



2 Corinthians 12:7-10 **When God Uses Pain**

Summary: Sometimes, success is the worst thing that can happen to you.

Everyone's life hurts at some point – the center of that pain may be located in your body, your heart, your mind, or your soul, but as REM sang so famously thirty years ago – “everybody hurts, sometimes.”¹ The question we want to dig into this morning is, why?

I mentioned last week, this is a common and powerful question for those who believe in God and those who do not, and those who aren't sure what they believe. It's even a reason why some who once said they believed walked away from their belief or modified it substantially.

The problem is presented like this: if God is morally good and all powerful, it stands to reason that He would stop suffering and pain. If He does not, it must mean either He is morally good, but not all powerful and therefore can't stop suffering and pain. Or, He's all powerful, but not morally good and therefore He could stop suffering and pain but chooses not to. It seems fairly straight forward.

But it's not, because it's too simplistic. This perspective assumes all pain and suffering is morally bad, that it's always entirely undesirable. But, when we pull back from the problem for a moment we start to realize that's not true. There are times when we *choose* to suffer in pursuit of a greater cause. Why do athletes push themselves so hard? Why does a musician develop calluses on their hands or fingers? Why do people study until they can't think straight or have a headache? Because they're *choosing* to pass through pain and difficulty *in order* to reach a higher level of performance or knowledge.

How many times have you heard “no pain, no gain?” “Pain is weakness leaving the body.” “The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war?” Many of us intuitively know that it is possible for pain and suffering to develop us instead of destroy us and therefore, we choose it.

So, why can we accept pain or deprivation at certain times and question the goodness and power of God at others? I believe the answer is: we can bear up under the pain we choose but we resent the pain that is forced upon us. We can often endure the pain if we can see or imagine the payoff, but we don't always have that privilege. And that's what makes pain really, really hard to endure – it's when we don't see any good that could come of it and can't find any reason for it.

¹ “Everybody Hurts,” Track 4 on REM, *Automatic For The People*, Warner Bros, 1992.

Well, for the next two weeks we're going to do a deep dive on a small passage of Scripture that helps us understand why sometimes success, or a pain free life, might be the worst thing that can happen to you, and what's going on when God uses pain as a tool for our spiritual development.

Read with me as the Apostle Paul continues to describe his life and ministry:

2 Corinthians 12:7 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. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 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. 10 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.

You remember that Paul is writing to Christians living in the city of Corinth in Ancient Greece during the days of the Roman Empire. You remember they were a popular, bustling, global city of their day, like LA, New York, Paris, or London. People had heard of Corinth. And you remember the people there were looking to be impressive, to get noticed, and they were looking to be impressed. They were looking for people with bodies built like the famous Greek statues, well-muscled from training at the gym which was a central part of each community. And they were looking for people who were impressive in their speech – people who could draw crowds and be interesting in the days before television, radio, and the internet.

And you remember, Paul doesn't fit that image. So, some people wonder why they should listen to Paul, especially when they've recently met a group of people who do seem impressive as they talk about Jesus. In response, Paul has been laying out his ministry resume and credentials, but it's been weird and disorienting, because instead of boasting about all the great stuff he's done, all these accomplishments and accolades, Paul listed a bunch of difficulties and trials he's been through. All the stuff that makes life hurt and hard.

And last week we said we might be able to understand his difficult life, if he was doing his own thing, going his own way – but all of this happened *while* he was actively trying to worship, follow, and serve Jesus. Again, it can all feel weirdly out of place and disorienting if you're used to thinking of God as the one who makes your life better, the one who answers prayers and keeps bad things from happening, if you're used to life-improvement Jesus – which is the God many people think of.

But here, in Scripture, we're confronted with a different God. A God who, Paul says won't answer his prayer for pain to go away because *He's actually using the pain to help Paul grow.*

Can I be clear about something? None of us want to hear that. None of us want to think there might be something difficult, painful, tormenting, in our lives and that God has no plan to remove it, stop it, or send it away. None of us want to hear that.

But can I be clear about something else? *That's exactly what this passage of Scripture says.*

So today, you might be enduring a painful situation and God has no plan to remove you from it, His plan is to *walk with you through it*. I'm sorry to say that. I wish I didn't have to say it. I wish that I could wave a wand over your life and heal everything because I want the fast and easy way out too. But then I realize that as I say that, I'm contradicting the entire point of this passage. You see, Paul says yes, I'm suffering – but I'm also experiencing grace. And the grace I'm receiving is better than the pain I'm feeling. So much better in fact, that it leads me to rejoice.

