

GOD'S PLAN FOR YOUR PAIN

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This is the third part in our series, "Not Shaken." That phrase comes from a passage in 1 Thessalonians.
2. **1 Thessalonians 3:2-3** "2 And we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you concerning your faith, 3 so that no one will be shaken by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are appointed to this."
3. The believers in Thessalonica were suffering. They were experiencing severe persecution for their faith. In response, Paul sent Pastor Timothy to strengthen and encourage them so that they would not be shaken by affliction.
4. There are many kinds of afflictions. Persecution, sickness, poverty, failure, rejection, loss, abandonment, disabilities, loneliness, physical pain, financial stress, etc.
5. Christians are not immune to the afflictions of life. Notice that Paul said in verse 3, "For you yourselves know that we are appointed to this." No matter how godly you are, no matter how much faith you have, you will face pain, suffering, adversity, trials, afflictions.
6. The goal as Christians is not to avoid affliction, but to not be shaken by affliction.
7. What does it mean to be shaken by affliction? To get angry with God and run away from Him. To self-medicate with drugs and alcohol. To try to cover the pain with sin. To try to solve the problem with sin. To panic with fear and worry and anxiety. To lose your faith in God. To get angry and bitter, taking it out on those around us. To seek revenge. To get depressed. To end our lives.
8. As Christians, we don't have to be shaken by affliction. God has given us all the resources we need to not be shaken. The Holy Spirit in us. The presence of God all around us. The church family alongside us. The word of God speaking to us. We do not have to be shaken by affliction.
9. One of the things that can help us to stand strong when facing affliction is to understand God's plan for our pain. One of the best places to find God's plan for pain is in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

II. TEXT: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

1. *7 especially because of the extraordinary revelations. Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself. 8 Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness." Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may*

reside in me. 10 So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2. In this passage we can find three important principles about pain.

III. THREE PRINCIPLES ABOUT PAIN

1. The purpose of pain.

- i. **2 Corinthians 12:7** “especially because of the extraordinary revelations. Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself.”
- ii. Paul clearly says that the purpose of his pain so that he would not exalt himself. In other words, to humble him, or prevent him from becoming prideful.
- iii. Notice that it starts out by saying “especially because of the extraordinary revelations.” Earlier in the chapter Paul wrote about a special spiritual experience that God had given to him. God took him to heaven where he heard “inexpressible” things. Most of us aren’t given that experience. And that’s why it can lead to pride. So, to prevent Paul from becoming prideful, to humble him, God sent him a thorn in the flesh.
- iv. So, in Paul’s case, there were two possible purposes for his pain:
 1. God used pain to protect him from pride.
 2. God used pain to help him grow in humility.
- v. Both of these are true in our lives. Sometimes God uses pain to protect us. And sometimes God uses pain to grow us. Let’s examine each of these truths more closely.
- vi. Sometimes God uses pain to protect us.
 1. There’s an old story about a shepherd who watched over many sheep. He loved and cared for his sheep. One of the young lambs had a bad habit of wandering off from the flock. And when a sheep wanders off, it gets killed by a wolf or a bear or a lion. Each time the lamb wandered off, the loving shepherd would go find it and bring it back. But it kept straying. Eventually the shepherd made the difficult decision to break its leg so that it would no longer wander off. From the lamb’s perspective, the shepherd is a terrible person, because the lamb can’t understand that the shepherd inflicted pain on the young lamb in order to save its life.
 2. Sometimes God will do the same to us. He will inflict pain or bring us into hardship to protect us from something.
 3. Years ago we had a young couple in the church who moved away to Texas. Before he moved, he shared with me that in high school he had terrible acne (although by then all traces of it had

disappeared). At the time he hated it, but eventually he came to see that God used acne to make him insecure, and to keep him out of tempting dating relationships. That's how God often works.

