

Bible Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10
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This is a special privilege to be here tonight and reconnect with my dear friend Don and also Catherine Curry who was up here playing the organ who was part of our ministry for a long long time; a privilege to see the hand of God in this ministry and in Don's life. The Apostle John said, "I have no greater joy than to see my children walking in the truth," and that's a privilege and joy for me to see the Lord blessing Don this way and all of you together with him.

I know you have in your church over the last number of months faced some difficult trials, some painful losses and some measure of suffering, and I will tell you now that I'm in my 50th year of ministry, I have done my share of funerals, funerals of babies, funerals of children, funerals of teenagers, adults. I have seen all the sorrows that life can possibly bring and in a large congregation, I've seen them on long long prayer lists, getting texts all day today about a young wife in our church who is near death. Do you know how old she is, Rich? I can't remember. I think in her late twenties. A little family and now in ICU in some kind of a coma and fading fast. And I've been by those hospital beds. I've done infant funerals. I've been there through all of this as a pastor and I need to bring to the folks that I'm ministering to the comfort that comes from God in these hours. I also, as a father, stood in the office of a brain surgeon who told me that the tumor in my son Mark's head might be terminal. I've stood in the hospital looking down at my wife's face after a car accident in which she shattered C2 and C3 in her spine and survived. I've lived through all of those things.

About eight or nine years into the ministry, there was an entire mutiny of the staff who rose up on what is historically known as Black Tuesday and it was an amazing, stunning shock to me. I had said to them, "I just want to tell you guys how much I love you," and one of them responded by saying, "If you think we love you, you've got another thing coming." And a mutiny unfolded. About 18 years into the ministry, 250 people left the church, including some elders, said I preached too long and too irrelevant. I've seen about all there is to see. I try to confine my pain to reality so I don't read about myself on the internet. That could be more than I could possibly bear, and certainly things I couldn't deal with.

But one of the things that a shepherd does, one of the things a pastor has to do over the long haul is go through all of this with people constantly and see the sustaining grace of

the Lord in it all and constantly give perspective. Look, "man is born unto trouble," says Job, "as the sparks fly upward," as surely as sparks of a fire go up, so we're going to have trouble. How we handle it and how we deal with it is so very very critical. In talking to Don a little bit about this, we thought this might be a helpful time for you to look together with me at the word of God along this line. It will transcend anything melancholy, I think, and it will get you to the place where you'll understand the purposes of God are unfolding even in things like this.

If you will open your Bible to 2 Corinthians 12, we'll look at a portion of Scripture just starting at the beginning of that chapter and running a little ways down into verse 10 and I'm reading from the New American Standard. 2 Corinthians 12,

1 Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago--whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows--such a man was caught up to the third heaven. 3 And I know how such a man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows-- 4 was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. 5 On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. 6 For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me. 7 Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me--to keep me from exalting myself! 8 Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. 9 And He has said to me [each of those times], "My grace is sufficient for you, [and I want you to lock in on that] "My grace is sufficient for you for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

No one is too weak to be useful to the Lord. Many people are too strong.

Look at verse 9, "My grace is sufficient." The word "grace" or "charis" is used in the New Testament about 155 times. It speaks of divine favor given to undeserving people. Divine favor flowing down from God that has power. It is favor with power. It is powerful transforming favor. It is favor that saves; favor that keeps; favor that delivers; favor that enables; that sanctifies; that comforts; that glorifies. Grace is not an inert deposit, it is divine power overruling all that is evil and debilitating, and for the believer it is a constant flow. The Bible speaks of the surpassing riches of his grace. It tells us that Jesus is full of grace and he lavishes us in grace. There is this unceasing flow of divine favor pouring into our lives as believers to save us, keep us, deliver us, enable us, sanctify

us, comfort us, glorify us ultimately. Ephesians 2:7 refers to this as, "the surpassing riches of His grace."

