

Suffering.

Suffering is a universal problem. Everyone faces it at some time. The Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:7, “To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me”. There has been much discussion about what this “thorn in the flesh” could have been. One theologian said it could have been spiritual temptation. Another felt it may have been an eye disease. Yet another said it was persecution. Paul gives us a clue in this chapter. He says in verse 10, “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then am I strong”. The thorn in the flesh appears to be the many trials and difficulties he faced as he served the Lord. The messenger from Satan was one of his demons sent to make life troublesome for the Apostle. One of the blessings of being a Christian is that we can put suffering in perspective. We can see its purpose. Suffering for the believer, although it’s never nice, is never seen to be pointless.

As we consider Paul’s words here we find that suffering is permitted by God. God never inflicts suffering personally, but he does allow us to experience it. Notice that Paul says in Verse 7, “there was given me a thorn in the flesh”. The word “given” is significant. In verse 8 we read, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me”. God said no. The implication of this is that suffering is from Satan but God is in control over its duration and degree. Satan could never have attacked Job if God hadn’t permitted him to do so. Satan accused Job of following God for personal gain. He wanted to tempt him to deny God through a time of suffering. We read in Job 1:12, “The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger’”. Jesus said to Peter in Luke 22:31, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail”. Soon after that Peter faced a trial. Again it came from Satan but only as far as God allowed it.

Not all suffering is directly from Satan. We experience suffering because we’re in a fallen world. The Christian can suffer the same thing as the non-Christian. Both may be made redundant. Both might have to face a worrying operation. Both may

face a life threatening disease. The difference between the suffering of the believer and non-believer is put well in the words of the hymn writer. He says, "When through the deep waters he calls thee to go, the rivers of grief shall not thee overflow, for he will be with thee in trouble to bless, and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress". Whether Suffering is from Satan, or caused by the daily storms of living in an imperfect world, they are times are growing and learning. Isobel Kuhn said, "God does not waste suffering. If he ploughs, it is because he purposes a crop". In verse 9 Paul says, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me". Positive results arise out of the suffering of the child of God. So when you face suffering recognise that you're in the hands of your loving heavenly father. He's permitted this time of suffering not to torment you, or tease you, but to bring good out of it for his glory, and your spiritual development. Paul would never have experienced the power of Christ in his life had he never faced this torment from the messenger of Satan. Paul describes his suffering as a "Thorn in the flesh". The word "Thorn" translates a Greek word which means "Stake". Paul's suffering wasn't a mere pin prick. It was painful, as though a large stake had been plunged into him. There was relentless pressure. Paul had a stormy ride to glory! He says in 2 Corinthians 11: verses 23 to 29, "I have been in prison8flogged8exposed to death8beaten with rods stoned shipwrecked", and the list goes on. The problems were so great and frequent that Paul sensed his own weakness and his inability to continue.

What do we need in times of suffering? Our own personal recourses will fail. God's provision in suffering is grace. Paul asked God three times to remove the thorn. God said in verse was 9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness". Have you reached a point in your suffering and trials that you feel weak and you can't go on? There's sufficient grace for you. Grace to enfold you. Grace to uphold you. Grace to strengthen you. Robert McQuilkin, President of Columbia Bible College, tells how he reacts to suffering when it comes. He said, "The answer must be to take God at his word though there are fightings without and fears within, and though circumstances of outward things and inward life seem to say needs are not being met. His grace is sufficient. So I go forward doing the next duty and resting in faith not in feelings". When you suffer trust in a gracious God who will

sustain you. In your times of weakness rest on his grace. You will see God's power at work making you an overcomer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are a few habits to develop that will be a great help in suffering. In verse 8 Paul prayed. He said, "I pleaded with the Lord". Suffering drives you to prayer like you've never prayed before! It makes us really pray! Take your burdens to the Lord in prayer. Talk to him about how you feel. Ask for his help.

Then Paul developed patience. He had to endure the suffering. Charles Stern said, "Our impatience only learns patience through the thorns of delay and darkness".

Look for the value in your suffering. Paul's suffering gave him greater insight into God's grace, and how he works in our lives for our spiritual good. Use your time of suffering to grow in the Lord. Paul ended up gladly bearing the suffering because it deepened his experience of God's power. Suffering brought him closer to the Lord. The ABC of spiritual growth is Adversity Builds Character. True spiritual maturity isn't rushing to God and asking for a pain free, healthy, prosperous life. It's learning to see God's hand in the affliction, and asking him to use the suffering for your spiritual growth. Paul arrived at the point in his suffering where he could actually delight in it. He says these remarkable words in verse 10, "I delight in weaknesses". Why? Because in his weakness he is made strong. But not through his own ability. It's because of the ability he receives from the indwelling Christ. He says in Philippians 4:13, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength". In suffering Christ's glory is seen in us as he sustains, supports, helps, and comforts us. He's our friend, and saviour.

The onlooker asks why it is that we are calm and peaceful in our times of suffering. We give testimony to the keeping power of our Saviour. One of the great blessings of being a Christian is knowing experientially Christ's friendship as we journey through life. He's there for us in the good times and the bad.