

With Paul in the School of Affliction, Part 2

2 Corinthians 12:7–10

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Introduction

Well three weeks ago, at the beginning of this month, I began a two-part series with you called, “With Paul in the School of Affliction.” And I began that sermon by observing the truth of an oft-repeated maxim: that education is one of the few things that people are willing to pay for and yet not receive. In many cases, young men and women move across the country—and all of them pay the exorbitant prices of higher education—to attend a university they believe will equip them for their chosen profession, only to give themselves to distractions in their classes—or even to intentionally skip classes all together.

And I made the observation that the same is often true with respect to many professing Christians and the education that we might receive as a result of the trials we face and the suffering we experience as a result of following Christ in this world. It was Spurgeon who said that “There is no *university* for a Christian like that of sorrow and trial.” Pain is often a good teacher. The school of suffering—the academy of affliction—is often able to teach us immeasurably more than anything we might glean from reading a book or listening to a lecture. What we learn about the character of God in a book is nothing compared to what we learn about the character of God as we lean on Him in the midst of a trial. We might strain to memorize a random text of Scripture as part of our spiritual disciplines, and even then soon forget it before long. But when we cleave unto a particular passage or a particular promise of God in the Bible that steadies us in the midst of the storm of affliction, it’s a verse that is not quickly forgotten. Suffering is often the best instructor that we have in the Christian life.

But *not* if we’re not paying attention in class! Instead of gleaning these priceless lessons about God, about Christ, about ourselves, about particular truths of Scripture, about vital spiritual experience, about how God intends our trials to sanctify us more into the image of Christ, we literally waste our suffering. We don’t ask those questions. We don’t view our afflictions as the occasion to learn invaluable lessons about the most precious truths in the universe. We regard our sufferings as a pure, unmixed evil, to be avoided at all costs, and, if they cannot be avoided, to simply be tolerated and endured until at last they’re finally over with. We’re like those students who pay the expensive tuition of the school affliction, and then skip class. We ignore the lessons that God designs for our suffering to teach us, and so we don’t receive the education we’re paying for.

And so I wanted to spend time considering the lessons that our trials can teach us, ultimately to ensure that we don't waste our suffering, and that we get the education we're paying for in the school of affliction. And to do that, I turned to what might be considered a classic text on the believer's faithful suffering: to 2 Corinthians 12, verses 7 to 10, where the Apostle Paul speaks about his famous thorn in the flesh. This is the passage we read earlier in the service.

Now, by way of reminder, the opening verses of 2 Corinthians 12 detail Paul's experience of his own personal rapture into the immediate presence of God. According to verse 4, he was "caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak." It was so wonderful, so transcendent, so marvelous, that it could not be adequately expressed in human language! But we learn in verse 7 that such glorious privileges as visions and raptures up to heaven tempted Paul to glory in his privileges, to think himself spiritually superior, and to exalt himself. And so in order to keep him humble, the Lord afflicted His servant with this thorn in the flesh, to remind him of his fallenness, his weakness, and his utter dependence upon divine mercy. And though Paul begged the Lord Jesus to remove this thorn from him, Jesus responded by saying, verse 9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." And if that's the case, Paul says he'll most gladly boast in his weaknesses! He's well-content with them! Because when he is weak, *then* the grace of Christ is powerfully at work within him.

Now, in our last time together, we began working through several **lessons** this text has to teach us that will equip us to make the most of our time spent in the school of affliction. As I said last time, these are **lessons** to learn *about* suffering that will prepare us to learn the lessons that can only be learned in the *midst* of suffering. They'll help us ensure that we don't *waste* our trials—that we don't shell out the costly tuition to the school of affliction without getting the education that we're paying for.

And we got to **two** of those **lessons** last time. There was, first, a lesson concerning **pride and humility**. Verse 7 says that Paul's thorn was so severe that it could properly be described as a torment from Satan. And in verse 8, he says that he implored the Lord Jesus three times that it might leave him. But Jesus did not remove the thorn. And we commented on the overtones of Gethsemane here. Jesus knew what it was to implore His Father three times to remove from Him the agonizing suffering of the wrath of God on the cross, and yet to be told no. Well this Jesus, intimately aware of the pain of such a moment, also refused the request of His dear servant, the Apostle Paul. And we observed that if that was the case, the sin of pride and self-exaltation must be desperately wicked. Presumptive arrogance, a sense of spiritual superiority, and pride in oneself are so destructive of the spiritual health of Christ's Church, that God is willing to send debilitating weaknesses into the lives of His people to purify us from it.

