

Grace in Suffering

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[0:00] For those of us studying Acts on Sunday morning, we're in the sections where Peter and John are facing two trials in front of the Sanhedrin.

And in the first trial, the Sanhedrin commanded them to no longer preach in the name of Jesus. Of course, we remember what Peter and John formerly responded with, and they said this in Acts 4, 19b and 20.

They said, We know that they continued to preach, and that led to the second trial before the Sanhedrin.

And Acts 5, verses 40 through 42 document the Sanhedrin's reaction there. Those verses say, And when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus and let them go.

So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name. And daily in the temple and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

[1:16] Listen to verse 41 again there. It says, So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.

When you think about it, the theme of rejoicing and thankfulness is throughout Scripture. So let's just look at a few places where we see that. Psalm 106.1 says this.

It says, Praise the Lord. O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His mercy endures forever. Then if we move to the New Testament, Jesus gives several examples of thanksgiving.

Matthew 11.25 is one of those. 11.25 is where it says, And we also see Paul reference thanksgiving several times in his letters.

Listen to what Paul says in Colossians 4.2. Colossians 4.2 says this. Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving. So does this give you an idea that we should offer thanksgiving regardless of the circumstances?

[2:30] Let's take it up just another level here. Here are two verses that tell us for what we should be thankful. This is 1 Thessalonians 5.18. And that verse says, In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

And then in Ephesians 5.20 we see this. Giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Thessalonians 5.18 and 5.20 tell us the things that we should be thankful for.

And did you see the references there? Both of them say we should be thankful in everything in one form or another. 1 Thessalonians 5.18 says in everything.

Ephesians 5.20 says in all things. We know that the Apostle Paul wrote both Ephesians 5.20 and 1 Thessalonians 5.18. So the obvious question there is, How can we really be thankful when we face difficult circumstances?

And Paul could write those verses because he had learned to be thankful in all circumstances. He not only told us to be thankful during difficult circumstances though, In 2 Corinthians 12.7-10, he showed us why we can be thankful in those circumstances.

[3:48] To get the full impact of the verses though, I want to set a little bit more of a context for you. Remember that Paul established the church at Corinth during his second missionary journey.

And after he left Corinth, some false apostles moved in. So Paul sent Timothy to visit the church. And among other things, Timothy found the church to be an open rebellion against Paul.

And when Paul heard about that, Paul made a second visit to the church. That visit didn't go very well when Paul went back to Ephesus. And once back in Ephesus, Paul sent Titus back to Corinth with a tearful and severe letter.

We don't have that letter now. We just have a reference to it. And that letter warned the church of God's judgment if they did not repent. Fortunately, the majority of the Corinthians did repent. But a minority, under the influence of Paul's opponents, still continued to reject Paul and his gospel. So Paul wrote 2 Corinthians in response to that news.

[4:50] And in the letter, one of Paul's objectives was to confront the false apostles. So in chapter 10 of 2 Corinthians, Paul summarized some of the criticisms against him.

And just listen to 2 Corinthians 10, verses 1 through 10. It says, It says, Do you look at things according to the outward appearance?

If anyone is convinced in himself that he is Christ, let him again consider this in himself, that just as he is Christ, even so we are Christ. For even if I should boast somewhat more about our authority which the Lord gave us, for edification and not for your destruction, I shall not be ashamed, lest I seem to terrify you by letters.

For his letters, they say, are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible. So if you caught that, just as I was reading those verses, Paul's opponents considered him, among other things, weak.

They considered him fleshly. They even said he was ugly and inarticulate. So here's 2 Corinthians 10:10 one more time. It says, For his letters, they say, are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible.

[6:43] We won't look at these verses, but Paul's opponents also questioned whether he had true authority, partly because he chose to take no money from the church.

And we see from these passages that Paul suffered verbal abuse, but he suffered more than that. We're getting closer to our focal passage now, but listen to how he physically suffered. These are Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 11, 24 through 27.

He says, In perils of the Gentiles, In perils in the city, In perils in the wilderness, In perils in the sea, In perils among false brethren, In weariness and toil, In sleeplessness often, In hunger and thirst, In fastings often, In cold and nakedness.

