



2 Corinthians 11:16-12:6 True Suffering

Summary: Suffering and difficulty are often experienced by those who follow Christ, but so are divine comfort and strength.

One of the questions that comes up again and again – asked by Christians and non-Christians alike is: if God is good, why do bad things happen? Or, where is God when bad things happen? Or, why did God let this happen to me or these people? They're all ways of trying to grapple with the fact that things are not going the way I thought they should. It doesn't seem fair, it doesn't seem right, I don't like it, why doesn't God fix it?

There is no perfect answer. If there was, no one would be asking. But over the next two weeks we'll explore some things that will help us wrestle with the question as we see the role that suffering played in the life of one of the New Testament's most significant apostles.

Remember, Paul is writing to people in Corinth, a fashionable, successful, global city in ancient Greece. A place where you could find impressive people looking to be impressed. And you remember, the critique some of them had of Paul – he wasn't that impressive outwardly. He didn't have this strong, powerful physique like you see in all the Greek statues. And he didn't give impressive, moving speeches like the famous orators, philosophers, and actors of the day.

So, some people were starting to ask: what's up with this guy? Why should we follow him? Why should we listen to him? Well, backed into a corner now, Paul lays out some of his resume and credentials, some of the reasons why Christians in Corinth should listen to him. Look with me at:

2 Corinthians 11:16 I say again, let no one think me a fool. If otherwise, at least receive me as a fool, that I also may boast a little. **17** What I speak, I speak not according to the Lord, but as it were, foolishly, in this confidence of boasting. **18** Seeing that many boast according to the flesh, I also will boast. **19** For you put up with fools gladly, since you *yourselves* are wise!

This is ancient sarcasm. Paul says if you want to be impressed, fine, I'll tell you some impressive things, but you really need to know, this is not the way we should live. We shouldn't go around trying to impress each other, because whenever that happens, there's this power struggle at play as people try to sort out: who is better than who and what does that mean?

So, when a group of young girls meet up, they start to sort out who is the prettiest in the group? Who is the smartest in the group? Whose parents have the most money? They make

all these judgments about each other and determine rank and standing in the group accordingly. Guys do the same thing. It doesn't matter if you're in junior high, or a mid-career professional, or retired – people measure other people up looking for who's the most impressive.

And if you come out on top, if you're the best, you usually get to set the rules for the group. Nine times out of ten, that means attention and loyalty and effort are going to move in the winner's direction. This is the way power works. The prettiest girl can often tell others to do what she wants. The strongest guy – whether it's physical strength or strength of personality, can say this is what we're going to do. The smartest woman can tell the group, this is how we should tackle the project. And whether you think it's right or wrong, in the majority of cases, this is just the way it is.

Which is why, Paul is saying, let's not do things that way, it's **foolish**. Let's not be so **foolishly** focused on what's outwardly and immediately impressive. Let's look at other things because when you play the what or who is most impressive game, look where it leads:

20 For you put up with it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours you, if one takes from you, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face.

Isn't this what we would call toxic leadership? And yet, isn't this exactly what unfolds on playgrounds, in class rooms, at work, even in romantic relationships, volunteer organizations and churches when Christlike love and servant leadership are not established as guiding principles? The strong use their strength to exploit, manipulate, and accrue more power. They use their position and privilege for personal gain, extracting from everyone else along the way.

The crazy thing is, so many other people play along, they **put up with it**, happy to be part of the system, the club, the organization or the relationship, happy to belong. Which is why Paul says, don't do it, don't live this way, don't value these things. He says:

21 To our shame I say that we were too weak for that!

Again, this is biting sarcasm used to make a point – I'm so sorry for not throwing my apostolic weight around or trying to be more impressive if that's what you want. But since it's the only way to get your attention, or if it's the only way you'll listen, fine, I'll talk about myself, I'll do some boasting and bragging. He says:

But in whatever anyone is bold—I speak foolishly—I am bold also.

22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I.

Paul starts his list of qualifications with some pretty basic stuff – issues of identity and ancestry. Are these impressive people **Hebrews? So am I**. That's probably a reference to

their culture – there were Jews who were 100% Jewish but had been raised somewhere else, so they didn't really speak Hebrew. Not Paul, he was 100% culturally fluent. [Are they Israelites](#), which may mean do they claim to have lived within the actual boundaries of Israel, not down in Egypt or over in Lebanon. Were they legit from the land? And Paul says, well, me too. If you want to talk about being a Jew, I'm as Jewish as they get.

