

Message #32

II Corinthians 12:7-10

One of the perplexing questions that every believer faces is the question of why do believers get sick and why do they suffer. When we crawl through the Scriptures, we learn there are some biblical answers to that question:

- 1) We get sick because we live in an imperfect body that breaks down. Philippians 2:25-30
Epaphroditus was so exhausted he nearly died.
- 2) We get sick because we live in an imperfect environment. I Timothy 5:23
Major water problems in Mediterranean world caused stomach problems
- 3) Some get sick because Satan tries to get a believer to turn away God. Job 2:3-10
In the case of Job, Satan was trying to get Job to curse God.
- 4) Some get sick because sickness is something God uses to cause death. II Kings 13:14-20
When it came time for Elisha to die, God used a sickness to cause it.
- 5) Some get sick because they don't heed medical counsel. I Timothy 5:23
If Timothy did not drink wine, he would continue to have stomach problems
- 6) Some get sick because they don't pray. II Kings 20:2-7; II Chronicles 16:12-13
King Asa went to a doctor but did not pray and he died; Hezekiah prayed and lived.
- 7) Some get sick because it is a judgment for sin. I Cor. 11:30; James 5:13-18; Rev. 2:22-23
There are times when God judges a non-repentant believer with sickness. He uses sickness as a chastening rod.
- 8) Some get sick so God can direct one to do His will. Galatians 4:13-14
It was a sickness, perhaps malaria that actually put Paul in Galatia.
- 9) Some get sick so God can be glorified in healing the sickness. John 11:1-4
Lazarus' sickness was for the purpose of demonstrating God's glory in healing.

These are all solid biblical reasons why people get sick.

But when we come to this text in **II Corinthians 12:7-10** we learn four more reasons why God permits a believer to suffer. All of these reasons existed in the life of the Apostle Paul.

- 10) Paul had some physical infirmity to keep him from exalting himself.
- 11) Paul had some physical infirmity so he could learn the sufficiency of God's grace.
- 12) Paul had some physical infirmity so he could experience the power of God.
- 13) Paul had some physical infirmity because his weakness made him stronger.

Now the point of the text is easy to decipher:

GOD HAD SPECIFIC REASONS FOR PERMITTING HIS FAITHFUL SERVANT TO CONTINUE TO HAVE A PHYSICAL INFIRMITY THAT HE WOULD NOT REMOVE.

Now this text is really an encouraging text to all of us because all of us suffer as believers. This passage informs us that there is purpose in the suffering. Sickness and suffering in our lives is not random. It has real purpose.

Now before we analyze the verses, there are four main observations we want to make:

Observation #1 - The physical issue is identified as a “ thorn in the flesh.” **12:7a**

The word “thorn” (σκολοψ) is a word that refers to something very pointed or sharp such as a thorn or wooden stake (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 409). Now the physical problem was “in the flesh.” **So Paul was literally experiencing some intense physical problem that caused sharp pain in his body.** Notice that this thorn “had been given” to Paul. **Paul did not want this thorn and he did not ask God for this thorn, but God had permitted him to have this thorn.**

Now there have been many opinions as to what this thorn actually was. 1) Some have suggested it was terrible eye problems and pain; 2) some have suggested it was intense headaches such as migraines; 3) some have suggested that it was some form of epilepsy; 4) some have said it was malaria; and 5) some said it was the people causing Paul problems and he wanted them removed. These are all good guesses, but that is what they are, guesses. **We may assume that the Corinthians were fully aware of what the physical problem was because obviously Paul didn’t have to name it.**

What we may observe from the text is that God did not specifically reveal to us exactly what the physical problem was. He did not name it and identify it, which is important. Had God actually named the physical issue, people with that physical issue may have glamorized it as having the same thing Paul had and those who had other physical issues may have been jealous or even hopeless because they didn’t have the same issue Paul had.

By not telling us precisely what the thorn was, this ministers to all of us who have any type of physical pain issue. This passage is applicable to us when we suffer and hurt, no matter what the problem because the problem is not specifically named.

Observation #2 - The thorn issue was sovereignly given by God by using Satan .

Satan was the one that actually saw to it that Paul was hit with this thorn. One of Satan’s messengers, literally an angel (αγγελος) or demon, was permitted to give Paul this thorn. However, God was in complete sovereign control even over things that Satan did to Paul. What Satan did was use this physical problem to “buffet” Paul.

