

WHY BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOD'S PEOPLE

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By the Book™ A Chapter by
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Let's Begin

Remember the story of Job? Being a good, decent man who lived righteously before God, a faithful husband to his wife of many years, and a caring father for his adult children, we have a tendency to assume life owes Job its most promising circumstances. Instead, Job lost everything, including his children and even his health. At his lowest moment, his own wife counseled him to "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9).

At some point, every person faces the mysteries which caused Job to lose it all. Is God really the God of justice? If so, why do bad things happen to good people? And to make things apparently worse, why does God allow bad things to happen to His people if He loves them so much?

Paul faced this question not just on a theoretical level, as one sitting comfortably in a classroom setting discussing good vs. evil, but on an experiential level virtually every day, as he served the God of the Bible. We learned some of Paul's perils and plights in chapter 11 as he rehearsed many of them, a rehearsal meant to visibly correct the false teachers at Corinth. Chapter 12 continues with Paul's perils while revealing, in part, their purpose. We will learn valuable lessons concerning the role of bad things in the believer's life.

As we study 2 Corinthians 12, let's follow the outline below:

- I. The Dangers of a Privilege (vv. 1-6)**
- II. The Disciplines of a Problem (v. 7)**
- III. The Delights of a Promise (vv. 8-21)**

I. The Dangers of a Privilege (vv. 1-6)

Paul has just listed many bad things he faced. Now he balances the bad with a blessing, "I knew a man in Christ... caught up to the third heaven... into paradise, and heard unspeakable words.... Of such an one will I glory; yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities. For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but *now* I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me." (2 Cor. 12:2-6).

On the surface, it looks as if the Apostle is speaking of someone else who has had an "unspeakable" vision. But as we read further, it becomes clearer Paul is describing a revelation he himself had experienced. He shares it with the Corinthians to vindicate his apostolic role to the church.

Reflection Connection

In what ways can Christians be both weak and strong? Is it possible to tell when to be weak and when to be strong? Are weak moments the only times when we may receive "visions" from God?

First, Paul recalls where he was raptured. He comes to "visions and revelations of the Lord" (v. 1). From whence came the "visions" he experienced? According to his testimony, the visions came from the "third heaven" or better still, "paradise". In short, Paul saw heaven! The term translated "caught up" is the Greek term *harpazō*, which means "to snatch up" or "carry off." Our Lord used the term to indicate the inability of anyone to "pluck" His sheep out of His or the Father's hand (John 10:28-29).

Paul uses the identical term to speak of saints being "caught up" forever to be with the Lord when Jesus returns for them just before end time wrath is poured out upon the earth (1 Thess. 4:17). Where Paul was when his visions were revealed is not stated in Scripture. Some believe it could have been when he was taken for dead after being stoned at Lystra (Acts 14:19-20).



Whatever the case, this particular event is not the only time Paul experienced visions from God (cp. Acts 9:12; 16:9; 18:9-10).

The Christian life has its ups and downs. All Christians have their mountain top experiences. Nevertheless, all experience life in the valleys. Indeed our mountain experiences often refresh our hope and instill courage to go through the valleys of life.

In addition, Paul was raptured to the “third heaven” which he equates with “paradise.” The English term “paradise” comes from the similar sounding Greek word “*paradeisos*,” and was used to refer to parks and gardens in the ancient world. Interestingly, *paradeisos* is used a mere three times in Scripture and used exclusively of God’s heavenly abode (cp. Luke 23:43; Rev. 2:7). Of further interest is the word’s reminder of the original purity of Eden, the perfect Garden of God (Gen. 1-2).

Second, Paul notes *what was revealed*. He received “revelations” (i.e., things unveiled). However, he was careful to distinguish the things God revealed to him which were “unspeakable.” At other times when God spoke to him, it was clear that his duty was to speak what God revealed to him everywhere he went (Gal. 1; Eph. 3). Whatever the content, it was a great encouragement to Paul. God is not stingy with His blessings and encouragement. He knows at every precise moment what we need and when we need it!

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II. The Disciplines of a Problem (v. 7)

As we can see, Paul’s plights were offset by the high privileges of visions and revelations, even being “caught up” to the “third heaven.” Even so, there is a price for receiving revelations from God. Those who receive them are particularly vulnerable to inflated egos, spiritual pride, and viewing themselves more valuable to Kingdom work than other faithful servants of God. Paul was no exception. He, therefore, explains the Divine disciplinary process, “And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure” (v. 7).

Exciting spiritual experiences have a peculiar way of inflating our self-centered egos. Hearing God, seeing clearly what He wants can make Christians arrogant. Many times we see this tragedy take place in young men who have great promise as pastors of large churches. Yet, because they could not handle the spiritual truths God freely revealed to them, they became filled with pride, self-centered ego, and succumbed to fleshly temptation. Many of them end up out of the ministry entirely.



God knows how to balance our lives. And, had the young men been patient, trusting God, allowing Him to caringly discipline them, more blessings than they could imagine would have come their way.

Here is the simple truth: *God balances our lives through spiritual discipline.* That is what he means when he confesses, “lest I should be exalted above measure.” God disciplined Paul for his own good. And, Paul explains discipline by offering two fundamental principles.

