

God's Purposes in Your Trials

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Date: 21 November 2021

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[0 : 00] Well, the title of my message this morning is God's Purposes in Your Trials, which is what 1 Peter is all about.

So we'll be in 2 Corinthians 12, 5-10 this morning, setting the stage for what will be, prayerfully, a verse-by-verse exposition of the book of 1 Peter together.

The subject then of this morning's sermon is God's Purpose in Your Suffering. God's Purpose in Your Suffering as a Christian.

Because un-Christians, unbelievers, suffer in a different way and in different reasons than do Christians, according to the Word of the Lord.

It's a very interesting reality for Christian people to face this, and this is something that trips up many young, new believers, spiritually immature believers, or even believers who've walked with the Lord for a while, but have not grown into what I'm about to say.

[1 : 25] It's very interesting. Something of a paradox, but the Bible teaches it very clearly. And here it is. The more you and I give ourselves in faithfulness, devotion, and obedience to Jesus Christ, the more we will suffer in this life.

Did you hear that? The more faithful you are, the more likely it will be that you suffer in your Christian life. Do you see why that would trip up new Christians?

Friends, I just became a Christian. I'm all excited. I'm in the honeymoon phase. And then as they seek to be faithful to Jesus and begin to tell other people in their lives about this wonderful thing that happened to me and what God's doing in my life and how it's changing my life, maybe my marriage, how it's changing the way I look at the world, how all of the things that I used to be enamored with are just fading behind me, and then, bow!

They get hit with people who want to reject them, people who want to tell them how silly they are, people who want to tell them what a waste this is of their life, etc., etc.

So the more faithful they seek to be, it seems the more suffering comes in to their lives. Well, I want to share something that John Piper, Pastor John Piper said.

[2 : 47] So, we'll put this up on the screen for you. So, I take it to be a biblical truth that the more earnest we become about being the salt of the earth and the light of the world and reaching the unreached peoples of the world and exposing the works of darkness and loosing the bonds of sin and Satan, the more we will suffer.

That's why, he says, we should prepare. And this message is all about helping us begin to prepare. Prepare for what? Prepare for suffering, for trials that will come on you as you seek to live your Christian life. So, as your pastor and friend, I want to do all that I can to help you prepare for what is and will be the day-to-day suffering and trials of Christian discipleship.

Christian discipleship is following the Lord. It's being a Christian. Christian discipleship is following the Lord. Christian discipleship is following the Lord. So, as you seek to be a servant of Jesus and be faithful, you will face increasing suffering in your life.

I want to recount a story to you from, if you will turn there with me, to Acts chapter 14. And this is very interesting for me.

[4 : 21] This is why I'm going there. Acts chapter 14. And we'll pick it up in verse 8.

This is the Apostle Paul recounting some of the exploits of his life as he has served Jesus as an apostle. He says in verse 8 of chapter 14, At Lystra, a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, laying from his mother's womb.

So, he was born this way. He had never in his life walked. This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze upon the man and had seen that he had faith to be made well, Paul said then with a loud voice, Stand up!

Get up on your feet! And the man leaped up and began to walk. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycanian language, The gods have become like men and have come down to us.

And they began calling Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.

[5 : 51] But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, Men, why are you doing these things?

We are also men of the same nature as you. And preached the gospel to you, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

And so you see what's going on here, don't you? Paul has done this miracle in the name of Jesus Christ as an apostle, and you all know that the reason that he was given this ability to do this on occasion was to give testimony to the fact that he was indeed a messenger of God, bringing God's truth inscripturated to the people.

He was legitimate as God's spokesman. And the miracles, just like in Jesus' life, proved that he was from the Lord with the Lord's message. And what happened?

These people saw them then as God. Such is the nature of the human heart. We are created to worship. So we have to fill that void with something.

[7 : 11] It's in our DNA. That's what we will do. So these people bowed down to Barnabas and Paul. The priest from the temple in the city showed up at the gates, and they're going to have a big worship service, and they're going to worship Paul and Barnabas as God's come down from heaven.

And you can imagine the heart of the apostle. What would be worse for a pastor who's bringing the heart of God to people and begging them with tears to turn from sin and sorrow to a living God only to have those people get it completely wrong and worship something other than the living God.

Worst case scenario, worship me. It broke his heart. It inflamed him with holy passion. I can imagine Paul, the man as he was, saying to these people with tremendous energy, No, no, no!

We're men like you. Now, Paul did a good thing, didn't he? In healing this man. That was very kind, very loving, very sweet.

Now, the people have completely misinterpreted the entire nature of what he's just done, right?

Now notice what's going to happen next. Where do we pick it up?

