

## **“Praying as Paul Prayed!”**

2 Corinthians 12: 1-10

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Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 (NIV) <sup>1</sup> I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. <sup>2</sup> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know--God knows. <sup>3</sup> And I know that this man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows-- <sup>4</sup> was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. <sup>5</sup> I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup> Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say. <sup>7</sup> To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. <sup>9</sup> 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> 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 I am strong.

The Apostle Paul was suffering. He wrote to his friends in Corinth and said that he had prayed about his miseries. We read:

**“...there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.”**

He said he had “pleaded” with the Lord. It’s an interesting word that is translated “plead” [parakalet-oh]. It can mean to “exhort” or “implore” or even “preach!”

It can mean to beg with a desperate tone! "Please" Paul said! "Please!" But the Lord said "No." The Lord could have healed Paul. But He did not. Why not? Why would that be? This morning in our series about prayer we will explore that question. Why does God sometimes not answer prayer? In fact, let's be truthful. Why does God *often* not answer prayer? How are we to understand unanswered prayer? First, let us pray.

Many years ago, Donna and I lived in Tulsa where we served for two years at an overseas mission that was headquartered there. During that time, we enjoyed worshipping at a rather large independent charismatic church until the atmosphere became somewhat disturbing. Why? Because one of the Pastors lost his wife to cancer. We all know that happens. But the church split right down the middle because of her death. On this side were those who said she should have been healed and would have been healed if only the faith of the people had not faltered. Because they had doubted, according to that view, the Lord had let her die. They insisted that God is always willing to heal and, therefore, the absence of healing meant that somehow there had been a failure of faith.

Here was their mistake: they saw Jesus heal in the Gospels and they thought that is supposed to be the norm. That if healing does not come, something is wrong because healing *should* come! But I suggest something very different. It is this: the healings and the miraculous activities of Jesus in the Gospels were not meant to set in place a new reality for all who would come to him in the age of the church. Rather, they took place to demonstrate his office as the Messiah! And as such they were glimpses...they were intrusions into the present of the future Kingdom when he will reign visibly among his own. After all, even Jesus did not heal everyone or feed everyone.

Thus, the other side of the argument says obviously God does not always answer prayer according to our requests. That side also argues that God does not always heal. They remind others that even Paul had some kind of affliction and his prayers went unanswered. But then the other side said....Paul lacked faith and that was why his prayers unanswered. Or they said Paul's affliction was probably not a matter of physical healing anyway. In that they were wrong, in my view, because Paul's "thorn" *was* most likely a physical problem. I say that because elsewhere he had indicated that he suffered from sickness and poor eyesight. But

even if his “thorn” was not a physical problem, even if it was persecution or loneliness the point would be the same. God said he would not take it away.

And for those who insisted physical healing is always God’s will, they needed to remember that Paul told Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach problems and frequent illnesses. [1 Timothy 5:23] Paul also spoke of how he had left his friend Trophimus sick in Miletus [2 Timothy 4:20]. But then others insisted that those men were sick because they lacked faith. That is what happens when you bring a presupposition to your Bible reading. In this case, it is the presupposition that God never approves of sickness. They went round and round in that church over why their prayers for the woman’s healing went unanswered.

So, between the sense of guilt that some Christians had because the woman had died...and the sense of frustration that some others had over the accusations of many, the church simply wrangled its way into a theological cull de sac and split in two. We moved on. All because of unanswered prayer and the reason for it.

Perhaps nothing could be more puzzling than unanswered prayer when the request seems righteous and reasonable. We always feel that if we love someone and we can help them in any way...that we should do so! So why does God not always “come thru” for us? C.S. Lewis struggled with the death of his wife Joy. Afterwards, he described the dilemma perfectly. He said: “I can believe in a God who is all-powerful and I can believe in a God who is all-loving. My problem is believing in a God who is both all-powerful **AND** all-loving!” We wrestle with the strange reality of unanswered prayer from the One who can always answer “Yes” but often answers “No.”

Today, let’s consider several factors relating to Paul’s situation in particular and unanswered prayed in general. When we look out over our life situation and we turn to God in prayer, let us remember three things:

### **ONE: HELPLESSNESS IS GOOD FOR US!**

Consider the Psalmist in that great passage we often mention:

**Psalms 121:1-2 (NIV) <sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the hills-- where does my help come from? <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.**

He has no problem admitting that he is helpless. In fact, his helplessness is at the very root of his prayers. But what if a man thinks he can do it all himself? What if a man thinks he is able in all situations? Even to save himself? What if a man is drowning in his own HUBRIS? A word that is much neglected in modern culture. "Hubris: Excessive arrogance and pride!" In ancient Greek mythology, there was a Greek "god" named "Hubris" who was overbearing and insulting to the other "gods." We are, because of sin, prone towards hubris. We have a repulsive pride of self.