The **second** lesson we learned last time was a lesson about **prayer and problems**. Verse 8 says that Paul "implored the Lord three times" that his thorn might leave him. And we observed that

by referring to Christ as “the Lord” and by addressing Him as the object of His prayers, Paul clearly demonstrates His faith in Jesus as fully God. And we observed that by referring to a threefold earnest entreaty to be relieved of suffering, Paul was intentionally making a connection to Gethsemane, when Jesus had prayed this same threefold prayer to the Father, and which highlights his full humanity as our Great High Priest who has suffered the wrath of God in our place. And so I exhorted you to, like Paul, make it the reflex of your heart to fly to Christ in the midst of temptations and afflictions, because in Him we have both the Almighty God, who is able to hear prayer and to save, and a compassionate High Priest, who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses and sufferings.

Well that brings us, this morning, to the final **four lessons** that this text has for us.

III. Sovereignty and Suffering (v. 7)

And that **third** lesson is a **lesson on sovereignty and suffering**. Verse 7 says, “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!” Now, when Paul speaks about his thorn, he uses the passive voice. He doesn’t name the subject. He doesn’t say, “So-and-so *gave* me a thorn in the flesh.” He says, “There *was given* me a thorn in the flesh.” So who gave Paul his thorn? You say, “Well, it says right there in verse 7 that the thorn was ‘a messenger of Satan to torment’ Paul. If the thorn is a messenger from Satan, then Satan gave Paul his thorn! He sent the thorn to torment him, to attempt to render him ineffective in ministry by overwhelming him with suffering!” And you’d be right. The thorn *is* a messenger from Satan. The thorn *is* intended by Satan to torment Paul and to hinder his ministry.

But that’s not the only answer to that question. It is also true—we can even say that it is more ultimately true—that God is the one who gave Paul his thorn. Why do I say that? Because, while it’s true that the thorn was given to torment Paul, that’s not the only purpose that the text gives for it. In fact, it’s not even the most emphasized purpose in the verse! Why was Paul given this thorn? Look again at verse 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—” And then he repeats himself: “*to keep me from exalting myself*.” Paul would write this in blinking neon lights if he could! “For *this* reason, . . . to keep me from exalting myself, . . . to keep me from exalting myself.”

Now I ask you: Who has a vested interest in keeping Paul from exalting himself? It’s certainly not Satan! Satan has absolutely no desire to keep Paul from exalting himself! Satan would love it if Paul went on exalting himself, patting himself on the back and being impressed with his super-spirituality because of all the wonderful heavenly visions he was receiving. It would have played

right into Satan's hands if Paul became insufferably arrogant because of these revelations, because arrogance cripples effectiveness in Gospel ministry. No, if the *purpose* of the giving of this thorn was to keep Paul humble, then the *purposer* could not have merely been Satan. The thorn was ultimately given to Paul from God Himself, to be a sanctifying agent of humility in Paul's life—to keep him intimately acquainted with his own frailty and dependence on God—and therefore to keep him effective in the service of Gospel ministry.

And this teaches us a number of things about **sovereignty and suffering**. First, it teaches us what theologians call the doctrine of *concurrency*. That is to say, there can be multiple agents *concurring*—or working simultaneously—in a single action. One example of that concurrence that we're all familiar with is the inspiration of Scripture. It's obvious to us all that the Apostle Paul wrote 2 Corinthians—under his own recognizance, free from coercion, and free to express his own intentions. I mean, we see so much of his personality and his heart come through in this epistle, that we can't doubt that he's writing what he intends to communicate here. But at the same time, 2 Timothy 3:16 says that all Scripture is *breathed out by God*. Second Peter 1:21 says that the Holy Spirit *carries men along* in the writing of Scripture, so that what human beings wrote under their own volition to express their own intentions, was exactly what God Himself intended to be written. The intentions of the human author concur with the intentions of the divine author, in the single act of writing Scripture.