So maybe we should take some time this morning to dig in and try to understand what is happening here and what we can learn from it. I don't know what God is doing in your particular situation and I want to really really careful not to say God is using your pain for a purpose, but I've also got to be really, really careful to say, God might be using your pain for a purpose – because that's what we see in Scripture.

We're going to spend most of our time this week in verse 7 looking at *what* happened to Paul, *how* he experienced the pain, and *why* he experienced it. Next week, we'll come back and look at his *request* for relief, God's *response*, and Paul's final *reaction* – the choice to embrace weakness and find strength.

So, first, what happened to Paul? We might answer: he had a thorn in the flesh. And that's true, but it jumps over something very important. Paul received an [abundance of revelations](#). We looked at one of them last week – he said he was caught up into heaven and heard things which he can't repeat or share on earth – probably not because they're secret, just because there are no words to adequately express or convey. The book of Acts lists at least five others.

The point is: Paul had some rather significant spiritual experiences which could have led him to boast about himself, or others to boast about him. And it was *for this reason* that he also experienced [a thorn in the flesh](#). The thorn was *meant* to keep him humble and close to God. Often, when we are hurting, we look for something that can help. Here, pain was the prescription.

Now, why would God do that? Why would God try to hurt us, or let us be hurt? This is where you get caught up in the moral problem we mentioned earlier – maybe God is powerful but He's not good. Not if He allows pain, hardship, and difficulty in our lives.

But, what if our thinking and categories are all wrong? What if God allows pain, hardship, and difficulty into our lives BECAUSE He's good?

What if God knows that the best thing for the eternal safety, security and strength of our soul is that we endure some measure of pain during our time on earth? What if God is using pain and struggle to keep us safe and help us grow by letting it push us toward Him? Do you have a category for that?

I'm not saying you want it. I'm not saying you asked for it. I'm not saying you agree that this is best. But I'm asking – might it be possible?

Look with me at verse 7 again and notice the sandwich Paul makes of his explanation.

2 Corinthians 12:7 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.

Paul is able to see, this thorn, whatever it is, keeps him from pride and exaltation and, of supreme importance for this letter to the Corinthians, it keeps him from being 'impressive.'

Church, I can't help but feel that in a city like ours, a city full of impressive, accomplished, credentialed people, it might be possible that there is also a measure of pain and difficulty being allowed *by the Lord* in order to keep people from being **exalted above measure**, that the God *who does not change*, is using pain and hardship with intentionality and purpose to point us back to Himself for help.

Why would He do that? Because, as much as we might desire peace, progress, and prosperity, history clearly shows that these things tend to lead people away from God and toward selfish independence. The Bible opens with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden where everything, absolutely everything is good and it's all meant for them to enjoy except one thing, and what winds up being the thing they're drawn to? They enjoyed the prosperity and wandered away from God.

If you're doing the Exodus study right now you know that God is preparing to lead His people out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land, a place flowing with milk and honey. And what do they do when they get there? Enjoy the prosperity and wander away from God.

Jesus taught that it was easier for a camel to pass through eye of needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. He said that after a young man who was financially well off and held a position in politics asked what he should do in order to inherit eternal life and Jesus told him – sell all you have, give to the poor, and come follow me. And Scripture says the young man **went away went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions**. In other words, he was too comfortable and successful to obey – he enjoyed the prosperity and wandered away from God.

Friends, we, and I include myself in this, like ability, success, strength, skill, and positions of influence and power. We like the sense of safety that comes from predictability and

financial stability. And so, we often cling to those things, pursue those things, protect those things *over a relationship with God*.

Which helps us begin to understand why Paul says he was given this thorn, this messenger of Satan to buffet him, [lest I be exalted above measure](#).

If having something – whether a spiritual experience, intellectual knowledge, or material resources is going to *keep you from God* – would it would be worth experiencing pain, discomfort, or loss that would *draw you back to Him*?

Would you rather have the mountaintop without God or the valley with Him?

The best answer is: I want the mountaintop, with God. And I'm with you. But I just don't see that being a realistic option. I don't see many people who can have it all and still walk closely with God.

