

## **God's Provision for Our Pain**

There was once a little girl who found a cocoon hanging from a limb in the forest. She took it home, put it in a jar, and placed it by the window in her room. Several times a day, she would check the cocoon waiting for a beautiful butterfly to emerge. After several days she finally noticed that the butterfly within the cocoon was finally trying to get out. There it was, struggling and trying to push its way out of the very small opening. Because she wanted to help the butterfly, the little girl took the limb and very carefully enlarged the opening in the cocoon. After that, the butterfly was able to exit without a problem.

However, the butterfly that emerged from the cocoon was very different from what she had expected to see. Instead of spreading two beautiful wings, the butterfly possessed two withered, shriveled, ugly wings hanging by its side. The little girl didn't understand why? What she failed to realize is that God designed the butterfly so that the tight opening of the cocoon would straighten and strengthen its wings. Without the pressure of exiting the cocoon, the butterfly was robbed of its beauty, and more importantly, it was robbed of its ability to fly. This butterfly would be condemned to a short life of walking around on the ground.

Just as this child thoughtlessly neglected the truth that the butterfly needed to struggle if it would fulfill the destiny for which it was created, we are prone to forget that it is precisely the struggle that confronts us each day, the seemingly constant opposition, that makes us strong. If you will ever be the beautiful example of the person God intends for you to be, you will need to accustom yourself to hardship. The trials you are facing today are designed to transform you into the gracious example of a redeemed individual that glorifies the Savior.

I'm speaking to people who know something of disappointment, of heartache, of sorrow. If you are a follower of the Master, you rightfully anticipate that He will be gracious to His child. At any given moment in the worship service are people who have experienced real pain and brokenness in life; you have been buffeted, beaten, and bruised. Among us are people who have gone through a marital breakup or family stress so severe that it has strained relationships that should be unbreakable. You may be well acquainted with the sorrow imposed by a child who has turned away from the Lord, disappointing you, and dashing your expectations. You may know what it is to be betrayed by people you thought were your friends. Others among us, myself included, have sat in the office of their physician and heard words that terrified their soul. Perhaps you have unexpectedly or prematurely lost a dear loved one. Someone you had planned a life of growing old with, but for some reason, death has intervened, and now you are left alone to somehow find a way through the dark world without the love and support of your soulmate. Crushed by what lies ahead, you are crying out to the God of Heaven, seeking some stable ground on which you might stand.

There may be some here who have tasted the bitter bondage that comes through foolishly buying into the world's message that more is better. They have indebted themselves to a crippling extent and wonder how they will ever be able to dig their way out of the hole they are in. They realize that the trap into which they have stumbled is of their own making, but this reality doesn't ease their pain, doesn't stop them from pleading for relief, and shouldn't stop them from asking God to do something to lift the burden that can press down so hard that it is difficult to breathe.

After being diagnosed with cancer earlier this year, I had a few very well-intentioned people tell me that God has promised not to give us more than we can handle. I believe this thinking comes from a misreading of 1 Corinthians 10:13, which says that “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

While I treasure these words, and I am probably guilty of misreading it before as well; this verse is talking about the temptation to sin, not the trials and tribulations that we endure. God will not allow Satan to tempt you to sin beyond what you can personally withstand. However, God does allow Satan to burden and harass us beyond what we can endure. Do not forget the story of Job, here was a man of great wealth and prosperity who was going through life happy and content. In Job chapter 1 and again, chapter 2, God and Satan have a conversation in which God gives Satan permission to do anything he wanted to Job except killing him. Satan took full advantage of this permission by taking all of Job’s worldly wealth, killing all of his children and their families, and physically hurting Job to the point that he sat on a garbage pile outside of the city gate scratching himself with broken pottery. I don’t know about you, but I have to think that this honestly felt to Job like God had burdened him too greatly.

The same can be said for the apostle Paul, the man who wrote the very words in 1 Corinthians. We see time and again through scripture that Paul endured terrible hardship and tribulation as he sought to travel, evangelize, and plant new churches. 2 Corinthians 11 tells us that he had been imprisoned numerous times; endured countless beatings (many that nearly killed him); he had been stoned publicly; shipwrecked three times; stranded at sea; in physical danger from numerous sources; had countless sleepless nights; was often without anything to eat or drink; and at times he experienced crippling anxiety. How could this man tell us that God won’t give us more trials and pain than we can endure? The simple answer is that he didn’t.

