



First Baptist Church Selmer

TRANSFORMED: FROM DEATH TO LIFE TO ABUNDANT LIFE • TOTAL DEPENDENCE •
2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10; 4:16-18 • 7/7/2024

MAIN POINT

The transformation in the life of a believer first starts with understanding and accepting our inability to overcome trials and hardships through our own strength.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What trial, whether of the mind or body, have you repeatedly asked God to take from you?

In what ways have other believers helped you see your trials differently, particularly with more hope and optimism?

None of us asks the Lord for trials, especially not those that seem to drag on without end. However, God allows trials to enter our lives because He has a greater plan in mind. As James MacDonald says, "If God was not going to use a trial for your good, then He would not allow it." When we understand that God has our good in mind when He allows our trials—even those trials that never end—we will then learn to be content, even during life's most painful and difficult experiences.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-8.

7 "So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me." (ESV)

When was a time in recent memory that God humbled you? How did you respond?

Think specifically about a trial ("thorn") you have recently experienced. What role does God play with the thorns in our lives?

What does your prayer life look like when struggling with a thorn?

A "thorn" is an enduring source of personal pain allowed by God for our good. Many of us have been guilty, at one time or another, of seeking independence from God. We do so under the false belief that we can handle things on our own. We oftentimes tell ourselves, "I can fix this" or "I can handle that." However, as we hear from Paul in this passage, God will sometimes allow "thorns" to enter our lives lest we should be exalted in our own minds.

How has God used a thorn to teach you discipline, improve your character, or strengthen your faith?

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 2 CORINTHIANS 12:9-10.

9 "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (ESV)

How has your thorn taught you to rely less on your own strength and more on Christ's?

What personal weakness or hardship can you gladly boast of as a way of declaring the perfect strength of Christ?

In what ways has Christ, in His grace, taught you to take pleasure in your thorn and find strength in your trials?

Although God allows thorns because they serve a greater purpose, our thorns will crush us without God's grace. Again, as James MacDonald states, "Grace is the capacity to do

anything spiritually profitable and the package that all blessing comes in." Tough times are not times for quitting. Tough times, moments when we seem to be fully experiencing the magnitude of our own weaknesses, are the times when the grace of Jesus is seen most clearly. We must: 1) boast in our thorns to experience Christ's power and 2) be content in our thorns to experience Christ's purpose.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18

16 "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."
(ESV)

How can a daily reminder of our trials being only temporary give us great hope?

What is the purpose again for our trials based on this passage?

Francis Chan, author, and pastor, used a rope illustration years ago while preaching. The rope, some 100 feet long, was all one color and size but on one end, contained a small piece of tape. The tape, measuring only a few inches, was almost unseen in relation to the enormous rope lying across the stage. Chan, pointing to the small piece of tape, stated, "This end of the tape is your birth... this is your high school graduation... this is your wedding day and first child's birth..." Moving down the piece of tape, Chan stops at the end of the tape, "And this is when you die." Chan reached down and stretched the 100-foot rope across the stage stating, "And this is your eternity."

Although we experience various trials and difficulties throughout our lives, the Bible teaches us that they are "*momentary*." This life will soon pass and there is an eternity that awaits those who know Jesus that is "*beyond all comparison*" to our earthly trials that seem like will never end. We are to keep our eyes focused on the eternal things and trust that God will give us the strength to endure the temporal ones.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Based on these verses, how would you describe a “thorn” to someone who is not a believer?

Although thorns cause us pain, how should we respond to them based on today’s passage?

What is the most difficult part about finding joy in your trials?

PRAYER

Thank God that He has a purpose for our thorns. Ask Him to help you remain content, no matter the trials that come your way.

COMMENTARY

| 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10

12:7-8. Apparently, Paul’s main reason for referring to his unique revelation was to introduce the subject of his thorn in the flesh. The Greek word translated thorn also was used to designate “a stake,” “a splinter,” or “the pointed end of a fishhook.” Although some interpreters hold that the term refers to a cross, thus, figuratively to self-crucifixion (Gal. 2:20), the evidence does not warrant such a view. Whatever the precise nature of his thorn in the flesh, Paul saw it as given to him to prevent his conceitedness because of the revelations he experienced. What was Paul’s thorn in the flesh? Three main theories about the thorn in the flesh are that it refers to: (1) physical affliction, (2) besetting temptation, and (3) persecutions. Many people believe that Paul purposefully did not identify his problem.