But then Paul takes a turn with his resume and heads in an unexpected direction:

[23 Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I *am* more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often.](#)

And you go, hold on, wait a minute, this isn't like any resume I've seen before. Where's the National Honor Society, the prestigious internship and the 7.3 GPA, the Most Important Person of the Year Award and the list of projects accomplished or papers published?

Paul says if I'm going to boast, I'm going to boast about what I've been through for the sake of Jesus and the gospel and that means boasting in what I've suffered *while knowing and serving Christ*. Which feels upside down and disorienting, doesn't it?

I mean, if you're a Christian, you can imagine this might be what life is like for other people, people who don't know or follow Jesus. You can imagine this might be what life is like when you live on your own terms. But I want us to see, this is *exactly* what life was like for Paul *while following Christ*.

Paul says I've [labored](#), long and hard, and that's not a brag about grit or capacity, this is not that entrepreneurial or aggressive get-after-it kind of labor that's pseudo-glamorous because it's how you built your success. No, it's grouped with physical suffering, imprisonment, and near-death experiences.

And church, this wasn't a one-time thing for Paul. It was a pattern of life...*while doing exactly what God had called him to do*. This is what following Jesus meant for Paul. Not privilege, not luxury, not attention and audiences – suffering and difficulty, and lots of it.

This is his ministry resume. And you know what people like to see on resumes? Numbers. Quantify things, give me metrics. So, Paul gets into some digits next:

[24 From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one.](#)

This was a form of punishment. If you did something wrong, broke some Jewish law, you could be sentenced to up to forty lashes with a whip made from strips of leather. Now, have you ever heard of a baker's dozen? How many is that? Thirteen. A normal dozen is twelve, but back in the 13th century in England, if the baker shorted you, they could be fined or flogged for cheating customers. So, they always threw in a little extra just to be safe and ensure everyone knew they were getting what they paid for.

Well, back in Israel, if the person giving the lashes miscounted and gave you more than forty, they could be lashed themselves. So, they stopped at thirty-nine, just in case. Well, do the math and you see Paul has received 195 lashes from a leather whip over the years. What do you imagine he looked like when he took off his tunic? But that's not all:

25 Three times I was beaten with rods;

This is the Roman form of punishment. Beatings were administered by men called *lictors*, these were bodyguards for Roman magistrates, essentially like our Secret Service, but they also administered punishments when directed. They did that with fasces – which is where we get the modern word fascist. Fasces are a five-foot-tall bundle of birch wood rods tied together with a strap of red leather around a bronze axe. The rods were used for beating and the ax for beheading. Axes were removed however when in the city of Rome as a reminder that Roman citizens had greater legal protections and couldn't suffer certain punishments.



As a result, the fasces became a symbol of executive authority, or *imperium*, indicating power and jurisdiction. Today you can find them all over the place in government if you know what you're looking at – they're everywhere in DC. They're on the official seal of the Senate as well as the National Guard. They're carved into the arms of the chair at the Lincoln Memorial and into the steps on your way up. They're in the Oval Office,

above the doors. There's a ring of them around the statue of freedom on top of the capital building and you can see a lictor carved into the pediment on the front of the Supreme Court, standing just to the right of lady justice.



Three times a grown man unwound those leather straps, took out a rod and beat Paul with it. We read about it happening once in Acts 16 at Philippi, apparently it happened at least two more times.

(25 cont.) once I was stoned;

That's when people throw rocks at you, until you die. According to Acts 14, this happened to Paul when he visited the city of Lystra. He and Barnabas had just healed a man and a crowd gathered thinking they must be gods – Zeus and Hermes come down to visit the city. Paul has to tell them no, *we're* not gods, we're servants *of God*. But then some Jewish religious leaders show up from out of town, win over the crowd, and turn them on Paul – they start throwing rocks at the man and don't stop until he's laying on the ground bleeding and they leave him for dead. Eventually though, we have no idea how long it took, he got up and actually walked back into town.

And that's not all:

three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep;

Can we all agree, that's a long time to be bobbing in the water waiting for a rescue helicopter...which they didn't have?

If you know your Bible, or you're familiar with the book of Acts, you think – man, I know about one of those shipwrecks. No, you don't. Paul is writing to the Corinthians from Ephesus. So, this letter was written during the time described in Acts chapter 19. You're thinking of the shipwreck that occurs in Acts 27 when Paul is on his way to Rome.

