

Vital Supplement for Spiritual Vitality
MY AFFLICTION AND GOD'S ANSWER
2 Corinthians 12:9-10
Rev. Paul R. Shockley ©

This is part 2 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.

Last Time: From our first lesson we asked the question, “What do you do when you are hit hard by affliction?” Though we do not know what the affliction was for the Apostle Paul, we do know it was real, painful, and on-going. Though we recognize the affliction was ultimately given to him by God (Job), Paul earnestly prayed to God three times to remove it. The Lord did not answer his request. Why? Because God knows that the apostle Paul would develop a propensity to exalt himself if he did not have this affliction. Therefore, the “thorn in the flesh” was preventive in measure in order to use the apostle in the most spectacular way. His four missionary journeys testify to that legacy, one that ripples even in today’s world.

Why should God remove your affliction (s)? God may allow you to be afflicted by some problem in order that you may be maximized for *His glory*, consistently dependent upon Him. Like the apostle Paul, the infliction may be preventive in nature. Therefore, if God does not remove your affliction, then **earnestly strive to see your affliction through Jesus Christ who best understands it. God did not spare His son. Instead, God led Jesus to Calvary. 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.**

This time: How did Jesus respond to Paul’s request? This glorified Christ, whose countenance shines like the sun yet bears the scars on his hands and feet, the one whose name is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, yet whose request was not honored by God the Father when He was in the Garden of Gethsamene, the One who never sinned yet became sin, the Son who enjoyed inseparable fellowship with the others members of the Trinity, yet called out on the cross on Golgotha, “**My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me!**” replies to Paul with these words: “**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.**”

Notice that Jesus’ words were not condemnatory. He did not chastise him for a prayer about himself! Nor did Jesus chastise him for praying three times about himself. This is important to note because it is not wrong to ask God to take our afflictions away. In fact, it is the proper thing to do. So, I say to you, no matter how little or unimportant your problems are, ask God.

One of my very best friends, who own a business, often wears this t-shirt that says, “*Let me drop what I’m doing to work on your problem!*” We have some good laughs teasing him about it. But this shirt points to something we need to explore! Many of us feel guilty to ask God to deal with our problems because there are a lot of other people who have problems worse than ours. Why would we want to bother God with our little petty problems? He’s too busy! Indeed, there are people who going through some horrific afflictions that pale in comparison to what we might be experiencing.

But I declare to you that it is proper to take ALL your requests to God, all your burdens, all your afflictions, no matter how insignificant they appear to you or to others. Here’s why. God is omnipotent. He can handle it! He can work on the famine problem while working on your arthritis problem. He can work on your car while convicting the hearts of those who commit social injustice. In contrast, when we do not take all our problems to him in prayer, thinking He’s too busy to deal with our problems while dealing with so many others that are a lot worse than ours, **we are courting the idea that He is not all-powerful.** Every year asked Hannah asked God to remove her affliction of barrenness and finally He did. Samuel was born!

Therefore, Paul was not rebuked by Jesus for his earnest prayer. You should not be as well! Don’t allow anyone to rebuke for praying! Do not rebuke yourself either! At the same time I invite you to examine the motives of your prayer life and reflect upon what your prayers say about God and what they say about you. Why? Our prayer requests can be so self-serving. I’m just glad that He answers prayers based upon His infinite perfections like omniscience and perfect love. At all points He knows everything about us and will honor requests that have our best interests at heart in knowing Him, following Him, and conforming to His Son’s image for His glory. **Agape love** is the commitment of the will to the true good of another person.