4. "Why didn't God let me get into that college?" "Why doesn't God give me more money?" "Why didn't God let me get that promotion?" Maybe God is protecting you from something – pride, greed, unbelief, sexual sin, addiction, etc. God uses pain to protect us.
- vii. Sometimes God uses pain to grow us.
1. In Paul's situation, it appears as though God was using pain to grow him in humility. But God uses pain to help us grow in all kinds of ways.
 2. When someone sins against you, which is painful, God's plan is to show you the sinfulness of sin so that you will avoid that behavior. For example, when someone is impatient with you, it teaches you to be more patient. When someone says mean things to you, it teaches you to be more kind with your words. When someone is unfaithful, it teaches you to be more faithful. When someone is harsh toward you, it teaches you to be more gentle.
 3. God uses all of our trials to grow us. When you get sick, it teaches you to be more compassionate to the sick. When you have financial difficulties, it teaches you to be more compassionate to the poor, and more financially frugal. When you have a moral failure, it teaches you to be more vigilant against temptation, and more compassionate toward others who fail. When you experience loss, it teaches you find comfort in Christ, and to comfort others in the same situation.
 4. Pain is the best preacher. Suffering is the best sermon.
 5. Why does the Bible encourage us to spank our children? To help them grow.
 6. It's been said that we don't change until the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change.
 7. There are many lessons that God wants to teach us, and because we are so sinful and stubborn, often the only way to teach us, the only way to get us to change, is with pain.
- viii. Let me make several important observations.
1. Your pain always has a purpose.
 - a. Pain is never random or pointless or meaningless.
 - b. God always has a plan for your pain.
 - c. There are several things we know about God:

- i. God is watching over your life very carefully. He knows exactly what you are experiencing; what you are facing; what you are feeling.
 - ii. God is sovereign. He is in complete control of everything that happens. Nothing can happen to you unless He allows it. Nothing can touch you without His consent. If you are in a trial, it's because that's where He wants you to be.
 - iii. God loves you dearly. He proved it by sending Christ to die. He will only do what is best for you.
 - d. Therefore, if you are in pain, it's because God has a plan to use it for your God. Isn't that what we learned in Romans 8:28?
 - e. **Romans 8:28** "We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."
- 2. Your character is more important than your comfort.
 - a. From Paul's situation we learn that God allowed Him to experience pain in order to protect him from pride, or to grow him in humility. In other words, your character is more important to God than your comfort.
 - b. That's important to understand if you want to understand pain. God is not committed to your comfort. You will experience comfort for all eternity when you reach heaven. But for now, God is committed to your character development. And He is so committed to it that He is willing to let you suffer to help you grow.
 - c. If your character is that important to God, it should be that important to you.
 - d. What does it look like when your character is more important than your comfort?
 - i. You are willing to do the right thing, no matter how much it hurts. Not until it hurts, but even if it hurts.
 - ii. You are able to rejoice in the midst of your trials, because you know that God is using them to grow you.
- 3. The danger of pride.
 - a. Even though God loved Paul dearly, God was willing to let him suffer to protect him from pride. This reveals how dangerous pride is to the Christian.

- b. Pride is thinking too highly of yourself. Pride prevents you from salvation, because you think you are good enough to get to heaven on your own. Pride prevents you from prayer because you don't need God's help. Pride prevents you from church involvement because you don't need church. Pride prevents you from apologizing because you don't make mistakes. Pride prevents you from learning because you know it all. Pride prevents you from growing because you have no weaknesses. Pride prevents you from serving because others should be serving you. Pride prevents you from following the leader because everyone should be following you. Pride prevents you from listening because what you have to say is so much more important.
- c. You can see why God would be willing to let Paul suffer to protect him from pride.
- d. Instead of being prideful, God wants us to be humble.
- e. **1 Peter 5:5** "All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble."
- f. Humility doesn't mean that you hate yourself, or that you lack confidence. It means you see yourself the way God sees you.
- g. How do you know how God sees you? You have to read the Bible. What does the Bible say?
- h. You are priceless, but without God you are hopeless. You are important, but no more important than anyone else. You are very talented, but your talents are a gift from God and must be used in His service. You have many strengths, but you are very weak without Christ's power working within you, and without the support of a church family. You have an amazing mind, but you are foolish without the wisdom of God's word. You may be the boss at home or at work, but God wants you to submit to His authority. You may be a leader, but God put you in charge to serve those you lead. You can accomplish much, but apart from Christ you can do nothing. You may be very beautiful, or very strong, but true beauty and strength are measured by one's character. You may be very rich, but God wants you to be rich in good deeds. You may be rich in good deeds, but apart from God's grace through the cross of Christ you are a sinner deserving of hell.