Of Jesus it was said in John 1:14, he was "full of grace," and we are in him and he is in us and we are full of Christ and we are full of his grace. John 1:16 then goes on to say, "of His fullness," he was full of grace, "of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace." Literally our lives are repositories for the accumulation of grace without restraint, without limit. Acts 4:33 says it is "abundant grace." Romans 5:2 says "we stand" in grace. James 4:6 says it is "a greater grace." Whatever it is that you have, there is greater grace coming. Peter says it's the multifaceted, manifold, multicolored grace of God. And listen to the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 9:8, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you," notice all the superlatives, he "is able to make all grace abound to you that always having all sufficiency in all things, you may have an abundance for every good deed." God doesn't skimp on grace. Verse 11 adds, "you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God." And verse 14 of that same text says this grace is "the surpassing grace of God in you." So that answers the question raised by the statement: is God's grace sufficient? It's more than sufficient and that's the declaration in verse 9, "My grace is sufficient." The writer of Hebrews says when you have trouble, go to the throne of, what? Grace. Go to the throne of grace to find grace in time of need. God lavishes grace on us and he lavishes it all the time but especially in times of trouble we get megadoses of his grace. There is sufficient grace.

Now that's just looking at that one phrase. This is the promise of God, that you have sufficient grace for everything, but I want to dig a little bit deeper into this passage. What is driving this statement here? This is a very emotional section of Paul's writings, 2 Corinthians. I've often thought that I'm so happy that I didn't start to teach this book until I had been beaten up for decades or I wouldn't have understood what he was trying to do here. He has been forced by the devastation going on in the Corinthian church to try to defend himself and he hates it. He does not want to boast. He doesn't want to call attention to himself but he has to defend himself because he is the divine instrument of God to bring them the truth and he doesn't want them turning from him to false teachers, so he does something that he hates to do and that is to defend himself. He does it to protect his church and for that reason alone, and in the doing, he comes to this particular section in chapter 12 where he lets us in on the most, I think, amazing work of God in his life. Now listen: God was using Satan to refine Paul. Did you hear that? God was using Satan to refine Paul. That may shock you. God so much wants to accomplish his purpose in you that he employs not only holy angels but even unholy ones. You'll see this unfold. It's a powerful, emotional section.

Paul was under tremendous duress. Let's go back, go back to the beginning of 2 Corinthians. Go back all the way to chapter 1. Listen to the heart of Paul, verse 5. Well, let's go back to verse 3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." Four times in one verse the word "comfort" appears. This is a suffering guy. He talks about affliction twice in that verse, "just as the sufferings

of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer," then in verse 7 he says, "you are sharers of our sufferings, [and] of our comfort." Suffering. Comfort. Suffering. Comfort. Suffering. Comfort. Verse 8 he says, "we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction," again the word "affliction." "We have been "burdened excessively, beyond our strength, [to the point] we despaired even of life; we had the sentence of death within ourselves," God had to "deliver us out of a peril of death." This is a man who is suffering profoundly.

In chapter 2, he says again in verse 3, "This is the very thing I wrote you, so that when I came, I would not have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice." Not only did he have suffering coming at him in the conditions he was in but he was sorrowing because of what he was hearing about this church. Verse 4, "out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not so that you would be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you." This is a broken-hearted man, deeply wounded.

In chapter 4 he says, verse 8, "we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake," he's not speaking mystically, he's speaking physically, "so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you." I live on the brink of death to bring you life. I don't see that kind of mentality among many in spiritual ministry. Paul was a beleaguered man; to be faithful in ministry put him in constant danger.

Over in chapter 6, verse 4, "in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger." It's just a relentless litany. If you jump down to verse 8, he sort of swings between "glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things." This is amazing insight into this man's life. Amazing insight.

In chapter 10, he says that he is being criticized by the false teachers who say about him in verse 10, "His letters are weighty and strong," they can see the logic of his letters, "but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible," which is to say, he's ugly and he can't communicate. If you are ugly but you can communicate, you might get by, or if you can communicate or if you're just handsome, you can stand there, but when you're ugly and can't communicate...

