

# WHY?

## SERIES DEVOTIONAL

"SUFFERING AND POWER" | SUNDAY, JUNE 7, 2020

GRACE  
FELLOWSHIP

### KEY THOUGHT

# #1

## Suffering teaches us life-changing humility toward God.

In 2 Corinthians 12:7 the apostle Paul writes: "To keep me from being 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."

Paul experienced grace from God as few have because he endured suffering and pain for Christ as few have. In this emotional-charged passage, Paul expresses several life-changing lessons he learned from what he describes as a "thorn in the flesh."

No one knows for sure what this thorn was—perhaps a physical affliction, perhaps a betrayed friendship from someone in the Corinthian church—but whatever it was, it was agonizing, torturous, and caused constant pain. Through this affliction, Paul discovered why it is so important to God that we be humble. The opposite of humility is pride, and pride is a dangerous and deadly thing! Paul said his thorn in the flesh prevented conceit and led him to humility (v.7).

John Bunyan, in the second part of his book *The Pilgrim's Progress*, describes the time when Christiana and her companions must descend into the Valley of Humiliation. Bunyan describes that place as "a steep hill, and the way was slippery." In other words, it's never easy to humble oneself, and when our path demands humility of us, we can easily slip.

Humility increases when we are willing to be humbled by God, circumstances, and others. Our sinful natures do not want to be humbled. We tend to protect our pride as though it were our best friend, but pride gets in the way of our relationship with God. James 4:6 tells us "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble." God will work with us when we desire humility, but the development of humility will be painful. Despite the discomfort, we find an added measure of grace to sustain us as we suffer through the refining process, just as Paul did.

The place of humility is a place of beauty and growth. To continue Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, once Christiana and her friends make their descent into the Valley of Humiliation, they find it to be a peaceful, abundant land. The author describes it: "This Valley of Humiliation . . . is the best and most useful brave piece of ground in all those parts. It is fat ground, and...consisteth much in meadows...Behold how green this Valley is, also how beautified with lilies. I have also known many laboring men that have got good estates in this Valley of Humiliation...for indeed it is a very fruitful soil, and doth bring forth by handfuls."

### TALK ABOUT IT:

- In *Pilgrim's Progress*, Bunyan describes the "Valley of Humiliation" as beautiful, fertile ground that is useful for growth. Why do you think humiliation is compared to a valley, and what kind of beautiful fruit can grow in our lives when we are in Humiliation's Valley?
- How would you advise a new Christian to live humbly before God?

## KEY THOUGHT

# #2

## Suffering teaches us life-changing dependence upon God.

Paul continues his thought on suffering in 2 Corinthians 12:8: *“Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.”*

Where do you turn when you are hurting? To a friend? A pastor? A counselor? While others may certainly be a channel of grace, God is our ultimate Source of grace! The Lord wants us to look to Him first in all our troubles.

Notice that the first place Paul went when he was afflicted with the thorn of suffering was to God (v.8). In fact, three times Paul appealed to the Lord, and the Lord said no. Paul prayed persistently and faithfully, yet he learned that God’s purposes could be better accomplished by God saying no. God wanted to use this thorn in the flesh to draw Paul closer to Himself.

It is God’s desire that we come to a point where we depend upon Him completely. The Psalmist understood this when he wrote: *“As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God”* (Psalm 42:1). We Christians should want our cup to overflow with God’s presence in our lives, and we should be ever seeking more of Him. Spiritual dryness comes when we think we have enough of God, when we think our cup is appropriately filled. The reality is, most of us aren’t willing to face the truth about ourselves until we are forced to. Sometimes God must bring us to the point of desperation to teach us our need for total reliance upon Him!

The story is told of a young student who went to his spiritual teacher and asked the question, “Master, how can I truly find God?” The teacher asked the student to accompany him to the river which ran by the village and invited him to go into the water. When they got to the middle of the stream, the teacher said, “Please immerse yourself in the water.” The student did as he was instructed, whereupon the teacher put his hands on the young man’s head and held him under the water. The student began to struggle. The master held him under still. A moment passed and the student was thrashing and beating the water and air with his arms. Still, the master held him under the water. Finally, the student was released and shot up from the water, lungs aching and gasping for air. The teacher waited for a few moments and then said, “When you desire God as truly as you desired to breathe the air you just breathed—then you shall find God.”

## TALK ABOUT IT:

- How would you describe to a new Christian what it means to be desperate for God?
- Has God ever allowed a “thorn in your flesh” to teach you to depend more upon Him? If so, please share your story.
- How can thinking we have enough of God—that our cup is full enough of Him and we don’t want or need more of Him—lead to spiritual dryness?
- Do you agree with this statement, “Anything that causes me to depend upon God is a good thing”? Why or why not?

## KEY THOUGHT

# #3

## Suffering teaches us about the life-changing power of God.

Regarding suffering, Paul goes on to write: “*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.*” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The same suffering that reveals our weakness reveals God’s strength. When we have nothing to rely on but God’s power, we are at our strongest. Paul did not love suffering, but he loved the grace and power that God manifested in him through it (v.9). Paul knew that authentic spiritual growth and ministry can only be accomplished in the power of the Spirit, so he was able to rejoice by faith that when he was weak, God was strong in him and through him.

God does not bless self-reliant people. He blesses people who are dependent upon him and surrendered to him. God wants to work in us and through us, but we must live by his power.

Ephesians 3:20 says, “*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us.*” Notice that Paul asserts that God is able (v.20a). That’s a basic statement of God’s adequacy.

But then Paul goes further and says that God is able to provide what we ask for and think about (v.20b)! That’s astonishing! All the dreams which ever passed through our minds, all the things we have thought of accomplishing for God in our wildest imagination—God is able to do those things! God is able to provide everything we need, to respond to everything we ask, and to provide everything we have thought about.

But Paul doesn’t stop there – he goes on to say that God is not only able to do those things, but He is able to go beyond and “*do far more abundantly*” than all of those things (v.20c)! God’s power is beyond imagination. His resources exceed our ability even to comprehend. But here’s the key: It is all based upon His power, not our own. So, to help us understand and experience this, God may allow suffering into our lives so we can be at our strongest by relying on Him.

When suffering, it is easy for us to feel abandoned by God and even question our faith. But Paul was content—he viewed suffering as a kind of a friend that could lead him to greater usefulness for the Lord: “*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*” (2 Corinthians 12:10). When you’re going through difficulties and delays and dead ends and despair and discouragement, don’t give up—God is ready to show His power to you.

## TALK ABOUT IT:

- When have you discovered that God’s grace is sufficient in your life?
- How can you tell when you have God’s power in your life?
- How do you think we can reach the point where we are “*content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities*” (2 Corinthians 12:10) like Paul was?