The actual word “buffet” (κολαφιζω) is a word that means to strike with a closed fist or to strike with the knuckles (*Ibid.*, p. 252). **This particular word is used only five times in the New Testament: Matthew 26:67 and Mark 14:65** where it refers to those beating Christ with their fists; **I Corinthians 4:11** where it is translated “roughly treated”; **I Peter 2:20** where it is translated “harshly treated” and here in **II Corinthians 12:7** where it is translated “buffet.”

Whatever the physical problem was, it was very painful and Satan was the one causing it.

Now the important thing to see here is that **Satan could not touch Paul unless God permitted it and if God permits it we may be certain there is purpose in it.** This is very important for us to grasp. Satan may only attack a believer if God permits it and if God does permit it, He has purpose in it. We are never told to “fear Satan,” we are told to “fear God” (i.e. Rom. 13:7; I Pet. 2:17).

The greatest illustration of this principle is what God permitted Satan to do to His own Son. Starting in the book of Genesis, it was predicted that Satan would bruise the heel of the Son of God (Gen. 3:15). When Christ went to the cross, the work of Satan was fully at work. But God was using Satan to accomplish His eternal plan because it was only by the death of Jesus Christ that any sinner could be saved. There is only one name under heaven whereby men may be saved and it is the name of Jesus. His death, His burial and His resurrection proves He is the only Savior.

Satan can inflict things on the people of God, but only by permission of God and when God permits it there is purpose in it.

Observation #3 - The thorn in the flesh gave Paul’s enemies further opportunity to insult him.
II Cor. 12:10

More than likely the fact that Paul was not healed of this problem gave the enemies of Paul ammunition to claim that Paul was not really a true apostle. The word “insults” (υβρις) is one that that would indicate many were outraged by Paul and were out to injure him physically and verbally (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 453).

Undoubtedly these false apostles were boasting to everyone and had invented things they claimed they had seen God do, which probably included claiming they had seen or experienced miraculous healing. They were attacking Paul’s credibility.

Paul obviously struggled with this physical problem and all the people knew he had it and it was not going away. They were probably insulting Paul by claiming if he were a real apostle, God would heal him and deliver him. Some were alleging that if he were really right with God, the pain would go away.

Observation #4 - God did not take away the thorn even though Paul prayed and asked Him to. **II Corinthians 12:8**

Paul specifically went to God three times and asked God to take away the physical thorn problem.

In fact the word “entreat” (παρακαλεω) is one that means Paul specifically called on, summoned and invoked God on this matter. He did this three times. This may mean that three specific times, Paul personally went to God to spend time specifically begging Him to heal him. These three times may have been three intense prayer meetings in which this was the only topic.

We may recall that when Jesus was in Gethsemane, three times He got alone with God and asked Him to remove the cup of suffering that was about to come upon Him (Matt. 25:36-46). That was specifically the topic Jesus was praying about. There were three specific prayer meetings with that focus.

So probably Paul was following this pattern and there were three special times when the “thorn” issue was the specific topic of Paul’s prayer. He was intensely asking God for healing and God’s answer was “no.”

Now it has been awhile since we studied the doctrine of prayer, but we may recall that there are at least four ways God may answer the prayers of His people:

- 1) God’s answer may be “no” like it is here—II Cor. 12:8-9
- 2) God’s answer may be “yes” like it was when Peter was in jail—Acts 12:5-19
- 3) God’s answer may be “wait” like it was for Paul many times—Rom. 1:8-15; 15:30, 32
- 4) God’s answer may be “work” like it was for churches that need to get busy—Rev. 2:19-23

In this case, God answered no and we must assume that if He does answer no to an apostle like Paul, he must have good reason. Well the truth is God had four good reasons that Paul tells us:

REASON #1 – The physical infirmity would keep Paul from exalting himself. **12:7a**

Paul was a remarkable man of God. He had received more revelations than any other apostle. **In fact, he classifies what God revealed to him as being at “surpassing greatness” level.** This was a man who literally had gone to heaven and back and it was not a delusional fairytale.

He had personal private meetings with Jesus Christ on at least two occasions we know of:

- 1) Acts 9 on the road to Damascus;
- 2) Galatians 1:12 when Christ personally met with him and gave him the Gospel.

He had heavenly visions. The Gospel that came to the United States came as a result of a vision given to Paul in which he was called to Macedonia, which is part of Europe.

Furthermore, when he was in jail in Philippi, God literally caused an earthquake to open the doors of the jail and unfasten the chains. Then he had the privilege of going to heaven. So Paul literally was at a revelatory greatness level that surpassed any person on earth. He walked close with God. He had seen God answer amazing prayers. He will be in a shipwreck and the Lord will tell him everyone will be safe. He will be bitten by a deadly snake and shake it off as if it is nothing.

