

10,9,25 2 Cor. 1:1-7, Why Must We Suffer?

As I'm sure most of you know, there is not book in the entire New Testament as personal as this one. There's no book that goes this far in revealing the inner man of the heart, as well as the very human struggles, questions and pain of a true disciple of Christ.

Just as a reminder (and also to set the stage for why this is so important), listen to these verses;

(Phil. 3:17) Brethren, join in following my example, and recognize others who walk as I do; you have us for a pattern.

(Phil. 4:9) The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.

(1 Cor. 4:16-17) I urge you to imitate me. For this reason, I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.

For reasons known only to the Lord, He chose Paul out of all the 1st century followers of Christ to receive the deepest and fullest revelation of what the Church is, and of what the Christian life is meant to be. Even Peter acknowledges this in 2 Pet. 3:15-16;

. . . our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand . . .

Through Paul we are given what he called "the full counsel of God"; the complete unveiling of the Christian life and the purpose of God's people in this Age. Paul was shown an entirely new revelation from God of His hidden mystery, which was unknown to every generation before Paul's. And this revelation was given to Paul by the Lord directly;

(Gal. 1:12) I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

(Col. 1:25-27) I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the

mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you . . .

Something that is often overlooked in this is that Paul makes sure at the very beginning of his work that any *true* ministry of God's Word can come *only* by revelation of the Spirit. We may be taught by church leadership, and scriptural knowledge can help lay a solid foundation of doctrinal accuracy for us; but ultimately, for us to know the Bible and the One the scriptures point us to, we have to go beyond academic knowledge and pray for the Lord to open our understanding to what lies beneath the information; to show us by His Spirit, the spiritual and life-changing meaning behind the words on the page.

(Acts 13:27) For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning Him.

They heard the "words" of scripture - but not the "voices". That's more common in our time than at any other time in history. Surface observations are the only things focused on; the spiritual realities *behind* those observations are rarely even considered.

And since the Holy Spirit determined to deposit this stewardship of the "mystery" with Paul first, He also used the *life* of Paul to show us, in very practical ways, what it's like to genuinely pick up our cross and follow Christ.

There's some historical information about the letter I picked up from Dr. Constable. It's in his overview of 2 Corinthians;

. . . opposition to the Apostle Paul persisted, and Paul's critics continued to speak out against him in the church. One man in particular seems to have been the ringleader of the opposition (10:7-11). He had rallied the support of a significant minority. The issue was Paul's apostolic authority. His critics were claiming equal authority with Paul.

This was in effect a claim to apostolic authority on their part and a denial of the full apostolic authority of Paul.

News of continuing problems in Corinth reached Paul in Ephesus during his prolonged stay there on his third missionary journey. He then made a brief visit to Corinth from Ephesus. However, his efforts to resolve the conflicts proved unsuccessful (2:1; 12:14; 13:1-2). Paul apparently suffered insult and he lost face during that visit (7:12). Consequently, that was a painful visit for Paul. He then returned to Ephesus.

Paul's next step in dealing with the situation in Corinth was to send a severe letter from Ephesus by the hand of Titus and another unnamed Christian brother (2:3-4; 7:8-12; 12:18). He apparently directed this letter, which is now lost, at the party that was opposed to him, and particularly its leader.

Paul evidently intended to receive Titus' report concerning the effects of this severe letter in Ephesus. However, persecution there made it expedient for Paul to leave that city earlier than he had anticipated (Acts 20:1). Titus, who was taking the land route from Corinth back to Ephesus, Paul moved west into Macedonia (2:12-13). There Titus met him and gave him an encouraging report (7:6-16). Most of the church had responded well to Paul's directives, and the church had disciplined the troublemakers (2:5 11). Unfortunately, some in the congregation still refused to acknowledge Paul's authority over them (10:1—13:10).

One other thing that caught my attention on this was this comment by J. Vernon McGee; “This epistle is difficult to outline, because it is less organized than any of Paul’s other letters”

I did some further research on that and I think I have an idea of why it was like that. Just prior to Paul writing 2 Corinthians, Paul was in Ephesus and was in danger and under extreme pressure. Being scholastic was the least of his concerns – 2 Cor. is a letter written in distress. He’s pouring out his heart and soul, and is not trying to write a systematic theology of Christian doctrine (like he did in Romans). There was even a sense in which Paul had been traumatized by his suffering (we will see some of that scattered throughout this letter).

So, as I mentioned, of all the epistles Paul wrote, 2 Corinthians is the one that more fully reveals Paul as a man in the heat of spiritual conflict than any other letter he wrote. It’s imperative that we keep that in mind as we study this letter, because

the implications of what we'll see will convince us that it's more important to *become* something, *experience* something and *live* something, than just to *know* something.

