



2 Corinthians 12:7-10 Pt II When God Doesn't Answer Prayer

Summary: Weakness reverses the curse and allows us to have a good attitude in bad situations.

You don't have to live very long on this earth before you start collecting scars. Over time they begin to accumulate on your heart, in your mind, and on your body – markers and memories of the battles you've fought, the things you've been through. And this is one of the biggest hang-ups people have with God. We don't understand, how can a good God allow so much suffering?

We've been exploring that question lately, we're not ducking it or dodging, because it's a very real question asked by honest people who have endured or been exposed to terrible things. This morning we'll continue by asking, why doesn't God answer when we pray about these situations? Why does He let things keep going?

We're doing this because we've come to a section of Scripture that deals with pain and suffering in a very personal way. This isn't an academic exercise; this isn't a lecture or lab in some theology or philosophy class. Paul the apostle speaks of his own personal experience of pain which he likens to being impaled on a sharp pole or punched by a fist. He has asked God to take it away, to heal him, and God has said no – 'I won't deliver you *from* it, but I'll carry you *through* it.' And Paul, somehow thinks that's a pretty good answer. Read with me:

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.

Last week we noticed that Paul is very clear about what is happening – he says in verse 7, this pain is meant to keep him from becoming conceited or being exalted above measure. His pain was God's prescription, meant to point him to God instead of falling in love with himself. Today many people think the worst thing in the world is to experience difficulty, discomfort, disease or disaster in life, and yet there is something far worse: to be separated from God and experience suffering for all of eternity.

But, it's easier to say that and even agree with that than to embrace it, accept it, and live accordingly like Paul. We don't like pain, and 9 times out of 10 we would rather be relieved from it right now than allow it to slowly produce something better in us.

Which is why we often pray when we see pain coming or when it's suddenly shown up like an uninvited guest. You already had enough going on, *and now this is being added to the mix?!? Great.* Isn't that how it feels for most of us? I had enough to worry about, enough to take care of, I was already working hard or stressed out enough, and now this!?! I don't have the time, space, or energy to deal with it. And yet here it is.

And so, we pray. Now, that's a good impulse. That's a good response! Scripture tells us in **1 Peter 5:7** to cast all our cares on God, because He cares for us.

Each week when you walk in, you see the invitation from Jesus behind the welcome table:

Matthew 11:28 Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. **29** Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

When there is pain and difficulty in your life, God is the first person you should seek. Just like a little kid running into the room, screaming and crying, asking for mommy because they've been hurt. Spiritually speaking – that's us. When we're hurt, we should come running, screaming, and crying to God. Or, you know, handle it like a man and make the first available appointment with the Almighty – but seek treatment.

If you shattered your femur you wouldn't try to treat that at home or wait a few days for the swelling and pain to go away on their own – you would seek help. Well, if you shatter a femur spiritually, treat it the same way – ask God to take a look at it and help.

And maybe you say, well I tried that and it didn't work. I understand, I really do. So let me show you something.

The elections are next week and we all know polling is notoriously unreliable, but this is different. I want to do a little polling of my own. And I want to be clear – I'm not going to trick anyone or embarrass anyone and this has nothing to do with politics. The goal of what I'm about to do is to encourage people by helping us see how common this experience is.

So, if you have experienced a time of difficulty, pain, or trial in your life and you prayed about it and at any point you felt like, *well, that didn't work*, would you raise your hand? You might have changed your mind later, you might have seen things differently later – or maybe you still feel like it didn't work, but if you prayed about it and you felt, at least in the beginning, *that didn't work*, would you raise your hand?

OK, now, just for comparison's sake – if there was a time when you felt it didn't work, but later things got better, or you saw it differently, or God showed up or spoke up in some unexpected way, would you put your hand back up? Again, all I'm trying to do here is to help us see that this is a common experience.

Paul says he prayed about his situation three times before he got an answer which means in the beginning, he may have felt like *it didn't work* himself. Notice it says he asked three times. And no matter you interpret that it means there were times when he didn't get the healing and he didn't get an answer. In other words, he felt like you and I do.

So, let's talk about that. What does it mean to pray **three times**? Does it mean there were three specific moments when Paul *really* prayed for healing? Was there something special about those three times – like did he try fasting all day and then praying, or did he try doing something good and generous and then praying? Was there some sort of special prayer that he used three times, some kind of super-duper option for prayer? Probably not.