This is the way they denounced him. False teachers were after him. People in the church were after him. Persecutors were after him. Then the culmination of it all in chapter 11. As we move into chapter 12, we come to chapter 11 and he's comparing himself with the

false apostles. He mentions them in verse 13 of chapter 11, the false apostles. False teachers had come into the church at Corinth and done tremendous damage. They were "deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds." False teachers had descended into the Corinthian congregation and this is their agenda: we want to teach lies, so if we're going to be effective in teaching lies, we have to destroy the people's confidence in the truth. The truth basically had to come to them from one man, Paul, so they had to destroy the people's confidence in Paul. So they assaulted Paul. This was their strategy. And if you read between the lines going through 2 Corinthians, they said he lied, he had no apostolic authority behind him. They said he was a self-promoting man. They said he had a hidden life of secret shame and iniquity and sin. They said he falsified the records of his successes. They did everything they could to destroy the people's trust in Paul in order to carve out a space for them to step in and teach their damning lies.

That's what Satan does. By the way, Satan doesn't let any time pass before he gets going on the church. You know that, right? Jesus says, "Who do you say that I am?" in Matthew 16. Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." High Point. "Flesh and blood didn't tell you that. My Father in heaven did." Just after that, immediately Jesus said, "I'm going to be arrested. I'm going to be killed." Peter talks again, only this time he says, "That's not going to happen, Lord." And Jesus looks at him in the face and says, "Get behind me," what? "Satan." He just went from representing God to representing the devil that fast. If you have any agenda other than God's, you're representing Satan, and believe me, Satan introduces his agenda into churches as fast as he can. It was one verse in between Peter saying, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," and being a tool of Satan.

So Satan was working on this Corinthian church. Paul then has to defend his apostleship. That's what this is about here. They have to trust him because he is their only hope. They don't have a written New Testament. He's the man. So as much as he hates to do this, he does not like to boast, he wants them to know his true credentials. It's amazing what he says they are.

Go down to verse 22 and he compares himself with the false teachers, "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I." This means they were Jewish teachers trying to teach the law. Salvation by law in any form is always Satan's operation. Then in verse 23, "Are they servants of Christ?" He doesn't say, "so am I," because the answer to that is no. They're not. If you teach the law, you're not a servant of Christ. Galatians 5 says if you teach the law, you are severed from Christ. You have fallen from grace. Christ is no effect to you and you are fully under the law if you add anything to faith. They are not servants of Christ.

"I speak as if a madman." For Paul this is a kind of insanity to have to do this. He's using hyperbole to say, "I don't like this. This is not me. This is something that I'm forced to do." But, "Are they servants of Christ? No. I am a servant of Christ and here are my

credentials, look what they are. Suffering because Satan doesn't persecute false teachers. Here are my apostolic credentials: in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes," because Deuteronomy 25 prescribed 40 lashes and the Jews stopped one short so they didn't break the law. "Three times I was beaten with rods," a Gentile form of beating was to strap together sticks and tie them together and flagellate people with them. That had happened to him as well. "Once I was stoned," you, of course, remember that, Acts 14, "three times I was shipwrecked," and that doesn't include the shipwreck in the 27th chapter of Acts, so that is a fourth shipwreck, "a night and a day I have spent in the deep." On some occasion, he was floating around for 24 hours out in the middle of the ocean. "I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure." Those are his apostolic credentials and pretty amazing, isn't it? He doesn't give a litany of successes. He said, "It ought to be enough for you to know that the whole kingdom of darkness is relentlessly coming after me and that's the proof of my legitimacy."

