

Prayer in Afflictions – 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

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Introduction

Pain and suffering – does anyone here have any? You might say, “Well, let me tell you about the troubles I face...”

Yes, in this Christian life we experience and observe and help others with affliction. And most of the time, nothing consistently leads us to prayer more urgently and consistently than our afflictions. During these times, we need God and we need him fast and often.

Although the prayer in affliction has much in common with other prayers, it is also distinctly different. It is often placed in deep distress and with much pleading. And often times, sent heavenward when we are not at our best or at our lowest. We come to God with much fear and with doubt and questions over our relationship to Him. Perhaps we come angry and demanding, forgetting who God is and what He has done and is doing for us. We come to God fatigued, frail, and possibly sick because of our particular affliction.

As it concerns one another, we often face chronic suffering alone. Besides, who wants to be a burden and sound like a complainer all of the time? Now this is a choice, but there is a reality to suffering alone; others can easily forget in the busyness of life and we forget their afflictions as well.

And when afflicted, we are apt to come to God in a state of shock or disbelief that it this is happening to us, forgetting that suffering is a normal feature of the Christian life. Remember what the Word tells us in 1 Peter 4:1, *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s suffering, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed.”* Peter reminds us not to be surprised but then we are surprised all over again by the remedy, which is to rejoice. Really? How is that possible? And therein lies the problem; our prayer of affliction may be afflicted itself, limited to only asking God for a fast and total removal of the problem.

But might God have different objectives for us in times of affliction? And might we have the wrong priorities when praying during these times? This can be a hard teaching but one which will expand our understanding of God and what He is doing and will bless our lives in its application.

The Setting

As we consider praying under affliction, there are a number of places in Scripture we can go but perhaps there is no better place than 2 Corinthians 12. So please turn with me there...

We are beginning at the end of letter of which up to this point Paul has described his apostolic ministry and the Christian life; one of suffering and weakness which seeks its comfort from God (1:3-4) and that draws its sufficiency from God in Christ (3:5), and one that is not of the letter but the Spirit (3:6) – one lived out in jars of clay containing the glory of God and demonstrating its surpassing power belongs to

God and not to us (4:7). He also describes a ministry of reconciliation given by God to be ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through him and us, a call to be holy, and an encouragement to give generously pointing to the Macedonian church as an example of those who gave through a severe test of affliction and extreme poverty (8:1-2).

And throughout the letter there is lurking in the background the constant presence of the false apostles and teachers who were wreaking havoc in the Corinthian church and against whom Paul was continually defending the church and his ministry. Beginning in chapter 10, the letter takes on a greater intensity as Paul turns his full attention to these false teachers – those he described as deceitful workmen, who heralded themselves as apostles and servants of righteousness but who were actually servants of Satan (11:12-15)

His defense against them consisted of some boasting of his own – boasting done with great reluctance and for which he asks the church their permission to indulge. His boasting is bounded by his influence over them and highlights his betrothal of them through the one true gospel, his not accepting financial support from them, the false teachers working on different terms than those of he and the true apostles, his heritage (a Hebrew, an Israelite, the offspring of Abraham, and a servant of Christ), and with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. He then goes on to describe the suffering, dangers, toil, hardship, sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, exposure, and constant anxiety over the state of the churches. In all of these things he boasted for they demonstrated his weakness – he was even let down in a basket at Damascus.

A Great Privilege (12:1-6)

And as if that was not enough to defend his ministry, Paul boasts of one more thing – a privileged experience of which he boasts in a different way that we might expect. In 12:1-6 we read:

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— ⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— ⁶ though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.

This last point of boasting for Paul is significant – significant because Paul is given perhaps the ultimate honor from the Lord. He is taken to paradise during his earthly life where he was allowed to see the throne of God, Christ himself, the angels, the saints, and all the things of heaven. He was allowed to hear divine words spoken only in heaven and that cannot be shared on earth among mortal and sinful man. Now Paul had been given visions before – he witnessed the risen Christ at his conversion (Acts 9 and 22) and had been encouraged in his ministry multiple times by them (Acts 16, 18, 23). He had also been given a profound understanding of great spiritual truths as recorded in his letters. The mysteries of

God were not new to Paul. This was a great honor though – so great that Paul was not even sure he went in his body or in spirit only. Could any false apostle or teacher claim such an experience?

But Paul did not see it this way. He thought boasting of such an experience was a vain exercise. He speaks in the third person – a person for whom he boasts but not for himself. Now he would not have been wrong to boast for it was the truth – the Lord had taken him to heaven for a time. It was true. He could have easily spoken of this experience among men over the course of his ministry and probably could have used it to elevate himself and draw a far greater following. The experience and honor of such a revelation was far greater than any of which a man could boast but Paul knew he was only a fallen man with a sin nature just like all men. He did not want anyone to see himself as more than who they saw on earth and among them in ministry. He only wanted to extend the defense of his ministry by highlighting his weaknesses. For in them, he discovered something far greater in them.

