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How God Uses Suffering

12: 5-10

How God Uses Suffering DIG: Notice the different ways Paul used the word “weak” or a variation of it in these verses. Highlight instances where being “weak” is a good thing. What do you think Paul meant when he spoke of receiving a “thorn in the flesh?” Why did Paul view that ongoing difficulty - whatever it was - as a good thing? How was his attitude different from merely “positive thinking?” What was Satan’s message for Paul? What was God’s message?

REFLECT: What are some personal weaknesses or ongoing afflictions you find it difficult to live with? How does God use “weaknesses” and thorns to bring about His purposes and to shape believers’ lives? How do “weaknesses” cause believers to grow in their trust in the Lord? What would be your likely response if you had the strength and knowledge to handle every given situation that came your way? When has God said “No!” to you? The result?

God works best when I consider my weakness.

The question of why bad things happen to seemingly good people is an issue that troubles many. Disease, crime, hunger, poverty, accidents, and natural disasters seem to strike without rhyme or reason, affecting both the seemingly innocent and the guilty alike. But the Bible teaches that bad things happen to all people because all are fallen sinners who live in a fallen world. No one is inherently good: **There is none righteous, not even one (Romans 3:10)**. Even **God’s** most noble servants are not immune to suffering. The pages of the Bible are full of them. How **Paul** handled suffering provides a model for all believers. No text in Scripture more powerfully displays **God’s** purposes in believers’ pain than does this passage. **Paul** was very emotional here about **his** personal pain. So from the trial of **Paul’s** suffering emerge **five reasons** that **God** allows suffering in the lives of believers.²⁷⁵

1. God uses suffering to reveal believers’ spiritual condition (12:5-6): Trouble is the truest test of a person’s spiritual character. When adversity strikes, the superficial veneer of peace and happiness is stripped away, revealing what is really in the heart. **The Lord** brought intense suffering into **Paul’s** life in part to reveal **his** integrity for all to see and

establish to **his** credibility. **About such a man I will boast; but about myself I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses (12:5).** What **Paul boasted** about were **his weaknesses**, for **they** provided compelling proof of **his** apostleship. How else could **his** immense impact be explained, **except** that **God's** power was at work in **him**? As **his enemies** were quick to point out, **Paul's letters were weighty and powerful, but when he appeared in person he was weak, and as a speaker he was nothing (10:10).** But what **they** failed to understand was that, paradoxically, **Paul** was **strongest** when **he** was **weakest (12:10).**

Paul's boast was not **foolish**, for unlike **the false apostles (to see link click [Af](#) - The Problem of the False Apostles)** and **their** baseless claims, **He** was **speaking the truth.** **His** vision really happened, and to deny that would be false humility. **Nevertheless, because of the extraordinary greatness of the revelations, Paul** wisely **refrained** from resting **his** case for **his** apostleship on **his** vision alone. The problem was that **it** was not repeatable, verifiable, or even fully comprehensible. Besides, it didn't draw people to **God**, and was, in fact, a potential source of temptation of **pride (12:7).** **Paul** was concerned **that no one will think more of him than what his words or deeds may warrant (12:6).** The true measure of believers is not their mystical experiences, but their godly life and their faithfulness to **the Word of God.** The most startling, spectacular vision or supernatural revelation is not as significant as the least righteous act. **God** plunged **Paul** into the deepest sorrow and the severest pain to reveal most clearly that **he** was a genuinely humble man of **God (Colossians 2:18-19).**²⁷⁶



2. God uses suffering to humble believers (12:7): Therefore, to keep me from becoming overly proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from the Adversary to pound away at me, so that I wouldn't grow conceited (Greek: *huperairo*, meaning *to lift or raise over, to uplift oneself*). **The Lord** knows how to balance our lives. If we have only blessings, we may become **proud**; so **He** permits us to have burdens as well. **Paul's** great experience in heaven could have ruined **his** ministry on earth; so **ADONAI**, in

His goodness, permitted **the Ruler of Darkness** to pound away at **him** in order to keep **him** from becoming **proud**.