Then verse 28. Beyond all externals, he's been talking about physical things – this is so important – beyond all those external things, "there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches." Please, that is not referring to administrative responsibilities. That's not what he's talking about. I've heard pastors use that that way, the responsibility for the churches, some administrative duty. No, that's not his concern. What is his concern? Verse 29, "Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?" For all the external things that I suffer, what I suffer on the inside is above it, beyond it, more difficult, and that is this, when someone in the church is weak, I feel the pain. When someone is led into sin, I have intense concern. He's got all these people in his heart. This is ministry. There are dangers without and there is profound suffering within.

The biggest disappointments that I ever experience as a pastor aren't external things, they are always massive internal disappointment. Three weeks ago, a professor from the Master's University in Israel for 23 years teaching the life of Christ and leading our Israel campus, after 23 years of teaching he declared that he didn't believe in the deity of Christ and couldn't sign the doctrinal statement. That is crushing because that is apostasy, to teach the life of Christ and live in Israel for 23 years and say he is a man and nothing more and not God. The brutality of that descending on the hearts of those who loved and cared for him is almost overwhelming.

Those are the things in the church that tear at the heart. You as parents, if you haven't gone through this, you can be thankful, whatever fears you had for a little child being ill or injured or even die, will be like nothing when you get an adult child who walks rebelliously against Christ. The things that are physical in our lives can inflict pain on us because we care, the things that are spiritual are everlasting. So Paul is feeling that pain as part of being a pastor so he says, "Do you want to know what my credentials are? I suffer. I suffer externally to get the Gospel to you. I suffer internally to see Christ formed in you," to borrow the words of Galatians 4:19.

So verse 30, "If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness." Then this all seems so intense that he adds a divine witness, verse 31, "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying." Then he adds a personal incident, "In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands."

This is an amazing litany of the things that he endured and the deepest pain that Paul will ever know is the pain that strikes at the heart of relationships. He's suffering the most severe trouble and pain, to have the people to which he has given his life and invested so much, turning away from him. He later says, "If I love you the more, am I to be loved the less?" His whole life is just one massive unselfish sacrifice of love and has he done it in vain?

Verse 1 then of chapter 12, he's saying, "Boasting is necessary." He hates to do this. He hates to do it but it's necessary. It's not profitable. It really doesn't have any value in and of itself what he's about to say, "but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord." There are six visions that Paul had in the book of Acts. Six. Six personal visions of the Lord. That doesn't happen to anybody else but Paul. He had six visions. Those are not profitable to boast about and he tells you why they are not profitable, because, he says, verse 2, "I know a man in Christ," referring to himself, "who fourteen years ago," and we don't have any record of this in the book of Acts so we don't know exactly when it was, "14 years ago--whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows," and he says it again in verse 3, I don't know, "I know how such a man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows," but such a man, "was caught up into," the third heaven, or as it says in verse 4, "caught up to Paradise," so Paradise and the third heaven are the same thing. The third heaven is the abode of God. The first heaven is the heaven of air and oxygen, the second heaven is the stellar, and the third is the heaven where God dwells.

He said, "I went to heaven. I went to heaven. I can't say any more than that about it. I don't know if it was in the body or in the spirit. I don't really know," and I "heard inexpressible words," I heard things but I can't repeat them, "which a man is not permitted to speak." So next time you hear some guy who went to heaven and came back and wants to tell you everything he saw and heard, you can file him away in the liar category. He said, "This is not profitable. I had a trip to heaven. I have had visions. I have had revelations," ultimately had the revelation of 13 New Testament epistles, didn't he? "I've had plenty of revelation. I was in Arabia," he tells the Galatians, "for a long time in a private tutorial with the Lord teaching me my theology. I had one professor and I went to one school and it was the school of Christ in the desert. I have had immense revelations beyond anyone else. I've had six visions and then this one, where I was actually taken into heaven, and I don't understand the pathology of that, but none of it is profitable. It's not profitable." Why is it not profitable? Because it's not verifiable and it's not repeatable, right? It's not going to hold up in a court. It's not verifiable and it's not repeatable and he's not even sure what the conditions were and doesn't know what was said.