So Paul's here, and consider the situation. The false apostles are disrupting the church that Paul founded. They're doing it primarily by making false accusations against Paul, and we've just seen how Paul bears the physical scars of suffering for the gospel.

So does this sound like a situation where somebody would be very thankful? And so now, when we get to 2 Corinthians 12, we'll see why Paul has learned to be thankful, even in the difficult circumstances.

[8:21] So here are 2 Corinthians 12, verses 1 through 10. Paul says, It's doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.

I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago, whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows, such a one was caught up to the third heaven.

And I know such a man, whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows, how he was caught up into paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such a one I will boast, yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will speak the truth.

But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be, or hears from me. And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

[9:26] Concerning this thing, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore, most gladly, I will rather boast in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. So we'll focus mainly on verses 7 through 10, but we need to touch on verses 1 through 6 just a little bit.

Because verses 1 through 6 talk about the man who had various visions and was caught up into the third heaven. And we know that person was Paul himself. Even though Paul is speaking in the third person, the context makes it obvious that he was speaking about himself.

Because if he were relating the experience of another man, that would hardly enhance his credentials. And then verses 7 through 10 of 2 Corinthians 12 are perhaps the most profound Bible

verses that deal with weakness and suffering.

[10 : 36] So we spent so much time covering the background so that we would get a sense of how Paul felt. He was likely at the low point of his ministry. So let's see what Paul learned about why God allows us to face difficulties.

So as we do that, ask yourself this question that I borrowed from Alistair Begg. That question is this. Have you ever considered the possibility that your limitations and your sufferings may prove to be the key to your usefulness in the service of Christ?

So once again, for those of you who are filling in the blanks, have you ever considered the possibility that your limitations and your sufferings may prove to be the key to your usefulness in the service of Christ?

So we'll come back to that question several times as we go through the lesson tonight. But keep that question going through your head as we start to look at the verses. And let's reread verses 7 through 10 with that question in mind.

Those verses again say, And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

[11 : 51] Concerning this thing, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, most gladly, I will rather boast in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake, for when I am weak, then I am strong.

In this passage, Paul shows us that he now understands five purposes for struggles. The first four are borrowed from a John MacArthur sermon, but more importantly, they come straight out of the text, as you'll see.

The five purposes are God uses our trials to humble us. God uses our trials to draw us closer to him. God uses our trials to display his grace.

God uses our trials to show his strength. And finally, God uses our trials to make us thankful. So we'll look at each of the five reasons now.

[12 : 58] And from verse seven, that's where we see God uses our suffering to humble us. God uses our suffering to humble us. Notice that twice Paul uses the phrase, lest I should be exalted above measure, to describe why he has the thorn in the flesh.

So let's talk a minute about what this thorn in the flesh is. We really don't know for certain what it is, but scholars have several theories. One of those is that the thorn is a physical ailment, and that's the most common view that you'll see out there.

Another is that the thorn is a person or a group of people. And the reason why people have that view is because the original Greek terms that Paul wrote are normally used to describe people or beings and not ailments.

A third one is that Paul is having to live with the remorse over originally persecuting the church. We know that elsewhere Paul claims to be the chief of sinners, so that could be a possibility as well. And then another one is that the thorn is demonic harassment, and that fits well with the wording that refers to the thorn as a messenger from Satan. Under this theory, the thorn could be the disruption in the church that Paul loved so much.

[14 : 19] Regardless of what the thorn is, though, we can tell from the verses that come after that that Paul wanted to get rid of that thorn, and to get the whole picture of how much this thorn bothered Paul, we need to consider the text in the original Greek, because the phrase translated, a thorn in the flesh, should be translated, a sharp stake for the flesh.

It gives you a little bit different view there when you think of it as a sharp stake rather than a thorn. You can see just how much it bothered Paul. It was no small irritation.

It was something that bothered him a lot. Before we leave this first reason, let's think about why Paul may have needed something to keep him humble, and the first six verses of chapter 12 summarized those reasons.

Few people can match the visions and revelations that Paul had. The book of Acts records several of Paul's visions, and Galatians and Ephesians record two of the revelations.