The phrase messenger of Satan probably refers to Satan as the source of Paul’s thorn in the flesh. Therefore, we may ask: Did God or Satan give Paul his thorn in the flesh? Because Satan is the author of sin, disease, and death, he alone is the culprit. Since God, however, is sovereign and omnipotent, everything Satan does must be according to God’s permissive will. Paul distinguished between God’s purpose in permitting the thorn as a test, to keep Paul from exalting himself (v. 7), and Satan’s purpose in using it to tempt him by tormenting him, perhaps to get Paul to renounce God. Recall that Satan was allowed to afflict Job, but only within the limits set by God (Job 1–2). Paul implored the Lord three times for the thorn to be removed (v. 8). Prayer, of course, was the appropriate approach

to Paul's difficulty. Yet even the prayer of this great man of faith was not answered by the removal of the thorn. Paul's experience reminds us that God sometimes answers prayer differently from what we ask or expect.

12:9-10. Although three times Paul requested God to remove his affliction, God did not take it away. Rather than removing Paul's thorn, God gave him something better. God gave Paul sufficient grace for Paul to rise above his thorn by depending on God's mighty power (v. 9). The term translated grace often has been defined as "undeserved, or unmerited, favor." The Greek verb translated is sufficient indicates "enough," or "adequate." The form of the verb indicates the continual availability of God's grace. The verb translated is perfected also means "completed," or "finished." Paul realized that God intended to bring him to a specific goal through difficulty. Although that goal was not specified, Paul's weakness opened the way for God's power to flow through him. Through God's response to his prayer, Paul understood God's reason for his affliction. Thus he wrote verse 9. The final portion of verse 10 summarizes the lesson God taught Paul through his painful experience. Paul was able to apply this lesson to far more difficulties than his thorn in the flesh (see v. 10a).

| 2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18

4:16. In 4:1, Paul did not lose heart because of God's mercy and because of the greatness of the ministry God had given him. Paul humbly realized that the ministry he was engaged in was a consequence of God's mercy to him. In 4:16 Paul stated that he did not lose heart because even though his outer man was decaying, his inner man was being renewed day by day. By the phrase our outer man is decaying, Paul referred to the aging process of the physical body, perhaps including all its faculties and energies such as mental processes. This reference to the outer man should not be confused with Paul's references elsewhere to the "old self," a reference to the unregenerate nature (see Rom. 6:6).

The form of the word translated as decaying indicates a constant and irreversible process. In contrast to this constant decay, Paul stated that our inner man is being "renewed day by day." By use of the expression inner man, Paul referred to the real but unseen aspect of himself. The expression denotes the source of a person's will, emotions, thoughts, and affections. In Ephesians 3:16, Paul prayed that God would grant believers "to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man." In effect, Paul contrasted his deteriorating physical body with his growing spiritual nature. The deterioration of his physical body was related to his afflictions and persecutions (see 4:17). Paradoxically, Paul was wasting away and growing at the same time. We must always remember, however,

that Paul anticipated the believer's future existence with God not as disembodied souls but rather as whole persons with resurrection bodies.

4:17-18. Although Paul never invited persecution or bodily pain, he viewed all the suffering he endured as momentary, light affliction. Certainly, Paul's sufferings for the sake of Christ were not trivial or inconsequential. Why then did Paul refer to his suffering as a momentary, light affliction? The key lies in Paul's perspective on life. Paul's afflictions seemed light and insignificant in contrast to the eternal weight of glory he anticipated.

Furthermore, Paul's sufferings for Jesus' sake led him to depend on God instead of on himself. If Christians are prepared to be identified with Christ in this sinful world and accept the sufferings that come as a consequence, they will share Christ's glory (see Rom. 8:17). Paul described this result as an eternal weight of glory, thus making his afflictions seem as nothing in comparison. Although Paul once had acted from the perspective of a zealous Pharisee and a persecutor of Christians, his perspective forever changed on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9). To the Christians at Philippi, he wrote: *"More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith"* (Phil. 3:8-9).

The Greek verb translated *"look . . . at"* in 2 Corinthians 4:18 carries the concept of fixing one's gaze intently or concentrating on something. As a Christian, Paul did not value material, temporal things visible to physical eyes. Rather, he valued spiritual, eternal things. Jesus changed Paul's perspective and enabled him to see what really mattered in life.