So when you want to demonstrate your apostleship, you don't parade out your visions and your revelations, you parade your weaknesses, your suffering. That's what he says in verse 5, "On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf," I will say it was an amazing thing for such a man, and he won't even say it was him, to have such an experience, "but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses." Does this put suffering on a higher level than maybe you thought about it? These are the credentials of spiritual service.

"I will boast about my weaknesses, For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish," I will not be a madman, "for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from," these visions, "so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me." If somebody calls out visions as credentials, they are not valid evidence. They can't be verified, they can't be reproduced. Paul says, I want you to make your judgment on this: what you've seen in me and what you've heard from me, and the concomitant suffering that has gone along with it. Judge me on the character of my ministry.

You know, all of those visions and revelations can tend to make you proud, don't you think? Can you imagine going to, like, a meeting of the minds, Timothy and others and Silas and Paul, and they are sitting around and one guy says, "I have a good idea, let's do this." And the other one says, "I have a good idea, let's do this." And Paul says, "Any of you been to heaven?" No. "Any of you had visions?" No. "We'll do my plan." Pretty amazing to have six personal visions of the risen exalted Christ and to be taken to heaven. Pretty amazing to have all these revelations and that could feed the flesh, right?

So listen carefully: the Lord brings suffering, first of all, to humble us. Verse 7, "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason," this is explicit, "for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself." You say, "Wait a minute, this is Paul the apostle. Did he have a struggle?" You bet. Romans 7, "I do the things I don't want to do it I don't do the things I should do. O wretched man that is in me! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?" The unredeemed flesh is a battle even for him. He needed divine intervention to humble him.

"Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations...to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me," by God, "a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me," again he says it, "to keep me from exalting myself!" Do you know why the Lord brings suffering into your life? To humble you. To humble you. With all those revelations, all those visions, Paul could have been very proud. Humility is the number one Christian virtue. The number one Christian virtue and let me tell you how serious the Lord views it: the Lord will allow Satan to work on you to humble you. That's what it says.

"There was given me," by God, "a thorn in the flesh." That word "thorn" is not like the thorn on a rosebush, that is the word "stake," like a spear filed down at the end like a pencil to run through somebody or to plant in the ground. He says, "The Lord gave me a stake, drove a stake through my otherwise proud flesh."

What was that stake? "A messenger of Satan." The word "messenger" in Greek is "aggelos" from which we get, what? Angel. What's another word for an angel from Satan? A demon. You say, "Are you kidding? Paul? God allowed a demon to be the instrument that drove a stake through his otherwise proud flesh? Aren't we supposed to chase demons away?" In the first place, you can't do that; in the second place, you might be trying to chase away some demons that the Lord sent for his own purposes. Aggelos is used as many as 180 times in the New Testament. Every single time it's used it means a person, and most of the times by far, it refers to an angel or an angelic being.

Well, where is this demon? Is the demon in Paul? No. No, because Christ is in him. I think the way you need to understand this is that demon-possessed false teachers were tearing up Paul's work in Corinth. Demon-possessed false teachers were assaulting his church and by doing that, they were tormenting him. Remember what he said back in chapter 11? "Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is caught into sin and I am not suffering intense concern?" It was tearing at his heart that the false teachers were doing so much damage in his church. This is a shocking thing for many people to think of but listen to this: God is so concerned about the humility of a shepherd that he may allow Satan to damage his church just to humble him.