That is the root of all sin...PRIDE! I spoke earlier of Lewis. Let me do so again. How I remember years ago being shocked when I first read his work "Mere Christianity." Early in the book, he speaks of the one great underlying problem of humanity and how it is actually considered a treasure! What is it that man admires most that is really toxic to the soul? Pride! Not the pride that reminds you to dress like a lady or gentleman or to cut your lawn or work hard. But the pride that gets you thinking that you are superior and that you are the most important and that you don't even need God! And in an age of achievement and prosperity, even as Christians we are always on the edge of pride! That is not new.

In ancient Israel, God allowed His people to prosper. But He warned them to beware of their pride. In Deuteronomy we read:

**Deuteronomy 8:17-18 (NIV) <sup>17</sup> You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." <sup>18</sup> But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.**

That was the sin of Nebuchadnezzar! Pride! In Daniel, we read that he had been warned to repent of his sins and begin to care for the poor and oppressed. Instead, he went the other way.

**Daniel 4:28-30 (NIV) <sup>29</sup> Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, <sup>30</sup> he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"**

Right after that, God reduced him to an animal and sent him to live in the woods! Anyway, helplessness is the best possible cure for our pride. That is what happened to Paul because he was in great danger of pride. In fact, Paul had experienced such unusual intimacy with God that he, Paul, needed to be humbled! Here is why Paul's prayer for relief from his affliction went unanswered:

**7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."**

Paul apparently had an experience that one person in a billion might have. He had been transported into Heaven itself and had seen and heard its glories. After that, he may have returned with a certain disdain for this world and its everyday sinners. In that attitude, he would have been no use to God. So, Paul is saying that his pride was the issue and that the Holy Spirit made it clear to him that he would not be healed! His prayer was unanswered because the best thing for him was to hear God say "No!" Helplessness can be a great gift that God gives to those He loves.

## **TWO: HURTING MAY BE GOD'S PROVISION FOR OUR CHRISTIAN GROWTH!**

Very often we pray that God will remove some kind of suffering or trial simply because it hurts. One of the things that Sigmund Freud got right was this principle: We move towards pleasure and away from pain. Absolutely true! And we naturally assume that suffering and pain are bad and that God knows they are bad and all we need to do is ask and He will act to remove them from our lives. But that is not necessarily true.

I like that story about a young baseball player named Josh Hamilton, who plays outfield for the Texas Rangers. Some people think he's one of the greatest to ever play the game. Years ago as a high school kid, he stunned the scouts with his abilities. Rising quickly toward the major leagues, Josh took a terrible detour

into the world of heavy drugs. Arrested and jailed and sent to rehab, his career was over in 2004 and no one gave him a chance at recovery. But his story did not end there. All of the suffering and hurting prompted him to finally respond to the call of Christ upon his life. He had two years of rehab and conditioning and growing in his walk with Jesus. Hamilton described it as a “God thing” for sure.

In November of 2010, Josh was named the most valuable player in the American League. But he is quick to point out that his success is more than the ability to hit the breaking ball. His success is rooted in the perseverance he learned in suffering. In other words, Josh’s original prayers for immediate miraculous deliverance went unanswered as they did for Paul. Why? Because he needed to learn to rely upon the Lord and to persevere.

Those who say sickness or affliction is always the result of weak faith really do not understand how God often works. Those who say that suffering can never be God’s will are worshipping a God of their imaginations! In fact, the Apostle Paul himself said just the opposite. We read in Romans Five:

**Romans 5:3-5 (NIV) <sup>3</sup> Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup> And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.**

Paul is saying he learned to rejoice in suffering because of its value in teaching perseverance. But that translates into this unexpected truth: **SOMETIMES WE MUST REJOICE...IN UNANSWERED PRAYER!**

We’ve said two things thus far:

1. Helplessness is good for us and
2. Hurting may be God’s provision for our Christian growth!

### **THREE: HARDSHIP IS OFTEN A BLESSING!**

Going back to our text, consider what Paul said:

**<sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. <sup>9</sup> 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> 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 I am strong.**

It was his suffering that allowed Paul to experience God's grace. Consider the Holy Spirit responding to Paul:

**"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."**

In the New Living Translation, God says to Paul:

**2 Corinthians 2:9 (NLT) <sup>9</sup> Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me.**

There is a key phrase here that Paul uses that we must grasp...but it is rooted in a point of view...in an attitude that Paul shows us. Think of it this way: what is the most important thing on Paul's mind as he pleads with God for deliverance from the suffering? At first, it is relief from the pain. That, for Paul, is the highest good. Paul makes a perfectly reasonable request of God...but maybe there is something much deeper going on here and in all pain and in all unanswered prayer.