A Painful Safeguard (12:7)

Now Paul did not come to this conclusion on his own as we read in verse 7:

⁷So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations,^[a] a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

Pride is a huge temptation for sinful man and is typically at the root of most sin. Paul was no different. And after having been given such a great honor, Paul was vulnerable to great pride. To keep him from becoming conceited, Christ allowed him to be afflicted with a thorn in the flesh. We are not told the nature of this thorn – the bible does not tell us. Some think it may have been a psychological struggle, a person or persons perhaps the false teachers, demonic harassment, or a physical ailment. It seems the best explanation is that it was a physical affliction since the verse says it was given him “in the flesh”. But we do not know with certainty and that is probably a good thing. Why? Because if we knew its exact nature, we might begin to do our own comparison of each other’s afflictions and then judge others and Paul relative to our own problems. Can you see how that might go? Paul had a bad foot but my entire leg does not work – look at me! And Sally needs to stop complaining about her chronic sore wrist because it does not even compare to my leg and on and on...I can see how our prayer requests might read. In this sinful flesh, we cannot be trusted!

So we know the thorn was painful and that Satan had a hand in continually aggravating it. But through it, Christ protected Paul. It was not what he wanted but it was what he needed. In fact, it was a gift – all Christians have benefited from Paul’s resulting ministry. Therefore, you can say it was a gift to us as well.

A Plea for Removal (12:8)

In this final argument of his “boastful” defense, Paul now shares his prayer fourteen years ago – one borne of a great affliction. We read verse 8:

⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

Paul's prayer is simple, "Remove it Lord!" In doing so, he is on firm theological ground. First of all, we are to bring all of our requests to God no matter what they involve – it is an expression of trust in Him. And we know that He hears the prayers of His people for He tells us so. And Paul could ask for removal of this thorn or any source of affliction – many examples are given in the Scriptures not the least of which is the Lord Himself in the Garden, asking that the cup be removed from Him if it be His Father's will. Paul sought comfort from his God and asked that God might provide it in His wise and gracious measure. And this request is made even though he recognized in full or in part that God was using the thorn for his good – it is still right to ask.

And it is right to plead with God – again we have many godly examples given in Scripture. But notice he did not demand removal of the thorn. There is no biblical authorization for making demands of the Lord. It is also ok to ask repeatedly as Paul did. Jesus teaches His people to pray not only reverently but with persistence. Paul is simply following his Lord's teaching and example.

Also notice from verse 7 that although Paul recognizes God gave him the affliction and was accomplishing something through this thorn (prevention from sin), he still prayed for its removal. And once again, he had the example of Christ Himself who asked in the garden for removal of what lied ahead.

So on the occasion of this prayer fourteen years ago, Paul was weak – weakened by a thorn given to him in the flesh to keep him from the sin of conceit – a temptation made possible for a man with a sin nature possessing revelations from heaven itself. This affliction was painful and limiting. As a result, Paul pleaded with Christ for its removal. It placed him in a weak and vulnerable position. And as we read on, it was precisely where Christ wanted him. And keep in mind, that this account is part of the overall argument Paul is making to defend his apostolic credentials.

A Surprising Answer Given (12:9a)

⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

So the Lord heard Paul's prayer and removed the thorn – well, not quite. Instead the Lord gave Paul an answer far different that he might have expected. He said, "My grace is sufficient for you". In other words, He says, "my provision, my love and the Holy Spirit in you is enough whenever and wherever you may need it. It has been enough in the past and it is operating presently. I am not going to give you a full explanation but instead I give you a promise. Paul, you have my loving favor in all things – my grace meets your need in affliction and it will be sufficient."

What Paul knew in theory about the Lord and His grace would now need to be learned by experience.¹

¹ A.W. Pink, *Gleanings from Paul*

Then the Lord gives His reason why His grace and favor are all-sufficient. It is not that Paul's suffering will end, rather in Paul's weakness, something will happen. The Lord's strength will be revealed – moment by moment coming to its full energy and complete operation. It will be made perfect in Paul. It seemed to Paul that this thorn might be the beginning of the end for him or at the very least be the one thing that limited him from finishing his mission for the Lord so therefore it must be removed. But the Lord said, "No, it is the beginning – you are just getting started Paul – now I can work in you – your weakness is the condition whereby my strength can be manifested – it is game on!"

And I think we have to conclude that Paul had a very fruitful fourteen years; taking the gospel to the Gentiles and turning their world upside down, planting churches all over the Mediterranean, and laying down the much of the New Testament Scriptures and all done in the power of God - not a bad run. The weakness of Paul proved the strength of God and was the stage for perfecting and demonstrating the Lord's power – it is the theme of chapter 12 and the core of Paul's defense throughout the letter to the Corinthians.