"Torment me," is a word used in Matthew 26 and Mark 14 to refer to those who were beating Jesus in the face with their fists. Why does the Lord allow this? "To keep me from exalting myself!" Pastors don't like trouble, then many pastors wonder why we have so much trouble. We as believers who are faithful and walk with the Lord and serve in the church, we don't want trouble. We don't like trouble. We may wonder why the Lord lets that trouble come to us. I was talking to somebody the other day and their daughter just newly married at the age of about 28, cancer, and her question was, "Lord, why me? Why are you doing this to me?" None of us welcomes this kind of suffering, or any kind for that matter, but there is a purpose of God initially in it and that is to shatter our confidence. Now, trials have a lot of purposes. They test the strength of our faith. They wean us from worldly loves. They call us to an eternal perspective. They reveal what is truly precious to us. They enable us to help others who suffer. They produce endurance. They equip us for greater usefulness. They allow us to share in Christ's suffering with him. But especially, trials humble us, and I think the more blessing you have received, the more your flesh may tend to be proud.

You remember in Luke 22, Jesus came to Peter and he said, "Satan desires to have you that he may sift you like wheat," right? And if I'd have been Peter, I would have said, "Well, you told him no, right? I'm yours. I'm an apostle." Jesus would have said, "No, I told him yes. I told him yes. He's going to sift you." And it was a horrendous sifting, wasn't it, in all the denials? But then our Lord said, "But when you are converted, strengthen the brethren. When you come out of this on the other side," and did he ever, he was launched on the day of Pentecost and 3,000 people came into the kingdom and the church was born. "God is opposed to the proud," James 4, "and gives grace to the humble." Embrace the suffering, embrace the trouble, embrace the pain, because in it God is humbling you under his mighty hand so that in time he may exalt you.

The second thing that Paul was taught in this, the second purpose that God has. God humbles us by suffering and, secondly, he uses suffering to draw us to himself. Verse 8, "Concerning this," this suffering that I was in during in my soul over the destruction the false teachers were doing in the church that I love, "Concerning this I implored the Lord," that's a strong word, "I implored the Lord," I entreated the Lord, I pled with the Lord. That verb is used in the Gospels a number of times to refer to the appeals coming from desperately sick people wanting Jesus to heal them. "I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me." This is, I think, the second and obvious lesson in suffering. You run to the relief that is available to you at the throne of grace, right?

I remember when I stood in that doctor's office and he said, "Your son may have a tumor that could be terminal." At that moment I didn't say anything to Mark but I had determined one thing: I would fast and pray. And I had to take him back down for MRIs and all kinds of scans in a period of about nine days, down to this cancer examination center. I never told him what the doctor told me and the doctor didn't tell him. I just prayed the whole time and I prayed and I prayed. I really had no interest in doing anything but praying. I have memories of the sweetness of that communion with the Lord and I remember how the prayer started out, "Lord, please spare him. Spare him. Spare him." To, "Lord, accomplish your will. Accomplish your will." To, "Lord, I know you love him. I know he loves you. Be glorified." That process goes on over those days and I'm sitting in my office, I think it was the ninth day at the church, and peace just swept over my soul, and I hadn't gotten the final report. I just was at peace and I remember thinking, "I'm hungry," for the first time in those days. And there was this little knock on the door. Knock. Knock. Knock. And I said, "Come in," at church and a lady walked in and said, "I was just thinking about you being up here. I could see the light was on and I thought you might be hungry and I brought a sandwich." Hm. When the fast was over, the Lord delivered the sandwich. I look back at that and I can honestly say that experience was repeated for me when Patricia had her accident and flipped the car and it landed on its top and she crushed her neck. The experience of being in the presence of the Lord in complete dependence and desperate dependence, at that, is a spiritual experience that is beyond description.

He prayed three times and that's kind of the way we're supposed to pray, right? With persistence. Importunity, is the old word. He prayed three times. I think one of the purposes in our trials is to drive us to the Lord to find communion with him there.

There is a third lesson, just moving quickly. God uses suffering to humble us to know that we can't control everything, we are weak; he uses suffering to drive us into deeper communion with him; and he uses suffering to display his grace. Look at verse 9, "And He has said to me." On each of the three occasions, the verb there is putting it in that sense. Every time I asked, I got the same answer, "My grace is sufficient for you." My grace is sufficient for you. Through all of this, you're going to live in the lavish reality of sufficient grace. I'm not going to remove the pain. I'm not going to remove the suffering. I'm not going to remove the sorrow. I want to increase the grace. Sufficient is "arkei," enough. Whatever it is you need, it's enough. It's enough. I've seen that sufficient grace. I've endured that sufficient grace. Death in my family. Difficulty in my family.

