

WHY ME? HELP AND HOPE FOR THE HURTING: SECTION TWO

Three Promises That Encourage the Hurting – Promise Three/Power Through Weakness

It is obvious by now that a positive perspective is essential in grasping the paradoxical benefits of suffering and affliction. Such optimism helps to maximize the potential of whatever negative situation we may be facing. That certainly is the case when it comes to the promise of God given to the Christian for those most difficult times of life, found in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, where we read the following –

“Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me – to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

More often than not, this promise is appropriated and lived out by the believer who has already gone through their fair share of adversity. No wonder God uses the apostle Paul to teach us this most profound truth about suffering. His instruction is so powerful yet practical because the apostle’s reference point isn’t hypothetical. Instead, his teaching consists of a personal sharing from his painful encounter with a thorn in the flesh. Three elements are contained in this promise, revealing how adversity can *humble* (v7), *hurt* (v8) and ultimately *help* us (vv9-10).

In mentioning his “thorn” in v7, Paul does not specify what ailment in particular afflicted him. But the fact that he uses the word “flesh” in describing it, indicates a physical problem of some kind. Based on Galatians 4:13-15, it could very well have been some sort of eye disease that not only negatively affected his vision, but his appearance as well. Paul also reveals the reason why this thorn was in his life: to keep him from exalting himself. It wasn’t that he was proud and needed to be humbled. The ailment was actually a pride preventative. In other words, Paul would have become proud had it not been for his thorn in the flesh. Yet this particular adversity prevented that from happening by humbling Paul and keeping him that way. He also reveals the reason why it was so necessary. It was due to “the surpassing greatness of the revelations” which he received from God in his ministry.

Before we consider the practical implications of v7, there is a distinction made by Paul as to the respective roles of God and the devil in his affliction. He states that the thorn was “given” to him, implying God’s role in allowing it. It was a gift from God. In the same breath, he also tells us that it was a messenger of Satan designed to torment him. The word used for “torment” can also be translated “buffet” and when used in the present tense, as it is here, it describes the action of repeatedly beating someone with the fist. Just as in the example of Job, so here in the life of Paul, we have the dual involvement of God and Satan in the suffering of the believer.