But why pray if God knows everything already. Indeed, this is one of the great paradoxes in the spiritual life. On one hand, God wants us to talk to Him about everything that is going on in our lives, no matter how small or great, even though our omniscient God knows everything. So why pray? My favorite response to the question is by Charles Swindoll. His answer to that question is because “prayer changes us.” R. A. Torrey also offers additional insight on why we should pray if God already knows everything: (1) Because

there is a devil, and prayer is a God-appointed way to resist Him (Eph. 6:12-13, 18) (2) Because prayer is God's way for us to obtain what we need from Him (Luke 11:3-13; Jas. 4:2); (3) Because prayer is the means God has appointed for us to find "grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16); (4) Because prayer with thanksgiving is God's way for us to obtain freedom from anxiety and to receive "the peace of God" (Phil. 4:6-7); (5) We are commanded to pray without ceasing: 1 Thessalonians 5:17.¹

As we discovered Jesus did not answer the prayer Paul prayed. But did that mean that Paul had some dark hidden sin that kept God from answering this prayer? Was God chastising Paul about some sin he was secretly cultivating? No, the thorn in the flesh was preventive in measure! We can be so earnest in our walk, walking passionately and diligently with Him, know and do all the right things, and God just is not going to answer certain prayers, no matter how well meaning, how "doctrinal" we are, or how mature we are in our Christian faith. Once again, God has purposes that go beyond the realm of understanding. We have to trust Him!

Now when this post-resurrection, post-ascension Son of God replied to Paul's request, he said, "*My grace is sufficient for you,*" is basically saying, "My favor, my love, my blessing is enough for you!" The word, "grace," is often used by Paul to mean being "justified freely by His grace" refers to the forgiveness of sin and reconciliation to a holy God. But here it is more than just undeserved favor. Used similarly in 2 Corinthians 13:14, "grace" is being used to refer to Jesus' favor, blessing, and goodness. Coupled with the word, "sufficient," which denotes "contentment," Jesus' favor provides all the contentment that the apostle Paul needs. So, we can translate it to say, "My love, my favor, my blessing is completely adequate for you!"

Once again, who is saying this to Paul? Jesus, the Son of God! Now it would be different if this person was duplicitous, unstable, or imperfect. No, this is the infinite perfect God, who is infinite love, saying "My love is enough for you!" These are the words of Christ!

If it is true that God can never love us anymore than He does right now, then it is only logical to assume that this "thorn" God allowed, was given in love. Somehow the love, the grace, the favor, was intertwined with the thorn. To remove the thorn would be to remove God's best for Paul's life. As always, God was proven right! Paul's life was used and he finished well. He was faithful to the very end in spite of and because of the thorn.

¹ Our Daily Bread, November 25, 1998

Why is Jesus' love enough for Paul?" Because it is in weakness that the Lord is glorified! Asked differently, "**How is My strength is made perfect in weakness?" Jesus' power is carried through to its completion when you are incapacitated" (Phil. 4:10-13).** See, the weaker Paul is the more conspicuous is His strength in sustaining and delivering him! When you are afflicted, serving God, it becomes evident to all who bear witness to you that you could not do it! He has to do it through you! Therefore, we need to understand the afflictions God may give us are used to demonstrate God's power through our lives. He must do it. If it is not clear that it is Him doing it, then we may take credit for it or someone else credits us for it. In fact, Paul offers this is as another reason why he is an apostle! It is like saying, "Corinthian church, if it were up to me, I could not do what I do. "Weakness is the hallmark of apostleship!"²

Weakness is the condition for Him manifesting his power through us. How does Paul respond when he understand that it is in weakness that He is enabled! It is in weakness that God's power becomes evident and brought to its fulfillment: "**Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities [weaknesses] that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.**"

Because of this, Paul is declaring that he will rejoice in his infirmities. Paul's heart is to see God's purposes, presence, and activities take place in, through, and all around his life (Phil. 1).

Now notice how Paul immediately moves from a certain "**thorn in his flesh**" to all sorts of "**infirmities**" or "**weaknesses.**" Verse 10 reveals that he is now thinking about all sorts of problems including insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for which he will boast in the Lord! Then realizing that it is all about Christ, about Him being glorified, and definitely not about exalting himself, Paul says, "**For the sake of Christ.**" He got it, ladies and gentlemen! It is all about Him! Be ever so weary when a ministry is all about the pastor! It is never about the pastor. It is always about Jesus!

