

Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time



Finding Security in a Troubled World

Selected Scriptures

Code: 81-73

We are rejoicing in our hearts for the opportunity to open the Word of God together and to try to help you understand what you probably already know if you're a part of Grace Community Church, that the Lord has revealed to us enough truth in His Word basically to cover any of the issues of life, and certainly that includes the one that we're all involved in. As I look back over, well now, about 51 years of ministry here at Grace Church, I remember that through the years, basically we have gone book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, sometimes word by word. We have worked our way through the entire New Testament, gone back to pick up some book for a second time. Basically in the early years preached through the Old Testament, got as far as about Psalm 72, if I remember, a series we were doing on Wednesday nights. So basically expositing the Word of God verse by verse. But occasionally through the years, we have also had some very important times in our church when we address the doctrine, a theological category, a theological truth, and those series have been helpful as well.

Occasionally, beyond the normal expository preaching, and even those doctrinal series have done, we have been forced to address, sort of, rare events, I guess you could say, things that so dominate the society that everybody becomes aware of them. If not everybody in the world, certainly everybody around Grace Community Church. And I think back to those kinds of times when I stepped into this pulpit and addressed an issue that had somehow become so widespread that I couldn't ignore it. I think the first time that happened was on March 2nd in 1988. There was a very famous television evangelist known basically to

anybody who had a television in those days by the name of Jimmy Swaggart, and there was a massive fall that occurred in his life, so much so that it was picked up by all the media. And I remember giving a lesson from the fall of this evangelist, a lesson around the idea of moral shipwreck. It was something I couldn't avoid because it was so much in the news.

It was a couple of years later on January 20th in 1991 that the United States engaged in the opening of what is known as the Gulf War. And people were asking all kinds of questions about, "How do Christians relate to war? What does the Bible say about war? Should we go to battle?" and so I did a brief series on war, what the Bible says about war. It was only a year later that here in Los Angeles – in fact, it was in May on the 3rd of May of 1992 that we had an event that scarred our city for a long time. It was known as the Los Angeles riots. It was, of course, on the global media as well, and I needed to address that from a biblical perspective; so I did. We had a message on the biblical perspective and what that reveals about mankind.

Two years later, it was January 23, 1994 when we had a massive earthquake known as the Northridge earthquake, and it was important for us because everybody out here felt that shaking, to look at that from a biblical perspective as well. And I remember that the church received a lot of new people coming into the church in the next few weeks after the earthquake because people were so terrified. There was a little bit of time that went by and then it was September, and it was September 16th when I stepped into this pulpit in 2001 and gave a message on 9/11 on terrorism, jihad, and the Bible. The 9/11 event happened on a Tuesday, and I had to figure it all out, at least from a biblical perspective, and be ready to explain it to our congregation on that following Sunday, September 16th of 2001.

Eleven years went by before I felt like there was another issue that reached the level where we had to stop everything and address it, and it was September 23rd of 2012. It was when there was an election going on, national election in our country, and the democratic party had decided that two of its advocacy platforms were going to be homosexuality and abortion. They were positive affirmations made by the democratic party to get people to vote for them, those who supported the slaughter of babies and homosexuality. That was a defining time in our nation's history and for the world. Three

years later, the Supreme Court legalized homosexual so-called marriage. It was July 19th, and I gave a message entitled “We Will Not Bow.”

Now here we are 2020 and our nation is facing something that has circled the globe, the coronavirus epidemic, and it has created fear, confusion, doubt, questions everywhere, and we haven't seen the end of it yet. It's still moving at a rapid rate. We don't know the final outcome of that, not just the physical outcome of the illness itself, but the implications that have hit everyone from an economic standpoint. And even though 99 point something percent of people who've received this will recover from it, there is still mounting fear, not just from the illness itself, but from all that's happening around it that is changing people's lives. And to be honest with you, it's something that you haven't experienced. Most of you who are listening to me won't get this likely, it's a very small number of people. And as I said, the vast majority of those recover. And yet the implications of this are frightening to people because it's taken life out of their control.

Now if you were with us last week, you remember that our Lord said, “Stop worrying about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own,” Matthew 6. Stop worrying. We talked about that from Matthew 6: “Stop worrying. Have you forgotten who your Father is?” You belong to the Lord. Have you forgotten what family you're in, you're not a part of those people in the kingdom of darkness, you're a part of the kingdom of God. You're part of the family of God. You're children of God, you're to be cared for as members of His eternal family. Remember who your Father is, remember who your family is. And thirdly, we talked about the fact that you might have forgotten what your future is. You don't need to worry about your future, it's in our Lord's hands.