As we come to our text this morning, we find the apostle Paul in tremendous pain. Look with me at the words of 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. If you need to use one of the Blue Bibles in front of you, this passage can be found on page 1149. This text starts as Paul is telling the Corinthian Church about an experience he had in which God took him to heaven fourteen years earlier and allowed him to witness and hear things so great and awesome that Paul had never before shared the experience with anyone. Join me if you will in verse 7 (Read 2 Corinthians 7-10). [2 SLIDES]

What Paul and Job had in common is that they both knew that despite everything we go through, **God wants to use our pain** to help us mature as Christians and glorify him. At the time he was first afflicted, it is doubtful that Paul understood that his thorn in the flesh, this messenger of Satan, was accomplishing a divine purpose. It takes time and maturity to begin to unravel God’s plan lying behind our experiences. Seldom are we able to recognize what God is doing when we are experiencing pain.

Are you suffering from a chronic illness? Perhaps God has permitted that condition to glorify His Name in you. Are you struggling against an emotional weakness? Is it possible that God has permitted this to reveal His power and might through you? Are you facing an impossible situation in your life now? God can and will continue to work in your life.

I know that some of you are here today and struggling with what appear to be insurmountable obstacles. You are convinced that if only those obstacles were removed, you could accomplish great things for the cause of Christ. However, I urge you to see that God is actively at work in your life now; He is even using the limitation that you see as a deficit to glorify His Name. I want you to hear these words of encouragement even now - you are part of His glorious plan to magnify His Name despite all the human limitations of which you are so very much aware; you are an instrument to His glory wielded powerfully even now.

When I think about Christians thriving in their faith despite their human limitations, I often think about my aunt, Carole. She has reached a place in life where she does not get around very well and must rely on others to take her from place to place. This means that she very seldom ever attends Church in person. However, she devours Christian programming on television and is perhaps the strongest prayer warrior in my life. After being diagnosed with cancer in February, she was the first person Lori, and I told, and she calls me almost every day to ask how I am doing and how she can pray for me. She has told me that she is convinced that the reason the Lord continues to give her breath each day is so that she can read her Bible and pray for people in need.

While we work to grasp how God is using the pain and trouble in our lives; **our pain can be perplexing** as we try to figure out what it means or why we must endure it.

Paul writes in verse 7 that his pain, or at least the cause of it, was “given” to him. One might ask, “What is perplexing about that?” I would answer, “Look at the source of the pain, the one who gave it!” The verb “was given” is a passive verb indicating that it was God who gave Paul the thorn which produced his suffering. If you allow that to sink in for a moment, you just might be perplexed. Christians so often blame the devil for all our suffering. However, the Bible makes it clear that at times, God gives those things to us, which cause pain in our lives. That is perplexing to many because God has a reputation of only being loving, kind, and merciful; and the devil is the one who causes every painful circumstance. Yet, God is still sovereign and sits on the throne, knowing what we need to grow spiritually. This same God is the very one who not only allows the trials of life to come our way; but as Paul learned, He also at times even directs them to come our way.

As we are learning, sometimes it is necessary for God to get our attention through difficulty or pain. If you are like me, sometimes a little pain or difficulty isn't enough to get your attention, so **God allows our pain to become piercing**.

Paul states that his pain is as a result of “a thorn in the flesh.” This “thorn” comes from the Greek word indicating a pointed piece of wood, or more literally, a stake one would use to impale with. This pain that Paul was suffering was piercing; more specifically, Paul's pain was piercing physical pain. Similarly, the pain that we often face in life, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual, can cut to the heart. This ultimately means that when God allows us

to experience pain and difficulty, it is often tailor-made specifically for us, meaning that **our pain is personal**.

This thorn in the flesh was given specifically to Paul, in his words “to keep me from becoming conceited.” He said, “there was given to me a messenger of Satan to harass me.” This pain was directed just for him. Likewise, the pain that we experience is unique to just us. Paul’s pain was for very specific purposes that God deemed necessary for Paul’s spiritual growth and well-being. Likewise, God “gives” us pain to bring us to the place spiritually that He knows is necessary for our continued well-being. To gain the most amount of benefit from your trials and suffering, look for what God has for you to learn through your circumstances rather than simply seeking His reasoning for causing you to endure it. Charles Spurgeon once said that “God is too good to be unkind and too wise to make mistakes.” This means that God is not going to cause you to suffer just for the sake of suffering; that would make Him cruel, and that is outside of His Holy nature. It is entirely possible that He is trying to get your attention about something. Until we begin to understand what God is trying to accomplish through our circumstances, **our pain will be persistent**.