Well, concurrence happens not only when two agents have the same intention. It's also true when they have different—even opposite—intentions. We see that plainly in the story of Joseph in Genesis 37 to 50. Turn back to Genesis chapter 50. Because they're jealous of Jacob's affection for his youngest son, Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt—a wicked act that certainly resulted in significant suffering for Joseph. But eventually, God blesses Joseph's ministry in Egypt to the point that he becomes second-in-command under Pharaoh, and he warns him to prepare for the coming famine. And lives were saved as a result. And so at the end of the story, Genesis 50:20 tells us that Joseph's brothers weren't the only ones who had a purpose for his sufferings. He says, “As for you, *you meant evil* against me, but *God meant it for good* in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.”

Now, notice what that text does not say. It does not say, “You meant evil against me, but God *worked it out* for good.” You know, Joseph's brothers had dealt God a rather bad hand, but He did with it what He could and turned it *into* good. No! The text says that God *meant* it for good! One and the same act—the sinful selling of Joseph into slavery in Egypt—had two concurrent agents, with two opposite intentions. Joseph's brothers intended that sinful action to destroy Joseph, while God Himself intended that same sinful action for the good of preserving life.

One other illustration of this. Turn to 1 Chronicles 21. This is the account of David's sin of taking a census of Israel. You say, "Why would it be sinful to take a census?" Well, it was a way for David to display his pride. It was as if he was saying, "Look at how numerous is the nation over whom *I* am king!" And Joab gets it. He says in verse 3, "David, I think it's great that the people are so numerous. But don't do this thing and be a cause of guilt to Israel." But David insists, and so Joab numbers the people. And verse 7 says that "God was displeased with this thing, so He struck Israel." Verse 14 tells us that God killed 70,000 men with pestilence. And David confesses this act as sin in verse 8.

Now, look back at verse 1. First Chronicles 21:1 says, "Then Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel." David's heart was *moved* to do this sinful action by Satan. Ok. Now turn to the parallel account in 2 Samuel 24. 2 Samuel 24:1: "Now again *the anger of Yahweh* burned against Israel, and *it* incited David against them to say, 'Go, number Israel and Judah.'" This same act—the incitement of David to take the census—is attributed to Satan in 1 Chronicles 21, and to God in 2 Samuel 24. What this teaches us is that God is the ultimate cause of this act, even if He accomplishes it by using Satan and Satan's evil intentions as secondary causes. Both God and Satan are agents of this incitement of David to take the census: God ultimately, but Satan immediately and efficiently.

Well, in the same way, the same act of giving Paul a thorn in the flesh is attributed both to Satan and to God in 2 Corinthians 12:7. It was not merely that Satan had sent the thorn, and then God showed up afterward and turned Paul's suffering into good! No, God had given the thorn! Like with Joseph, though Satan had intended Paul's suffering for evil, God had intended Paul's suffering for good. But God *intended* Paul's suffering!

Now, why do I go through all that? What this all means, friends, is that **God is absolutely sovereign in our suffering!** It means that whatever hand Satan, or demons, or the forces of wickedness in the world have in our experiences of suffering and trials, *they* are never the ultimate cause of our troubles. They are only ever the instruments in the hands of our kind and gracious Father—who knows our needs before we even ask Him, who delights to give good gifts to His children—who is **absolutely sovereign** over all things. There is always a divine design in our distress! And because God is **sovereign in our suffering**, that design is never merely the design of our enemies, but it is ultimately the design of our Father, who intends that very same suffering for the good of working holiness in us, to keep us humble, to make us patient, to teach us to abandon self-reliance and to depend solely on God Himself. Even those trials that we can identify as being unjustly perpetrated against us by the messengers of Satan are nevertheless sovereignly sent to us by God to accomplish His purposes in us.

And let me tell you something: that is all our comfort in the midst of such trials! The **absolute sovereignty of God in our sufferings** is, as Spurgeon said, "the pillow upon which the Christian

rests his head.” Adoniram Judson, the missionary to Myanmar whose mission cost the lives of his first two wives and several of his children, said this: “If I had not felt certain that every trial was ordered by infinite love and mercy, I could not have survived my accumulated sufferings.” “I couldn’t have survived it if I didn’t know that it all came from God!” To know that there is purpose in our suffering, that we’re not just the victims of blind fate or of the malice of Satan, but that in the deepest of sorrows, in the darkest of storms, we are right where our loving Father has designed for us to be! Indeed: that God is working these very sufferings for our good—Romans 8:28—making them produce for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison—2 Corinthians 4:17—*that* is a sure and steady anchor for the soul!