Remember your Father, remember your family, remember your future; we talked about that last time. You have enough trouble today without projecting trouble that may never come in the future. We all have enough trouble for the day, we understand that. Health, jobs, money, marriage, children, difficult people, I mean, we understand all the categories that bring us trouble. But it's more than it's ever been in human history, and we have to admit that, and this is a good illustration of it.

If you just knew what was going on in your family and what was going on in your

neighborhood and what was going on in the little circle that you live in, you probably wouldn't be scared about anything, because not knowing that there's something out there that has the potential to do harm wouldn't be known to you, that that exists, you might not even know, and you would live your life in a certain kind of simplicity. We don't live in that world anymore. We all know everything, and what that does is basically add to the burden that we bear. It's enough to deal with the trouble in your own life. and now because of media, we literally have to carry the trouble of everyone on the planet, which is overexposed to us so that the burdens become utterly overwhelming and debilitating in some cases, unbearable, and even depressing.

The world can be a difficult place. Isaiah 8:22 says, "Look to the earth, and behold, distress and darkness, and the gloom of anguish." We understand that. On a more personal level, Solomon, writing in Ecclesiastes chapter 2 said, "I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind. Because all of a man's days his task is painful and grievous; even at night, his mind does not rest." Now that's a man with no media. That's a man just saying, "Life is vain just in my own circle of experience." Jesus said in John 16:33, "In the world you will have tribulation, you'll have trouble." The word in the Greek is actually "pressure."

The Bible, however, always tells us this, that God is in the trouble, God is in the trouble. He's not just looking at the trouble, He's not just allowing the trouble, He is in the trouble. Listen to Isaiah 14:24, "The Lord of hosts has sworn saying, 'Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand.'" Again Isaiah says in chapter 46, "My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.' Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it." And what is God speaking of? Everything. Actually, everything.

In the prophet Amos, there is a statement made, actually a couple of statements made in the third chapter of Amos that I want to read to you. Amos is a very brief book, but a very rich book, and this particular portion of it is very helpful to us as we think about our current stress. Amos chapter 3, verse 6: "If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble? If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?" Some people want to sort of divest God of responsibility for what goes wrong. That's not the right approach.

“If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?” the next verse, verse 7 of Amos 3, “Sure the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets.” So God is the one who does things. Even calamity is done within the framework of the Lord’s will. And He says He doesn’t do those kinds of things unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets. What that’s telling us is that in ancient history recorded in the Word of God, when God brought about a calamity, it was inevitably a judgment, and that judgment had a warning, and the warning would always come from God to the prophets. The prophets would warn the people, and then God would bring His judgment where there was a failure to repent. God is not hiding from His own judgments. God will declare His right as a just and holy God to judge sin and iniquity; and when judgment comes, God takes full responsibility for it.

Again, people want to exonerate God from trouble as if somehow that made Him less than holy and pure, when the fact of the matter is, His holiness, His absolute purity and righteousness demands justice and judgment. The question is not, “Why does God allow these things to happen?” The question is, “Why doesn’t God allow them to happen more often or even terminally?”

In Lamentations chapter 3, we read in verse 37, “Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth? Why should any living mortal, or any man, offer complaint in view of his sins?” What an amazing statement.

So you see calamity come to pass. It comes to pass because the Lord commands it. “It is from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill forth. and why should any living mortal, or any man, offer complaint in view of his sins?” Those of us, all of us are sinners; we have no right to complain against the holiness of God. We can’t complain, we are sinners.

There was a book written by Rabbi Kushner years ago called *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* and he went chapter after chapter after chapter trying to discuss why bad things happen to good people. And the book could have been very simple. The title would have been *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* You open the book and it should

have said one thing: "There are no good people. There are no good people." Why do bad things happen to good people? There are no good people. "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Bad things will always happen because there are no good people; we are all sinners.

Now in ancient times, as we read earlier from Amos, God would reveal His coming judgment by His prophets. God would reveal His purpose so His people would know what was coming and why it was coming. That happened many times in Scripture. But that's not the case in all of God's judgments, and it's not the case now because there are no real prophets as Old Testament prophets were. There is no new revelation, God is not revealing things; that is all completed at the end of the book of Revelation in Scripture.

So we're looking at the world and we're seeing things happen, but we don't have the prophets as the Old Testament people did. So we can say with [Isaiah 45:15](#), "Truly, You are a God who hides Yourself." We don't get a word from heaven now. We're not hearing from God as to why this is all happening. That puts us in an interesting situation. That puts us in a place very much like the character in the Bible, and that character is Job.