Three times likely means he asked *a lot*. It's meant symbolically. Both the number 7 and the number three are used in Scripture to represent something that is full or complete. For example, Peter denied Jesus three times, and later saw a vision of a sheet let down from heaven three times. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In Revelation, the angels cry out Holy, Holy, Holy and one angel looks at things unfolding on earth and cries out woe, woe, woe. Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. And, on the night before His crucifixion Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane three times asking the Father if there was any other way to secure the salvation of souls.

So, when Paul says **I pleaded with the Lord three times**, it doesn't mean he only prayed three times. It's not spiritual baseball - you get three tries with God and you're out or three wishes from a genie and you're done. To the contrary, you should go until God says no.

It was Jesus who told the story of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8) who kept going to an unfair judge until she finally wore him down and got what she was asking for. Jesus' whole point was, if she could move the heart of an unrighteous man, what affect do our prayers have on God? Well, Jesus tells us, God will **"avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?"**

In other words, God will act, even if He keeps you waiting, crying out day and night, for a time.

Again, it was Jesus who said:

Luke 11:9 "I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. 11 If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if *he asks* for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? 12 Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? 13 If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

Ask. Seek. Knock and go until God says no. Paul gives us the simple admonition:

1 Thes 5:17 pray without ceasing

Here's your goal: you want a revelation or a resolution. One or the other. Keep praying, keep persisting until you get the answer. It's either yes, no, or wait. Pray until you're absolutely certain which one it is. Don't just pray once or twice and think you're done. And as you pray, ask God: is this a crisis, or will it be chronic? Is this situation temporary or permanent?

But as you're praying, don't forget - there was a time of asking without answers. There was a time of enduring without explanation. Paul eventually got his answer - and we'll talk about what it was in a moment - but for now, I need you to see, there was a time when Paul the Apostle, a godly man, a mature man, a leader in the church, a man who had visions of Christ, a man who was doing the right things, the right ways, at the right time, was suffering, tremendously, and was praying to God about it, **pleading** with God, asking for relief and help and not only was the pain not going away, he wasn't getting an answer either.

You have to know that. You have to see that. You have to let that settle down deep into your soul. The truth is, it's bitter medicine. We don't like it. It tastes awful. We want to spit that out. But it's true. Christian, I'm sorry to say it, but it's true. There was a time when a man who loved God and did everything right prayed and prayed and didn't get an answer. So, he kept on praying... and you might need to do the same thing.

We have to remember God is not like Amazon or Doordash or Uber - I just open my app, tell it what I want and within minutes or hours, a day or two at most, I open my front door and find exactly what I ordered. God is not in the customer service business because we're not his customers, we're His children.

The point of prayer is not simply to get stuff or to change situations. The point of prayer is gain God's perspective and invite Him into a situation. Prayer, like conversation, is an invitation to communication and relationship. Sometimes we forget that. Sometimes we think of prayer as like a superpower. We look around and realize, hhhmmmm, things aren't going exactly the way I hoped, we need a different strategy...I know! I'll pray about it. Friends, that's all wrong because it keeps you at the center of everything, determining what needs to happen next, how it should happen, and when.

Instead, true prayer is us, reaching out to God, seeking His perspective, companionship, direction, and help for the situation. Prayer is us opening up to God and inviting Him in.

Which is exactly why He might allow the situation to drag on. If the situation you're in is propelling you to God or keeping you near Him, like a sheepdog driving sheep toward the shepherd by barking and baring it's teeth, can you see how it might actually be a good thing?

Again, I'm not asking you to like it or appreciate it. I'm not saying you would ever ask for it or recommend it to others. But if something in



your life is actually driving you to spend more time with God than you would otherwise spend, do you see how the net effect of that could actually be a good thing?

And here's the upside of inviting God into the situation, cultivating your relationship with Him through prayer – He sees things you don't see and knows things you don't know. Paul thought he had two options: God take away this thorn and let me get on with life or, leave it and I'll be permanently reduced in my capacity to do the things You have given me to do.

And, that might be the way you see your situation right now – there are two main options – either God gives you what you want and ask for, or you keep grinding it out and enduring, making your way through.