Therefore, the apostle is declaring that he would glory in his weaknesses than seek deliverance. Why? Because those weaknesses become conduits of Christ's glory! In fact, Paul says, "**Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.**" In other words, I glory in my weaknesses so that the power of Christ

² Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians: The Anchor Bible*, 550.

may possess me, that is, work through me! Paul is being very rational. **He understands that the condition for the manifestation of God's power is human weakness because God wants the glory for all that He does.**

In summary, the plain fact of this passage is that Christ is telling Paul that my power will only be manifested in your weaknesses! So, if you want you to accomplish His work, this affliction may need to remain!

This passage becomes applicable to us because this the condition for which God has laid out if we want to be used by Him. When you encounter insults, distress, persecutions, difficulties, or have afflictions given to you, instead of seeing them from a victimized mindset or rushing off in order to try to escape from them, look at them as opportunities to depend upon the Lord. **“For when you are weak, then you are strong.”** If you wallow in your problems, Satan has you! You will be ineffective as a servant-leader. God will use your weaknesses in order to glorify Himself. He wants the credit, not you.

Are you satisfied in resigning yourself under suffering, saying something like, “Well, God, I guess this is your will. I don't like all these problems, but I will get use to it.” Do you think it is merely a great accomplishment to bring yourself to submit to sovereignty in view of your problems...is that what God is asking of you? Could it be that God is using the limitations, the distresses, and the pain, inviting you to be used by Him? “I want you to see great activities of my work but you have to decrease, you have to become dust, because I will not allow you to take credit, to receive glory for my work? It has to be obvious that it is not about you; it is about God! You are only an earthly clay pot, He is God! So, with each affliction, each problem, I wonder if God is trying to get your attention, to invite you to become part of His work.

Do you look at problems as only a bad thing? For the Apostle Paul, Christ's answer not only comforted him, but enabled him to rejoice in them for it was the highest honor to suffer so that He might be glorified? In fact, his sufferings became a source of joy because they provided the opportunity to manifest the power of Christ.

Do you? Do you think it is the highest honor to suffer so God may use you to fulfill His purposes for His glory? When you are empty of “me, myself, and I,” then will you be in a position to be greatly used by God. Charles Spurgeon put it this way: “When God wants to do an impossible task, He takes an impossible man and breaks him. “We are but men, frail, feeble, and apt to faint.”

God took Joseph's problems, used him in a palace, and saved his family. God took Moses' difficulties from his time in Egypt and delivered His people. God took Naomi through a whirlwind of troubles, losing her home, her husband, and both of her sons to the point that she renamed herself “bitterness.” Yet through these afflictions a Gentile was introduced and the line of Israel's greatest king was born: David! A man born blind was healed by Jesus to testify to His power! John 9:1-3. God took Paul's infirmities and used him to spread the Gospel. God took John's exile and used him to write the Book of Revelation. God took Jesus and nailed him to a cross to deliver us from our sin.

God wants to use you! But you will have to come to the end of yourself, saying, *“not I, but you, Lord!”* Take me and all my problems. Cause me to decrease that you might increase! But let us beware of trying to pay God off in order to allow ourselves to be used by Him on our terms. God must do everything for us. King Saul's subversive efforts did not pay off. God knows the human heart! He sees all! God not only wants the best parts, He wants it all. Confess your sins! Make God your singular ambition!

To be sure, glorying in our weaknesses is tough but powerful. But when his work reaches completion in your sphere of influence, you will mightily testify to the power of God. Sure, your pain may not ever subside, but I suspect it will not be the center of your attention when He uses you to touch hurting hearts, comfort those in mourning, bear witness to God's saving work in the lives of others, see sheer evil wickedness exchanged for God's peace. So the opportunity lies before you? Will you take up such a life with all the afflictions you possess?

In closing, consider this prayer I adapted from A. W. Tozer's, *Pursuit of God*:

Lord, how excellent are your ways, and how devious and dark are ours. Show us how to die that we may rise again to newness of life in our daily experience. Rend the veil of our self-centered ways from the top down as you tore the veil of the Temple. May we draw near in full assurance of faith no matter how difficult our overwhelming our afflictions may be! May we so intimately walk with you in how we live, in moment-by-moment living, that we become accustomed to your glory. When that moment comes that we depart earth for heaven, may there be no regrets for the life we lived here on earth. In Jesus' name, Amen!