So Paul had come to know that one reason why God did not answer his prayer about removing the “thorn” was because it would keep Paul from “exalting” himself. Now the word “exalt” (υπερ-αίρω) is intriguing because it is not the normal word for “boasting.” This particular Greek word has to do with lifting up oneself or raising oneself over someone (*Ibid.*, p. 457).

Now frankly, when we have the privilege of meeting Paul we will realize he is way over us, but God does not apparently want the believer to promote himself as being way above others. Obviously Paul did not do this because he boasted about his weaknesses, not his strengths. God permitted Paul to have this thorn because it would remind him that he was human. Had not Paul had this physical infirmity he would have been way above and beyond other people, including the other apostles. His knowledge level of grace and revelatory level were already way above and beyond everyone else in the world and if he had not had this physical issue, he would have been lifted up way beyond all other humans on earth. He needed something to show he was human and what God knew He needed was this thorn.

REASON #2 – The physical infirmity would teach Paul the sufficiency of God’s grace. **12:9a**

S. Lewis Johnson said that D.L. Moody used to say, “The only way to keep a broken vessel full is to keep it always under the tap” (*II Corinthians 12:7-10*, p. 7). This infirmity of Paul kept him under the flowing tap of the grace of God. He constantly was having to look to God and His grace for help.

The negative things Paul experienced in life enabled him to learn much about the grace of God. In fact, notice the Lord personally spoke to Paul on this matter. What the Lord said to Paul is “my grace is sufficient” (αρκει σοι η χαρις). The verb “is sufficient” is present tense, which means it is presently and continually sufficient all of the time. What this means is that Jesus Christ personally came to Paul and talked to him about this thorn and informed him that His specific grace would prove to be enough to satisfy and assist him all through life.

This “thorn” would enable Paul to experience more and more of the grace of God many, many times. It would be there continually. Not only that but the word “sufficient” (αρκεω) is one that means God’s grace is sufficient in the sense that it will satisfy and assist every single time (*Ibid.*, p. 59)

Now it is an exciting possibility to think that when we are experiencing problems that do not seem to go away even though we pray, that we may actually experience a sufficient and satisfying amount of grace directly from Jesus Christ to cope with the situation. We stand in a position to receive a very satisfying amount of God’s grace any time we have a thorn.

The word “grace” is the great Pauline word, which means that which is undeserved, unearned and not merited. God’s undeserved grace will never be withdrawn from a child of God until he gets out of this world and it is especially available to us when we are hurting.

REASON #3 – The physical infirmity would permit Paul to experience Christ’s power. **12:9b**

Now the Greek literally reads “the power of the Christ.” The pronoun “me” is emphatic. So Paul is saying that when we have a thorn that God does not remove, we are actually in a position to personally experience the power of Jesus Christ in us. That word “power” (δυναμις) is one that refers to the might and strength of Jesus Christ which at times is miraculous (*Ibid.*, p. 123).

Problems put us in a great position to experience the miraculous strength that comes directly from Jesus Christ.

This makes the “thorn” issues almost exciting, because if we will stop whining and complaining long enough to look at things, we will discover that we have been granted an amazing strength and ability from Jesus Christ. What a concept having power in weakness. This is the essence of the whole book of II Corinthians.

REASON #4 – The physical infirmity would enable Paul to be very strong. **12:10**

We are at our strongest in our relationship with God when we are at our weakest regarding ourselves.

Now when Paul thought about this, he concluded well I will be content with my thorn. I am content with weaknesses and insults and distresses and persecutions and difficulties for Christ’s sake because when I am in a state of weakness, I am in a state of supernatural strength.

Now Paul says I am content because the things I am experiencing are “for Christ’s sake.” That is critical. We cannot ever be content if we are suffering because of our foolish choices. In fact, our foolish choices should make us sick and disgusted with ourselves. If we are suffering because of our foolish choices, we need to make wise choices so that we may become strong.

For example, some person with cancer because he smokes cannot be content that he has cancer. He is not suffering for Christ’s sake; he is suffering for stupidity’s sake. If some person has some liver disease because he is drinking alcohol, he is not suffering for Christ’s sake; he is suffering because he won’t quit drinking.

But in Paul’s case, his suffering was not self-induced; it was for Christ’s sake and when you are suffering for Christ’s sake you have every right to cry out to God of His delivering grace and power and you may expect to receive it.

Now every time you hurt and suffer with some “thorn” as a believer, you have the right to cry out to God for help and deliverance and if that help and deliverance doesn’t come, look to God for something else. Look to experience His grace, His power and His strength.

Those are the exact reasons God permitted Paul to have some thorn in the flesh.