[8 : 31] He asked them, Turn from all of that to the living God who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them. Verse 16. In the generations gone by, this same God permitted all the nations to go their own ways.

Yes, he did. And yet, he did not leave himself without witness in that he did good. He gave you rains from heaven, fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

Even saying these things with difficulty, they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifices to them. Now notice. But Jews.

Here's where the music, if you're watching the movie, comes in and it's real. Right? These are the bad guys. But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.

But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city again. I mean, Paul, are you kidding me? Run! Nope.

[9 : 45] He goes right back into the city. The next day, he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples encouraging them to continue in the faith and saying, through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God.

Wow! He didn't give up. He didn't run away. He didn't pity party. He didn't find a hole somewhere and kneel down and say, hey, what is the deal, God?

Why are you gypping me? I'm doing the right thing. I couldn't have healed that guy if you weren't with me, so I heal him and this is what I get? I'm going to suffer for doing right?

That's not... What is that? Do you read any of that in that passage? In fact, you won't read it in any passage where the Apostle Paul is serving the Lord. I doubt very seriously there's anybody in the room, including myself, who has suffered to the point of a raging mob picking up big rocks and

throwing them at you until they render you unconscious and then drag you out somewhere into a field and leave you for dead.

Any hands? No. So as we sit and listen to this, I hope that we can relate to the reality that we understand who is behind the suffering in this man's life in these moments.

[11 : 32] Who is the designer behind this suffering in this man's life? Well, he kind of gives it away when he says this at the end of verse 22.

Through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God. The Lord's behind all this. The Lord has his purposes in all of this.

Paul went on to tell Timothy, Suffer hardship with me as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

That's 2 Timothy 2, verse 3. Hear that again. Suffer hardship with me, Timothy, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

Now, why is Paul so willing to embrace and to endure such hardship in his life on account of the truth? Well, if you would turn then with me to 2 Timothy, I want to answer that question.

[12 : 38] The book of 2 Timothy, as Paul writes to his young and faithful servant here, Timothy is pastoring the church in Ephesus.

And so the question here is, why is Paul so willing to embrace and endure this hardship in his life on account of the truth? 2 Timothy 2, verse 10.

For this reason, I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory.

Paul says, My suffering is a matter of faithfulness in my evangelism. There are those who are chosen in Christ, and I want to make sure that my testimony remains such that they can see the work of God in my life and bring honor to Him.

So Paul's saying, I understand that my suffering isn't simply about me. It's about other people and the importance that God places on their lives.

[13 : 53] And so I see myself simply as a servant of that suffering because I recognize it has a purpose. God has a purpose for my suffering as His servant.

And a big, huge part of that suffering as His servant is that's the way He wants me to serve His people as a sufferer.

Wow. So it's His calling. It's actually purposed into the way that He will live His life before the Lord Jesus.

He must suffer for the sake and cause of Jesus Christ on account of the people of God. That is just so beautiful to me and so convicting.

Notice then also, Paul instructs each of us who suffer for our faith to cling to the truth of our relationship with Jesus to comfort our souls.

[14 : 59] Look at verses 11 through 13. What does He say there? It is a trustworthy statement for if we died with Him, which we did, we will also live with Him.

Hallelujah. If we endure, we will also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He will also deny us.

If we are faithless, notice verse 13, He remains faithful. We just sang about that, didn't we? For He cannot deny Himself.

Jesus cannot deny Himself in you. So you can't be denied by Him because you belong to Him. He lives in you. He is faithful even when we're faithless.

He knows how difficult the struggle and suffering is on this planet. He knows how hard it is. He understands. Why? Because He is our great high priest who went through all these things to know what it was like to be tempted in these things and yet remain without sin.

[16 : 05] Look at chapter 3 beginning in verse 10, brothers and sisters. Now you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, and sufferings.

What a list! Such as happened to me at Antioch, Iconium, Lystra. What persecutions I endured and out of them all the Lord rescued me.

Verse 12, Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. Let me say it again. All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

And then in verse 13, But evil men and imposters will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. 2 Timothy 3, 11 through 13.

That is an amazing reality. Paul reminds Timothy of both the commitment and the cost to his faithfulness to Jesus.

[17 : 21] And where does Paul tell each of us to focus our faith during trials like this? If you look at verse 14 in 2 Timothy 3, you, however, Timothy, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of knowing from whom you have learned them.

And that from childhood you've known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for what? Teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for some of the work of the ministry, some of the things that come at you in life, most of the stuff that the world will throw at you, all.

All. All. Not some. All. So what is he saying should be the focus? What is he telling us to put our faith in as we move through these trials?

