a believer. But what it does tell us is that what was going on in the disruption of the Corinthian church by the false teachers was demonic. False teachers are the servants of Satan, they operate under the power of demons. Go back to chapter 11 which says in verse 13 that the false apostles, the deceitful workers disguised themselves as apostles of Christ and no wonder for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So when false teachers show up, they are Satan's angels, indwelling men propagating Satan's lies. All the gods of the nation are demons, says the Old Testament. Satan infiltrates all false religious systems and orchestrates them for his own ends.

He's referring here, I think it's pretty clear, to the demonic influence on the false teachers that was ripping and shredding his beloved church. This would be the demon who was behind the ring leader of the Corinthian conspiracy. Verse 15 of chapter 11 says that Satan's agents disguised themselves as servants of righteousness. And so demons embody false teachers to do their hellish work. The effective enemy then here was Satan or his demons who were moving through the false teachers. But, here's the amazing thing, even the demon leading that assault was given that opportunity by God as a way to humble Paul. It's astounding to think about it. In fact, the word "buffet" there is the word torment. Paul was being tormented by this demonic assault on the congregation he loved and their succumbing to it. The word "torment" is used in Matthew 26 and Mark 14 of the soldiers beating Jesus in the face with their fists. It's also used in 1 Corinthians 4 of Paul being physically punched. Paul is saying I'm taking a pounding. Why is God allowing demon-possessed false teachers to go in and disrupt this church and abuse me like this? The answer, to keep me from exalting myself. That is a staggering thing to think about. The humbling of God's servant is so important to God that He will use Satan and demons if need be to inflict the profoundest wounds where the servant of the Lord will feel the pain most because it accomplishes His purpose. God wants His children humbled to the degree that He will allow Satan, He will use Satan to torment the work of ministry if it assists in the humiliation of the servant. Luke 22, Satan desired to have Peter. Satan desired to have Peter and Jesus said, "Have at him...have at him." And He said to Peter, Satan wants you and he's going to sift you, but when it's over, you're going to be able to strengthen the brethren. Is that surprising? Think of

Job. Satan goes to God, says give me Job and I'll destroy his faith. And God says have at him. And in the end, Job's faith was triumphant, I had heard of you with the hearing of my ears, now my eyes sees you and I repent in dust and ashes. In a glorious triumph in Job 42:6 he says, "Now I really know my God." And his life is flooded with blessing. Which more than covered what he had lost.

There are times when God who is sovereign over Satan at all times and sovereign over demons at all times, uses Satan and demons for His own ends. God wants His children humbled to the degree that He, the sovereign over even the forces of hell will use them in the humbling of His own servants. So bless God for what humbles you. Embrace the suffering that humbles you, for He gives grace to the humble, but resists the proud.

Secondly, Paul learned another principle. 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." I can't take it, God, I cannot take what's happening in the Corinthian church. This is my work, I'm afraid it's all going to be undone. I can't take it. This is my great success story. I went into the most wretched city to Corinthianize men to go to bed with a prostitute. It was so identified with that place. The worship of false gods, pagan orgies with temple priestesses up on the Acropolis, a horrendous place, worship Aesculapius. I went into that place and I preached and a church was born and I gave nearly two years of my life and it's all gone bad and why don't you remove this? For three sessions he goes to God and it leads us to this second principle...God uses suffering to draw us to Himself.

I think it's interesting, first of all, just to look at this, "I entreated the Lord." Entreated is a very strong word used frequently in the gospels of the appeal of the sick for Jesus to heal them. It's a begging word. What interests me is he goes to the Lord three times. He doesn't go to the demon and try to chase the demon. He doesn't go to Satan and try to bind Satan. Those are foolish things. You wouldn't want to be attempting to do that anyway because you might be trying to send away the ones God had sent, then you'd be in conflict with God. But it's foolish to assume that there's any necessity to do anything about demons or Satan, why would you when God is the sovereign over all of them? So he goes to the sovereign over Satan. Satan is God's servant, only able to do what God allows him to do...so are all his demons. I entreated God. I begged God on three separate occasions. And I asked Him to eliminate it, stop this. Probably prayed the imprecatory Psalms on the head of the false teachers...Kill them, God, kill them...kill them now.

He was persistent. That met the condition of Luke 11, persistence God responds to. He goes to God and he goes back and he goes back. His prayer was in faith. His prayer was specific. His prayer was persistent that he might be delivered from this. And so here we learn a second lesson. Profound suffering has a very positive effect on your prayer life, right? Very positive effect on your prayer life. Where else you going to go? You face the greatest trial by turning to the only one he knew to be sovereign over all things, all circumstances, all persons, righteous and unrighteous...his Lord. And he asked Him to remove it. This is what happens in times of great stress. Our prayer lives are enriched and we enter in to the richest, deepest, sweetest communion with the Lord, far more sweet than the prayer we offer in times of prosperity.

But that leads a to a third principle. He learned, thirdly, that God uses suffering to display His grace...that God uses suffering to display His grace. Verse 9, "He said to me," actually He has said to me in the perfect tense which means it's a settled answer, it's a fixed response. All three times the Lord established this standing answer. "My grace is sufficient for you." And so the point is, God uses

suffering to put His grace on display. And what a benediction this is...what a benediction. God answered not by removing the pain, not by removing the trouble, but by increasing the grace which then increases our confidence in our salvation and in the presence of God and the goodness of God. It is these kinds of test when we experience enduring grace that produces assurance. He gave relief but relief not by removing the problem, but by pouring on the grace. It's amazing when someone has been told they have a terminal illness, or a loved one has a terminal illness. One who walks with the Lord finds a flood of grace, the likes of which they've never experienced before. As believers near the end of their life, an illness, you watch God just expand the grace until there's a certain joy and anticipation that overwhelms all the sense of loss. God wants to display His grace. He has a right to display His grace. He finds His glory in His grace.