- ix. So, God always purpose, a plan for your pain. Sometimes it is to protect you, and sometimes it is to grow, and sometimes it is for other reasons. But God always uses it for your good.

2. The provision for pain.

- i. Let's get back to Paul's story. Paul is giving us a very intimate look into his life.
- ii. **2 Corinthians 12:7** "especially because of the extraordinary revelations. Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself."
- iii. Paul tells us a little about the nature of his pain. He uses two terms to describe it.
- iv. "A thorn in the flesh."
 - 1. Theories abound as to the nature of this thorn.
 - 2. The ESV Study Bible sums up the most popular theories:
 - a. Paul's inner psychological struggles (such as grief over his earlier persecution of the church, or sorrow over Israel's unbelief, or continuing temptations);
 - b. Paul's opponents, who continued to persecute him (cf. Num. 33:55 and Ezek. 28:24, where thorns refer to Israel's enemies);
 - c. some kind of physical affliction (possibly poor eyesight, malaria fever, or severe migraine headaches);
 - d. some kind of demonic harassment ("a messenger of Satan"). Most commentators cautiously prefer some form of the third view, since "thorn in the flesh" would seem to suggest a physical condition."
 - 3. Whatever it was, it was very painful.
 - a. The word literally means a stake in the flesh; or sharpened wooden shaft. As in a wooden stake that would be used to kill a vampire. In other words, not a little thorn from a rose bush, or a splinter, or a small rock in your shoe.
 - b. Weymouth translated it, "like the agony of impalement." Another Bible version said Paul was "given a chronic pain in my body." The Twentieth Century New Testament "a sharp spike was sent to pierce my flesh"
- v. "A messenger of Satan to torment me."
 - 1. That Paul calls it a messenger of Satan means that while God allowed the thorn, Satan caused it. Satan is always looking for ways afflict God's people, but he can't touch us unless God allows it. And if God allows it, God will use it for our good and His glory.

2. But take a look at the word “torment.” It is translated as “torment, harass, buffet, hurt and bother, beat, punish.”
 3. One scholar said that the word literally means “blows that are struck with the closed fist.” It is derived from the word for “knuckles,” and it means to strike with the fist so that the hard knuckles make the blow sting and crush.
- vi. So, how does Paul respond to this extremely painful affliction? He prayed.
 - vii. **2 Corinthians 12:8-9** “8 Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me. 9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.”
 - viii. There are several important lessons about prayer here.
 1. First, pray when you have problems. “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you (1 Pt 5:7, NIV).” Sometimes we do everything but pray. We panic, complain, self-mediate, run away, destroy things. Sometimes we pray, but it’s the last thing we do. Prayer should be our first reaction to problems. Remember, you don’t have because you don’t ask (James 4:2-3). It may be that God wants you to remove your thorn, or to help you understand it, or to give you strength to endure it, but He’s just waiting for you to ask.
 2. Second, pray for yourself. Years ago a new Christian in our church said he didn’t think it was right to pray for himself. He thought it was selfish. You should pray for yourself. Paul prayed for himself. All the heroes in the Bible prayed about their own problems. Not only should you pray for yourself, but God has so designed you that you can’t make it unless you pray for yourself.
 3. Third, keep praying until you get an answer. The Bible teaches that prayer must be persistent. “Keep on asking, and it will be given to you. Keep searching, and you will find. Keep knocking, and the door will be opened to you (Mt 7:7, NLT).” God often doesn’t answer prayer the first time you ask. Why? He delays to test your sincerity. Do you really want what you are praying for? He also delays because He wants to use the current situation to work in you or through you in a certain way.
 4. Fourth, God doesn’t always answer our prayers the way we want. He always answers our prayers, but He reserves the right to give us something better than we asked for. If the request is wrong, He says no. It might not be good for you. If the timing is wrong, He says slow. Yes, but not now. If you are wrong, He says grow. As I said, He may want to leave you where you are for the time being to teach you something. But if the request is right, the timing is right,

and you are right, then God says “Go!” In Paul’s case, God’s answer was “No,” because He had something better in mind for Paul.