Truth. Truth. In other words, we are tempted to focus on self. Woe is me.

[18 : 54] We are tempted to focus on the pain. I'm hurting, I'm suffering, and I don't like it. Or we're tempted to focus on the problem.

I got to get this fixed and get it out of my life because I don't like it. Self, pain, problem, right? That's, it's just our default.

Anybody with me on that? I'm the only one in there. No. That's how we operate, right? So we need, we need the truth of the Lord working in our hearts to give us Thursday night people, Thursday night study people, to give us God's perspective on the issues and the matters of life that are coming at us as Christians so that we can sort through them in wisdom, which is what Paul says here.

Sort through them in wisdom. Having God's view of this helps orient me. It helps me understand there is purpose behind this and in this my God is in control.

I can trust him. I can look to him. My circumstances might not change but I have a God who will bring me through this. What did he tell Timothy earlier? Who rescued us through all those troubles.

[20 : 12] Paul's circumstances in large part didn't change. City to city to city he encountered these things where they beat him, they stoned him at Lystra, they put him in prison for not just months at a time, years.

This is a man who knew untold suffering far beyond anything you and I would call suffering in our day. I'm not disparaging your suffering. I'm saying keep it in perspective.

Keep it in perspective, beloved. This is what we need to do. Jesus also spoke clearly of our commitment and its cost as we follow him.

Listen to what Jesus said. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. That's John 15:20. Then in John 16:33, we have this. Jesus explained in the world you have tribulation. This is where you live. This is life here.

[21 : 14] In the world you have tribulation. Tribulation in this context means pressure, trouble, oppression, affliction. And how does the Lord Jesus tell us to respond to trials, troubles, and tribulations in our life because we all have them.

And we have them at different degrees at different seasons of our life. How does Jesus say to respond to them? Listen to what he says. This is all he says. But take courage.

I have overcome the world. I don't there are no steps. Give me some steps. What do I do?

I'm suffering here. Take courage. Well, what does it mean for you as a Christian to follow Jesus and do a very simple thing in terms of what he says?

Take courage. There's the key. Paul talked about it this way. endure, persevere, stay focused.

These are key concepts in dealing with suffering in our lives as Christians.

[22 : 24] Take courage. I have overcome the world. You see how Jesus seizes the moment and he grabs the focus and attention that you might put on yourself or on the problem or on the pain and he moves it and points it up right?

And where does he put the focus? On him. Take courage. Who's overcome the world? You? I have over.

So look to me. I can do for you what you can't do for yourself. We call that the Christian life. Right? We call that the Christian life.

Now every single one of us find ourselves in that boat because we all suffer. We all understand what it means to be in a broken world as broken people dealing with what comes at us.

Now Jesus tells us to put our eyes and our hope on him. He tells our hearts to rehearse the truth of his person and his goodness.

[23 : 33] In other words folks here's what I'm saying. Jesus is the source and center of our courage. And this is where we're headed in 1 Peter.

I want you to look at with me again even though we read it this morning. Look at 1 Peter chapter 4 and I'll just highlight a couple of verses. This is where we're headed God willing if he gives me breath for life and you breath for life and we're going to sit under the exposition of the book of 1 Peter.

1 Peter 4 verse 12 we read this morning. Beloved do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you which comes upon you for your testing as though some strange thing were happening to you.

No God's in control. God's in control. This isn't some strange thing. This is normal to the Christian life. Now notice verse 19. Therefore those also who suffer according to the will of God.

That is you are living in Jesus name. You are seeking to be faithful. You're not living as a murderer or a thief or whatever that list was. You're trying to live faithfully to the Lord.

[24 : 48] You're not sinless but you're trying to be faithful. He says therefore those who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful creator in doing what is right.

So you're not taken off the course of being a servant. That's what's at stake. You will be derailed from the place of being a servant.

A servant to Jesus as you serve Jesus's people with Jesus's truth. Do you see why why Satan would want to pull you away from all that and put your focus on anything but Jesus truth and Jesus people.

We most often take our eyes off of those three things and put them where when we're suffering. Right. So we all we all need this.

We all need the grace and love and kindness and patience of a wonderful Savior who understands what it's like to be in that position and yet he never gave in.

[26 : 00] He never sinned. Talk about somebody who walked the face of the earth that could have made it all about him and that would have been a great thing. He made it all about the father.

He said I didn't come to do my will. I came to do the father's will. I don't even say what I want to say. I say what the father's given me to say. All right.

That's my introduction. With this brief survey we can see that suffering and trials are purposed by God and therefore natural to living as Christians and can be expected as we seek to be faithful to Jesus.