This kind of belief – that there are only two options – either God fixes it or He doesn't is exactly the kind of perspective that leads people to ask: where is God when bad things happen? It's exactly the kind of the perspective that leads people to a crisis of faith or even to abandon their faith. They 'tried that once and it didn't work for them.' Or, they're 'glad that works for you,' but they've got their own issues, pursuits, and struggles and it doesn't seem like they *need* God or that He's making a difference either way.

But, these are not the only two options – there was a third and God finally revealed it – the situation could be changed by adding grace. God said, Paul, let's leave everything else the same, but substitute My strength for yours.

Now, we've all had one of those experiences where someone turns to us and says, here, try mine. Maybe it was their baseball bat, or their computer, or their truck, it could have been their dinner, or their knife, or their gun, maybe it was their sewing machine – the point is they said, here, try what you're doing with mine. And it was better. You could tell immediately, oh, this is nice. This makes a difference. And now you suddenly know what you want for Christmas or what you're ordering next.

Well, what difference would it make if you were to face your same life, same challenges, same pain, discomfort, disease, or trials, with the grace and strength of God?

I don't know. But I can tell you this – it was enough to make Paul say:

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.

His perspective on pain radically changes. But don't miss this – *his pain didn't go away*. He wasn't miraculously healed. He just had a new approach to the same old situation. Now he was resting in God's durable, sustaining, empowering, grace.

Paul had gone to heaven – you remember he spoke of being caught up to the third heaven – now he was learning that heaven could come to Him as well. And though he couldn't share

what he heard in heaven, he can tell anyone who will listen about what he's experienced on earth.¹

So, what has he experienced? Well, notice, verse 9 – this is crazy stuff ya'll! He said [the power of Christ rests upon me](#). That's the same way the shekinah glory of God rested upon the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. The power and strength of God come upon our weakness, fill in every gap, flatten every bulge and transform us.

Church, listen to me: God is able to use our afflictions to work for us, not against us. God didn't change the situation by removing something, but rather, by adding His grace and that made all the difference. Wiersbe says, Paul learned "His suffering was not a tyrant that controlled him, but a servant that worked for him" because God was using the suffering to accomplish a greater goal.

I so often think back to my days in Marine Corps boot camp. There are times when we thought the drill instructors were going to kill us. They pushed you, drove you, and challenged you to do things that you never thought you could do. But here's the thing – they knew you could. You wouldn't be there if you couldn't. They had been in the business of making Marines for over 200 years by the time I stepped on their yellow footprints.

During the recruitment process, they took a good look at me, from every angle. They gave me mental tests like the ASVAB, gave me all kinds of physical examinations, even looked at my records to see if I had any criminal activity. And all along the way you had to meet certain standards. There were things that would disqualify you. But if you made it through the evaluation, here's what they knew – you had the all the right raw ingredients to make it through. In other words, you could do everything the drill instructors were going to tell you to do.

Now, they never told you that. They never explained it that way. But that's the whole reason they put you through all of those exams, tests, and appointments. They knew you could do it, but you didn't know you could do it, you would have to learn what you were capable of. And in the process you're transformed, you start to see yourself differently, carry yourself differently, and believe new things about yourself. All because a bunch of guys in funny hats yelled at you a lot. The US government wasn't using them to hurt me, they were actually making me better.

And, they were giving me everything I needed along the way. They gave me a bed to sleep in, they gave me food to eat, they gave me clothes to wear. When I needed to go somewhere they either led me as I marched or drove me in a vehicle. I was under their constant care. I was never alone or far from someone who was entirely responsible for my well-being. I was going through an intentionally designed, professionally conducted, historically proven, process that was not always fun, but produced something valuable.

¹ Wiersbe.

Maybe you didn't volunteer to enlist or commission in whatever God is doing. Maybe you were drafted against your will, but can you believe that if He allowed you to get into this, He can either get you out of it, or walk with you through it? Can you believe that He wouldn't let it unfold if He didn't know that you could do this *with Him*?

Do you believe that it is possible for you to experience God's grace as sufficient for you? To know the power of Christ resting upon you. To actually **take pleasure** – you might want to underline this in your Bible, because the prepositions are important here – you could actually learn to **take pleasure, in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake because when you are weak, then you are strong.**

Look, no rational, reasonable, thinking person prefers to pain to health. But, if and when God allows it to come, can you also allow Him to use it to transform you? Can you allow your weakness to deepen your worship?