Now, we want to be careful here. This is not an absolute. You see, it would be easy to say, that people who are successful and doing well must not know God and people who are poor or obviously suffering are inherently more pious and spiritual. That's not true. It's a blanket statement. But it is true that the more status you achieve, prosperity you experience, and opportunities you have, the more tempted you will be to chase those things, protect those things, and pursue more of those things rather than prioritize your relationship with God.

Pain and desperation have driven far more people to God than prosperity and achievement.

Of course, there are no guarantees. Many of us know from personal experience that there are people who have learned to thrive in their pain and challenges; there are also people whose faith has been broken by the things they've endured and observed in the world. They can't bring the two together.

I would be willing to say, our problem is not with pain as much as it is with pointless suffering. But here's the thing: just because we can't see the reason for the pain, doesn't mean there can't be one. God may have a purpose we can't see or understand. Tim Keller speaks of this in his fantastic book, *The Reasons for God* which has an entire chapter on the problem of pain and suffering. He points out – if you have a God big enough to be mad at for *not* stopping suffering, you also have a God big enough to have reasons for suffering that you can't know.² It's a package deal.

Think about this – how many times have you heard someone who went through something very difficult say later: I would never ask to do that again, I wouldn't suggest it or commend it to anyone else, but I am who I am today because of it, and I wouldn't undo it if I could.

In a similar vein, Rebecca McLaughlin points out in her excellent book *Confronting Christianity* which also has a chapter on the problem of pain and suffering: if there is no

² Keller, *The Reason for God*, 25.

God, then there is no design to the world, there's just pitiless indifference.³ I put it this way – the universe doesn't care about you. The universe isn't fair. If there is a God, then yes, there is a problem of pain and suffering. But take God away and then ask: does that solve your problem? No, you're still left with your pain and experience but now you don't have anyone to blame. Removing or rejecting God doesn't fix anything for you.

It's far better to understand things the way Paul does – he said his [thorn](#) was [a messenger of Satan sent to buffet him](#). Let's focus on that and see what we can learn.

First, you need to know that the grammar here allows this to be read two ways. It could be a messenger *from* Satan – sent by Satan to do Satan's work. We see this in the famous story of Job. Satan asks for permission to tempt Job to curse God. And with God's permission, Satan sends difficulties his way. But our passage could also be read as a thorn *belonging to* Satan. So, in that case it's not something Satan was directly involved in, but it represented the category of the fallen side of our existence as epitomized by Satan. Think of it like this, when you go overseas as a tourist, you represent America, you *belong to* America. But if you go overseas as an Ambassador you have been *sent* by America. We could read Paul's thorn either way.

Second, whatever it was [buffeted](#) him, tormented him, harassed him. The same word is used to describe Roman guards striking Jesus prior to His crucifixion. So, whatever it meant for Paul, it was not the kind of thing you just brush off or ignore. It seems quite likely that this thorn affected his schedule and had a significant, if not daily, impact on his life.

And church, I need to point out something very uncomfortable again – this was while Paul was *exactly* where God wanted him to be, doing exactly what God wanted him to do. It wasn't like he could escape it by making some changes and getting things right in his life.

So, third, what was the [thorn](#)? Well, the original word here in Greek has a range of meaning. It's the same word used of what we might call a stake, like a tent stake, or even a large, sharp pole. There are accounts of people actually being impaled on a "thorn" as a form of execution. One theologian noted it was "incessantly painful and thus irritating or vexing"⁴ another said it would involve "almost savage pain."⁵ In other words it's not like poor little Paul has an owwie, he needs to find his mom and a set of tweezers. It's more than that.

But we still haven't said exactly *what* it is, right? That's because *no one really knows*. There have been different ideas throughout the ages. Some suggest Paul was speaking figuratively, he was referring to persecution or opposition that he faced and it felt like a thorn in his flesh.

Others think Paul was speaking spiritually referring to the flesh in contrast to the spirit. So then, the thorn was some sort of temptation that constantly pulled at him. Most however,

³ McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity*, 195.

⁴ Guthrie

⁵ Barclay

think it was some sort of actual illness or injury that really did affect his body. Headaches, epilepsy, and malaria have all been suggested, but the bulk of the Biblical evidence points toward some sort of eye trouble. You remember he was blinded in the desert when he saw the risen Christ (Acts 9).