So in the midst of those trials, Grace Church, *cling* to that sure and steady anchor of the sovereignty of God! In even our greatest sufferings, do not seek to rob God of His glory and destroy the foundation of your own comfort by thinking that God would never *send* such grievous trials, that He’s caught off guard by our suffering, or even that He only passively *allows* it. *Rest* in the knowledge that God sovereignly ordains whatsoever comes to pass—that as Ephesians 1:11 says He “works *all* things after the counsel of His own will”—and therefore He has ordered every trial that we go through as a gift of His good providence, whereby He means to sanctify His people and glorify Himself.

IV. Strength and Suffering (v. 9)

Well, in addition to that lesson on sovereignty and suffering, this text also teaches us, **number four**, a **lesson on strength and suffering**. In response to the thorn, verse 8 tells us that Paul “implored the Lord three times that it might leave” him. He begged the Lord Jesus—just like the Lord Jesus begged the Father in Gethsemane—to take away this Satanic affliction and grant him relief! And if you view life and ministry like the false apostles in Corinth do—if you believe faithfulness to Christ always issues in blessing and favor and victory and deliverance—you might expect for Christ to grant Paul’s faith-filled prayers and miraculously remove his thorn! Paul would be free from his debilitating nuisance! He’d live the triumphant, affliction-free life that he was supposedly entitled to as a child of the King!

But that is not the answer Paul receives! Just as the Father denied Jesus’ request in Gethsemane, so Jesus denies Paul’s request. Verse 9: “And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’” And commentators have called this the verse for which the entire epistle of 2 Corinthians was written. Philip Hughes wrote, “This is the summit of the epistle, the lofty peak from which the whole is viewed in true proportion” (451). Charles Hodge said, “These words should be engraven on the palm of every believer’s hand” (663). “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.”

There would be no quick-fix, miraculous deliverance. The thorn would remain. Paul would continue to suffer. But you can't miss—you have to see—that Christ does not leave Paul's prayer unanswered! It wasn't the answer that Paul was asking for, but it *was* an answer. And it was so much better than the answer Paul was asking for! Jesus does so much better than to deliver Paul from affliction! Instead, He promises to give Paul sufficient *grace* to endure his affliction!

And friends, grace is so much more glorious a gift than ease! Grace, in this context, is dynamic. It is powerful. You see that in the parallelism of the verse: "My *grace* is sufficient for you, for *power* is perfected in weakness." Christ's grace is identified with His power. This grace is the powerful influence of divine **strength** that empowers our sanctification, endurance, and communion with Christ. Grace is that dynamic sanctifying power, 2 Corinthians 8:1–5, that takes destitute, suffering Macedonians and makes them overflow in joyful generosity, that makes them beg for the favor of giving beyond their ability to support the needs of fellow-believers. When Romans 5:3 says, "Tribulation brings about perseverance, and perseverance [brings about] proven character, and proven character, [brings about] hope," grace is what brings those things about. When James chapter 1 says the testing of your faith *produces* endurance, and endurance *results* in perfection and completeness, grace is what produces those results. Grace is the engine of sanctification.

And Jesus says to Paul—and He says to all of us who suffer for righteousness' sake, all of us who endure affliction on the path of obedience to Him—"I may not remove your suffering, but I will so be *with* you in your suffering, that you will never lack the divine, dynamic, powerful, sanctifying, **strengthening** grace to endure your suffering, and to respond to it in a way that glorifies Me, and serves others!" Charles Hodge puts it so well. He writes, "[Jesus] says, to those who seek deliverance from pain and sorrow, 'It is enough that I love you.' This secures and implies all other good. His favor is life; his loving kindness is better than life" (663). And if we have Him—if we have His grace as we find ourselves in communion with Him—we have what is better than ease, better than victory, better than freedom from all difficulties and afflictions! We have Him! "Foes may hate and friends disown me; Show Thy face and all is bright!"

And when we believe that—when we can endure all manner of affliction, when we can endure the loss of every worldly comfort, and, because we have Christ and His grace, when we can be content, and satisfied; when we can cry, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain!" "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord!" then we glorify Christ! We proclaim to the world that that the presence of Christ is infinitely sweeter than the absence of suffering! And that makes Him look glorious.