Go back to the book of Job with me for a moment. You're going all the way back to the patriarchal period of time with Job. All the way back to the time of Genesis is when Job was living. He's introduced to us in the first chapter as a man in the land of Uz, blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil. That's the best that could ever be said about anyone, which is to say, salvation and sanctification were already operating in the patriarchal period. And we all know the story. He had great wealth, he had a large family, and all of a sudden, everything began to go wrong in his life, and he doesn't know why.

We know why, because in chapters 1 and 2 of Job, Satan comes to God and Satan says to God, "Hey, does Job fear God for nothing? In other words, the reason Job fears You, the reason he's righteous, the reason he's such a good man, the reason he worships You the way he does is because You have blessed him so greatly. You've made a hedge about him, his house and all that he has on every side. You've blessed the work of his hands. You've given him possessions, they've increased in the land." And then Satan says to God, "But put forth Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse You to Your face. Job only

worships You, serves You, because You've blessed him. Take away the blessing, he'll curse You."

So this is a test: "Will a faithful, righteous man be faithful and righteous when he has everything taken away?" And the story unfolds from there. God says, "I'm going to prove the character of saving faith. I'm going to prove the power of life, spiritual life. I'm going to prove the power of sanctification." And so God allows Satan to unleash all kinds of horrors on Job.

And Job loses everything. His friends come around and give him really bad advice; and he's struggling with all of this. He's struggling because he doesn't understand. He doesn't know about the conversation between God and Satan. God is hidden, the conversation is hidden. He doesn't know why it's happening. His friends give him wrong answers. They give him good theology in a generic sense, but badly applied and irrelevant in his case.

Finally, after hearing bad advice and poor insights and condemnation from his friends that is not legitimate, God speaks. That's in chapter 38 of Job; you might want to look at that for a moment. And God does not tell him anything about what He's doing. God doesn't say, "Look, Satan and I were in a confrontation, and this is why I'm doing this, because I want to prove the validity of your faith. I want to prove that saving faith is everlasting and can't be broken. I want to prove the power of sanctification." He doesn't say anything about that. He doesn't tell Job anything about the conversation with Satan.

So here God hides the reality; and what God does from chapter 38 through 41 is just a barrage of questions that essentially say to Job, "You don't even have a right to ask this question." The Lord says, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Now gird up your loins like a man, and I'll ask you, and you instruct Me! Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Where were you" - verse 6 - "when its bases were sunk? Where were you when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" speaking of the angels most likely at creation. "Where were you when I made the sea? Where were you when I made clouds?" Verse 12, "Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, caused the dawn to know its place?" It just goes on like this.

Verse 16, "Have you entered into the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you?" Verse 19, "Where is the way to the dwelling of light? And darkness, where is its place?" He's asking him questions that say, "You're not even entitled to know anything. Who do you think you are to question Me? This is so far above you. What I do is so far above you, it is so infinitely above you, it makes no sense that you would even question Me." Down in verse 31, He even refers to the fact that God has designed and put in place the constellations and He identifies them. Verse 39, He talks about the animals, and goes into verse 1 of chapter 39 talking about more animals; talks about animals all the way through chapter 39.

Chapter 40, verse 1, "Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it." Job finally gets the message and says in verse 4, "I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, I will not answer; even twice, I will add nothing more." "Okay, it's too far beyond me. You couldn't give me an answer that I could even comprehend."

God's not done with him. Chapter 41, He starts it all over again, "Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook? Or press down his tongue with a cord?" speaking of great sea monsters; and He keeps going with that same approach all the way through chapter 41.

And Job finally in chapter 42 says, "I know You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted." What came out of all that? "You are sovereign. You are sovereign; I get it. I don't understand. I get it. This knowledge is hidden, it's too wonderful for me. I don't know it. I can't understand it." And he says in verse 5 of chapter 42, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; and now my eye sees You. For the first time, I see You in a new way; therefore I repent in dust and ashes." Job asks forgiveness for even assuming that he could understand the purposes of God. "You don't need to know, Job. Trust Me. Trust Me." "I do. I repent. I trust You."

Knowing the divine mind in all of its infinite complexities is not possible to us. The innumerable, incalculable, infinite complexities and contingencies that function in the mind of God that cause Him to do what He does in the way He does it and where He does it are far beyond our capacity to grasp. And certainly, knowing the reasons why God does

anything and knowing the future is beyond us. But it's not only beyond us, it's not good for us. You wouldn't want to know the future. You think you would, but you wouldn't.