At this point I want to introduce a CRITICAL POINT that is of great importance. We've been talking about bringing our suffering to the Almighty God who can alleviate it but often does not. And we've read that Paul heard from God that although He could take it away but would not do so. Why not? So, Paul can really experience His power. That is, so Paul can experience the pain and simultaneously experience God's presence in the pain. But wait! Wait please! What is going on in the mind of God that He is saying "It is more important that you experience my power than for you to experience relief?" Why do we find that idea so foreign and strange?

Let me say something very, very radical. In my opinion, the vast majority of non-Christians do not understand the Gospel and what it means to be a Christian.

That's obvious. But here's the amazing and disturbing thing: most Christians do not understand the Gospel either except in the sense of salvation and eternal life. In other words, it is possible to genuinely be saved...to be born again, but live your whole Christian life mildly frustrated because you only understood the Gospel partially and not fully.

Here is the partial portion that we mostly hear: **"Jesus Christ came to save sinners"** as in Paul's letter to Timothy [1 Timothy 1:15]. Then we hear that we must **"believe in his name to have eternal life"** as John said in his first letter [1 John 5:13]. But those realities are the gifts of God given because of Jesus's Crucifixion and Resurrection and our faith in his work. But those things are not a complete description of the Gospel as Jesus presented it. THE GOSPEL IS NOT JUST TAKE FROM CHRIST IT IS GIVE TO CHRIST! GIVE WHAT? ***YOUR WHOLE SELF!***

According to Jesus, the centerpiece of the Gospel begins with dying before entering into life. We must grasp that Jesus is not calling us to a regular worldly life at the end of which we will go to Heaven because we asked him to save us. No! Jesus is calling us to a radical decision that should be made with fear and trembling. Think of it...how did Jesus describe the life of those who would be his and be eternally saved? When Jesus spoke of the **"abundant life"** in John 10:10...what did he mean? Wealth? Perfect health? Success?

Look closely. The true Gospel and the true Christ-centered life is a life of putting away the ordinary claims to everything this life has to offer! It does not necessarily mean a life of poverty but it might! It does not necessarily mean a life of poor health...but it might! It does not necessarily mean a life of suffering...but it might! It does not necessarily mean a life of being misunderstood and left out and persecuted...but it might! When we understand the true Gospel and what Jesus was really saying...we will let go of all of our claims upon God as if He had to do anything and everything we think He ought to do! Only when we really grasp the whole Gospel do we readily say with Paul **"I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties."** Think of it. Who do you know who really delights in weakness and insults and hardship and persecutions and suffering? In the world, they call such people masochists and try to get them psychiatric help. But Jesus calls us to an upside

down dying to this life! That is the Gospel. Consider the things Jesus said that you will never hear from those who present the Gospel as a cure for loneliness and a cheerful walk with God with Him meeting all of your desires. Please look closely at what Jesus really called for and offered:

1. **Mark 8:34 (NIV) <sup>34</sup> Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."**

Carrying your cross means you are willing follow Jesus to death to this life! Not just to salvation and abundant joy but to death to this life! To a total life change whereby you willing to deliberately give up any normal guarantees to the rights in this life that others may hold. You see, some people present the Gospel in an exactly upside down and backwards way by saying that you "GAIN" rights as a child of God. No, really you lose rights to gain joining God's family.

2. **Matthew 10:39 (NIV) Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.**

If we hold on to this life, we will lose it. If we give it up to follow him we will find it.

3. **Matthew 8:19-22 (NIV) <sup>19</sup> Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." <sup>20</sup> Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." <sup>21</sup> Another disciple said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." <sup>22</sup> But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."**

All of the ordinary rights that humans have are nailed to the Cross when we follow Christ. We give up our right to return wrong for wrong. We give up our right to chase millions of dollars. We give up our right to be exalted. We give

up our right to not forgive. The Gospel calls for an upside down life in which God may...or may not...give us things that we used to expect in life.

Only in that kind of new life can we take delight in **HELPLESSNESS, HARDSHIP AND HURTING!** When God did not answer his prayer with a “Yes” ... Paul had a growth spurt in his faith and he realized that there was something far more precious than being pain-free. What was that? It was to have “the power of Christ” at work in himself! Paul's response to the unanswered prayer, if you think about it, was the totally upside down response of a man who had died to this life and moved on to eternal life even as he finished his life here on Earth.

In other words, eternal life and eternal living begin here and now and we are to be changed people. Little wonder Paul put it this way:

**Galatians 2:20 (NIV) <sup>20</sup> I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**

And so when Paul prayed, he prayed as one who did not live the normal human life on this earth but as one who had entered into eternal life while he was still here on Earth. Thus, he was able to delight in God's answers to prayer whatever they were...“Yes” or “No”...because he knew that God was treating him exactly as he needed to be treated to become more like the Lord Jesus Christ whom he was following.

We've seen prayer as fellowship with God. We need to see it more and more as the opportunity to embrace God's will and become more like Jesus...whose own prayers were not always answered.

Let us pray.

