



Growth Group Spring 2020

Why Does a Good God Allow Evil and Suffering?

Week 2 – April 26, 2020 - 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Growth groups are one of the best and easiest ways to find community at a church. In this time of Corona19 and “social distancing” please don’t meet in person, but do continue to check in with each other. If your growth group would like to meet online or if you are aware of needs that the church can help fill, please let us know at connect@ljpres.org. Thank you for loving and caring for each other.

Setting the Context

The apostle Paul had a fairly contentious relationship with the church at Corinth. He had founded the church around 50 AD, near the end of his second missionary journey. However, there were some in Corinth who questioned his “credentials”. They were not sure that his preaching and teaching was adequate and they questioned other things about his leadership. The letters of 1 and 2 Corinthians are part of Paul’s attempt to set the church right.

No one is sure why Paul does not refer to himself in the first person in this text. Perhaps, he is trying to model humility to a congregation that did not put a lot of value in that trait. Nonetheless, Paul goes on to speak about a vision he had 14 years previously. It is interesting that Paul had never spoken of this to the congregation while he was in Corinth. In this vision he was “caught up” into paradise or the third heaven. However, Paul says he doesn’t know exactly how it happened and he also cannot share much of what he heard.

This type of vision is what the people of Corinth were interested in, but Paul does not use it to brag about himself. Instead, he uses it to talk about this thorn in the flesh. Many have tried to figure out exactly what this thorn in the flesh is, but there is no clear answer. What should be noted is the word that Paul uses for “thorn.” The word is only used once in the New Testament and it has the literal sense of something that is pointed like a stake that is used for impaling, or a medical instrument that sticks deeply in the flesh.

Paul wants to make it clear that he suffers because of this “thorn or stake.” It is more than just a nuisance. It is something that brings him pain and he had prayed “three times” that it might be removed from him. And God said no. Instead, Paul hears, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Paul’s prayer is answered, but it is not what he expected. Instead of removing the thorn God says I will give you the grace you need to bear this suffering. This issue will not keep Paul from preaching the gospel, and it will actually make his preaching and teaching even stronger because people will see Jesus even more clearly in Paul’s weakness.

Paul learns that his weakness plus Christ’s power equals perfect power. This is not the thinking that pervades the believers in Corinth, but Paul is teaching them a powerful lesson. Christ takes our suffering and by his grace transforms it into something more wonderful than we could ever possibly imagine. Humanity cannot fully understand how this happens, but it is the consistent message of the Scriptures.



Exploring the Text

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

¹ I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Questions

If you are answering these questions alone, we would urge you to try journaling. Rather than just pondering the answers, try writing them out along with a prayer to the Lord.

- 1) Since the Governor announced the stay-home order, list the things you are no longer doing on a daily or weekly basis. Then list the things that haven’t changed. Lastly, list the things you are now doing that you were not doing before. How do those lists compare?
- 2) In vs. 1-4 Paul tells about visions and revelations from the Lord. Have you ever had a vision or revelation that could have only come from God? How did that happen? What temporary and/or permanent impact did that experience have on you?
- 3) In vs. 5-6 Paul tells us that he doesn’t want any credit beyond what can be seen in his life. What does that statement mean to you? Do you know someone who exemplifies that commitment? What about the opposite, do you know of anyone who boasts of things that are not evidenced by their actions and behavior?
- 4) Vs. 7: Paul suffered from “a thorn in his flesh, from Satan.” While we’re not really sure what Paul was referencing, have you ever suffered a physical affliction that didn’t seem to ever resolve? How did/do you handle that affliction? Who are you most tempted to first blame when affliction strikes--Satan, yourself, or God--and why?
- 5) In vs. 8-9, we’re told that Paul asked God to take away his affliction. What was God’s answer to him? Has God ever told you something similar to what he told Paul? If so, explain.
- 6) God says his grace is all we need. If you have found that to be true in your life, describe how and when.
- 7) Though most of us prefer to be active in our strengths, doing things we feel equipped and able to do, God says his power works best in our weakness. How do you reconcile these opposite ideas?
- 8) In vs. 9-10, Paul makes bold statements about taking pleasure in his weaknesses, that is, when he suffers for Christ. We all know good people who have had bad things happen to them. How do you reconcile Paul’s words with your belief in a good and loving God?