The mystery of human suffering will not be solved completely in this life. Sometimes we suffer simply because we are human beings with a fallen sin nature (see the commentary on [Romans Bm - The Consequences of Adam](#)). Our bodies change as we grow older, and we are susceptible to the normal problems of life. The same body that can bring us pleasure can also bring us pain. The same family members and friends who delight us can also break our hearts.

Sometimes we suffer because we are foolish and disobedient to **the Lord**. Our own rebellion may afflict us, or **the Lord** may see fit to discipline us in **His** love (see the commentary on [Hebrews Cz - God Disciplines His Children](#)). King David suffered greatly because of his sin; the consequences were painful and so was the discipline (see the commentary on [the Life of David Df - O God, A Broken and Contrite Heart You Will Not Despise](#)). In **His grace**, **God** forgives our sins; but in **His** righteousness, **He** must permit us to reap what we have sown.

Suffering is a tool that **ADONAI** uses for building godly character (see the commentary on [Romans Bi - The Perfecting of Justification](#)). Certainly, **Paul** was a man of godly character because he permitted **God** to mold and make **him** in the painful experiences of **his** life. When you walk along the shore of the ocean, you notice that the rocks are sharpest in the quiet coves, but polished in those places where the waves have beaten against them. **The Lord** can use the "waves of life" to polish us . . . if we let **Him**. **Paul's thorn in the flesh** was given to him to keep **him** from sinning. Exciting spiritual experiences - like going to heaven and back (**12:1-4**) - have a way of inflating the human ego; and **pride** leads to a wealth of temptations to sin. Had **Paul's** heart been filled with **pride**, those next **fourteen years** would have been filled with failure instead of success.

We do not know what **Paul's thorn in the flesh** was. The word translated **thorn** means *a sharp stake used for torturing or impaling someone*. **It** was a physical affliction of some kind that brought pain and distress to **the apostle**. Some Bible students think that **Paul** had an eye affliction (see the commentary on [Galatians Ch - The Autograph: See the Large Letters I Am Writing with My Own Hand](#)). But we cannot know for sure. It's a good thing that we do not know, because no matter what our sufferings may be, we are able to apply the lessons **Paul** learned and get encouragement.

God permitted **the Lawless One** to afflict **Paul**, just as **He** permitted **the Lawless One** to afflict **Job** (**Job 1-2**). While we do not fully understand the origin of evil in the universe, or

all the purposes that **Ha'Shem** had in mind when **He** permitted evil to come into existence, we do know that **ADONAI** controls evil and can use it, even for **His** own glory. **The Adversary** cannot work against a believer without the permission of **God**. Everything that the enemy did to **Job** and **Paul** was permitted by the will of **YHVH**.

The Devil was permitted to **pound away** (Greek: *kolaphizo*, meaning *a blow with the fist*) **at Paul**. The tense of the verb indicates that this pain was either constant or recurring. When you stop to think that **Paul** had letters to write, trips to take, sermons to preach, churches to visit, and dangers to face as **he** ministered, you can understand that this was a very serious matter. No wonder **he** prayed **three times** (see below), as **the Lord** had done in **the Garden** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Lb - The Garden of Gethsemane**), that the affliction might be removed from **him**.

When **God** permits suffering in our lives, there are several ways we can deal with it. Some people become bitter and blame **Him** for robbing them of freedom or pleasure. Others just give up and fail to get any blessing out of the experience because they will not exhibit any courage. Still others grit their teeth and put on a brave face, determined to endure to the very end. While that is a courageous response, it usually drains them of the strength needed for daily living; and after a time, they may collapse.²⁷⁷

3. God's uses suffering to draw believers to Himself (12:8): Three times I begged the Lord to take this thing away from me. Was **Paul** sinning when he prayed to be delivered from **the pounding** he was taking from **the Ruler of this World**? I don't think so. It's certainly a normal thing for a believer to ask **ADONAI** for deliverance from sickness and pain. **The Lord** is not *obligated Himself* to heal every believer when they pray; but **He** has encouraged us to bring our burdens and needs to **Him**. **The apostle** didn't know whether **his thorn in the flesh** was a temporary testing from **YHVH**, or a permanent experience **he** would have to live with.