That's the reality. Now just a little more from Piper Pastor John Piper. He offered the following. I want to read it. It was balm for my soul. So I'm sharing it with you in the hope that it'll also comfort your soul especially in light of what I've just said to you.

All right. Let's put this up there over a hundred years ago. Horatius Bonar the Scottish pastor and hymn writer wrote a little book called Night of Weeping or When God's Children Suffer.

[27 : 19] In it he said his goal was to minister to the saints to seek to bear their burdens to bind up their wounds to dry up at least some of their many tears.

It is a tender and deep and wise book he says. So it's not surprising then to hear him say this book is written by one who is seeking himself to profit by trial and trembles lest it should pass by as the wind over the rock leaving it as hard as ever by one who would in every sorrow draw near to God that he may know him more and who is not unwilling to confess that as yet he knows but little.

He goes on to say I speak to you as a fellow sufferer who would in every sorrow draw near to God that I may know him more and is one who is not unwilling to confess that as yet I know but little.

It's a Scottish pastor. I don't know where Horatius Bonar lived in Scotland but in our time in Scotland I'll tell you this brother and sister I've never been so cold in my life. I was there without Suzanne in January.

I slept with my clothes on for five days. I kid you not and we went up into the highlands together on another trip and we saw trees by the there's this beautiful golf course by the North Sea and there was one hole.

[29 : 03] Oh I wanted to do it so badly and you stand up on the cliff and there's the sea and down below the cliff is the hole way over there.

So you make the shot and the ball and it way down there and then you have to walk in this winding path just to get down to where your ball is.

But while you're up there there's a bench with a tree and the tree sits. Here's the sea. This is the tree. It sits like this. The wind.

And the rocks. Now here's his point. Here's how you can be in suffering. You can let suffering make you harder like wind going over a hard rock and it doesn't even have any effect.

It just goes right over it. Or you can bend with it. the roots stay solid. But you bend with it.

[30 : 05] You flex with it. You receive it. So it can either make you harder or it can make you flex and receive and bend and go.

But it's going to do one of those two things. things. And that's what this man in great wisdom is telling us. Don't let your trials harden you and make you like the wind over a hard rock which leaves it hard as ever.

Do what instead? Well Jesus is saying it. I have overcome the world. Let Jesus hold and mold your heart to his will as he uses suffering in your life.

Now turn to 2nd Corinthians. I will have time to do this. I promise. 2nd Corinthians chapter 12 beginning in verse 5.

On behalf of such a man Paul says I will boast but on my own behalf I will not boast. Huh. Except in regard to my weaknesses.

[31 : 19] Now Paul why would you want to boast about your weaknesses. That doesn't sound smart. Verse 6. For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish for I will be speaking the truth but I refrain from this so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.

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 concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me and he has said to me my grace is sufficient for you for power is perfected in weakness 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 weakness insults distresses persecutions difficulties now this very important clause for Christ's sake for when I am weak then I am strong.

I'm going to borrow from John MacArthur's little outline for this passage as we just briefly look at it five reasons we'll put it up here for you five reasons God sovereignly allows and purposes suffering and trials in your life.

now these are drawn from the real life exploits in life of the Apostle Paul I'll spend most of the time on the first point and then we'll move through rather rapidly. Here's the first point God uses suffering and trials to reveal your spiritual condition.

[33 : 02] To whom? Well to you first but then to those around you as well. That's verses five and six on behalf of such a man I will boast but on my own behalf I will not boast except in regard to my weaknesses.

If I do wish to boast I'm not going to be foolish about it. I'll just speak the truth but I'll refrain from this because I don't want anybody crediting me with more than he sees in me or hears in me.

That's a concern that he has. So Paul listen Paul is suffering deeply as he writes this. He's experiencing deep sorrow in his life.

Why? It's due to the rejection of the Corinthians towards him in his ministry. They basically ran him out of town after he spent all this time ministering to them loving them teaching them the truth.

They got upset with him and now they will hardly have anything to do with him. In fact they've disparaged him. And it's broken his heart. He was so broken hearted over what happened in Corinth that a ministry opportunity opened to him in Troas and he said I turned it down because I was too broken hearted.

[34 : 19] Wow. The apostle Paul. The situation has grown so increasingly bad as the Corinthians are being led further and further from the truth and away from Jesus by false teachers who are slandering Paul.

They realize that if they're going to gain a following among the Corinthians they're going to have to discredit Paul because they trust Paul. They follow the apostle Paul as he's followed Jesus and he's led them well.

So at this point in the letter he's very very reluctantly rehearsing his spiritual credentials with them. He offers it as or refers to it as boasting my spiritual credentials boasting and he's doing it to reestablish himself as a true apostle.