Knowledge is the *means*, not the *goal*. The more we know of God's Word and the more faithfully we pray for spiritual *comprehension* of His Word, the more we will advance in true spiritual life – fullness of life in Christ. And it will be the increasing, experiential knowledge of the scriptures that enables us to reach our goal of spiritual maturity.

(2 Tim. 2:15; 3:16-17) Study to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth . . . All Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that *the man of God may be complete*, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

When I said that knowledge is the means, not the goal; I was saying that there is a danger in making knowledge the goal. The Pharisees made that mistake and we know how that worked out for them;

(John 5:39-40) You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me; but you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.

The written word was given to us, not just to fill our heads with Biblical information, but to be used by the Holy Spirit to reveal the *living Word* to us. If when we study the scriptures with that realization in our mind and in our prayers, then the Spirit will lead us into all Truth and He will deepen our relationship with the One Who *is* the Truth.

What 2 Corinthians can do for us is bring us face to face with a man who did exactly that – he allowed the Holy Spirit to reveal the Son of God to Him and this epistle is going to show us how that *revealing* was worked into, and shaped, Paul's life, so that we will have some idea and expectation of what God will do in *our* lives to get us to the place in our relationship with Christ that Paul had; or at least as close to that as we can get personally.

Much of what Paul went through was divinely orchestrated to fully accomplish this “outworking” of Paul’s revelation of Christ. The following are descriptions of what Paul calls his “light affliction” in 2 Cor. 4:17.

(1 Cor. 4:9-12) God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored! To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure.

(2 Cor. 4:8-9) We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

We know from these passages and others, that God uses suffering in the lives of His children to accomplish certain things in our lives that would never happen without it. It’s impossible to predict what we will go through or when we’ll go through it. We are all being dealt with individually and uniquely, based on what the Lord knows we need to experience to reach conformity to Christ.

One thing we know for sure, no matter where you start in the Bible – whether in Genesis with Job or 2 Cor. with Paul, suffering is the most challenging thing that exists to our faith. And since faith is that which pleases God the most, and at the same time, brings the greatest defeat to the enemy, every time a child of God chooses God’s will over his own will at a time of great suffering, God is the most glorified and His disciple is most honored and advanced spiritually.

It would take several studies to show all the things suffering does that are a benefit for us, so I’m going to narrow down to the ones I feel are most consistent in scripture and the most important for us to understand at this time in history.

Different passages, different authors in the Bible, have different ways of explaining the “why” of all this. It’s vital for us, especially during the times we are suffering, to take the passages we’ll look at being as absolutely true, rather than just doctrines or principles for our notebooks. The last thing we need in times of pressure is superficial advice. What we need most is to *believe* the Bible’s explanations of why

we are experiencing these things, and to believe in a way that goes to the core of who we are – we need to believe that the Bible is telling us the truth, because it's only when the truth is believed that it can set us free.

As I read various passages on this, don't let your familiarity with them distract you from receiving a fresh understanding of what they are saying. No one needs to really grasp what is being offered by what these authors are saying more than someone who is suffering.

(Rom. 5:3-4) We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

(Heb. 12:5-11) Do not despise the chastening (lit. 'training') of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for all whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

(2 Cor. 4:16-17) Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing (our bodies are falling apart), yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

(2 Cor. 4:11) We who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

(2 Cor 12:7-10) Lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

Therefore, most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

In this life, suffering brings about the division of soul and spirit, so that rather than *you and I* being the "life" that is manifest through us (which would be the soul-life), it's the life of Christ that comes through (the spiritual life that has its source in Him, not us).

There is no way to overstate the importance of this, because it's the lack of this separation, and subsequent domination of the soul or natural life among God's people, that has become the root cause of the current global apostasy of the Church by making it a soul-based religion rather than spirit-based revelation of Christ. Rather than the Church being, simply, the expression of Christ; it's become an expression of Christians doing Christianity.

In terms of the benefit for the *life to come*, suffering equips us to share the throne of the Son of God; (2 Tim. 4:12) "If we endure (hardship), we shall reign with Him." I'm going to re-share a couple familiar quotes by Strombeck and Billheimer that help tie all of this together;

God's purpose then in the lives of His children while here on earth is to create, develop, strengthen, and refine that complete dependence on Him which must be found in those who, throughout all eternity, are to be the very closest to Him and share His glory. That is why God places so great an emphasis upon the trial of faith. He is preparing for Himself, those who will be in complete voluntary dependence upon Him and in living subjection to Him . . . They shall be with Him where He is (seated in the throne at the right hand of the Father); and this is of utmost importance, the earthly existence of the saved is but a brief period of preparation for an eternal calling. Few there seem to be who realize the glories of this exalted a position which is to be held (by the Lord's overcomers, His remnant) throughout an unending eternity. Finite mind cannot grasp the fullness of all this, but the Bible reveals enough to show that it shall be the greatest thing that has ever come to any of God's creatures. (Strombeck)