Second Corinthians was written several years, and apparently several shipwrecks, before that trip. He'll go on to live at least another ten years and experience a decade worth of things that are not on this list. Let that sink in.

The list goes on:

26 in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers,

This is all the stuff that just makes life hard – whether you're doing it for Jesus or yourself, somethings in life are dangerous and difficult. It's not persecution, it's the fallen environment we live in and we've all got to put up with it – it's nothing personal, but it's still hard.

in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea,

Are you getting the comprehensive nature of this? Paul is saying, basically, everywhere I go, things are hard. And worse, I never know where the problems are going to come from, look at this:

in perils among false brethren;

There are few things worse than betrayal – to have thought someone was on your team, shared your interests and concerns, thought they were onboard with you, and then they walk away - or worse, sell you out, abandon you, or stab you in the back. Paul knows that feeling, and he learned it, while doing *exactly what God was calling him to do*.

Well, now Paul goes on to describe what all these difficulties feel like:

27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often that might be due to anxiety or concern about the situation or it could be simply because danger or travel or opportunity demanded it – either way, it wasn't just occasional, it was frequent. *in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—* not necessarily absolute nakedness, but a lack of appropriate clothing for the situation.

28 besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?

It's not just the physical challenges he faces, it's also the emotional burden he carries for others. And again, many of you know what this is like – and sometimes you think you would be happy to endure all the drama and difficulty of life, if everything could just be OK with so and so. But constantly thinking about them, worrying about their situation, hoping and praying it will turn out alright eats you alive, it's a heavy burden for your soul.

Can you see the relevance of this ancient book for our modern lives? You might not be in [dangers of waters](#) or [beaten with rods](#), but you know what it's like to go through difficult seasons of life while also caring desperately about someone you love and the situations they're facing. Well, what I want you to see is, this all happened to Paul *while he was right smack in the middle of God's will*. He was where he was supposed to be, doing what he was supposed to do, when all of this happened. And there's still more to say:

[30 If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity. 31 The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. 32 In Damascus \(this is the same city that exists today, in Syria – these are real world events\) the governor, under Aretas the king \(who ruled until about the year 40AD – so this probably happened in 39-40AD\), was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; 33 but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.](#)

Now, what you have to know is that there is a tremendous difference in the way Paul traveled to Damascus and the way he left. Paul was headed to Damascus before he met Jesus. At the time, he was a bigshot young member of the Pharisees, a zealous religious group. He received letters of authorization from the high priest to take a delegation from Jerusalem to Damascus, track down and imprison anyone spreading and sharing stories about Jesus and His death, burial, and resurrection.

But on the way to Damascus Paul had an unexpected encounter with Jesus who asked him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? Now, Saul (as Paul was known then) wasn't actually persecuting Jesus, at least not directly, and yet, Jesus was saying, when you hurt My people, you hurt Me. Well, Saul was overwhelmed by the experience and came to faith in Christ. So, when he finally arrived in Damascus, instead of arresting the Christians, he ended up worshipping with them and sharing his testimony.

Well, eventually word got out that Paul had converted and now he was a wanted man as well. So, the guy who set out for Damascus with a whole entourage, full of confidence and authority, expecting an official welcome by important people in the city, has to leave in the middle in the night like a fugitive. There's nothing dignified about it. And yet, this is what his life had become by following Jesus. He goes on:

[2 Corinthians 12:1](#) It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen 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.

Paul is almost certainly referring to himself here – likely when he was stoned and left for dead back in Lystra which was probably around 41-42AD. The first heaven is the sky above us. The second heaven is the stars and everything else out there in the universe. The third heaven is the actual dwelling place of God. So, Paul says, I was caught up into the presence of God in heaven.

3 And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. 5 Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities.

Now, Paradise is an interesting word that comes to us from Persia. It was used to describe the private parks and gardens of the Persian king and his nobles. To be invited to walk with the king in the garden, was a tremendous honor. And today famous historical gardens blooming in the deserts of Iran are listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites.



Well, in both Genesis and Revelation the Scriptures make reference to Paradise as a garden setting where men walk with God. Paul had some experience of this, but it resulted in something he called a thorn in his flesh, which we'll talk about next week – an **infirmity** that kept him humble.

6 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.

Notice what Paul says here in vs 6 – **I might desire to boast**, draw a little attention to myself, but that would be **foolish**. Instead, I'll just tell you the truth of who I am and what God has brought me through. And why does he hold back? Notice, **lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me *to be* or hears from me**.