We won't look at all of them, but let's just touch on a few to remind ourselves of everything that Paul had seen. Those recorded visions started just after Paul's conversion, and they continued until he was on his way to Rome.

[15:33] Acts 9.12 is what takes place while Paul was still blind after seeing Christ on the Damascus road. Acts 9.12 is where it says, And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him so that he might receive his sight.

Then the final vision mentioned in Acts occurred while Paul was on the voyage to Rome to appear before Caesar. If you'll remember, the ship was in the middle of a serious storm that had everyone on board, fearing their lives.

And listen to what Acts 27.23 and 24 say. They say, For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, Do not be afraid, Paul.

You must be brought before Caesar. And indeed, God has granted you all those who sail with you. Now that we've looked at some of the visions, let's look at a revelation that Paul received.

And these are Paul's words in Galatians 1, 11, and 12. And there he says, But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man, for I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

[16:47] And here's one more. In Ephesians 3, Paul talks about how God revealed to him the mystery that the Gentiles like us would also be part of the church. So if anyone had reason to exalt himself, humanly speaking, Paul certainly did.

So we may not have to worry about getting the visions and revelations like what Paul had, but we can all occasionally fall into the trap of thinking that we deserve the blessings that God has given us.

And that's why sometimes we face suffering to humble us, or to keep us humble. people. Let's look at the second reason Paul shows us for why God allows trials, and that's God allows trials to draw us closer to him.

So God allows trials to draw us closer to him. Look at verse 8 one more time of 2 Corinthians 12. It says, Concerning this thing, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

So do you see it there? The thorn in the flesh drove Paul to God and made him plead to God to try to take it away from him. So this is fairly typical. It's a natural reaction for us to pray more when we're going through difficulty.

[18:02] We see that from Paul in these verses, and James also gives the same advice in the first part of James 5.13. That's where James said, Is anyone among you suffering?

Let him pray. from 2 Corinthians 12.8, we also see just how much Paul wanted the thorn to go away. Because the word translated as pleaded can also be translated as entreated or begged. Entreated or begged. Let's move on and look at another reason why God may sometimes bring trials into our lives.

Because Paul didn't get the answer that he wanted, but he did get an answer that turned out to be even better. He learned that God uses our trials to display his grace. So God uses our trials to display his grace.

Look at the first part of verse 9. It says, And he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you. The present tense of the verb there reveals the constant availability of divine grace.

[19:10] It doesn't say my grace was sufficient or my grace will be sufficient. It says my grace is sufficient. It currently is. It will be in the future.

In fact, it always has been. So God wouldn't remove the thorn as Paul requested, but God will supply him with the grace to endure the thorn instead.

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians before he wrote Romans, and we see from Romans 8 verses 35 through 39 that Paul held fast to the promise that we see in 2 Corinthians 12, 9.

Just listen to Romans 8, 35 through 39, and you'll recognize these if you don't already. They say, Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?

As it is written, For your sake we are killed all day long. We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

[20:16] For I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present nor things to come nor height nor depth nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

We talked earlier how we cannot be sure what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. We can safely assume though that it's included in the list of things that cannot separate us from the love of God.

So Paul shows just how God can use our weaknesses and suffering to display his grace. Paul certainly learned that lesson well. So, so far we've seen that God uses our trials to humble us, to draw us closer to him and to display his grace.

Now we're ready for the fourth way that God uses difficult circumstances and God uses our trials to show his strength. God uses our trials to show his strength.

We see that in the last part of the quote from Christ in verse nine. We know that the quote says, my grace is sufficient for you for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

[21 : 29] The reason why the Lord's grace is sufficient is because of his strength. Christ said that his strength is made perfect in weakness. So that's something we need to remember. Does that mean he's still working on his strength and he'll one day get it right?

He'll get it right. The phrase translated made perfect actually could also be translated fulfilled or accomplished. It reads a little bit different when you look at that as fulfilled or accomplished.

Set another way, the Lord's strength is manifested by our weakness. Are you still thinking about that question that I asked you earlier? Remember what that question was?