Someone who's faithfully bringing them the truth of Christ. Now remember we're at the end of second Corinthians. Paul has already written first Corinthians to them. There's also been a letter in between these two that we don't have but we know he wrote to them. So this is actually the third letter. He's this is the third attempt that we know about where he's pouring his heart out to these people and trying to win them back and saying look it's not a matter of you thinking I'm all that but I am an apostle.

[35 : 44] I'm telling you the truth. If you get rid of me you get rid of the truth. We're the ones that are bringing the truth to you. Don't cut us off because if you do you cut yourself off from the Lord and from the truth and you'll believe the lies of these false teachers.

That's what's breaking his heart. That's why he's willing to go to these extra links. So in verses 1 through 4 look at this. Boasting is necessary.

Though it is not profitable. But I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. You see I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago whether in the body I do not know or out of the body I do not know God knows such a man was caught up to the third heaven.

And I know how such a man whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know God knows was caught up into paradise and heard inexpressible words which a man is not permitted to speak. What's he talking about? He's speaking about spiritual visions and revelations that the Lord gave him 14 years ago and until now he hasn't mentioned any of this to the Corinthians.

[37 : 00] So he's not bragging. He's not even engaging in false modesty in a way that Paul himself doesn't even understand. God took Paul to heaven so that Paul saw and heard things which he says a man is not permitted to speak.

So he can't go into great detail. In verse 5 he says look this really happened to me. But that's not the man that I'm putting forward or even desire to talk about in my relationship with you.

I'm not living out of that experience. I don't use that as leverage with people as I live my spiritual life. In other words Paul's not walking into this situation and trying to use his suffering and all that he's gone through to look at people and say you just don't understand how spiritual I am.

Which is what we do. Because we want people to legitimize how much we've suffered. Paul says I'm not doing that. I'm not doing that.

Verse 6. Verse 6. If I do wish to boast I'm not going to be foolish. I'm just going to tell you the truth.

If I offer this as credentials for my life if I boast about it I'm just going to tell you the truth.

[38 : 18] But I'm going to refrain from this actually. Why? Why is he so concerned that he not move into the details of these experiences in his life? What does he say?

So that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or more than he hears from me. Paul says it's not about me. It's about Jesus. I don't want you thinking I'm all that.

I want you thinking Jesus is all that. So I'm not going to put myself forward like this. I'm just going to tell you enough to let you know. Look I'm legitimate.

I'm telling you the truth. Please listen to me and follow the Lord Jesus. MacArthur makes this comment. He says the true measure of a man of God is not his alleged mystical experiences but his godly life and his faithfulness to the word of God.

There you go. Paul says look look at my life and what do you see? If you hang around with me long enough Paul saying you're going to see human weakness.

[39 : 24] Because I'm just not all that. I'm just a man. I am in human weakness made useful and strong by the power of Jesus in me.

That is what I boast about Christ in me. I boast in him. MacArthur goes on to explain this quote God plunged Paul into the deepest sorrow and severest pain to reveal most clearly that he was a genuine man of God.

Do you believe the Lord will do that in your life? You say you're a Christian. Don't be surprised if God brings suffering into your life which puts you in a position for all the people around you who know you as a Christian to see.

Oh yeah. Now what? And it's a powerful testimony when people know you as a person in the weakness of who you are as a person especially those closest to you like your spouse your kids your closest relatives and friends and they see this happening to you and then they see the grace of God at work in your life so that the only explanation for how you're able to move through these things and be the person that you're being is you're following Christ.

So who gets all the glory you or Jesus? Jesus that's where we want to live. That Paul is saying live there in your suffering live there.

[40 : 49] Don't live focusing on you or the problem or the pain. Those are real. You're real problems real pains real. There's something more real and more worthy of your focus your devotion your worship.

Christ. Christ. And boy I tell you we've got a wonderful example in the Apostle Paul of a man suffering and trying to make it all about Jesus and not about him and what he's gone through. When you and I suffer in trial so that our human weakness is being felt and seen our faith in Christ gives way to joy strength hope endurance. It's evidence that Jesus lives in it.

You say Jeff is it OK to grieve? Well sure grief's in the Bible. Paul grieved. I'm not saying that we won't grieve. Listen I've cried crocodile tears lately for some stuff going on in my life in grief. But we don't lose joy. We don't lose perspective. We don't lose sight of the fact that we're serving a bigger God for a greater purpose. Even if he doesn't make all those purposes known to me or to you.

[42 : 03] Can we still hang on that God has purpose and one of those purposes to reveal his character in your life. There maybe there are people in your life that need to see that in you and you don't even know about it.