First, Paul reveals the *severity* of spiritual discipline. He speaks of a “thorn in the flesh.” Understand: this is not a tiny briar underneath the surface of his skin to which he is referring. Rather the thorn is literally a “stake,” a massive deterrent to any comfort whatsoever. The thorn weakened him, disturbed him, and caused him to lose focus on life.

What was the thorn about which Paul spoke? No one knows to this day. Paul did not identify it. Whatever it was, it was a big thing in Paul’s life and carried the potential to drag him completely out of the will of God.

Note also the thorn was not given to Paul because he was sinning against God. To the contrary, the thorn was given to keep him from sinning against God. Assuming the difficulties you might face daily in your walk with God are because you are out of God’s will may lead to complete discouragement. The fact is, the difficulties may very well be allowed in order to keep you in God’s will.

Second, Paul reveals the *source* of spiritual discipline. Here we come face to face with the mystery of suffering. No easy solution exists as we think about it. In essence, we have with Paul, the story of Job all over again. What is the source of suffering? Of spiritual discipline? The immediate source is the “messenger of satan.” On the other hand, the ultimate source is as a gift of God. Paul said the thorn was “given to me.”

The reality is, an all-loving, all-powerful God is able to use bad things to accomplish good purposes (Job 2:7; Rom. 8:28). It is not that God *creates* the bad; instead it is that God *uses* the bad. There is a huge difference. Why? Once again, hear well the Apostle. Twice he says, “lest I should be exalted above measure.” Sometimes suffering is a tool God uses to build something good into our lives. Think of a dentist who uses a painful tool to drill our teeth in order to remove the decay. So God uses pain at times as a way to remove decay.

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Reflection Connection

Reflect on a time in your life when pain was used as a way to bring you blessings. Be prepared to share with the entire group.



III. The Delights of a Promise (vv. 8-21)

In the end, the “thorn in the flesh” drives the child of God to depend on the promises God has given. Paul writes, “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me” (v. 8).

First, Paul made his *request* to God (v. 8). Problems drive us to pray. Unfortunately, some people would rather blame God, become bitter, and lose faith. Instead, difficulties are never sent from God to make us bitter, but to make us better. Paul prayed to escape the problem. Escape is a natural reaction to pain. We desire to simply have the pain go away. Asking God to take the pain away was Paul’s initial reaction.

However, another problem surfaced for Paul; it surfaces for us as well. God did not take the pain away. Escape was apparently not an option. God does not always grant the requests for pain to be taken away. In fact, God’s response to Paul’s request was quite different.

Therefore, second, we see God’s *response* to Paul’s request. He writes, “And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong” (vv. 9-10).

One purpose in prayer is not to get what we want. Instead it is to find out what God wants. Indeed, Jesus instructed us to pray for God’s will to be done on earth as in heaven, not for our will to be done on earth as in heaven (Matt. 6:10). In fact, Paul records that God spoke to him in his hour of need.

So God, in fact, answered. He just did not answer the way Paul requested. Instead God solved Paul’s problem. Paul needed grace, not relief from pain. God’s grace is always “sufficient” in our time of need.

Finally, we see Paul embracing his *responsibility* as an Apostle (vv. 11-21). While he had become a fool in “glorying”

(v. 11), the signs of an apostle had been clearly displayed among the Corinthians (v. 12). His only sin was preaching the Gospel for free (v. 13)!

In fulfilling his apostolic role, he was coming a third time to them but he still would, as his practice had been, refuse any support they offered (v. 14). He desired only to offer himself (v. 15), and work for reconciliation between all warring parties (vv. 16-18). Paul held no resentment for the persecution he

Reflection Connection

Do you think believers are more interested in their reputations than in genuine results? Explain.

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Golden Greek Nugget

In summing up his love and sacrifice for the Corinthian believers, the Apostle Paul affirmed in no uncertain terms, “And I will very gladly spend and be spent for you” (v. 15). The Greek term translated “spend” is *dapanaō* and it simply means “to spend” as one would spend money for the cost of meat at the market. There is no certain amount attached to it. However, Paul intensifies the term when he further says he would not only “spend” but also “be spent.” The stronger word he uses is *ekdapanaō* and it means “to be spent out.” In other words, Paul says he would become dead broke, giving his last nickel for their spiritual benefit.

endured from their hands. However, he did hold some apprehension concerning his trip, “For I fear, lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and *that* I shall be found unto you such as ye would not: lest *there be* debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults” (v. 20; also, v. 21).

Nothing could keep the Apostle from the responsibilities his Lord gave him. He loved the church and he loved the Lord Jesus even more.

Wrap Up

Why do bad things happen to God's people? From the Apostle Paul we learn the dangers of Kingdom privileges. Serving God, being faithful to Him does not bring a cozy, comfortable life. Instead, we find Kingdom living is risky living. Even more, when spiritual truths are revealed to us, sometimes we are disciplined lest we become spiritually sick with egomania and self-centered living. God knows how to balance our lives, however. He always gives grace--sufficient grace--in our hour of need.