There are those health and wealth advocates who want us to believe that an afflicted believer is a disgrace to **God**. "If you are obeying **the Lord** and claiming all that you have in **Messiah**," they say, "then you'll never be sick." I have never found that teaching in the Bible. It is true that **ADONAI** promised **the Jews** special blessing and protection during the Dispensation of Torah (**Deuteronomy 7:12**), but **He** never promised B'rit Chadashah believers freedom from sickness or suffering. If **Paul** had access to instant healing because of his relationship to Messiah, then why didn't **he** make use of it for **himself** and for others, such as **Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25ff)**.

What a contrast between **Paul's** two experiences. **He** went from Paradise to pain, from

glory to suffering. **He** tasted the blessing of **God** in heaven and then felt the **blows** from **the Enemy** on the earth. **He** went from ecstasy to agony, and yet the two experiences belong together. **His** one experience of glory prepared **him** for the constant experience of suffering, for **he** knew that **the Lord** was able to meet **his** need. **Paul** had gone to heaven . . . but then **he** learned that heaven could come to **him**!

4. God uses suffering to display His grace (12:9a): Two messages were involved in **Paul's** painful experience. **The thorn in the flesh** was **the Old Serpent's** message, but **God** had another message for him . . . a message of **grace**. The tense of the verb in this verse is important: **But he told me. God** gave **Paul** a message that stayed with **him**. **The apostle** was not permitted to share the words **he** heard while in heaven. But **he** did share the words **God** gave **him** on the earth: **My grace is enough for you**. And how encouraging those words were.

What is **grace**? It is **God's** provision for our every need when we need it. It has been said that **God** in **His grace** gives us what we do not deserve, and in **His** mercy, **He** does not give us what we do deserve. Someone has made an acrostic of the word **grace**: **God's Riches Available at Christ's Expense. And of Christ's fullness have all we received, and grace for grace (John 1:16).**

As **Paul** prayed about **his** problem, **God** gave him a deeper insight. **He** learned that **his thorn in the flesh** was actually a gift from **God**. But what a strange gift! There was only one thing for **him** to do: accept the gift and allow **God** to accomplish **His** purposes. **God** wanted to keep **Paul** from being "big-headed" and that was **His** way of accomplishing it.

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** for being such a loving **father** that you wisely allow short earthly trials and problems in my life - so that **You** can reward me for all eternity when I trust and love **You** in my trials. **Your** desire is always to bless me. **You** are looking to the future and how long eternity stretches out. **You** know I will forget my trials once I am living in heaven with **You** and then will enjoy my rewards forever!*

***You** use trials and problems as tools to refine the purity of faith in me and to bring praise and glory to **Messiah**. **These trials are so that the true metal of your faith (far more valuable than gold, which perishes though refined by fire) may come to light in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Messiah Yeshua (First Peter 1:7).** If it were possible, I would want to give **You** a big gift for all **You** have so graciously given me. But, the gift **You** most want is me! How indescribably wonderful! Yet, it would not be much of a gift if I gave you myself as sluggard, unrefined gold; rather, I thank **You** that **You** refine me so that when I get to heaven and present myself to **You** as my gift of love, I will have*

been refined by the fire of trials and made purer.