Later, in writing to the Galatians, he mentions their love for him saying that they would have [plucked out their own eyes](#) to give to him (Gal 4:15) and closing his letter by saying [see how I write to you with such large letters](#) (Gal 6:11) leading some to believe he couldn't see well and required a constant companion to guide and care for him as he travelled – perhaps that was the role of Luke the physician. Luke wrote the gospel bearing his name, but also the book of Acts which describes Paul's travels and often includes the word "we," indicating Luke was present with Paul for many of the events.

At the end of the day, we don't really know what Paul's thorn was. But, that's probably for a very good reason: it keeps us from dismissing whatever he was facing as somehow different from us. In other words, if we knew it was a toothache, we would say, yeah, but I've got cancer. Or, if we knew it was the opposition he faced, we would say, yeah, but that's different than my (fill in the blank) and we would find a way to put it in a different category than us.

The bottom line is, whatever his [thorn](#) was, it was painful and humiliating, and it was given to him *by God* to prevent pride. From God's perspective, sin is worse than any sickness and the greatest sin is pride, especially spiritually-rooted pride. And so, in order to keep him from that, pain was God's prescription for Paul. Pain kept him close, and became a gateway to grace.

And if you notice, Paul says he got a really good deal. He says, notice vs 10, [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.](#)

I don't know the exact source of your pain – whether it's private or public, physical or psychological. I don't know the exact reason for your pain whether God has sent it with a purpose or if it's a consequence of life on this broken planet where we're surrounded by broken people. But I know this, according to Scripture – He can either heal it or help you through it.

Most of us want to be healed, we want to be helped, we want out of the situation. That's fine. There's nothing wrong with that. We'll talk more about praying that prayer next week. But think of what it means for God to come to you in the midst of your pain and walk with you through it – to be your strength in your weakness.

Scripture tells us that Jesus knew our condition, knew the sources and causes of our pain, and so, in order to save us from enduring, everlasting, eternal pain, He came and suffered for us. He endured a life, just like ours – he knew physical pain and suffering from the daily grind of life, he got tired, he was hungry and thirsty and went without sleep. He knew heartache and loss and betrayal. He cried. Jesus is able to identify with us.

And then, he allowed even greater pain to enter His life as He was arrested, harassed, mocked, misjudged, and maligned. He experienced injustice and indifference and was finally hung up as spectacle for all to see as He died an excruciating death. Why does God let bad things happen to good people is an interesting question – but why did God let bad things happen to His perfect Son is an even better one.

Fortunately, we know the answer – it was so that He could draw us near. So that we could be restored spiritually, given new life, a life that lasts forever. Along the way, there may be pain, there may be sorrow, but there is also an abundance of sustaining grace.

Whatever you're facing, whatever you need – this morning's passage is meant to help you see – God is the answer for your weakness and pain. He offers to be the source of your strength and your hope. And what He offers is so real and tangible that you could learn to say, in the midst of it all, [when I am weak, then I am strong](#). It is my hope that you're already experiencing God this way. If not, I hope you've seen that is possible. And more than that, desirable. I encourage you, take your pain to God today. Ask Him for healing. Ask Him for help. Invite Him in.

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 When God Uses Pain

Summary: Sometimes, success is the worst thing that can happen to you.

- Not all pain and suffering can be seen directly as a prescription from God. What are some other sources of pain and suffering that we might say God tolerates or allows without the kind of direct linkage we see here?
- When has the problem of pain been most acute in your life? When have you struggled to understand why God is letting something hurt so bad, or something so wrong to occur?
 - Have you gotten your answer?
 - What have you learned in the process?
- It seems that Paul's thorn in the flesh would slow him down and get in the way of what God had called him to do: travel and teach. What value is there in situating Paul's weakness right in the center of his calling and purpose?
- Have you seen success and prosperity lead someone in an ungodly direction? What happened? Did they ever repent and return?
 - Where are you most vulnerable to walk the same path? Where is success or stability most likely to draw you away from a close walk with God?
 - Read Pr 16:18-19. What do you learn?
- In your personal experience, have you felt closer and more dependent on God during times of prosperity and comfort or times of difficulty and trial?
 - Is it possible to experience closeness with God with during times of peace and success? Explain.
- For more of Paul's visions, look up the following passages:
 - Acts 22:18
 - Acts 16:9
 - Acts 18:9
 - Acts 27:23