

**SECOND CORINTHIANS 12:7–10.** (EHV)

Therefore, to keep me from becoming arrogant due to the extraordinary nature of these revelations, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, so that I would not become arrogant. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that he would take it away from me. And he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me. That is why I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then am I strong.

“Why is this happening to me?”

Have you ever heard someone ask that question? Maybe you have even heard them bring God into it: “Why is God letting this happen to me?”

The response you will often hear from Christians is: “You just have to trust that God has a plan.” And that’s true. But of course, what is the next logical question? “Okay, but what is his plan?”

That’s all we really want to know when we’re suffering, isn’t it? What is God’s plan? What is his purpose in having me go through this or that, in having me suffer this or that? We can put up with a lot of hardship if we just know there is a good purpose behind it.

The hard truth is that we will never know all the specifics of God’s plan this side of eternity. The ultimate answer to “What is God’s plan?” is the one God gave Job: “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?” (Job 38:4). The ultimate answer is the one God gives us through Paul: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). The one who created the universe, who somehow hangs the planets of our solar system in black space like Christmas ornaments, who leads the sun out from his chamber each morning, who sets the boundaries of the seas, who handed his own Son over to death to save us, knows infinitely more than we do and has a good and gracious plan.

But that doesn’t mean that he doesn’t reveal any of the purposes of our hardships. This morning he uses the example of the apostle Paul to give us a glimpse into some of the purposes of our pain.

**1. The Pain**

The apostle Paul certainly experienced pain. In this section, he talks about “a thorn in [his] flesh” that tormented him and made him weak. It seems to have been sort of physical infirmity. Since Paul ends his letter to the Galatians by saying, “See what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand,” it appears that after dictating the letter to someone else to write for him, he wrote the final part of the letter himself, but had to use very large letters to do so. This suggests that Paul had poor eyesight. Perhaps this was the “thorn in [his] flesh.” Or perhaps he suffered from some other physical ailment that was even worse. Others suppose that “the flesh” here refers to his sinful nature, and that it was a spiritual thorn, perhaps a temptation Paul had to deal with repeatedly.

Whatever the case, it wasn't anything ordinary or trivial, like a small rash somewhere underneath his clothes, or mild allergies that flared up every so often. It was a thorn. It was painful and nagging. It tormented him. He pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away. That probably doesn't mean that he said three quick prayers in one day. It probably means that he had three intense pleading prayer sessions, begging God to take it away and giving him multiple good reasons why he should take it away.

Many have supposed that Paul wrote about this thorn in general, non-specific terms so that we could more easily relate to him, substituting our own pain for his, substituting our pleading with God for his.

## **2. Satan's Purposes**

It's interesting that Paul doesn't just talk here about God's purposes with his pain. He also calls the thorn in his flesh "a messenger of Satan." Literally in Greek, it is called "an angel of Satan." This shows that, even though if his thorn was a physical infirmity, there was definitely a spiritual component to it. One of Satan's demons was responsible for Paul's thorn in the flesh and was trying to use it to accomplish Satan's purposes.

And what would Satan's purposes have been? Satan wanted Paul to be miserable, to be in torment. Satan wanted to hinder Paul's missionary activity. The more time he spent dealing with his pain, the less time he would spend traveling, preaching, writing, and conversing with people about Jesus. Ultimately, Satan wanted Paul to despair of God's grace, yes, even to deny God's very existence. Every time Paul pleaded to the Lord without visible results, Satan wanted Paul to get bitter and angry at God, until he stopped believing in him altogether, so that he would be condemned to hell when he died.

And Satan's purposes are the same or similar with our pain. He wants us to be miserable. He wants to hinder us from sharing the gospel and doing good to others. He wants us to doubt God, to despair of his grace, to lose our faith, and to be condemned to hell.

## **3. God's Purposes**

Thankfully, Satan's purposes were not and are not the only ones at play.

Paul writes about his pain in a section where he is addressing false apostles that were causing trouble for the Corinthian congregation in Paul's absence. Paul sarcastically calls them "super-apostles," because they were challenging Paul's personal integrity and his authority as an apostle and always comparing themselves to him in such a way as to make themselves look better. Since they were doing so much boasting, Paul spends a lot of time talking about things he could boast about and the things he will boast about. He wants the Corinthians to see that, while the boasts of the super-apostles glorify themselves, the boasts Paul makes emphasize his weaknesses so as to glorify God and the power of his gospel.

That doesn't mean that Paul couldn't make boasts that glorified himself. At the beginning of this chapter, he writes, "I know a man in Christ who, fourteen years ago, was carried up to the third heaven." This is Paul's way of talking about the heaven where God dwells—the first heaven being the sky where the clouds are and where the birds fly and the second heaven being outer space where the sun, moon, and stars give their light. There in Paradise, Paul says this man "heard inexpressible words that a man cannot possibly speak." Paul says the experience was so real for this man that he is not even sure if it was purely an out-of-body experience, a vision, or if

he was actually carried to heaven in the flesh, like Enoch and Elijah were taken straight up into heaven.