You don't even know they're watching but they need to see it. Let's put this up there for Michelle. Our spiritual character is revealed and refined as the Lord humbles us through trials which he controls. That last part's really important which he controls.

Point number two. God uses suffering and trials to humble us. Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations for this reason verse seven 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.

Friends Paul experienced deep spiritual transformation and spiritual growth through the grace of God. And yet while the visions and revelations were powerful experiences he understood they were also fleshly temptations towards spiritual snobbery and a sense of superiority in his life.

[43 : 23] Oh yeah I've been to heaven and back. Oh yeah I've seen things that if I told you would just blow your mind I can't even tell. I'm under orders to be secret about it.

And make a big old deal of himself. He's you know what. Mm hmm. I know. See look that prideful heart and that way of life was something that Paul did struggle with.

He struggled with it before he was saved as he took great great pride in his Jewish heritage his superior education and understanding. He was educated under two of the most influential and brilliant Jewish scholars of his day.

A lot of pride. Look at that verse with me again verse seven. What does he mention twice in this verse as to why the Lord gave him a thorn in the flesh twice.

He mentions why the Lord did this. To keep him from pridefully exalting himself over others. Now we don't know what the thorn was.

[44 : 30] I'm not even going to speculate. It's a label. It's a messenger of Satan to buffet him. Here's the point. Buffet. Buffet has the idea of strike with a fist.

It's a full on spiritual punch in the face or punch in the stomach. Now just do you ever feel like that? Have you ever suffered where you felt like that?

Have you ever been hurt by other people betrayed by other people let down by other people where you felt that kind of pain? You have to. Right.

All of us have had something like that. Well clearly it was God who gave Paul the thorn for the godly reason of slaying his pride.

Now here's the deal. Satan would want to increase Paul's pride not slay it. So we know it's not from Satan. And the Bible tells us God gave me a thorn in the flesh.

[45 : 32] God is using even this thorn this messenger of Satan in his plan for Paul. Folks I delight in telling counseles people who come to see us for just to walk with them through an issue.

I delight in telling them this your sin is not greater than the grace of God and his purposes for your life. The hope the hope that you have as a Christian is that God's grace and love is greater than your sin.

No matter what you've done no matter how hopeless you may feel right now you have a God who loves you and wants to mercy you because his grace is greater than anything you can do or will do.

You cannot overcome the power of God's love in your life. Not even your sin can do that. I delight in saying that it's true. That's who we serve.

That's why Paul wants us to focus on him not even on ourselves. Not on the wrong that's been done to us not on the pain that it's caused but on him. He's not denying that all those things are real but he's saying if you camp out in those other areas they're going to take you into a dark hole.

[46 : 45] They're going to exalt your pride and they're going to deceive you. So look to Christ. He will use this to humble us.

Verse six. Look at verse six with me. Paul's concern right at the end. I don't want anybody to credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.

You know what verse six tells us? It tells us that God's spiritual plan is working in Paul. Does that sound like a humble man? God's dealing with this man's pride.

It's working. He's becoming more humble. Point number three. Let's put this up there for you. God uses suffering and trials to draw us to himself.

Verse eight. Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. How many times does the text tell us Paul asked for God to remove this thorn that the Lord had given to him?

[47 : 46] Three different times. Three different occasions. Paul begged God with passion. Please take this away from me. He went to God. He prayed.

He prayed deeply and earnestly. Now put your own name, if you would, in Paul's place. That's exactly what God wants from you in your suffering.

What does he want, Jeff? Your worship. What we just described Paul doing as he went to the Lord, that's worship. That's exactly what God wants from us in these times of suffering particularly.

Worship. To focus on him. To not be distracted or lured away from honoring him. He wants our worship.

Now if you ask me, if you ask me, is it wrong for me to ask the Lord to remove or to shorten the trial? I'll say, no.

[48 : 46] Paul, Paul did it three times. So no, that's not wrong. But I'll add two quick qualifiers. One has two parts.

Be ready for the answer. You ever heard somebody say, I've prayed and prayed and prayed and I'm just not getting an answer. What were you praying about? I was praying that God would give me a new Ferrari and I just, do you see a Ferrari in my driveway?

I'm being ridiculous, but you know what I'm saying. I say, well, maybe that's your answer. Maybe the answer's no. Can't be no. I want it too badly. Can't be no.

I know how good it'll be for me. Maybe he'll say no. You go, you okay with that? If you think he knows best and you trust him, you'll be fine with that.

Maybe your circumstances won't even change. Another thing, pay careful attention to what comes next. Look at verses 9 and 10. And he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you for power is perfected in weakness.