And if Christ can be made to look glorious in my suffering, I can endure any suffering there is! The key to the Christian's endurance in suffering is to treasure the glory of Christ so far above all things—to find all your satisfaction and all your joy in the magnification of His glory—that if

what it takes for Him to be glorified is your affliction, you're content with it! And that sentiment has been captured so beautifully by Charles Spurgeon, that I can't help but read this to you. He says, "I know not why it is, but if I sink in spirit (and I do full often) I very seldom get any [relief] anywhere except from this one thing—that Christ must reign. 'There,' I have said in my soul, 'then what becomes of *me* is of no consequence at all. If he will only take me into the royal galley, and chain me down to the oar, and let me tug and pull till I have no more life left, I will be satisfied, if I may but row my Lord towards his throne, and have but the smallest share in making him great and glorious in the eyes of men and angels.'" Listen carefully: "If Christ be glorious, it is all the heaven I ask for. If he shall be King of kings, and Lord of lords, let me be nothing; if he shall but reign, and every tongue shall call him blessed, it shall be bliss to me to know it; and if I may be but as one of the withered roses which lie in the path of his triumph, it shall be my paradise."

The greatest need that you and I have in the midst of weakness, and conflict, and suffering, affliction, is not quick relief from our circumstances. It is the rock-solid confidence that that the suffering we're experiencing is part of the greatest mission in the world: the glorification of the grace and power of the Son of God (cf. Piper). What becomes of us is of no consequence at all! If Christ will be displayed as glorious, I am content to be a withered rose in the path of his triumph! That, dear brothers and sisters, is where **strength in suffering** comes from.

V. Joy and Suffering (v. 10)

And when you understand that—when you have tasted the sweetness of Christ's grace in the midst of the most debilitating suffering, when you have known the fellowship of His sufferings, and have caught glimpses of His glory that you could only know on the path of affliction—when the storms of life come, you start to sound like Paul in verses 9 and 10: "Most *gladly*, therefore, 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, then I am strong."

And that brings us to a **fifth lesson** from this magnificent text. So far this morning we've had a lesson on sovereignty and suffering, and just now a lesson on strength and suffering. Here we have a **lesson on joy and suffering**. When this understanding of sovereignty and suffering and strength and suffering have gripped you—when you understand that Christ's power takes up residence in you only insofar as you are weak—then your reaction to suffering and difficulty is not merely that of passive resignation. Paul does not say, "Well, since Christ will be glorified in this suffering, and since I'll know His power in a unique way in my weakness, {sigh} I guess I can grin and bear this. I guess I can grit my teeth and clench my fist and *tolerate* this." No! He says, "*Most gladly*, therefore, I will rather *boast* about my weaknesses!"

The Greek word there for “gladly” is *hēdistā*. This is a cognate of the word from which we get the word *hedonism*! It speaks of sweetness, of *pleasure*. Paul does not just begrudgingly *submit* to suffering; he *rejoices* in suffering. He finds great pleasure in the knowledge that his weakness can become the occasion for the display of Christ’s strength! that his affliction can become the occasion for the display of Christ’s glory! He eagerly welcomes his sufferings! He’ll even *boast* in them, if by them he can put Christ’s name on display.

Friends, how are you doing with this? Do you know anything of this in your own experience? It is one thing to endure suffering faithfully, rather than to sin by impatience or complaining or taking vengeance. But it is entirely another thing to rejoice in suffering. It’s entirely another thing to say, “I will boast, most gladly, in my weaknesses!” How are you doing with that?

Now, understand what this is not saying. This is not saying that we should be marked by some morbid, masochistic reveling in suffering for suffering’s sake. This text is not teaching us that we should be giddy when we wreck the car, or when we experience relational conflict, or when we lose a job, or when we receive a cancer diagnosis. Paul is not an ascetic. He does not rejoice in suffering *for the sake of suffering*. Look again at verse 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.” It is not suffering for the sake of *suffering* that Paul is well content with; it is suffering for the sake of *Christ* that brings Paul this sweet joy. He rejoices not *that* he’s suffering; he rejoices in the fact that *by* that suffering he is able to magnify the worth of Jesus.