*I want to be as pure of a gift of gold as possible. I do not like trials but when I think of them as a scrub brush in your hand to make me shine more for **Yeshua** - then I say, "Bring on the trials. Then they will help me be a purer vessel for my **Lord and Savior, Yeshua Messiah**. Thank **You** that **Your** hand is on the heat of the fire and **You** will never let it get too hot. **You** are with me in each trial, encouraging and guiding me. Praise **You, For God Himself has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5)**. When I am in a trial, I will gently squeeze **Your** hand and look up into **Your** face, thanking **You** for giving the trial so you can reward me for all eternity! In **Your** holy **Son's** name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*

When **Paul** accepted **his** affliction as a gift from **God**, this made it possible for **God's grace** to work in **his** life. It was then that **God** spoke to **Paul** and gave **him** the assurance of **His grace**. Whenever you are going through suffering, spend extra time in **the Word of God**, and you can be sure that **ADONAI** will speak to you. **He** always has a special message for **His** children when they are afflicted.

God did not give **Paul** any explanations; instead, **He** gave **him** a promise: **My grace is sufficient for you**. We do not live on explanations; we live on promises. Our feelings change, but **God's** promises never change. Promises generate faith, and faith generates hope.

Paul claimed **God's** promise and drew on the **grace** that was offered to **him**; this turned seeming tragedy into triumph. **God** didn't change the situation by removing the affliction; **He** changed it by adding a new ingredient: **grace**. Our **God** is **the God of all grace (First Peter 5:10)**, and **His throne** is a **throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16)**. **The Word of God** is **the word of His grace (Acts 20:32)**, and the promise is that **He will give even more grace (James 4:6)**. No matter how we look at it, **God** is adequate for every need that we have.

But **God** does not give us **His grace** simply that we might "endure" our sufferings. Even people who are lost and in the world can display great endurance. **God's grace** should enable us to rise above our circumstances and feelings and cause our affliction to work for us in accomplishing positive good. **God** wants to build our character so that we are more like our **Savior**. **God's** grace enabled **Paul** not only to accept **his** affliction, but also to glory in it. **His** suffering was not a tyrant that controlled **him** but a servant that worked for **him**.²⁷⁸

5. God uses suffering to perfect His power (12:9b-10): What benefits did **Paul** receive because of **his** suffering? For one thing **he** experienced the power of **Messiah** in **his** life: **for my power is brought to perfection in weakness.**” It wasn’t that **Paul** preferred pain to health, but rather that **he** knew how to turn **his** infirmity into an asset. **He** was suffering for the sake of **Yeshua Messiah**. **He** glorified **God** by the way **he** accepted the difficult experience.

God loves to use **weak** people. Everyone has **weaknesses**. In fact, you have a bundle of flaws and imperfections; physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. You may also have uncontrollable circumstances that **weaken** you. The more important issue is what you do with these. Usually, we deny our **weaknesses**, and defend them, excuse them, hide them, and resent them. But this prevents **God** from using them the way **He** desires. The Bible says: **God chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the strong (First Corinthians 1:27)**. Your **weaknesses** are not an accident. **God** deliberately allowed them in your life for the purpose of demonstrating **His** power through you.

A **weakness**, or **thorn** as **Paul** called **it**, is not a sin or a vice or a character defect that you can change, such as overeating or impatience. A **weakness** is any limitation that you inherited or have no power to change. It may be a physical limitation, like a handicap, a chronic illness, naturally low energy, or a disability. It may be an emotional limitation, such as a trauma scar, a hurtful memory, a personality quirk, or a hereditary disposition. Or it may be a talent or intellectual limitation. We’re not all super bright or talented.

When you think of the limitations in your life, you may be tempted to conclude, “**God** could never use me.” But **God** is never limited by our limitations. In fact, **He** enjoys putting **His** great power into ordinary containers (see **Az - Priceless Treasure in Clay Jars**). Like common pottery, we are fragile, flawed, and break easily. But **God** will use us if we allow Him to work through our **weaknesses**. For that to happen, we must follow the model of **Paul**.