[49 : 56] Then he says, well, most gladly, therefore, now remember, folks, you see that in quotes? That's how God responded to his prayer. Hey, Paul, my grace is sufficient for you.

My power is perfected in your weakness. That'd be a no. That's a no. I'm not taking it away. It's not going anywhere. Nothing's going to change. I'm not changing anything. But what you're going to find is when I don't change your circumstances, I don't change either.

I'll be there and I'll be with you and I'll do all that you need me to do. I promise. Most gladly, therefore, he says, I will rather boast about my weaknesses that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

Therefore, I'm now content with weakness, insults, distresses, persecutions. I'm content with all that for Christ's sake. Yeah, I am. For when I'm weak, then I'm strong in the Lord.

I'm strong in the Lord. Sometimes you've got to ask yourself, is that enough?

[51 : 14] Let me ask you this. This is the second qualifier. If you knew for certain that God was using a particular suffering or trial in your life to make you more like Jesus, would that have any good effect on how you might perceive and pray about that trial?

You think it might change the way you look at it and change the way you pray about it if you knew for certain that God was using it to help you be more like Jesus? Would you ask him to take it away then?

Because that would be tantamount to saying, find another way. Do you want to tell the God of the universe? Find another way.

I don't like your way. Or worse, I don't want to be like Jesus in this. I don't want you to slay my pride in this.

I want to hang on to it and milk it and use it. Paul's digging deep, isn't he? Getting all in our business.

[52 : 25] But this is where we live. Let's put this up there for him, Michelle, so I can read it off. If what you choose to focus on is the pain, the wrong, and the difficulties of your sufferings, you will sinfully neglect serving God in his purposes for your trials.

every time. If you focus on anything other than the love and joy and mercy and goodness of God in your trials, knowing that God has purposes for what he's doing in your life, if you do not focus on the Lord and you focus on the pain, then you're going to sinfully neglect serving the Lord and what he has for you in that trial.

You won't submit and you won't serve. You'll fight. You'll chafe. You'll blame shift. All right? And then, number four, God uses suffering and trials to display his grace in our lives.

And I've just read verses 9 and 10. God's answer to Paul was no. Now, that's hard. But the implication is even harder.

Here's the implication in the know. The suffering will continue, Paul. Three different requests led to the same answer.

[53 : 47] My grace is sufficient for you and my power is perfected in your weakness. Paul, I'm going to use your weaknesses to display my strength and power in your life.

So Paul said, oh, well then, I'm going to boast about my weakness. Why? Because in my weaknesses, Jesus is going to be exalted and seen for who he is. Not for what I am.

My weaknesses show me for what I am without Christ. Nothing. Weak. Cowardly. Frail. Whatever. But as God works through those weaknesses, people don't see me and exalt me.

They see this wonderful, gracious God working in my life to display himself through this weak human instrument. Wow. All right.

Our human weaknesses are why we need Christ. The brilliant, brilliant beauty of Jesus shines most vibrantly in our lives against the backdrop of our need for him.

[54 : 53] Our need for him is like putting the diamonds against the black velvet. So I have my weakness and my need, my lack, and then Jesus right there.

So that stands out. And then people begin to see the grace of God working in my life, the servanthood, the gentleness, the love, the tenderness, even in the suffering. You're not responding to this the way people normally respond.

What's that? It's not a what, it's a who. His name is Jesus and he's at work in me. When Christ's goodness and grace are at work in our lives through faith, the spirit of God gives us spiritual power to embrace and endure our suffering to his glory.

So folks, look, when you see God's grace at work in human weakness, suffering, you do not see sinless perfection. All right?

You won't find sinless perfection in my life as I suffer. But what you can find is the evidence of a humble heart hard won through a life of prayer warfare.

[56 : 10] That's what you can see in us. Humility hard won in prayer warfare as we suffer through trials to the glory of God.

This will happen to you over the course of your Christian life and God will conform and refine you and purify you in this if you'll submit to him in it. I don't think there's anybody in here who would say, yeah, well, I don't need humbling.

I'm just as humble as I need to be. I think you can see the evidence of God's spiritual power his grace reflected in human eyes warmly radiating God's peace in the midst of trouble.

Those eyes might look tired from tears. They may look red from tears and lack of sleep because of the grief that they can radiate the peace of Jesus.

I'm grieving but I'm not undone. I'm heartbroken but I'm not destroyed. They can have a countenance brimming over with hope.

[57 : 27] In Paul's life, God's use of trials was proving spiritually effective in building in him godly character, revealing his godly character, humbling him, drawing him into deeper dependence.

So why would the Lord remove something so spiritually beneficial? Let's put this next one up there for him, Michelle. God controls your suffering. God controls your suffering.