And so when we find ourselves in weakness, in affliction, in distress, in difficulty, the **joy** that we must seek in those times comes from knowing: “Ok. I can respond one of two ways to this suffering. I can respond in a way that dishonors Jesus, or I can respond in a way that glorifies Him. I can worry, I can be anxious, I can complain, I can be depressed, I can be defeated, I can feel sorry for myself: I can show the world that knowing Jesus doesn’t really make all that much of a difference when circumstances take my treasures from me. Or, I can remember that my weakness can be the occasion for the display of Christ’s power, that my lowliness can be the occasion for the display of Christ’s glory, and I can rest, and I can rejoice! I can show the world that walking *with* Jesus *through* suffering is infinitely more delightful than walking on the streets of gold themselves *without* Jesus!” And when the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings are sweet to you—when the presence of Christ is sweeter to you than the absence of suffering, you realize that you can suffer for Christ’s sake—for the sake of displaying His beauty to the world! And that is cause for rejoicing. Not: “Oh, I love my thorn!” But: “I can make Christ look great!”

VI. Ministry and Suffering (vv. 9–10)

And that brings us, finally, to a **sixth lesson** that we learn from this magnificent text. We've had a lesson about sovereignty and suffering, about strength and suffering, about joy and suffering. We come now, number six, to a lesson about **ministry and suffering**. And I draw this, once again, from verses 9 and 10. Paul says, "Most gladly, therefore, 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, then I am strong.*"

Here is the paradox of ministry. And it is, in a real sense, the whole point of the entire letter of 2 Corinthians. At the very moment of Paul's greatest weakness—the suffering and humiliation that the false apostles marshal as evidence against Paul's genuine apostleship, the very substance of what they say disqualifies him from being a legitimate servant of Christ—it is that very weakness that is the theater upon which the power of Christ is showcased to the world.

In 2 Corinthians 4:7, Paul has famously said, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels." There is a fundamentally disproportionate relationship between the glory of the New Covenant message and the glory of the New Covenant messenger. The message is a precious treasure, but the servant of the message is nothing more than a clay pot. God is glorious! Christ is glorious! The Gospel is glorious! But the minister is not! The genuine servant of Christ is not the fine china that people use to impress their dinner guests. We are the ordinary, unremarkable, fragile, expendable earthen vessels. We are not the high-powered, put-together, well-respected, perfectly-polished, cultural elite. We're the scum of the world, 1 Corinthians 4:13. We're the not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble, 1 Corinthians 1:26. We're the foolish, and weak, and base, and *despised*.

Why? Back to 2 Corinthians 4:7: "so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves." So that when the Word of God does its work, nobody will be tempted to think that the treasure chest had anything to do with it! There will be no doubt that the glory belongs to the treasure alone! And God is so jealous for His glory—He is so utterly resolved to share the praise that only belongs to His name with no one else—that He will bring you and me through the severest afflictions, so that He can keep us weak, and magnify Himself as gloriously strong.

You say, when has He done that? Only everywhere. He doesn't give Abraham and Sarah children until they're in their *nineties*! And then He ties His own reputation to the promise to bring forth a child from the barren womb of a 90 year-old woman with a 99 year-old husband! He leads Israel out of Egypt, only to have them be trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea! And just when they have nothing of their own strength to trust in, God shows up in power and parts the Red Sea. When Gideon assembles the armies of Israel against the Midianites, in Judges 7, there are 32,000 men ready for battle. God tells 22,000 of them to go

home! And then God says the 10,000 remaining are too many; “Gideon you’re only taking 300 to battle!” Why? Judges 7, verse 2: “The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, ‘My own power has delivered me.’” “I’m going to deplete your army of 32,000 down to three hundred, so that you know, when you defeat them, that it was My power that did it, and not your own!” When all the powers of darkness, of hell, of Satan himself are to be overthrown, God sends His Son—not as a conquering King, but as a baby in a manger, and then as a Lamb led to the slaughter. When the world is to be subdued by the Gospel, Christ sends twelve virtually-illiterate peasants to preach a message that is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. When pagan lands are won over to faith in Christ, they are won by the foolishness of the message preached, by weak and dying missionaries. In 2 Corinthians 1:8–9, Paul says the affliction that came to him in Asia was so excessive a burden, so beyond his strength, that he despaired even of life. “Indeed,” he says, “we had the sentence of death within ourselves.” “We believed death was certain!” “Paul, why would God sovereignly ordain an affliction that was so beyond your power to endure?” Verse 9: “So that we would not trust in *ourselves*, but in *God* who raises the dead!”