A Grace Enabled Response (12:9b-10)

And then with a "Therefore" in verse nine, Paul reveals what he has learned over these years. No mention is made of the Lord not removing his thorn of affliction. We can be sure it still remained and the messenger of Satan still harassed him. But Paul's desire for deliverance had been replaced by a far higher priority which was to boast even more on account of his weaknesses. Paul asked for removal but the Lord gave him transformation instead. Paul's outlook on his situation changed dramatically - he would now rather gladly surrender to his affliction for something far greater.

It is important to note that he took no peculiar delight in the suffering itself – who would? But rather the suffering, weakness, and sense of dependence were a source of such pleasure. And what was his motive? Well, it was that, "the power of Christ may rest upon him." It was that the Lord and His power would take up residence in him. Do not miss the Old Testament allusion; this was the Shekinah Glory residing in the Holy of Holies of the Tent of Meeting, this was the Christ, working within Paul's tent or clay pot and giving him aid.

Paul's motive for glad boasting in his weaknesses was rational. It was not to suffer for the sake of suffering. His motive had an object and it was Christ's power resting upon and in him. In his weakness God would be present and therefore conditions would be right for God's power to be manifested. There could be no loftier motivation for glad suffering.

Paul takes his motive in verse 9 slightly further in verse 10. "For the sake of Christ" and for all that the Lord is working to accomplish, Paul is content with his present and future afflictions whether they be weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities – he takes a divine enabled pleasure in all of them. Again, he took no pleasure in the sufferings themselves nor did he draw contentment in those sufferings brought on by his own sin and foolishness (self inflicted) but in those God allowed into his life for Paul's good and for God's glory.

Paul then brings the account of his prayer for deliverance and his overall defense of his ministry to a close with, *“For when I am weak, then I am strong.”* To be weak is to see our total inadequacy to do and be who we ought to be and to cry out to the Lord, the One of Strength. To be weak is to be emptied of self and look only to God to be filled. To be weak is to be conscious of it and ask the Lord to provide (wisdom, strength, etc) and to recognize unbelief and ask for increased faith. We can then be filled with God and appropriate Christ’s strength so that we can say with Paul, *“then I am strong.”*

Sounds easy, right? Well, not always. Note that Paul did not just speak of his weakness only. He was not simply talking about the fact that he was weak and stopping there. For Paul there was no advantage in only being conscious of his insufficiency – he took hold of Christ’s total sufficiency so that he might be strong. He did not fall into the self-absorbing *“Woe is me”* trap or adopt the self-sufficient attitude of *“I will take it from here”* but appropriated the strength of Christ in his weakness so that he might be strong. As a result, he accepted his afflictions, was content with them, and even gloried in them – a transformed man by God’s sufficient grace.

Charles Hodge said this, *“Those who think they can change their own hearts, atone for their own sins, subdue the power of evil in their own souls or in the souls of others, who feel able to sustain themselves under affliction, God leaves to their own resources. But when they feel and acknowledge their weakness, he imparts divine strength to them.”*²

And do you see Paul’s praise? He is glad in his weakness and content and pleased to suffer for Christ’s sake. He is glorying not in his suffering but in his transformed condition – one that sees Christ’s presence with him – perfect communion and fellowship with His Lord. These weaknesses and afflictions which, at first glance had the potential to cripple him, afforded him the opportunity to glorify God in his life and to make him strong with His strength – all of this despite the fact that Paul was utterly inadequate in and of himself to be anything or to do anything. So whatever tragic weakness or affliction that would come to Paul, would be turned to triumph.

Our Prayer under Affliction – Reflect and Respond

Now Paul’s prayer of affliction is short but given its context, the Lord’s answer, and Paul’s response, there is much to learn and apply. So how might it shape or reshape our prayer priorities when under affliction?

First off, when afflicted we often pray with wrong priorities and miss the bigger picture. Our first priority is almost always is to ask God to remove the affliction and remove it immediately. And when he does not, we continue to ask the same thing repeatedly without considering that God may be saying “no” or “not yet” because He is doing something more in the situation. Now it is not wrong to plead with God for its removal from ourselves and others. It is biblical and we just saw Paul do it. By all means, pray for its removal, for we do not know what God might do. But at the same time, let us recognize that God might be doing something else altogether.

² Charles Hodge, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Crossway Classic Commentaries*, ed. by Alistair McGrath and J.I. Packer (Wheaton, Crossway Books, 1995), p. 222.