In these verses, Paul declares that this pain is there to “harass” him. The Greek word translated here as “harass” is also found in elsewhere in the New Testament, and it literally means “to strike with the fist.” It is written using the present tense and active voice which denotes a constant or continual pain. This was not the flu or some bacteria or virus that, with a few antibiotics or medications, can be cured in just a few days. No, this was physical suffering that would not go away. Before beginning my treatment plan for cancer, this is the type of pain that I lived with. Constant discomfort and abdominal pain had become a way of life for me. In some ways, this pain had become so normal for me that I began to tune it out and accept it as my new reality of life. God does not desire for us to become complacent in our pain and suffering; He wants to use it to accomplish something specific. In Paul’s case, **God used pain to crush his pride**.

In verse seven, we are informed that the thorn in Paul’s flesh was given to keep him humble. God knew the inherent risk in allowing Paul to witness the glories of heaven. No one else had been privileged to see what Paul had seen, and there was the very real possibility that Paul would use his privileged status with God to lift himself to an elevated position. Therefore, God had two possible ways that he could deal with Paul’s potential pride in response to his great revelations. First, God could choose not to allow Paul to experience heavenly glory in person. Or, second, God could allow Paul to witness great things, but he also must endure great weakness. Thus, to circumvent Paul’s prideful tendency, God acted by permitting Satan to work so that in some way, the Apostle was weakened. In his weakness, Paul would be driven to look to the Lord for strength. We’re left with the impression that he became utterly dependent on divine strength to accomplish even simple tasks each day.

God gave Paul a thorn in the flesh so that, in the words of the King James Bible, he would not be “exalted above measure.” This literally means that God made sure that Paul didn’t become conceited about what he had been so privileged to have witnessed. We do not know what he suffered with as scripture is silent concerning it, but it nevertheless caused Paul a great deal of pain. Could it be that God has allowed pain in your life so that you will remain humble and fully dependent upon Him? Christ reminds us in John 15:5, “for apart from me, you can do nothing.”

God can see down the road. He knows where the potholes are that can cause great damage to our spiritual vehicles. He sees the ruts in the sidewalk that can cause us to trip and fall. Pride was just that for Paul. So, what does God do? He brings spiritual asphalt to fill in our ruts and potholes. But just like natural asphalt, it will not smooth over unless heated up. Likewise, the spiritual holes of our lives, caused by sin or other things that distract us from God, cannot be filled in unless the heat of life's pain is present. You can not begin to know or understand God's purpose for your pain unless you talk to Him about it. Therefore, **God uses our pain to compel our prayers.**

Jesus taught His followers to pray without ceasing. Luke 18 teaches us that, "[Jesus] told [His followers] a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." I am the first to admit that it is difficult to pray under some circumstances. "Difficult" may not be the proper term because prayer can become heroic in some instances.

When your world is crashing down around you, and your heart says no one stands with you against the forces that threaten to overwhelm you, the act of praying can even seem to be a distraction rather than a necessity. It is precisely at such times that we most need to bombard Heaven with our cries for relief. It is during these times of crisis that we need to seek the face of the Living God, and that is the time when it can be most difficult to pray. One thing is certain, at such times we won't simply be saying polite prayers—we will cry out for deliverance! Let me remind you that one of the most powerful prayers any of us can offer can be as simple as one word—HELP! When it seems that Satan and his minions are focused on you alone, pray! Don't quit praying; God is listening. And in His own time, the Living God will move His great hand to deliver His child, because He loves you.

Verse eight shows that Paul's trials drove him to his knees. The Bible tells us that he sought the Lord three times for healing. I know that Paul was a praying man. Multiple times in his writing, he said so himself, and he encourages everyone else to do so as well. But there was something different this time; Paul's praying was more urgent. Don't let the fact that Paul only prayed three times about this malady fool you into thinking that this was just some casual praying. No, this was serious, passionate, urgent praying. The New Living Translation has recorded that Paul "begged" the Lord three times to remove the thorn. I love the wording of this translation because it shows us that what Paul was doing was so much more than how we typically approach God with our pain.

