

Vital Supplement for Spiritual Vitality

WHY SHOULD GOD REMOVE YOUR AFFLICTIONS?

2 Corinthians 12:7-8

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This is part 1 of my first lesson on “Popular Promises of God Uncommonly Understood” whereby I explore popular promises of Scripture. This first lesson comes from my study of a passage we hold dear: **2 Corinthians 12:7-10**. In this passage Jesus responds to Paul’s request to remove his on-going affliction that was given to him by saying: *My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.* ~ Second Corinthians 12:9.

What do you do when you are hit hard by affliction?

In years past many of us imagine life to be filled this with optimism and sentimentalism... something I describe as the “Kinkade life.” We will live in beautiful homes near water streams, flowers always in bloom, and lazy afternoons sipping on refreshments with dear friends. Sunlight is shimmering all around. But does that kind of sentimentalism ignore what is real, counter to the way reality actually is? Then when our optimism and sentimentalism is crushed by reality, what do many of us do? We turn to diversion, soaking ourselves into some addiction, some pleasure or/and victimization mindset where we hunger, if not demand entitlements. The world owes this to me for my pain!

Then some of us go on to fabricate another “Kinkade world” with “the grass is greener on the other side” syndrome in an effort to escape the blows we faced, the fallen expectations, and shattered dreams. While there is nothing wrong with a positive outlook and taking a “breather” from our troubles, positivism and sentimentalism become a problem when we ignore reality, refusing to face the way things actually are head on. Let me put it this way. The fact of the matter is that **all of us are suffering**.

In 2 Corinthians chapters 10-13 we find the Apostle Paul defending his apostolic authority against false teachers in the Corinthian church. Within that context we have chapter 12:6-10 where we find the apostle claiming that he was “*caught*” up into heaven. God does that just prior to pivotal events in His guidance of human history. God met Moses on Mt. Sinai. Moses and Elijah came down to meet with Jesus at His transfiguration. John was asked to write the final book in the soon to be called Canon, disclosing to the world what is yet to come. Here, Paul is transported to heaven just prior to his missionary journeys where he will begin spreading the good news of Jesus

Christ to pagan Gentiles and plant churches among them. But something happens, perhaps unexpectedly in his life. Paul is ever so careful to draw attention away from himself to God in view of the experiences he has had. He wanted to make sure that others do not exalt him. But who would save Paul from himself? Evidently, Paul had a disposition that could promote arrogance, conceit, or pride within. That is not too difficult to believe not only because of his incredible privileges and experiences, but also because the possibility is so ever real in our own lives. The satanic counterfeit kingdom and the indulgences of our fallen nature use God-given blessings to try to exalt ourselves over the God of the Universe. How pitiful we are!

Therefore, 2 Cor. 12:7 reveals that lest Paul become arrogant in view of all the privileges and experiences he had and will have, he was given a “thorn of flesh,” that is, some affliction that was ever present for the remainder of his physical life. Notice that that affliction was “**given to him.**” In contrast, so many of our afflictions can be explained in reference to our free choices. For example, abusing our bodies can result in sickness, & chronic afflictions. Some afflictions are brought on indirectly by free choice. The choice to be lazy can result in poor health. Some afflictions result from our free choice as in the case when my wife beats me. Some afflictions are caused indirectly because of our free choice. Alcoholism can lead to poverty of one’s children. So this affliction was given to him and this is important to note because it is God who ultimately sent this affliction to him. From Job we learn that God is sovereign. He takes what Satan does and turns it around for His noble purposes. In Paul’s case, what Satan intended for bad, God used it for good, by keeping him from becoming conceited in order to be what God wanted him to be.

Verse 8 reveals that that the apostle Paul pleads to the One who ultimately gave him the affliction in the first place. I find this verse striking. Here the Apostle Paul pleads to the One who ultimately gave it to him in the first place. I take it that the apostle Paul realized this to be the case which I think makes the prayer much more enriching! Three times he earnestly asks the Lord to completely remove an affliction that was tormenting him.