You see, God will empty His people of every bit of self-reliance by bringing us into situations we cannot possibly handle on our own—pushing us to the brink of despair until we have no place to turn but to Him. And it’s then that He shows up to manifest the glory of His power. John Newton wrote that glorious hymn, “I Asked the Lord that I Might Grow,” and he speaks these words from the perspective of God to the suffering believer: “These inward trials I now employ, / From self and pride to set you free, / And break your schemes of earthly joys, / That you may find your all in Me.”

So you see, friends: Suffering, weakness, difficulties—they can never disqualify you from being a servant of Christ. In fact, because God’s power is perfected in weakness, suffering, weakness, and difficulties are *prerequisites* for the servant of Christ! You cannot be too weak to serve Christ, but you can be too strong. You can be so neat, and polished, and put-together, and glorious, that you detract from the glory of the message you preach. So stop with the boasting. Stop thinking, like the false apostles did, that health, wealth, and prosperity and trumpeting your accomplishments is going to be what attracts sinners to the Gospel and certifies the effectiveness of your ministry. We do not preach ourselves! We preach Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your *slaves* for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor 4:5). Genuine ministry is not lordship, it’s slavery. Because Christ’s power is perfected in weakness.

And so, brothers and sisters, *embrace* the weakness and the slavery of a life laid down in service to the Gospel, in ministry to the Church of God. Don’t expect ministry to be easy. When you pursue genuine relationships with people in the church, laboring with one another to identify and mortify sin, expect that it’s going to get messy. When you preach the Gospel faithfully to the world, expect conflict. And derive strength to be well content with weaknesses, with insults, with

distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; because when you are weak, then you are strong in the grace and power of Christ.

Conclusion

And for those of you who are here this morning who are not yet united to Christ by saving faith—you who remain outside of Christ and accountable for your sins—all that we have spoken about here this morning lies outside of your reach. Surely, God is sovereign over all things—even the lives of unbelievers. But outside of Christ, you can derive no comfort from that. Romans 8:28 says that “God causes all things to work together for good *to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*” And if you're not in Christ by faith alone, that is not you. Those who love God trust in His Son. And so you do not have a God who is causing all things to work together for your good. Neither can you lay hold of the **strength in suffering** that we spoke about earlier, because that strength only comes as a gift of God's grace to us in Christ. Because of that, you have no reason to be **joyful in suffering**, because apart from Christ, all suffering in this life has no redemptive value, but is only a faint whisper of the flood of judgment that awaits you upon your death. And outside of Christ, weakness is just weakness. There is no divine strength in weakness except as it is given in union with the only Savior of the World.

This, dear sinner, is a sad, most miserable state of affairs. To be destitute of all the comforts and consolations that the Scripture so graciously assures Christ's people, and to look forward to nothing but the fires of eternal punishment and the darkness of divine abandonment! As the Scriptures say, to be without God is to be without *hope* in this world (Eph 2:12). And yet, dear friend, there *is* hope! There is *good news* for you! This miserable state of affairs is not set in stone! There is still time! These blessings that you lack are not all together outside of your reach, because—wonder of wonders—Christ is not outside of your reach! He offers Himself to you this very day!

Friend, you're in this state of condemnation before God because you've sinned against Him. You've broken His law. You have not loved Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You have not loved your neighbor as yourself. You're not a good person; you're a sinner just like the rest of us, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And there's nothing you can do to pay God back for your sins: no sacrifice to offer, no duty to perform to earn your righteousness before Him.

But, my friend, Jesus has come! Fully God and fully Man, He lived the perfect life of obedience to God's law that you have failed to live. The life that was demanded of you, He lived in the place of sinners. And the death that you are required to die as the eternal penalty for your sin—

Jesus died that death. The Father made the Son who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf—to be crushed under the weight of divine wrath as He bore our sins in His body on the cross—so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. On the cross, the Father treated the Son as if He lived your life of sin, so that now He can justly treat you as if you lived Jesus' life of perfect righteousness.

And the means by which you lay hold of that forgiveness and that righteousness is turn from your sins and put your trust in Jesus—to abandon all confidence of securing your own righteousness by your own good works, and to trust in the perfect sufficiency of the doing and the dying of Jesus. Repent of your sins! Lay hold of Christ through faith alone! And find in Him every spiritual blessing that there is to know!