Literally everything Christ is doing in our lives is designed to qualify His Eternal Companion for entering into full partnership with her Lord in the governance of the creation. . . This is the order of beings which is to be the aristocracy of the universe; we are to be princes of the heavenly realm. Christ will administrate and govern His eternal kingdom through His body, the Church. (Billheimer)

Everything we are going through is reshaping our inner man into the image of Christ and is preparing us to be placed as adult sons in God's kingdom in order to take on the responsibility of co-ruling with Him over His creation.

As the Heb. 12 passage told us, no training seems joyful, but painful – but, this is how the future princes of God's kingdom are prepared for their eternal vocation.

Many of God's children who are experiencing a time of suffering, especially if it's prolonged, can reach a point where, like Paul, they are "pressed above measure". When that happens, some of us start pleading with the Lord to take the pressure away; its too much. We're in an "enough is enough!" mode and how glorious our future might be because of all this is the last thing on our minds. But God examines the heart and He knows what the future holds for those whose "endurance (completes) its perfect work." He knows how incredible that future *will* be and how grateful we will be that He completed what He began in us.

Never feel guilty if you cry out to the Lord to withdraw the training; as I said, even Paul "despaired of life"; he was certain that if what he going through continued, he would die. We can't second guess God when it comes to understanding what infinite love and wisdom determines will be in our best interest for spiritual growth in time and for honor in eternity.

One other brief quote on what we've been talking about;

If we are willing to receive from God's hand, we can have development by exercise, to develop capacity, to bring us into the large place that we may be intelligently His instrument for governing under His Headship in ages to come. We cannot always fathom the things that enter into our history, but the explanation which we *can* give is that, whatever there may be as second causes, the Lord is Sovereign and He thinks it worthwhile sometimes to allow what the world would call the most terrible thing to overtake us for the time

being, and it would seem that even His Name and interests suffer through that thing, but through that thing He brings His people to a place of maturity and they get to know the Lord for themselves. Through these terrible things we find the Lord produces something that is very much more worthy of Himself in the life of His children. In the long run He does get spiritual maturity among His people, where they *know* Him. *If He could do it in any other way He would.*

With all that in mind, let's look at the first 7 verses in 2 Cor. 1. And as I mentioned earlier, we have already covered much of what is in this part of chapter 1, but there are some additional implications that we'll need to touch on related to this passage;

(2 Cor. 1:1-7) Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

One of the most important points Paul is making in this passage is how our *own* suffering is meant to impact others. First, suffering is painful or it wouldn't be suffering, and people all around us are in pain at some level. Not everyone shows it, but everyone is hurting;

(Rom. 8:22) We know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs . . .

In vs. 4 Paul uses the word "thlipsis" (affliction) to describe his experience. Here's a lexical take on that word;

Affliction (thlipsis) means pressure or crushing and was used of squeezing grapes to make wine or of crushing wheat to make flour, both excellent word pictures to remind us of the potential value of affliction in a believer's life. thlipsis is clearly a keyword in 2 Corinthians occurring 9x in 8v (out of a total of 45x in 43v in the entire NT), so almost 25% of the uses of thlipsis are found in this epistle.- 2Co. 1:4; 2Co. 1:8; 2Co. 2:4; 2Co. 4:17; 2Co. 6:4; 2Co. 7:4; 2Co. 8:2; 2Co. 8:13. Some of Paul's uses seem to describe emotional affliction (2Co 2:4, 2Co 11:28), but others imply physical affliction (e.g, 2Co 1:8). Some of Paul's uses of thlipsis are difficult to differentiate and may indicate both physical and emotional affliction. This would make sense because when we are physically afflicted, there is invariably an emotional response to that affliction.

I'll add also that the word "comfort" (parakaleō) includes the idea of "to strengthen". The reason that's important is because we sometimes think of "comfort" as having the affliction removed; but because of what suffering can accomplish, it's often more important that we are strengthened in some way to be able to better endure it.

So, Paul's bottom line is, "How could we help others going through these things if we've never experienced what they are experiencing?" That's the work of a true "priest" of God.

(Heb. 4:15) We do not have a High Priest who cannot empathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tested as we are . . .