You see **God has varying purposes for us in affliction that we often cannot see.** The spiritual and eternal is far more important to God than any temporary, earthly affliction we may obtain. Therefore, some affliction is often permitted into our lives to keep us from sin or from harm. Have you ever you looked back on suffering in the past and thanked God for it now because you can see its effect was to protect you from sin or even more sin? And at times, he afflicts us just to keep us close to Him at all times, dependent, and trusting far more than we would have otherwise. And sometimes He allows affliction in our lives so that He might show a particular comfort to us when we turn to Him when we seek him for help – a comfort that we might later share with someone else who goes through the same suffering as we did – think persecution by unbelieving family members, the loss of child, the prodigal son or daughter, the chronic pain and illness, the job loss and difficulty in making ends meet, the difficult spouse, the intense care of an elderly parent in their last years, and the list goes on and on. Remember 2 Corinthians 1:3-11.

Affliction is part of the Christian life the Bible tells us – do not be surprised. But you might say, “That is depressing, how can I hold up under such constant duress? Is this all there is to this life?” Well, actually no. **God knows how to give us the right mix of difficulties and blessing.** I have noticed more and more how when there is much difficulty in my life, the Lord brings new joys often from directions and sources I never expected.

So God does not always answer our prayers according to what we want and think and that is good. God knows best. Romans 8:26 tells us that, “we do not know what to pray for as we ought.” We ask for the transitory, He gives the eternal, we ask for deliverance, He gives patience and grace, we ask according to our will, He answers for our good. So do not lose heart if your prayers are not answered exactly. Our God knows the big picture.

God may say “no” when we pray for deliverance but does not leave us there. **He then supplies sufficient and sustaining grace** – not a saving grace but a freshly given and reviving grace – a grace that stirs us up with new vigor. And it is sufficient for the present and the future. Perhaps right now you do not believe this in what you are facing but consider this: Is not the God who gave you saving grace, a grace which paid for our all sins and spared us from eternal death and hell, capable of saving you from the relatively small and temporary trials of this life?

We need only to submit to His will and trust Him in our situation. For in the midst of our afflictions is where the “rubber hits the road” in our walk with the Lord – often an occasion when we fall down. But we can pray about this as well. We can pray that His grace will bring us to trust and to a hope filled submission in the affliction. And we can pray that God would give our brother and sister these same things as well.

Might praying for His sufficient grace, whether for ourselves or one another, be a high priority? Might we ask the Lord for this enduring grace regardless of the outcome of our affliction? Who knows how

God will answer our prayer? But this we do know: the giver of the thorn is also the giver of the grace to endure it.³

Now if we stop at praying only for a simple submission and acceptance of affliction, we fall short of hearing Paul's experience in this passage.

This is where the Lord brought Paul but His grace took Him even further. You see it is one thing to trust and submit to God in our affliction but **His grace takes us to another level when we find ourselves filled with pleasure and contentment at the moment when we realize we are truly weak and inadequate.** His grace rises to another level when we see our motive for gladly facing weakness and affliction is that Christ will be glorified in us through it. And His grace rises to another level when we see the awesome power of the Lord Jesus Christ take up residence and be on display in us (these clay pots) in the midst of our affliction. Believers are then encouraged and praise God, unbelievers are amazed, and the spiritual world shudders at the power of our God.

And if so, might we pray for these things to be? Might we look to shape our prayer of affliction to God so that He would be on display regardless of the earthly outcome for us?

Then let us pray for more grace in affliction and make certain Christ is our sole source of our strength.

How cheerful are you when you face troubles? Is there an ease by which we seem to handle affliction?

⁴It is possible to possess when our source is the power of Christ. But is your source truly the grace of Christ? Remember how the apostles in Acts 5:40-41 responded after their interrogation and beating at the hands of the chief priests? They rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Christ.

And **let us pray that our afflictions not be an obstacle to serving Christ.** The mountain of trouble Paul faced did not stop him. Let us not be paralyzed. It is easy to do, right? We become so pre-occupied with our problems that we miss the opportunities God's desires to work through us. Remember in our weakness is where he is glorified. A pastor named Truman back in Wisconsin comes to mind for me...

Let us pray that we take on a similar mind.

And **let us seek the Lord's all sufficient grace with diligence.** Psalm 138 says, *"On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased."*⁵

The priorities in our prayers of affliction must be shaped by the reality of our Lord's character and attributes and in His will for us. He is gracious, faithful, infinitely wise, perfect in His care for us, eternal, and so many other things. And His will and plan for us is to conform us to the image of His Son largely through affliction and trouble. He is less interested in our physical comforts and earthly success but has an eye towards the eternal.

³ Pink

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

So knowing that our God works in and through our weakness to reveal Himself with great power, let us pray under affliction in a way that He would cause us to depend and rely upon Him only for strength – regardless of what happens to our affliction. For when we recognize and are fully conscious that we are weak, we are strong, and most importantly, He is glorified.

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