

Sermon Notes:

One of the great “Questions in Life” is “Why?”

- “Why is this happening to me?”
- Or, “If God loves me, Why doesn’t he take this away?”

The Apostle Paul understood this (these) questions. He reflects them in his teaching from 2 Corinthians 12:7-9.

- A “thorn” from Satan — to harass him.
- 3 times pleads for God to remove.
- Essentially, God says “No” to removal.
- God offers “grace that will be sufficient” to assist in the non-removal.
- God asserts: “My power is made perfect in weakness.”
- Paul humbly accepts.
- **This passage powerfully illustrates that one can be a genuinely and sincerely devoted follower of Jesus — and have one’s prayers denied (at least as you would want them answered). It also teaches that one may be broken or damaged or physically ill and God can still effectively use you in service for His kingdom. His “power is made perfect in weakness.”**

Notice what God “did not promise” in this passage:

- An easy life for all Christians
- Faithful followers will never be sick
- Because of prayer, every hardship can and will disappear

Possible answers to our prayers:

- Yes; No; Not yet, or Not in that way

Byron tells the story of Joni Eareckson and then makes this (hypothetical) statement:

- God has used her (arguably) more powerfully because of and through her weakness than perhaps she could (or would) have been used without it.

Now, all of the above is useful to set up our reading of **Galatians 4:13-15**

- 13 You know it was because of a **bodily ailment** that I preached the gospel to you at first,
- 14 and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. 15 What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have **gouged out your eyes** and given them to me.

Byron emphasizes (above) “bodily ailment” and “gouged out your eyes” in order to make a connection with Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9.

- Is this Paul’s “thorn in the flesh?” Maybe. Maybe not.
- What is important to notice is that **the gospel advanced in spite of his “ailment.”**
- Quote from sermon: *“In the Greco-Roman world, the physical body was closely tied to a person’s authority and spiritual standing. A disfiguring illness or severe physical weakness was culturally interpreted as a sign of cosmic punishment or divine cursing. The Greek verb for “despise” or “reject” (exseptusate) literally means “to spit out.” It was a common pagan practice to physically spit on the ground when encountering a severely sick or deformed person to avert the “bad omen” or evil spirits associated with them.”* The gospel overcame this.
- Quote: “God’s power rests not on self-sufficiency, but on dependence upon Christ.”

Discussion Questions:

Have the group share about times when:

- God has answered prayers
- Or, when it has seemed like God said “No” to requests
- Any stories about when God seemed to say “No,” but His “No” was actually, “Not yet” or “Not in the way you want/expect?”

Read **2 Corinthians 12:7-9** and discuss its passage’s ramifications about:

- Prayer, or
- How God wants us to trust Him when He does not answer our prayers as we thought He would, or
- How God can use us (sometimes) more powerfully when He works through our weaknesses. (Discuss examples of weak or sick or broken people whose testimonies God has used to move and inspire others — think: “recovering addicts” or “people who have overcome accidents” or etc)
- Spend some time exploring Paul’s “thorn in the flesh.” Does it matter if we know what it was?

Tie **2 Corinthians 12:7-9** with **Galatians 4:13-15** (I apologize for only preaching about 3 of the possible 20 verses that were assigned to me. This is how God has led me this week.)

- It appears that Paul’s bodily ailment was an eye problem. Is this his thorn?

In your discussion about prayer or unanswered prayer, look at the following passages that add to the discussion. Each one below suggests possible reasons why someone’s prayer would not be answered. Prayer is more complex than simply, “Do you believe?”

- **Isaiah 59:2** — But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.
- **Psalms 66:18** — If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened...
- **Proverbs 21:13** — If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.
- **1 Peter 3:7** — Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.
- **2 Chronicles 7:14** — If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.
- **James 4:1-3** — 1 What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Isn't it the whole army of evil desires at war within you? You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous for what others have, and you can't possess it, so you fight and quarrel to take it away from them. And yet the reason you don't have what you want is that you don't ask God for it. 2 And even when you do ask, you don't get it because your whole motive is wrong — you want only what will give you pleasure.
- **James 5:16** — Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and wonderful results.