The Greek word used here is the same word used in the Gospel of Mark when Jairus was pleading with Jesus to heal his daughter, and when speaking of the leper who begs Jesus to heal him. It is also used in Matthew 18 in recalling how a servant begged his master for mercy over a bill that he owed and risked being thrown into prison because he could not pay. Think about it for a moment. How would you pray for your dying child? In what manner would you pray if you had a terrible and painful disease, or you were in danger of being cast into prison?

Perhaps one of the most convicting passages about prayer I have read is found in Hebrews 4:16. It instructs us to "come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most" (NLT). When we pray, God wants us to come boldly to him. Pastor Rick has been instrumental to my thinking about

this passage. He told me once, “you aren’t going to manipulate God into anything. Just be honest with him, God is always going to answer our prayers. Sometimes He says “yes,” and we get the positive answer we have been seeking. Sometimes he tells us “no,” as He did Paul here; and sometimes his answer seems delayed because He wants us to know that it is not the time for His response. Therefore, just tell God what is on your mind.” We need to stop being so hesitant and timid in approaching God’s throne in prayer. If you are suffering, cry out to God in it and ask him to either remove your suffering or minister to you and give you what is needed to endure.

I am certain of this—when I cry out to the Father, He hears me, and since He hears me, I am assured that He will answer according to His perfect will. The answer won’t always be dramatic, but it is certain. For the Apostle, the answer to his plea was divine assurance: “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.” That promise is hard for us to believe, but our struggle to accept what God says does not alter the reality of what is said. God’s grace is sufficient for you. The reason His grace is sufficient is that His power is made perfect in weakness. Here is a truth that is oftentimes neglected—some of God’s choicest saints are some of the weakest of His children. Here is the surprising corollary—those weakened saints are among God’s strongest representatives. Their strength lies in their utter reliance on God for strength, for hope, for anything that will ever be accomplished through them.

For the moment, many of God’s people know what it is to suffer. I recognize there are many ailments which are common to all of humanity; I don’t deny that these conditions often entail suffering—pain, and limitations, both physical and emotional. There is nothing pleasant about physical ailments that are part of the human condition. There is nothing pleasant about emotional deficits that inflict their special form of suffering upon those so afflicted. There is nothing easy about the struggle to provide for your family when your culture pressures you to meet its standard.

God is always working in and on us; His perfect work is not often seen as His at the time because pain is distracting, debilitating, and devastating. Pain grips us by the throat and demands that we focus on what we are experiencing. When this happens, we will inevitably plead for relief. I want you to understand that it is not a sin to go before the Lord and pray like this. Notice that when Paul sought divine relief, God did not rebuke him for asking for deliverance. Instead, Paul was learning to pray in the same manner as Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39).

How should we respond when we are struck by such painful experiences? Looking at Paul’s response, it is obvious that we should pray. Though we need no encouragement to pray when we hurt, it is fascinating to note that prayer is one of the last things we do in our pain. Prayer should be our first resort; unfortunately, it is often the last thing we turn to out of desperation. Charles Stanley once said that “one of the most devastating realities of the Christian life is that we fail to ask the Lord to do anything more complex than blessing the food we are about to eat.” We imagine that the pain we are experiencing in our body is normal, or that it is minor and will go away on its own; so, we don’t seek divine intervention. Life’s pain will drive you to your knees! Now, understanding this truth, and coupling it with the fact that the Lord knows that we are more apt to seek Him when we hurt or have a need, isn’t

it sensible to conclude that He will allow us to experience the suffering of life's pain? As we seek the Lord through prayer about our struggles, **He will begin to use our pain to change our perspective.**

Paul began by acknowledging his pain, and then he began pleading for God to remove it. Somewhat surprisingly, God didn't heal Paul. God replied not with healing, but rather with information that would change forever how Paul looked at suffering. What did God say that so radically changed Paul's perspective? "My strength is made perfect in weakness."