Look, don't go grow critical or cynical or bitter or resentful because you suffer as a Christian. Don't blame and complain or refrain.

What I mean by refrain is very common among people. Isolate, withdraw, run away from. So you stop serving. You stop reaching out to others.

You know one of the things that I tell people who are locked in the throes of this kind of pattern and have been for a while? One of the best things they can do to get outside of themselves is to look for opportunities to serve other people.

[58 : 24] Look for opportunities. If you can't find one, I'll make some for you. You come over and rake my leaves for me. You know, whatever. Just something to get outside of yourself and do for other people.

Don't waste your life being anxious about and trying to avoid suffering. Servanthood brings suffering and God uses it to make us more like Jesus.

The fifth point, and I'll just be brief, God uses suffering and trials to perfect his power in us. Again, these are verses 9 and 10. We've already read them. Think of the power, peace, and proof of this truth.

Think of what Paul's saying here in these verses. To sincerely say, pray, and live that you are, listen to what Paul said in these verses, well content with weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, difficulties for Christ's sake.

Christian, are you well content with those things in your life? Are you well content? This is biblical now. Godly contentment.

[59 : 35] What's that? A strong satisfaction with, and a growing sense of God's presence and peace in your suffering. That's godly contentment. In other words, you understand, I didn't say your circumstances change.

You're strongly satisfied with this growing sense of God's presence in your life. That's enough. That's the pathway to suffering for Christ's sake.

It's discipleship. It's servanthood. It's following Jesus. It's embracing the suffering as you yield to the Lord. We all struggle with being well content. And so I want to encourage you.

It's a spiritual process. It's a hard attitude that you can grow in. Now you're going to ask, how? How do I grow in a hard attitude of being well content in these distresses and trials and tribulations and hardships?

I mean, people say and do some of the meanest stuff. People close to me. Okay. How can I grow in that sense of being well content? All right.

[60 : 36] Through prayer. Set your heart to adopt a biblical view of your suffering like that of the Apostle Paul. So you're embracing the truth that your trials are God's means of making you more like Jesus.

You see how going into that's going to help you? As you reinterpret the trial and the suffering, God is using this in my life to reveal my weakness to make me more dependent on him.

Now there may be something that you struggle with in your life and you've struggled with it habitually for a long time and you're just finding it so hard to deal with and to move through.

Have you considered that God is using that in your life to reveal these elements that we've gone over this morning to you to draw you more to himself and to put you in a position where you're depending more on him.

He wants you to see you for who you are so that you can look to him and see him for who he is and that he's working that in your life. God's means of making you more like Jesus, of making you more spiritually useful to others is what he does in suffering.

[61 : 58] So you're asking this question, how can I submit to God making me more spiritually useful in this trial? How can I submit to that? Not chafe against it, not run from it, not be scared of it.

You accept and live in the reality that living to serve Jesus is going to cost you everything. Serving Jesus will guarantee that you suffer for Jesus' sake and you accept that.

You don't wear it like some martyr or a badge of honor, you know, look at how much I'm suffering.

Now folks, here is the grace medicine you and I need to dose ourselves with in order that we will suffer well in pleasing the Lord and spiritually benefit others around us.

I want to throw these up here for you. Look at these passages, 1 Peter 4.19. Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God, see that?

Shall entrust their souls to a faithful creator in doing what is right. and then in James 1, 2 through 4. Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

[63 : 25] That's what Paul was speaking about. Endurance, perseverance, a faith that is steadfast in Jesus and let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing.

When I am weak, then I am strong in Christ. That's what Paul said. Will you pray with me? Father, this is, as on many occasions, a sobering, sobering teaching.

It's hard. And so, Father, I'm aware that my brothers and sisters in some ways or others may be struggling to understand or to receive this.

Certainly, Satan doesn't want them to receive it. Certainly, the pride of their hearts doesn't want them to receive it. So, I ask you, Almighty God, by your grace and your love and your mercy, overcome that in our lives which would want to overcome us.

Help us to look to the cross where you have conquered the power and penalty of sin. Help us to look to Jesus and reflect on what he's told us.

[64 : 39] I have overcome the world. We just pray that you'd help us to entrust our souls to you like Peter and James have encouraged us about, like Paul has talked about.

I pray that you would help my brothers and sisters to walk steadfastly as they submit to you and look to you that they would not grow bitter or cynical or focus on themselves, but they would simply look to you and in prayer ask you to help them walk in a way that would please you, making decisions that would please you, relating to other people in ways that would please you, and continuing to be servants.

We thank you for the power of your word and the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. May Jesus be exalted in each one of us to your great honor and glory. In his name we pray. Amen.