Admit your weakness: Own up to your imperfections. Stop pretending to have it all together, and be honest about yourself. Instead of living in denial or making excuses, take the time to identify your personal **weaknesses**. When the people of Lystra tried to idolize **Paul**, **he** declared: **We too are human, just like you (Acts 14:15)**. If you want **God** to use you, you must know who **God** is and know who you are. Many believers, especially leaders, forget that they are only human. If it takes a crisis to get you to admit this, **God** won’t hesitate to allow it, because **He** loves you.

Be content with your weaknesses: **Paul** said: **Therefore, I am very happy to boast**

about my weaknesses, in order that the Messiah's power will rest upon me Yes, I am well pleased with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties endured on behalf of the Messiah (12:10a). At first this doesn't make sense. We want to be freed from our **weaknesses**, not to be content with them! But contentment is an expression of faith in the goodness of **God**. It says, "**God**, I believe **You** love me and know what's best for me." **Paul** gives us several reasons to be content with our **weaknesses**.

Our **weaknesses** cause us to depend on **God**. Referring to **his** own **weakness**, which **God** refused to take away, **Paul** said: **For it is when I am weak that I am strong (12:10b).** Whenever you feel **weak**, **God** is reminding you to depend on **Him**.

Our **weaknesses** also prevent arrogance. They keep us humble. **Therefore, to keep me from becoming overly proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from the Adversary to pound away at me, so that I wouldn't grow conceited (12:7).** **God** often attaches a major **weakness** to a major **strength** to keep our egos in check, A limitation can act as a governor to keep us from going too fast and running ahead of **God**.

Our **weaknesses** encourage fellowship between believers. While strength breeds an independent spirit, our limitations show how much we need each other. When we weave the **weak** strands of our lives together, a rope of great strength is created.

Most of all our **weaknesses** increase our capacity for sympathy and ministry. We become far more likely to be compassionate and considerate of the **weaknesses** of others. **God** wants you to have a ministry on earth. That means other people are going to find healing in your wounds. Your greatest life messages and your most effective ministry will come out of your deepest hurts. The things you're most embarrassed about, the most ashamed of, and the most reluctant to share are the very tools **God** can use most to help others.

Honestly share your weaknesses: Ministry begins with vulnerability. The more you let down your guard, and share your struggles, the more **God** will be able to use you in serving others (**Romans 7:19; Second Corinthians 1:8 and 6:11; First Corinthians 2:3**). Of course, vulnerability is risky. It can be scary to lower your defenses and open up your life to others. You risk rejection. But the benefits are worth the risk. Vulnerability is emotionally liberating. Opening up relieves stress, defuses your fears, and is the first step to freedom.

God gives **grace** to the humble, but many misunderstand humility. It is not putting yourself down or denying your strengths, it is being honest about your **weaknesses**. The more honest you are, the more of **God's grace** you get. You will also receive **grace** from others. Vulnerability is an enduring quality; we are naturally drawn to humble people.

Pretentiousness repels, but authenticity attracts, and vulnerability is the pathway to intimacy.

This is why **God** wants to use your **weaknesses**, not just your **strengths**. If all people see is your **strengths**, they get discouraged and think, "Well, good for him (her), but I'll never be able to do that." But when they see **God** using you in spite of your **weaknesses**, it encourages them to think, "Well, maybe **God** could use me!"

At some point in your life, you must decide whether you want to impress people or influence people. You can impress people from a distance, but you must get close to influence them, and when you do that, they will be able to see your flaws. That's okay. The most essential quality for leadership is not perfection, but credibility. People must be able to trust you, or they won't follow you. How do you build credibility? Not by pretending to be perfect, but by being honest.

Glory in your weakness: Paul said: **About myself I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses (12:5b)**. Instead of posing as self-confident and invincible, see yourself as a trophy of **God's grace**. When Satan points out your **weaknesses**, agree with him and fill your heart with praise for **Yeshua Messiah**, who **understands our weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15a)** and for **the Spirit of God who helps us in our weakness (Romans 8:26a)**.²⁷⁹