

PAUL

A MAN OF GRACE AND GRIT

STUDY SEVEN

Finding Contentment in God's Sufficient Grace

2 Corinthians 12:1–10

Paul's theology of pain is well honed from the crucible of suffering. He knew what it meant to be misunderstood, mistreated, left for dead, forsaken, forgotten, abused, mistreated, maligned, attacked, imprisoned.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

SUFFERING in the Christian life is not a popular subject. The *theology of pain* is not a pleasant study. Few preach it. Fewer receive the Bible's teaching on it. No one likes it.

After all, our impulse is to think that if God is a God of love, grace, and mercy, then suffering must come from somewhere else or someone else, right? Satan and his demons or evil people might be the source, or suffering might be self-inflicted or due to natural calamities. But surely it could never come from God, could it?

As tough as it might be to accept . . . yes, the Bible teaches that God enrolls each of us in His school of suffering, in some way or another, because maturity follows more often from the groan rather than the grin. His purpose is to transform us through suffering. As the God of redemption, He orchestrates suffering to produce good in our lives that otherwise could not have come to us. It's just as tough to understand as it is to accept.

For that reason, we keep our gaze fixed on Jesus, “a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief” (Isaiah 53:3). The great apostle Paul had learned to do so and instructed us to do the same because he, too, was a man acquainted with great suffering, being “weighed down with troubles” (2 Corinthians 1:6).

This *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study explores a deep passage in which the apostle Paul autobiographically records his privilege, his potential pride, his pain, his petition, and his renewed perspective on God's good purposes.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Prepare to engage God's Word today by reflecting on Psalm 6:2–4 penned by Israel's King David. Ask the Holy Spirit for guidance through Paul's profound statements on this weighty topic.

Have compassion on me, Lord, for I am weak.

Heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.

I am sick at heart.

How long, O LORD, until you restore me?

Return, O LORD, and rescue me.

Save me because of your unfailing love.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Throughout his powerful ministry, the apostle Paul endured extensive hardship, pain, and suffering. Among his 13 New Testament letters, 2 Corinthians is his most autobiographical. He wrote it around AD 55 less than a year after writing 1 Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians, Paul defended his apostleship against accusers. In doing so, he elaborated on his sufferings.

Beginning in [2 Corinthians 1:8–9](#), to what extent were Paul and Timothy afflicted? Where did they find confidence to endure?

From [4:8–10](#), list the verbs which detail their types of suffering.

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According to [2 Corinthians 6:4–5](#), what additional trials did they encounter?

Now look at [11:16–28](#). Paul compared himself with his accusers. What additional hardships and suffering did Paul reveal? Observe how Paul shifted between pronouns in this passage. What do you notice? How does that make his description more personal?

The suffering Paul endured, captured throughout the letter, sets the stage for his teaching on the *theology of pain* in 12:1–10.



Observation: Privilege . . . Pain . . . Petition . . . Perspective

Observation involves carefully reading the biblical text, noticing every word. It helps the reader discern the feelings behind what is written. For a letter like 2 Corinthians, observation nails down the subjects, the ways the author connected those subjects together, and how the author described those subjects. Do that now with 2 Corinthians 12:1–10.¹

Privilege—2 Corinthians 12:1–4

By the close of chapter 11, Paul had vigorously defended his God-appointed apostleship before his opponents. Read [2 Corinthians 12:1–4](#). In 12:1, what posture did Paul assume about his “boasting”? What was he about to share which would bolster his apostolic authority?

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What did Paul experience, according to 2 Corinthians 12:2–4?

While Paul stated twice that he was uncertain of his *physical orientation*, “whether in the body or out of the body,” what was he certain about regarding his *location*? In 12:4, did Paul reference what he *heard* or what he *saw*?

Pain—2 Corinthians 12:5–7

Read [2 Corinthians 12:5–7](#). While Paul could have boasted about his revelations from the Lord, what did he choose to boast about instead? Why?

In 12:7, Paul was given a “thorn,” or a “pointy stake.” Stated by Paul twice, what was its purpose?

Petition—2 Corinthians 12:8

Next, look at [2 Corinthians 12:8](#) in both the NLT and the NASB. What do you notice about the sincerity of Paul's request?

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Perspective—2 Corinthians 12:9–10

According to Paul's request, God delivered His verdict. In [2 Corinthians 12:9](#), the Lord said two things and Paul responded. Summarize the exchange.

How did Paul incorporate the Lord's response and instruction in [12:9](#) into a life and ministry principle, found in [12:10](#)?