Horrendous things in other families. I've seen that grace on display and it explodes into the lives of God's children who rest confidently in his perfect will.

Then just a final point. Through the trials of our life, God humbles us, drives us to himself in communion, puts his grace on display, and we talked about that so I won't go over that, I gave you a lot of verses on that, and finally, God – this is important – God uses suffering to perfect his power in us. This is where this whole passage is going and this is full circle back to why Paul said his apostolic credentials were weaknesses, because he says in verse 9, "power is perfected in weakness." You're never powerful unless you're weak.

Once in a while we talk about certain preachers and we say, "We were looking for Jesus but he got in the way." We need power, we want to be powerful Christians, we want to be powerful preachers, we want our lives to have high impact, right? God chooses very carefully who he puts through the crucible of suffering and those who suffer most are most useful. When James and John came to Jesus and said, "Hey, can we be on the right and the left hand in the kingdom?" His answer was, "Can you suffer what I suffer?" That's the pathway. If you're suffering, if you have gone through very difficult things in your life, the Lord has chosen to put you on the pathway of usefulness at a greater level than you would have been able to be used without the vicissitudes and sorrows of life.

"Power is perfected in weakness." That is a great statement. Power is perfected in weakness. That's where power reaches its high point and reaches its apex in suffering. Listen to Hebrews 2:10, God perfect the author of salvation through sufferings. Wonderful to think about the fact that back in Luke 22 that the Lord says, "Peter, I'm going to let Satan go after you because when it's over, you're going to strengthen the brothers." Power is perfected in weakness.

It's all here, folks. The purposes of God are laid out through our difficulty. The right response, the middle of verse 9, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses." That's why he said what he said in chapter 11. There it is. That's why I said that. I would rather boast about my weaknesses than my visions and revelations because it's in my weakness that the power of Christ is perfected. So, "I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak," say it, "then I am strong."

Embrace the suffering. The most fruitful times in my life, the most empowering times in my life, have not been times of success but times of trial. I don't learn much from what goes right, I learn a lot from what goes wrong.

Some time back, a man wrote this, you may have heard the words.

"There burns a fire with sacred heat, white hot with holy flame
And all who dare pass through its blaze will not emerge the same

Some as bronze, and some as silver, some as gold, then with great skill
All are hammered by their sufferings on the anvil of His will.

The Refiner's fire has now become my soul desire
Purged and cleansed and purified that the Lord be glorified
He is consuming my soul, refining me, making me whole
No matter what I may lose, I choose the Refiner's fire."

Embrace the suffering. The writer says,

"I'm learning now to trust His touch, to crave the fire's embrace
For through my past with sin was etched, His mercies did erase!
Each time His purging cleanses deeper, I'm not sure that I'll survive
Yet the strength in growing weaker, keeps my hungry soul alive."

No matter what I lose, I choose the Refiner's fire. Embrace the suffering. Embrace the suffering. It's all for your good and God's glory.

Let's pray together.

Lord, we know you want us like your Son and he was made perfect through suffering, and we aren't going to be like him unless we are taken down that same path. May we embrace the suffering. May we fear the successes, fear the comforts, fear the easy times, and embrace the purposes that you can only accomplish through difficulty. Put us through the Refiner's fire that we might be more useful to you; that we might hold lightly to all that this life offers and cling with all strength to the power of the eternal kingdom and our blessed Christ. For his glory we ask these things and pray in his name. Amen.

Thanks for listening to Pastor Don Green from Truth Community Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. You can find church information, Don's complete sermon library and other helpful materials at thetruthpulpit.com.