How does the Lord respond to Paul’s earnest request? The Lord simply states in verse 9, “***My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.***” But notice...the Lord did not answer his prayer! The Lord does not remove the affliction! The Lord did not promise that He would one day remove the affliction! He did not say to him that once he shares the gospel to the Roman Emperor, once he establishes churches among pagan Gentiles, once he goes on his fourth missionary journey, he will then remove it from him! The Lord does not even offer to alleviate or dull his

affliction. There is no temporary relief whatsoever. **In that respect, the apostle's prayers went unanswered.**

While the apostle's request was not granted, take a moment and consider who says this amazing statement to him: Jesus Christ. Here is the person who also prayed three times in the Garden of Gethsemane, *"If it is your will, please take this cup from me."* This is the same Jesus Christ who faced the torture, the humiliation, the cross. This is the same Christ who called out to God on while nailed to the cross, *"My God, my God why have you forsaken me!"* Jesus has been resurrected. Now, where is Jesus! He is in heaven! He's at the right hand of the Father (Phil. 2:5-11). In fact, we learn some years later by the Apostle John, who also had the opportunity to see Christ (Revelation 1:9-18), that he is clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair *were* white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet *were* like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance *was* like the sun shining in its strength. In his possession are the keys to death and Hades.

Therefore, why should God remove your affliction? He did not do it for Jesus and He did not do it for the Apostle Paul. In those two cases God deemed it best for them go through those afflictions (Phil. 2:5-11)! What benefits came from such afflictions! Jesus saved us from our sins and Paul generated a legacy that was unstoppable for His glory and His glory alone!

When God does not remove an affliction that He gave to you, I want you to remember what the apostle Paul discovered:

1. Afflictions remind us of our frailties. The apostle Paul evidently had a propensity for pride. In order to best represent God's interests, God deemed it best for him to have this thorn in his flesh.

2. Afflictions expose what is hidden. The apostle Paul went out of his way to make sure that people would not exalt him because of his privileges and experiences. But the apostle Paul candidly reveals that this affliction was meant to keep him from exalting himself.

3. Afflictions are used to shape us into the representatives God wants us to be. This affliction shaped the apostle Paul by not only keeping his pride down, but was used by God to shape him... to move him unto dependence upon God. Likewise, pain is the universal leveler. It works differently in everyone's life but is intended to do what success, pleasures, and recreational escapes could not do!

Afflictions remind us that we are vaporous (e.g., Psalm 90; Ecclesiastes). We are like steam from a hot cup of coffee; here today, gone tomorrow.

Afflictions give us opportunities to represent Christ in ways that were not opened to us before. Not only does the apostle use this affliction in his apostolic defense, but he now boasts in his affliction!

When we attempt to explore why we have these afflictions let us not forget to ask this question: **"Why do we not have more?"**

If you are facing an affliction, whether physical, emotional, or/and spiritual, then earnestly pray to God! Give it to Him! Beseech Him! There is nothing wrong with that! In fact, it is the right thing to do! But if God does not remove your affliction, then realize that on the basis of God's goodness and sovereignty, for some reason it may very well be for your best interest! Unlike the apostle Paul, we may never know why God gave us this affliction! But He does and I can trust him! God does not do things unplanned or not well thought-out. God is not impulsive, disorganized, or has anything to prove. God is not childish, selfish, and vindictive. For some reason this affliction is God's best for us even if we or others do not see it!

Many of us think that because God is all-loving, He is obligated to do every loving thing possible which includes removing our afflictions. But this is an incorrect assessment of God's obligations. For example, it would be very loving for God to make us all multi-millionaires, but God is not obligated to do it. So, God's love does not obligate Him to do every loving thing possible. Rather, everything He chooses to do (though he isn't obligated to do everything he can do) must exhibit His perfection of love. As to God's grace, at most it means that the thing He chooses to do will exhibit grace, but even here we must be careful. Grace is defined as undeserved favor...something never owed. So we can hardly demand that God act graciously toward us. The basic point is that before we get angry with God for failing to remove our afflictions, on the basis of his character, we must be sure that we understand what He is obligated to do.

Ask yourself: "Is the reason why I'm experiencing this is because there would be a propensity in me to lift myself up...to exalt myself?" But then again, when Jesus prayed that this cup would pass from Him, God did not deliver Him. But he did minister to Him as He led him to the cross.

But let me ask you this question? Was Christ's death on the cross intended for Him? No, it was intended for us! Was the shedding of His blood for him? No, it was meant for us! Likewise, I suspect that some of our afflictions are

not meant for us at all. Rather, in some mysterious way, they are meant for others to see, to learn from, to be puzzled by, and consider the God you know and with whom you walk ...to cause them to consider the greatness of your God in the midst of your suffering. There are greater purposes at work of which we do not see! We simply do not recognize the eternal significance of our afflictions!

In conclusion, pursue Him! Follow hard after Him! Look to Him! Imitate Him! Receive all that He has for you in the midst of your affliction not only tells people something about you, it also *says a lot about Him!*

Final Thought:

Earnestly strive to see your affliction through Jesus Christ who best understands it. If we don't see our affliction through Him who suffered and died for us, then I suspect we will never see the affliction we experience God's way.