- ix. Notice that Paul “pleaded with the Lord” to remove the thorn. The word means “begged, implored, urgently appealed.” This was a passionate, sincere prayer.
- x. It also says that Paul prayed “three times” to remove the thorn. There are different theories as to what this means.
 - 1. First, it could mean that Paul spent three seasons of prayer begging for God to remove the storm. In other words, he didn’t just pray three times, but spent three seasons in prayer. Perhaps it was a chronic disease that had occasional flare ups, like migraines, and three times had a migraine he prayed for God to take it away.
 - 2. Second, one scholar that this was a Jewish figure of speech that meant ceaseless, continuously, over and over again.
- xi. Notice how God answered Paul.
- xii. **2 Corinthians 12:9** But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you.”
- xiii. This has three possible meanings.
 - 1. First, “My grace is enough to satisfy you.”
 - a. In other words, “My grace is enough for you to live an abundant, full, and meaningful life. You don’t see how you can possibly be happy with this thorn. But all you need is me. And sometimes the only way to learn that God is all you need, is when He is all you have.”
 - 2. Second, “My grace is enough to sustain you.”
 - a. In other words, “You don’t think you can carry this burden. You don’t think you can survive it. You don’t think you can take it. But I’ve got you. I will be with you the whole time, and I will give you everything you need to carry this burden.”
 - 3. Third, “My grace is enough to empower you.”
 - a. It is possible that Paul’s prayer was not for his own comfort, but for his ministry. That he was afraid that the thorn would prevent him from fruitful ministry. How was he going to continue to preach, and plant churches, and travel, and write letters, with this thorn in his flesh? God’s answer was, “My grace is sufficient for you to fulfill your ministry. Even though you are disabled and weakened, I will enable you to accomplish just as much as if you were fully healthy.”
- xiv. So, which is it? It could be all three, because all three are biblical. All three are true. When you go through a trial, God will provide what you need.

1. He will satisfy you, so that you can have peace and joy in the midst of the trial.
2. He will sustain you, so that you are strong enough to handle the trial.
3. He will empower you so that you can fulfill your ministry in spite of the trial.

3. **The profit of pain.**

- i. **2 Corinthians 12:9** But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.”
- ii. “For my power is perfected in weakness.” This has two possible meanings.
 1. First, it could mean that God’s power is more visible when you are weak.
 - a. When everything is going great in your life, it’s easy to be good. But when you are in the midst of a storm, people don’t expect much. So, God’s plan is to strengthen you so that you can continue to be Christlike in the midst of the storm – loving, joyful, patient, kind, etc. You will be a walking wonder. You will be living supernaturally. People will notice. And you will be able to point them to Christ.
 2. Second, it could mean that God’s power in and through you is most effective when you are weak.
 - a. In other words, God was saying, “Paul, this thorn makes you a better Christian. Because of this thorn, you are more godly and more useful to me.”
 - b. Haven’t you experienced this? When we prosper, we tend to forget God, to drift from God, to backslide, to get prideful, to get complacent. But then God gives us a thorn in the flesh, and it revives us spiritually. The thorn feels terrible, but it gives us a spiritual jolt. We become more prayerful, we get into the word, we repent of our sins, get back into church, we are more humble and compassionate toward others, we are more servant-minded, we are more evangelistic, etc.
 - c. This pattern was evident in the life of Israel. In the book of Judges the Israelites repeat the same pattern over and over. First, God helps them prosper. Second, they drift from God. Third, God sends them a thorn in the form of a foreign invader to oppress them. Fourth, they return to God and cry out for help. Fifth, God, removes the thorn.

Unfortunately, the only time Israel was faithful was when they had a thorn in the flesh.

- d. This doesn't have to be the case with us. We can be faithful in times of prosperity. But sometimes prosperity gets to our head, and into our hearts, and we drift. And God sends a thorn to revive us. And sometimes He leaves the thorn in place because He knows that without the thorn, we will drift again.
- iii. So, which interpretation is correct? I'm not sure which God meant in this context, but I know that both are true. Both explain the profit of pain.
 - 1. God's power is more visible when you are weak.
 - 2. God's power in and through you are more effective when you are weak.

IV. CONCLUSION

- 1. Notice Paul's conclusion.
- 2. **2 Corinthians 12:9b-10** "Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me. 10 So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong."
- 3. Now that Paul understood God's plan for pain, he had a new perspective on pain. He boasted about his pain. He took pleasure in his pain. And we can too.