Right after the author to Hebrews wrote that, he added; "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

I'm sure you've heard the old cliché; "If I ever break my leg, give me a doctor who's leg has been broken." Are we willing to suffer in order to be better equipped to help others who are suffering? Christ was, in ways we will never fully understand. So, it would be "Christlike" if we were also willing to trust the Lord with the confusion in our lives knowing that everything we are going through has both temporal and eternal ramifications. As Spark's once explained this;

The best doctors and nurses are those who know something about suffering themselves. Some are just professional, treating you as a case – you are just number. But, there are others who treat you as a person, a human being, who care for you. If you ask why, you may find that they have a background of suffering themselves. They know just a little of what you are going through. We have read in the Letter to the Hebrews: "We have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are... He is able to strengthen those that are tested" (Hebrews 4:15, 2:18). He has been the way of the winepress and we have received the benefit. A preacher or a teacher who has never suffered will never minister Life.

Sometimes the comfort we receive can come from God directly (as in 2 Cor. 1:4), and it might be as simple as reminding us of the value of suffering and encouraging us to stay the course. At other times the comfort we receive can come from Christ's body (which is also Him comforting us, but using members of His body to do it), like in 2 Cor. 7:6, "But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus . . ." Paul acknowledges the Source of his comfort as being God, but tells us that God used Titus to do this.

So, by whatever way God chooses to lift us up when we're broken, part of the reason we are going through what we are is to be able to help others in similar situations; vs. 4, "(God), Who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

In trying to lay a foundation or an overall principle that addresses Christian suffering, I believe we can easily establish two absolutes;

First- we are encouraged to take anything and everything we are concerned about to the Lord in prayer.

(Jas. 5:14-15), Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up.

(1 Pet. 5:6-7) Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting *all* your care upon Him, for He cares for you.

Second- we also know from what we see in Paul's emphasis in 2 Corinthians that most of the exhortations Paul wrote regarding suffering are focused more on endurance than on deliverance.

(2 Cor. 12:7-10) To prevent me from being exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

(Jas. 1:2-4) Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patient endurance have its perfect work, that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

(1 Thess. 5:18) In *everything* give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

Listen to this commentator's input on these verses;

The literal structure of "count it all joy" in James exhorts the call to joy with even greater emphasis-- "*All joy* count it"! On the surface, this command is one of the most difficult in all the Bible in my opinion. It ranks up there with "in *everything* give thanks". And yet we know that God is not trying to frustrate us or defeat us, but to conform us to the image of His Son and in so doing He wastes no circumstance, no adversity, no affliction, no sickness, no success, no failure, in achieving His end.

So, regardless of what God's response is to our prayers, something vital is being accomplished; something that we may not understand or see the results of

immediately, but as the quote I read earlier said, “If He could do it any other way, He would.”

In one of his articles, Sparks called faith “the most difficult thing in the world.” To respond in faith, in trust, in the midst of overwhelming suffering coupled with deafening silence from heaven, means that we have come to realize that nothing that God is doing is coming from any other place than a deep love for His child and matchless wisdom in knowing exactly what would be the absolute best for us.

As difficult as that might be to believe when we are suffering, we have to tell ourselves (and the enemy) that this is the truth; all our *other* thoughts are lies. We can never rise above our circumstances by believing lies.

The Scriptures tells us that the first will be last, the least will be the greatest, strength is perfected in weakness, and the list goes on. The Christian life is an immense paradox, and no amount of human reason or logic will ever make sense of it. If we understand even part of the “why” behind everything, it will have only come to us by revelation. We walk by faith, not by sight.

We need to wrap up soon, so I’m going to close with an extended quote on suffering under a silent heaven;

If we have committed ourselves to God and want His full will and we do not want our own, and by His grace we will go the way that He leads whatever it costs. If we have done that and then situations have arisen which look terribly complicated and seem to contradict the faithfulness of God, what am I to conclude? We have to conclude one of two things – that God cares nothing for all our devotion and consecration, and just lets us get into any mess; or else this is all under His eye. That is ultimate. We have either to believe God or not to believe Him. You have all these examples in the Bible, and it all bears down upon this, that people who are related in Divine foreknowledge and sovereign action come into situations like that, but in the end that sovereignty has been shown to relate to something extremely precious to the Lord.

Our Lord is after something more than ordinary and He needs a people for it, but such a people will have unusual experiences, inside and out. It will not be the ordinary, normal course where everything goes well and

straightforward. It will not be like that for these people. They go through ways that are tortuous and exceedingly difficult, but there is a sovereignty at work. That is my way of analyzing and summing up the situation as I see it in the Word, and I can only say to you that it is not foreign and strange to God's special purposes to have experiences like that. Whether it be the remnant of Israel, whether it be the reactions of God in this Christian dispensation, in the book of the Revelation, the messages to the seven churches, it is all like this. Nothing seems normal with a people like that, because God is not going to have anything that is just normal, as we call things normal. It is something more, something extraordinary, and our experience therefore must also be extraordinary.

(Rom. 8:18) I am convinced that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.