

July 22. Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Isaiah 55:8. Paul accomplished many extraordinary things for God. He walked in faith, obedience, and trust in the Lord. Yet, he too experienced frustration...God allowed a thorn in the flesh, a great source of suffering, to afflict him. (See the passage in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10) The legitimate question is, "why, Lord...why?" And when this question remains with no answer in sight, it may be accompanied by an inability to understand and frustration. **"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord.**" (see Isaiah 55:8). His thoughts are not ours...God doesn't think, and thus doesn't act, like we would. So if God proceeds in a way you don't understand... Is frustration inevitable? Are you doomed to live frustrated? What if part of the solution was hidden in simply accepting the frustration, telling ourselves that God knows better than we do and is always acting in our best interest? It's easy to say but much harder to actually live out. However, I believe nonetheless that living in Christ does not mean remaining a prisoner to frustration. It's possible for us to relinquish it into the hands of the Master so that we can go through every situation with His peace. Thus, even when nothing happens according to my plan, I can still: Turn to God, Receive peace, Thank Him for everything I have, Go forward in serenity.

July 23. Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. Paul shares a problem with us here that was like a thorn in the flesh for him. For centuries, theologians have disputed and have been unable to agree about what this thorn represented:

Was Paul sick and had a problem with his eyes as some of his writings might lead us to believe? Was he experiencing temptation? Was he overwhelmed by opposition of some kind? Was it loneliness weighing heavy upon him? Was it difficulties with the churches? Was the devil the primary source of this trial? Or was it all of these...all at the same time? In fact, it doesn't really matter...you surely understand what Paul was feeling. A thorn is something that seems so small but, in reality, comes to occupy and consume all of our thoughts. Our thorns...these are the financial difficulties that seem to persist, or the sickness that's strangling us, the increasing number of fights with our spouse, the forgiveness we can't bring ourselves to release, this loneliness we can't seem to rid ourselves of...And like a thorn under our feet, though well-hidden, it still hurts us all the same...and sometimes very badly. In any case, Paul had to have been especially tormented...he prayed three times, pleading, that God would deliver him from this thorn.

Are you suffering from a thorn in your flesh? Know that even if it seems insignificant, even if no one else can see it, Jesus understands the suffering caused by this thorn, whatever it may be.

July 24. Let's take a look at the apostle Paul today, when he addresses three prayers to God concerning his suffering. (see 2 Corinthians 12:7-10) Do you remember when he wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, "**Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.**" (2 Corinthians 12:8)? As I imagine it, the first time he prayed, he was probably determined to immediately get rid of this obstacle that had come upon him: "God, I need You...this situation is shaking me to the core. Please...lift this pain. Amen." Yet, the thorn remained. However, Paul, strong in character, doesn't get downhearted. He perseveres in prayer with doubled fervor: "**Lord, I come again to ask You to take this thorn from me. I've really thought about it, and truly, it's handicapping me in the ministry. If you remove this from me, I could serve You much better than I am today: I could visit more widows, train more people, write more letters to teach and encourage Your Church! I want this suffering to go away! Amen.**" And still...the thorn persisted. This time, Paul surely set aside a time to fast and pray, desperate to see his pain lifted: "**Jesus, You said that You took our afflictions by dying on the cross, and as for me, I'm so weary of fighting this thorn. I ask You again, one last time...I beg You to take this pain from me...please, do it! If not, I need a word from You. Amen.**" Today, I invite you to join with Paul for one more prayer, a prayer of relinquishment: "Yes...when I'm weak, when I feel like I'm at the lowest of lows, when I feel like I can't bear it anymore, when I think I'm going to lose it, when I'm at the end of my rope, when I just can't take this frustration any longer, when I'm so weak...it's at this moment that through You, JESUS, I am strong. I give up my thorn and release my frustration into Your hands. Amen!"

July 25. Have you noticed that Paul considered his suffering to be something sent by Satan? Yet, this thorn also carries a revelation...it enabled God to manifest Himself in an even more extraordinary way in Paul's life.

Could it be that God has allowed this suffering, hiding a marvelous message in it for you? Take your situation, for example...behind the sickness, rebellious child, relationship difficulties, physical or emotional wound...God is there.

He discreetly slipped a word of love in the envelope, a word of compassion, an unfailing promise..."**My grace is sufficient for you!**" (See 2 Corinthians 12:9) If you're being tested and tried right now, remember that the source of your frustration is just a crinkled, dirty envelope. But inside, there's a divine message, full of love and full of grace. I pray that the Holy Spirit helps you discover it today! The Bible says, "**Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are fearful-hearted, "Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; He will come and save you."**" (Isaiah 35:3-4)

July 26. Have you ever noticed? When facing difficulty, our first line of defense is frustration. We can't understand why our spouse won't stop looking at his/her phone when we so desperately need someone to listen, why our coworkers seem to do everything possible to make work an ordeal, and why our pastors can't seem to help us solve our problems... So, our fight-or-flight survival instinct kicks in...And we flee.

We change: Churches, Spouses, Jobs, Neighborhoods, Friends, Etc.

Then, quite often, the difficulties return...And we may not want to acknowledge them. We close our eyes... However, rather than running from them, the Lord exhorts you to find joy, take pleasure, in these difficulties! **“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.”** (2 Corinthians 12:10) Why? Because these difficulties always hold a message for you. What is God’s message for you? Your Father, because He already accomplished everything for you, wants you to walk in His victory. His grace alone is enough...you can exchange your bitterness for forgiveness, what’s impossible for you for what’s possible for Him. Maybe you need to grow in flexibility, reexamine your priorities, or perhaps learn to better communicate? It’s with such love that God sends you this message of hope: “I love you just as you are, and I love you so much that I can’t leave you in this place. I can bring you further, higher. You can let go...My grace is powerfully revealed in your weaknesses. I am with you! Don’t be afraid.”

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