This is not a new idea...the wonderful book of Lamentations gives us insight into this in the third chapter where Jeremiah who suffered so much...so much rejection from the people he loved, writes, "Remember my affliction and my wandering," Lamentations 3:19, "the wormwood and the bitterness." And then he says, "His soul is bowed down within him." This is sad and this is remorse and grief and agony and pain and suffering. But in verse 21 he says, "This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope." What did he recall? "The Lord's loving kindness indeed never ceased." Loving kindness is an Old Testament word for grace. The Lord's loving kindnesses indeed never cease, His compassions never fail, they are new every morning, great is Thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I have hope in Him. The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him. So it is good that he waits silently for the salvation of the Lord. It is good for a man that he should bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone and be silent since he has laid it on him. Sit there, be silent since God has brought about this trouble and wait quietly, silently for the faithfulness of God, the compassion of God and the loving kindness of God to flood you. God said My grace is sufficient.

Deuteronomy 33:26 says, "There is none like the God of Jeshurun, or the God of Israel, who rides the heavens to your help." What a vivid picture. Or Joshua 1:9, "Be strong and courageous, do not tremble or be dismayed for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Enter your trouble, embrace your pain, in it God is humbling you. In it God is drawing you into His intimate presence and in it He is displaying His sufficient grace. He does not promise a trouble free life, but He promises lavish grace in the midst of it.

There's one other lesson. God uses suffering to perfect His power...God uses suffering to perfect His power. We would all like to be powerful for the Lord. We would all like to think our lives really mattered, that our lives were a saver of life to life, or death to death, that we were living lives of powerful influence. I guess it's a nagging painful realization for most people in the world that their lives don't matter at all. It's wonderful for Christians to think of lives that really matter eternally. And that means our lives need to be powerful for God. Go back to verse 9, "Not only is My grace sufficient for you, but My power is perfected in weakness." My power just begins to operate in its fullness when you have none left. The suffering that humbles you, the suffering that draws you into My presence, the suffering that dispenses My grace is also the suffering that makes you powerful. It's when you're broken, it's when you're at the end of your own resources, it's when you have nothing in yourself to lean on or trust in that you cast yourself completely on Me that you really become powerful. As long as you keep trusting in your own ingenuity, as long, as long as you keep trusting in your own cleverness, as long as you keep trusting in your own money and your own ideas and your own strategies and you keep trusting in your own ability to solve all problems and accomplish all ends in ministry or whatever it is, as long as you operate, you're going to be weak. No

one is too weak to be powerful, but many are too strong to be powerful. You want to come to the end of yourself and then you begin to see the power of God released through your emptiness.

So what's the end of it all? Paul goes to sadness to joy. Verse 9, "Most gladly..." I get it, Lord, I get it. It's about humility. It's about intimacy. It's about grace. It's about power. I embrace the suffering. I embrace the spear rammed through my otherwise proud flesh. I embrace the pain most gladly therefore I would 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. That's the heart and soul of the Christian life. Not the assumption that, "Well, I don't know what's going on in my life, I'm a Christian, everything should be going right. And some people are telling me there are problems in my life and illness and disappointment and lack of success, it's because I don't have enough faith or I haven't found the right formula or I haven't figured out the right strategy or I haven't read the right book or gone to the right counsel or heard the right message. I could just kind of sort this deal out, I could extricate myself from all this stuff and get on living this gloriously successful life."

Nothing could be further from the truth when God really does His work in your life, He puts you in the place of pain and suffering. As Peter said, "After you've suffered a while, the Lord will make you perfect." And it's in the midst of that, that you find your real power and then you say with Paul, "I am well content with weaknesses and insults and distresses and persecutions, difficulties for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong." Embrace the pain. Embrace the suffering because you embrace the divine purpose.

Samson, strong in weakness crushed the enemies of God. Joseph strong in weakness rose to the throne of Egypt. Job strong in weakness saw the glorious face of God. I asked for prominence, God gave me humiliation. I asked for power, He gave me weakness. Then I became usable.

Some words of a song go like this. "There burns a fire with sacred heat, white hot with holy flame. And all who dare pass through its flames will not emerge the same. Some as bronze and some as silver, some as gold then 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 was sin was etched(???), His mercies did erase. Each time His purging cleanses deeper, I'm not sure that I'll survive. Yet the strength in growing weaker keeps my hungry soul alive." And the chorus, "The refiner's fire has now become my soul 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." Let's pray.

What more, O God could we want than to be humble before You, to be intimate with You, to be flooded with sufficient grace and to be powerful for Your cause. All things which come through our suffering. We embrace that with Paul, gladly we embrace it. Gladly we are content with it that You might truly be glorified and honored through us. O Refiner, refine us, we choose the Refiner's fire. We thank You, O Lord, for the good gift of grace and power, sweet fellowship and humility that come to us through our suffering. And we admit that we do look forward to that day when we will suffer no more in the glory of eternal heaven. But until then, may we suffer whatever refining we need that the glory of Christ may be manifest through us in this world that His saving power may be on display for others to see and believe. It's in His name that we ask. Amen.

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