And Paul makes it pretty clear that, even though he refers to this man in the third person, he is actually talking about himself. The reason he talks about himself in the third person is because he says it wouldn't be helpful to boast about himself like that. He will only boast about his weaknesses.

The reason Paul knows it wouldn't be helpful is because he has a tendency toward arrogance. If he spent too much time dwelling on all the special experiences and privileges God gave him as an apostle, he would easily become puffed up and start boasting about himself, instead of boasting about God.

Paul knows this about himself because God actually revealed to him that the devil wasn't the only one responsible for his pain, and that one of the purposes God had with Paul's pain was to keep him from becoming arrogant: "To keep me from becoming arrogant due to the extraordinary nature of these revelations, I was given a thorn in my flesh." And when Paul says that it was "given" to him, in this context it is clear that it isn't just the angel of Satan who was responsible for it, but that God was ultimately the one who gave it to him.

This thought might initially make us uncomfortable—that God himself would give us something painful in our lives. But first of all, it's a thought that can be found all over Scripture. Even in Job's case, where it's clearly the devil who wants to rob Job of all his blessings and to strike him with a disease, he isn't able to do anything without asking God's permission and God giving it to him. God is firmly in control, and is just as much responsible for all of Job's pain and losses as the devil was, even though they each had very different purposes. In Isaiah 45, God says explicitly that he forms the light and creates darkness, that he brings prosperity and creates disaster. "I, the LORD, do all these things," he says.

And second, if you stop to think about it, would it really be comforting if God were not involved in our pain? If all of our pain could *only* be traced back to the devil and not to God, what would that say about God? Was he not paying attention when the devil snuck in? Was he not powerful enough to stop him? Did he not care? Let me ask: Who would you rather have give you a shot? Someone who has clearly demonstrated his love and friendship, or someone who didn't care one bit whether you lived or died?

Yes, God was the one who gave Paul his thorn in the flesh. And God gave it to him, in part, to keep him from becoming arrogant. In Proverbs 30, a wise man named Agur says, "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?'" He was concerned about becoming arrogant, because when you become arrogant, you trust in yourself, not in the Lord. And trust in yourself inevitably leads to a downfall and to destruction, because no matter how rich or gifted or powerful you are, you are not God.

That was the danger Paul would have been in if God had not sent him his pain. He would have said to himself, "Look at all the awesome revelations God has given to me and no one else! Who else has the relationship with God that I have? I deserve the utmost attention and respect! I'm not going to have any patience when people don't listen to me. Who are they to disagree with me?" And not only would he not have treated people with the respect and patience he

should have, but he also would have trusted in himself, his own superior character, for his salvation.

But God also had another purpose with Paul's pain: "[God] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me. That is why I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then am I strong."

God wanted to teach Paul the all-sufficiency of his grace. Asaph says in Psalm 73 that if he only has the Lord, he neither needs nor desires anything else in heaven or on earth. God wanted to teach Paul that attitude. If we lose an arm or a leg or our health as a whole, if we lose our wife or son or daughter or all our family members, if we lose our house, our truck, our appliances, our books, our fishing gear, or all our possessions, we still have everything if we have the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. An angel of Satan can rob us of everything, but he cannot rob us of our peace with God. He cannot rob us of the undying, undefiled, unfading inheritance kept in heaven for us through the atoning death of Jesus Christ and his glorious resurrection from the dead, into which we were baptized.

Most people associate large families and lots of friends and abundant possessions with strength. But those of you who have seen and met Christians who have lost so much, whether people or possessions or both, and yet are able to say, "It's okay. The Lord is God, not I. And I still have my Savior and the inheritance in heaven he has won for me. All the rest is just temporary"—those of you who have seen and met such Christians know that they are truly the strongest ones. I just had an email conversation with a Christian out in the Black Hills area whose wife has been diagnosed with cancer. This is what we wrote to me: "We are in the gracious nail-pierced hands of our Savior. Nothing can touch us without passing through his grace first. That doesn't mean we don't cry. But who are we to refuse the cup he would give us at this time?" That is strength.

"Whenever I am weak, then I am strong," Paul wrote. And it's not just true of Paul. In Christ, it is true of all of us.

How comforting it is to know, from this section of 2 Corinthians and many other places in Scripture, that our pain is not without purpose and meaning. How comforting it is to know that we're not alone, that even Christ and his apostles can relate to us. How comforting it is to know that the devil and his evil angels aren't the only ones behind our pain. How comforting it is to know that God does hear and answer our prayers; it's just that his yes is often a better yes. How comforting it is to know that God cares about us enough to keep us from becoming arrogant. How comforting it is to know that God knows what we need, what is sufficient for us. How comforting it is to know that no one and no thing can ever rob us of God's grace and forgiveness and the eternal glory our Savior is preparing for us in heaven. How comforting it is to know that God's power is made perfect, is at its best, is on its brightest display in our weaknesses.

There is a plan, there is purpose, in your pain. And in Christ Jesus, you can be sure that the purpose is a good one. "That is why I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then am I strong." Amen.