Now here's what's curious to me – wasn't that exactly the problem they had with Paul? When they saw him, they weren't impressed. When they heard from him, they weren't impressed. And yet he **doesn't want anyone to think of him above what they see or hear?**

What's going on? I think Paul is saying, if you were to see or hear anything else in me, you would be attracted to the wrong things, impressed by the wrong things. I've been hurt and humbled by life, I've been readjusted by Jesus. I've been changed. This is who I am now and I don't need to be thought of as anything else, anything more impressive. I need, and I want, to be seen and known for who I am in relationship to Christ. That's enough.

I wonder if we can say the same thing? Do we need people to think more of us? Are you comfortable with who you are? Do you still desire to be impressive, and if so, what is that you think will impress?

I'll end this morning by pointing out something I've said several times already: all of this happened *while Paul was serving Jesus*. In fact, much of this happened to him *because* he was serving Jesus. So, when we ask the question why does God let bad things happen to good people, we have to understand that's not a surprising question to God.

It's not like we've come up with something He hasn't thought of – 'gee, I guess you're right, I never thought of it that way.' Sometimes, a very good and holy God allows His people to suffer tremendously. And it's not always because they've done something wrong. More often that not, the things we suffer from are the consequences of life on a fallen planet filled with death, disaster, and disease which themselves are the result of humanity rebelling against God, coming up with our own way of doing things instead of following His instructions for life. We have sabotaged the planet and feel the effects.

And then there's the pain we cause each other by choosing to put our selfish desires and interests above other people. How much of the pain and hurt, frustration and difficulty of this life can be classified cleanly and clearly as human on human?

And how much of the pain we bear is something we carry for others? [Apart from all these things](#), Paul says, [my daily concern for the churches](#). How much do you care about, think about, worry about, cry for and about the choices others make or the things happening to them – things that you cannot control?

I shared earlier, there's no perfect or completely satisfactory answer to the question: why does God let bad things happen to good people? But looking at the life of Paul tells us – bad things *do happen*, even when *you're trying to serve and follow God*. Just because your life is hard, doesn't mean you're doing it wrong.

But remember - life wasn't easy for Jesus. He did everything right and still wound up betrayed by a friend and murdered on a cross as a political convenience. People used their power and positions to crucify the Son of God. The world really is that messed up... and that's why He came to save us.

As we follow Him, we should not expect everything to go well. We should not expect everything to be perfect. Jesus is not an insurance policy or pain reliever for your life. But He's a rescuer, a redeemer, a kind and gentle shepherd who will walk with you through whatever difficulty comes your way.

Consider this – Paul went through all these difficulties, all these hardships, faced all this rejection and questioning, and yet *kept on going*. Why? Because he believed Jesus and the gospel were worth it. Do you? Do I? May God give each of us a taste of His presence and power and the kind of conviction that kept Paul going even when life was full of challenges and pain.

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

2 Corinthians 11:5-15 The True Apostle

Summary: Confidence in God's calling enables you to show love and humility, even when challenged.

- What is one way that someone, other than Jesus, has suffered for you?
- How and why does suffering authenticate a message? Why are we more apt to listen to someone who has suffered?
- Today there are still both pastors and ministry leaders who use their platform to increase their ministry and make their lives easier, and there are those who sacrificially use their lives to serve others. Where have you seen or experienced each approach?
- Consider what you learn about the value and purpose of suffering, or the Christian's attitude toward it, from the following passages
 - Acts 5:41
 - James 5:10
 - 1 Peter 2:20; 1 Peter 5:10
- Paul lays out his credentials in Philippians 3:4-11 as well. Read that passage and note, how does Paul think of his resume today? What is most valuable to him?
- Amy Carmichael was a missionary to orphans in India in the early 1900s, her writings have had a tremendous impact Christians throughout the years. One of the most famous is her poem, *Hast Thou No Scar?* Read it and consider: what connection does she make between scars and following Jesus?

Hast thou no scar?

No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?
I hear thee sung as mighty in the land,
I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star,
Hast thou no scar?

Hast thou no wound?

Yet I was wounded by the archers, spent,
Leaned Me against a tree to die, and rent
by ravening beasts that compassed Me, I swooned:
Hast thou no wound?

No wound, no scar?

Yet as the Master shall the servant be,
And, pierced are the feet that follow Me;
But thine are whole: can he have followed far
Who has no wound nor scar?