Because here's the amazing thing that has become increasingly clear to me as I study and pray about all of these things: pain and weakness actually reverse the curse.

Here's what I mean. Sin separates us from God, but God is able to use pain, weakness, struggles and trials to point us back to Him. When we realize that we are weak and that this world is broken and we turn to Him for help and strength and courage there is a strange way in which the difficulty of our lives becomes the catalyst for our spiritual growth. It's the sheepdog nudging us back toward the shepherd, decreasing the distance between us and Him.



And for that reason, we can look at our trials and pain in a whole new light.

We can ask God to help us change our attitude. You can bring your **weakness** to God in prayer and ask for His **strength**. You can also ask, God, if I can't change this situation, would You help me see it the way You do?

You can also see your suffering and trials as an opportunity to worship. Your pain and sorrows can be dedicated to God as an act of worship, over and over again. Each time it hurts, bring it God and say, 'I'm willing to endure this with You and for You because I trust You and I love you. If I was living for myself, I would seek to numb it with drugs or alcohol or food or sex or shopping, but instead, I turn to You and ask for help.'

We can learn to worship like Habakkuk, the Old Testament prophet who lived during extremely difficult days in the history of Israel, but said:

Hab 3:17 Though the fig tree may not blossom,
Nor fruit be on the vines;
Though the labor of the olive may fail,
And the fields yield no food;
Though the flock may be cut off from the fold,

And there be no herd in the stalls—
18 Yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.

19 The LORD God is my strength;
He will make my feet like deer's *feet*,
And He will make me walk on my high hills.

We can choose to intentionally receive pain and trials with open hands instead of resisting, we can trust that God really does know what's happening and will use it for our eternal good. Tell God and tell your soul, that you will learn to worship, even in this. That **nothing will separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, our Lord** (Romans 8:39).

And remember all that He has already endured for you. Christ who was strong became weak for our sakes. Paul spoke of a thorn in his flesh, Jesus endured a crown of thorns pressed into His scalp and iron nails pounded into His hands and feet. He knows every pain and weakness we know, and more. He endured them all for our sake and when weakness and suffering point us back to Him, there is a strange sense in which they become tools for our transformation, catalysts for our growth.

Sooner or later life hurts for everyone. Sometimes it hurts really, really bad. Sometimes we pray and don't hear an answer. This is life. This is real. If this is your experience, you are not alone...in more ways than one. You surrounded, in this room and in the global church throughout history with people who hurt, people who prayed, people who wondered where God went. Many of them eventually heard His voice, learned that pain and trials were drawing them closer to a God who understood – a God who offers us strength in our weakness and who became weak that we might become strong.

We remember that today as we celebrate communion – as we take in our hands reminders of His sacrifice and suffering that tell us, yes, our pain and sorrows are real, but so were His and yet, He endured them for us. His pain and suffering brought Him closer to us, may our pain and suffering do the same – moving us toward Him, finding strength in our weakness.

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 Pt II When God Doesn't Answer Prayer

Summary: Weakness reverses the curse and allows us to have a good attitude in bad situations.

- How has God used a thorn in your life to demonstrate His strength and teach you to lean more on Him?
- What are some practical things you have discovered help you lean on God in times of weakness?
- The first mention of thorns in the Bible occurs in Genesis 3:18. What is the context there and what role do thorns play? Does this have any effect on your life today? How?
- Read Romans 5:1-5. What is ultimately produced by trials? What happens along the way?
- Scripture gives additional reasons for unanswered prayer. What do you learn from the following verses:
 - James 4:2-3
 - 1 Peter 3:7
 - Matt 5:21-24
 - Matt 6:7-8
- God never gave Paul an explanation, but He did give Paul a promise. Would that be easy for you to accept or hard? Why? Note: God did the same with Job who asked God "why?" and never got an answer.
- Sometimes Christians are called to accept our situation in light of the sovereignty of God. How does each of the following alternatives fall short of the biblical ideal? Which are you most likely to turn to?
 - Capitulation – surrendering to my situation after a few tries
 - Fatalism – this is my fate, I can't control it or change it
 - Detachment – I choose to detach and not to feel; I become indifferent
 - Resignation – It's inevitable and I can't do anything about it
 - Stoicism – I am unmoved by emotion or passion, indifferent to pleasure or pain
 - Quietism – I withdraw into devotion and contemplation retreating from my situation