From this moment on, Paul ceased to ask God for physical healing. Furthermore, he takes on an attitude of asking God to leave the thorn where it is. Paul's entire attitude does an about-face. Now, he is not only glad to have the thorn, but he embraces weakness for the glory of God. In verse 10, we see that Paul became "content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities." Paul points out that his contentment comes because as he struggles with human weakness and infirmity, God is glorified, and his ministry may be strengthened. Through our human frailty and inadequacy, God's power and glory can be fully manifested through our lives.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says that we should "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Wow! I don't know about you, but as I struggle with the extreme side effects of cancer treatment it seems impossible for me to "rejoice always" or "give thanks in all circumstances;" but this is precisely what I am supposed to do. Think about this; Paul wrote these words while struggling with this debilitating pain. God wants us to see our struggle as something to learn from, something that strengthens our testimony, something that draws us and those around us closer to Him. Paul understood, as we can that sometimes the pain we are enduring has a divine purpose, and **God is using our pain to conquer Satan.**

When God allows Satan to test or weaken us, know that he does so to continue letting Satan defeat himself. Remember Job from earlier? Satan's argument for wanting to test him was that he said if Job were to lose everything, he would curse God and seek death. However, at the end of Job's story, he stayed true in his faith and resisted the attacks and advice of numerous people that thought they were speaking truth into his life. In the end, Satan was defeated, and God ended up rewarding Job and blessing him tremendously for enduring such testing.

Look at the story of Judas; here, we find a man that people do not typically talk about in a positive light. After all, he betrayed Jesus for a little bit of money; leading Jesus to be arrested, put on trial, and ultimately crucified. Hear this, NONE of these things happened by chance! God allowed Satan to test Judas because He knew that Judas would do exactly what he did. Think about this, Satan enters Judas (Luke 22:3), and Judas turns Jesus over to the authorities leading to his death on the cross. But what happened when Jesus died? I'll read it to you, "He disarmed the [satanic] rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (Colossians 2:15).

Because God permitted Satan to test Judas in his human weakness; Satan inadvertently stripped himself of the only damning weapon in his arsenal against humanity – unforgiven sin. When Satan entered Judas, he signed his own death certificate with the blood of Jesus.

Time and again through history, we see Satan being allowed to exploit human weakness and frailty, only to harm himself as a result further. That is what being accomplished here in Paul's life; God is using the father of all pride to work so that Paul could be delivered from the sin of pride. The same pain and trouble that Satan tries to use for our destruction, God uses to draw us closer to Him.

The old-time hymn writer Fanny Crosby knew a life of struggle more than most of us. I'm sure when she learned that her sightless world was the result of a doctor's foolish mistake, she was forced to deal with wondering "what might have been." The hot compresses her physician had employed to cure her eye infection at six weeks of age had only succeeded in scarring sensitive tissue. His act had rendered her permanently blind.

Few of us know what it's like not to see—not being able to describe the color yellow, or distinguish a loved one's face in the crowd, or navigate a city block or street crossing simply by spotting obstacles and watching the traffic. What if even the simplest tasks of pouring your breakfast cereal, or counting change, or sorting the laundry required the intently focused attention of your hearing and touch? We forget to be thankful for the blessing of sight.

One time a preacher sympathetically remarked, "I think it is a great pity that the Master did not give you sight when He showered so many other gifts upon you." She replied quickly, "Do you know that if at birth, I had been able to make one petition, it would have been that I should be born blind?"

"Why?" asked the surprised clergyman. "Because when I get to heaven, the first face that shall ever gladden my sight will be that of my Savior!"

One of Miss Crosby's hymns was so personal that for years she kept it to herself. Kenneth Osbeck, the author of several books on hymnology, says its revelation to the public came about this way:

"One day at the Bible conference in Northfield, Massachusetts, Miss Crosby was asked by D.L. Moody to give a personal testimony. At first, she hesitated, then quietly rose and said, 'There is one hymn I have written which has never been published. I call it my soul's poem. Sometimes when I am troubled, I repeat it to myself, for it brings comfort to my heart.' She then recited while many wept, 'Someday the silver cord will break, and I no more as now shall sing; but oh, the joy when I shall wake within the palace of the King! And I shall see Him face to face and tell the story I am saved by grace!'"

Imagine being able to say, as Fanny Crosby did, "I could not have written thousands of hymns if I had been hindered by the distractions of seeing all the interesting and beautiful objects that would have been presented to my notice." As she wrote in her autobiography, "It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank Him for the dispensation. I thank Him for my blindness."

At the age of 95, Fanny Crosby finally passed into glory and saw the face of Jesus.