After the glory came, the groan came. On the heels of privilege came throbbing pain. Following the exalted supernatural series of revelations came humiliating and anguishing suffering, and he lived with it incessantly for the rest of his life.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Paul's Privilege Fortified His Ministry

Paul recorded unique and fortifying truths which provided him the necessary endurance for the suffering service that awaited him. Let's dig more deeply with several word studies.

In 2 Corinthians 12:1, Paul wrote that he received "[visions](#)" and "[revelations](#)" from the Lord. Review these terms in your Bible study resources like the online *Holman Bible Dictionary* at [studylight.org](#). What did you discover? Then, consult a Bible commentary on this verse like *Constable's Notes* at [netbible.org](#) and elaborate on what you find.

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In 2 Corinthians, verses 12:2 and 12:4 inform us that Paul was “caught up.” Get a deeper understanding of this Greek word, *harpazo*, and how it is used in the New Testament at billmounce.com and record key insights you learned.

The same phrase is used by Paul in *1 Thessalonians 4:17*. What is significant about its parallel usage, and what did Paul's personal experience in 2 Corinthians 12 foreshadow?

Paul recounted in 12:2 that he was caught up to the “third heaven” and in 12:4 that he was caught up into “*paradise*.” Review this term in the free, online *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* at studylight.org and summarize what you find.

In 12:4, Paul communicated that he was “not permitted to speak” what he had heard in paradise. Why do you believe he was forbidden to share?

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Dig deeper into Paul's mind-set on suffering by consulting Bible commentaries on 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 like [Constable's Notes](#) at netbible.org. How did God answer Paul's prayer, and why did he receive that answer? Why was the thorn good for Paul? Based on this passage, write your own summary statement on the *theology of pain*.

His vision fortified him for future suffering and service. This was Paul's equipment for future ministry. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: God's Purpose in Our Suffering

Suffering in the Christian life is rarely welcomed or enjoyable, but it is purposeful. God *can* and *does* use it. Several passages offer this hopeful perspective.

Job, perhaps the oldest or one of the oldest books in the Bible, addresses suffering in depth. Read [Job 5:7](#). Summarize the author's point in this verse.

God sometimes uses suffering as a disciplinary tool in the Christian life. What does [Hebrews 12:11](#) inform us about this kind of suffering's specific benefit?

What does Paul's example in [Philippians 4:11–13](#) teach us about one of God's purposes for our suffering? How does this text mirror 2 Corinthians 12:9–10?

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While each of the passages cited in Correlation demonstrate the personal fruit of suffering, *2 Corinthians 1:3–4* provides “other-focused” fruit from our suffering. What is Paul’s point?

The devil is not always the one responsible for our pain and suffering. It is not always the Father’s will that you be relieved of the pressure. It is not the Father’s will that everybody be happy. Suffering frequently comes directly from the hand of our Father, who knows what is best for us in light of what He’s doing within us. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Suffering Frequently Plays a Beneficial Role

Suffering is a reality we naturally flee from rather than embrace. We gravitate toward comfort, ease, and predictability—not pain, hardship, and volatility. However, our God knows what’s best for us. What lessons can we draw from our study? Here’s three.

1. *We must remember that suffering is not new.* Avoid the temptation to question God’s goodness and faithfulness when bitter times come.
2. *We must realize that suffering plays a beneficial role.* As we embrace this realization, our questions move from “Who caused this?” to “How do I respond?”
3. *We must release the idea that contentment requires comfort.* Ouch. The apostle Paul learned contentment by going *through* suffering, not *around* it!

Are you suffering with a painful thorn? What is it? How has this study helped you understand it and strengthened you to endure it? How does the truth you learned guide your prayers about that thorn?

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What unexpected blessings have you received from past thorns? Do you know someone else navigating a season of trials? Pray for him or her and consider how you can offer comfort and spiritual encouragement.

It's not about the cause—it's about my response. It's not about someone's actions—it's about my attitude. Our desire is to grow in Him in grace and endurance and wisdom. I'm not interested in being happy. That's a byproduct of contentment. I want to know what it is to find contentment in whatever may come my way. That's what I want. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Our Father, it's a comfort to know that Your Son is a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." How enormous was the burden of the sin of the world that He bore. Forgive me, Father, for my lack of wisdom and for my superficial view of life. You are doing things in my own life that I need. I want You to know, Lord, I give You the entire burden, and I entrust it to You for the outcome You have, not that I have. In Jesus' comforting name. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, "[How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?](#)"

For the 2025 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Marshall F. Davis in collaboration with Aaron Massey, senior vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, and Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 2001, 2025 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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