

PAUL

A MAN OF GRACE AND GRIT

STUDY SIXTEEN

Responding as Paul Responded

Selections from 2 Corinthians

This was the apostle Paul, crippled from the blows, broken in body but never in spirit. It is not about himself—it is about his Savior. It isn't about the actions that were done against him—it's his response to those hardships that make him so great and cause us to admire him so much.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

WE know her fondly as Joni.

For decades, Joni Eareckson Tada has touched millions of Christians worldwide through her winsome personality and gripping life story. She inspires, encourages, and motivates by way of radio, television, film, and books. It was anything but easy attaining such an influential platform.

An active, athletic, and outdoorsy young woman, Joni found herself a quadriplegic at age 17 after a diving accident into the Chesapeake Bay. In the prime of her youth! During her rehabilitation she endured deep depression and suicidal thoughts. Through the prayer and support of her Christian community, she rediscovered hope, joy, and purpose.

Joni's more recent journey hasn't been a bed of roses. She's a two-time breast cancer survivor and bears chronic pain. But she manages to sing and record music despite diminished lung capacity, and she can paint with a brush held between her teeth!

Pastor Chuck Swindoll notes, "I've said for years that life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we respond to it." Joni's story inspires others not *because* of her life situation—that's the 10 percent. But how she has *responded* to her situation—that's the 90 percent.

Much like Joni, our modern-day heroine, the apostle Paul affords us a similarly inspiring, biblical portrait. In this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study, we candidly consider Paul's pain, suffering, and hardship. When he was knocked down, he got back up. What were the secrets of his ability to respond so well?



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

As you prepare to engage God's Word today, meditate on these words from the poem, "Blessed by Bitter Things," by Florence White Willett.

I thank You for the bitter things
They've been a friend to grace,
They've driven me from the paths of ease
To storm the secret place.

I thank You for the friends who've failed
To meet my soul's deep need;
They've driven me to the Savior's feet
Upon His love to feed.

I'm grateful too, through all life's way
No one could satisfy,
And so I've found in God alone
My rich, my full supply!¹



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Before Paul had written his second letter to the Corinthians, this seasoned apostle and missionary endured tremendous physical, emotional, and spiritual trials in advancing the gospel of Christ. Just as Joni can speak with authority on hardship because she has endured so much hardship as a quadriplegic and cancer survivor, so, too, could Paul speak with authority given his suffering.

At the close of his letter to the Galatian churches, Paul defended himself by calling attention to his wounds. "See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!" Paul scratched on parchment (Galatians 6:11 NASB). Whether the reason for writing large letters was because of his poor eyesight or his aching hand or some other ailment, Paul's disabilities demonstrated his authority.

"I bear on my body the scars that show I belong to Jesus," he wrote (6:17). The Greek word for "scars" is *stigma*. Paul pointed to his "scars" as a brand that proved Jesus was his master. For more insight into the Greek term "stigma/stigmata," read about it in [Strong's Greek Lexicon](#) at studybible.info or in [Constable's Notes](#) at netbible.org.

Let's turn to 2 Corinthians to see three ways that Paul responded to hardship and suffering.

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In Affliction Paul Focused on Things Unseen

2 Corinthians 4:7–9, 16–18

Paul allowed the affliction he encountered to remind him to focus on the things unseen.



Observation



Interpretation

In 2 Corinthians 4:7–9, what do you observe about Paul’s perspective within the four contrasting couplets?

In 2 Corinthians 4:7, what is the “treasure in earthen containers” (NASB)?

In 4:16, what does it mean that “our spirits are being renewed every day”?

In 4:16–18, what contrasts do you see?

In 4:17, how do troubles “produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them”?

In 4:18, what are the “things that cannot be seen”?

Nothing of what touched Paul externally would cool him internally. In fact, it fueled him internally. The longer the persecution continued, the hotter his fire for God. He focused on the One who works His eternal purposes in the unseen realm. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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In Affliction Paul Acknowledged His Weakness

2 Corinthians 11:23–28; 12:7–10

Paul allowed the affliction he encountered to remind him to acknowledge his weakness, inadequacy, and dependence on God.



Observation

In 2 Corinthians 11:23–28, how many types of trials and pressures did Paul list? What stands out to you?

In 12:7–10, why was Paul given a thorn in the flesh? What do you notice about Paul's attitude?



Interpretation

In 2 Corinthians 11:23–28, what was Paul's purpose in extensively listing his trials? What did he want his Corinthian readers to understand?

11:23–27; 11:28; and 12:7 cite different types of affliction, pointing to Paul's weakness and dependence on God. How would you describe those different categories?

In 12:9–10, why was Paul able to boast in his weakness? While it may sound counterintuitive to delight in his weakness, how did that free him?

Your humiliations, your struggles, your battles, your weaknesses, your helplessness, and your disqualifying infirmities MAKE you effective, they don't keep you from being effective. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Correlation: God Alone Is the Answer

Paul fleshed out the major biblical principle that—no matter the circumstance, the trial, the hardship, the affliction—God alone is the answer. He doesn't simply provide an answer, HE is the answer and makes all necessary provision for His children.

Read *1 Samuel 30:1–6*. Given the magnitude of the tragedy faced by David and his men, where did David alone find strength?

In *Proverbs 18:10*, how did Solomon's insight mirror David's?

According to *2 Corinthians 1:4–6*, what is one practical purpose for individual suffering? As suffering increases, what also increases?

Have you ever been there? Nothing around you gives you strength. Not even on your closest friends can you rely, quite possibly. Your situation is bleak. Your future is uncertain. It may be threatened. You find yourself at a loss. And the only direction you can look is up. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: How Will You Respond?

How about you? Are you excessively afflicted, burdened, or pressured? Perhaps even despairing of life itself? God intimately knows your circumstance. Look up. **Trust God alone** to minister to you. Are you feeling confused, misunderstood, beaten down—crushed? Making plans to get even? Perhaps your focus is there. Instead, **focus on the unseen** and the everlasting—the “eternal weight of glory” (2 Corinthians 4:17 NASB). Are you facing an impossible situation? Feeling ill-equipped to handle it? **Acknowledge your weakness** and lean on God's strength—“for when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10).

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Reflect on Paul's responses: trusting God alone, focusing on the eternal, acknowledging weakness and dependency. Which response most encourages you? How can you incorporate that response to grow your daily walk with Christ?

Where do you most struggle in your response to God when you encounter affliction? Jot a brief note of confession and petition to Him, asking Him to supply exactly what you need in your current circumstance.

It is our response to life's situations that makes for greatness, not the situations themselves. It is not action but reaction that leads us to greatness.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Thank You, Father, for this man of greatness, who was just a man, but he had learned in his more than 60 years on this earth how to respond to life's contingencies. All this trouble of life is the perfect opportunity to trust You and You alone. It's the perfect opportunity to focus on what's unseen rather than what's seen. It's the perfect opportunity to admit my own inadequacies and weaknesses. And in each case, You're the answer. Bring me to You, Father. I ask in the name of the Lord Himself. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Florence White Willett, "I Thank God for the Bitter Things," as quoted in Charles R. Swindoll, *Paul: A Man of Grace and Grit* (Nashville: Word, 2002), 242.
2. 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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