That question was, have you ever considered the possibility that your limitations and your sufferings may prove to be the key to your usefulness in the service of Christ? Matthew Henry puts it this way. Matthew Henry says, Christ Jesus understands our case and knows our need and will proportion the remedy to our malady and will not only strengthen us, but glorify himself.

[22 : 35] Interesting thing to think of there, isn't it, when it says God will not only proportion the remedy to our malady so that it strengthens us but also glorifies himself.

We have one more purpose for weaknesses and suffering in these verses and that last one is that God uses our trials to make us thankful. God uses our trials to make us thankful.

Look at the last part of verse 9 and then on to verse 10. We see Paul's response to what he learns from the Lord. Paul says, Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Therefore I take pleasure in my infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Consider how Paul's attitude has changed. He first begged the Lord to remove the thorn. Now he is using the thorn to proclaim the greatness of God.

[23 : 39] When Paul says he takes pleasure in discomfort and difficulties, does that mean Paul takes pleasure in the struggles and pain themselves? I think we know that that's certainly not the case.

Paul took no pleasure in the pain itself, but he rejoiced in the power of Christ that it revealed through him. So here's another quote from Matthew Henry. Matthew Henry said, This is a Christian paradox.

So let me read that quote one more time.

He said, This is a Christian paradox. When we are weak in ourselves, then we are strong in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we see ourselves weak in ourselves, then we go out of ourselves to Christ and are qualified to receive strength from him and experience most of the supplies of divine strength and grace.

So let's recap the five reasons for how God can use our weaknesses and suffering. Those reasons are to humble us, to draw us closer to him, to display his grace, to show his power, and to make us thankful.

[25 : 04] Paul learned a lot from his difficulties. Now do you have some idea why Paul says that we should give thanks for everything? We've been through the verses, but let's think about the passage as a whole.

And here's one more quote from Matthew Henry. The thorn in the flesh is said to be a messenger of Satan, which he sent with ill intentions to discourage the apostle and hinder him in his work.

But God designed this for good. He overruled it for good and made this messenger of Satan to be so far from being a hindrance that it was a help to the apostle. Consider that last sentence.

Because of what Paul learned, said, God turned Satan's hindrance into a help. God turned Satan's hindrance into a help. Do you think what Paul said was what he really meant?

Did he practice what he preached? Do you think he came to see a greater purpose for his suffering? Well, flip back to the very first chapter of 2 Corinthians.

[26:10] Before Paul listed any of his difficulties, he said these words in 2 Corinthians 1, verses 3 through 5. He said, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. Listen to those one more time. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulations, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. Here are three questions to think about.

One of those questions is about Paul, and two of those questions are about each of us. Do you think Paul would have been as effective as he was if he didn't have to overcome so many difficulties?

He really learned what it was like to suffer, and therefore he could be more empathetic to the people that he taught, and he could actually be an example for them and for us.

[27:38] So now here are the questions for each of us. Have you ever thought something like this question or this statement? If I could only blank as well as blank, then I could do something much more useful for the Lord.

For example, have you ever thought something like, if I could only teach as well as Paul, then I could be much more useful for the Lord. You'll have to fill in those blanks yourselves, but when you do fill in those blanks, think about the question that we've been asking all along tonight.

Have you ever considered the possibility that your limitations and your sufferings may prove to be the key to your usefulness in the service of Christ? It may be those very limitations and sufferings that help you be effective.

So even if you can't do something as well as somebody else, maybe that's God's purpose, and maybe that's why you can be effective for him. 2 Corinthians 12, 7 through 10 may not be the typical verses we would use to illustrate thankfulness, and we may never welcome weakness and suffering.

However, we have to remember the bigger picture. The bigger picture is that God's purpose is not to make us prosperous and comfortable. We know from Romans 8, 29 and other passages that God's purpose is to conform us to the image of Christ.

[29:04] We always need to remember that God's purpose is to conform us to the image of Christ. And Christ certainly didn't have a life on this earth that was a picture of comfort and ease either.

He also showed us how you can deal with suffering. So we've talked about 1 Thessalonians 5, 18 a lot tonight, but let's end by reading 1 Thessalonians 5, 18 and the two verses that come before it. So here are 1 Thessalonians 5, 16 through 18. They say, Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

So one more time, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. .