If you knew the future, it would rob you of present joy. If you knew the future was better, that would rob you of current joy because you would be anticipating something better. If you knew the future was worse, that would rob you of present joy because you would live in fear. You don't want to know you're going to have a car accident in six months. You don't want to know you're going to have cancer in three years. You don't want to know that your child is going to perish. You don't want to know that your wife is going to leave you. You don't want to know that somebody you love is going down in a plane crash. You don't want to know that death is looming over your household; you don't want to know that. You can't live with that now, that would steal all your joy.

God is far too complex for you, and He only lets you know what you need to know. And what you need to know is this, that He has marked, as we read in Psalm 103, by compassion, kindness, grace, mercy, forgiveness, fatherly love and care for His own children. That's what you need to know, and that's really all you need to know. "Trust Me. Trust Me," God says.

So we are seeing things happen in our lifetime, in our world, and they come a lot more rapidly than perhaps they have in the past, because the law of entropy is working, things are breaking down. Perhaps more specifically, they come in a lot greater volume because we, by the media, know everything that's wrong everywhere. So what do we do? Like Job, do we say, "What's going on, God? What's going on? I demand to know. I want to know. I want to figure this out." And God says to us, "It's way beyond your ability to grasp." Just look at the entire creation: macro-creation, micro-creation, everything in between, all the bodies in space, all the molecules of life on this planet. The complexity of it is so massive. And God functions simply in that complexity, and an explanation given to you would be utterly beyond your comprehension.

There are some things He wants you to know. There are some things He wants you to know for certain, and here's the main one: that He works all things according to His will. "He works all things according to His will," [Ephesians 1:11](#). That's what you need to know.

And then you need to know this, Romans 8:28, that, “He works all things together for good to those that love God and are called according to His purpose.” So He does everything according to His will in the universe. And Job is God’s testimony that He runs everything in the universe; even gets specific in those chapters, as we pointed out.

What God wants you to know is He is in charge of absolutely everything at a complexity level that is so vastly beyond your comprehension that explaining it would be useless. But He wants you to know this: it’s all according to His will that everything operates. That is to say, He is absolutely sovereign in the world. He is in control, and what He purposes is exactly what comes to pass. And He wants you to know that if you belong to Him, it’s all working together for your good.

And then there’s a third thing He wants you to know, and that is that in the end, it is all for His glory. He is doing what He wills, what He purposes, in everything. He is accomplishing your good in everything because He loves you and you’re His child, and He is to receive the glory in the end for all of it. John Piper was looking at Romans 8:28, “All things work together for good,” and he wrote this: “All things includes the fall of sparrows, the rolling of dice,” – these are all from biblical texts – “the fall of sparrows, the rolling of dice, the slaughter of His people, the decisions of kings, the failing of sight, the sickness of children, the loss and gain of money, the suffering of saints, the completion of travel plans, the persecution of Christians, the repentance of souls, the gift of faith, the pursuit of holiness, the growth of believers, the giving of life and the taking in death, and the crucifixion of His Son.”

And as I read in Isaiah 46, God says, “My counsel shall stand. I will do all My pleasure. Indeed, I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it, I will do it.” This is not to say that God creates evil. This is to say that God is not overwhelmed by evil, but that God controls evil to His own ends and purposes which are all righteous and glorious.

So what I’m trying to I guess in a measure is to put you in the place of Job and let you know that God is hiding in this event, and there are no prophets to declare what He’s doing. So what are we supposed to do in response to that? Know this, that everything that is happening is in His will, that everything that happens is going to turn out for good to

those that love Him and are called according to His purpose, and ultimately for His own glory because, "All things are by Him and for Him," Romans 11.

He doesn't tell us why He does everything; again, it's too complex. He doesn't tell us the future because we can't possibly even handle the present trouble. Compounded by knowing the world's trouble. God spares us mercifully the knowledge of the future. The information God does give us is all we need. Ignorance of the future leads to trust in God who has eternally secured our future, and ignorance of the future is a sweet and kind gift from God to us. If God gave us more information, we wouldn't understand it. It wouldn't make sense to us because it only makes sense to God who is an infinite mind. The contingencies related to any information given to us would be so complex as to overwhelm us. God wants us to know this: "You're Mine. I love you. I sent My Son to die for you. You are My child. Trust Me. Trust Me."

God is in charge of everything. He's not revealing everything, but He is doing something, and that is He's teaching us to trust Him. He's teaching us to trust Him. And most of those lessons are much more enhanced and much more intense and much more effective when we're in trouble. We don't learn a lot when everything's going well, we don't listen very well. We start listening when we're at the end of our ability to control something, when life's getting away from us, when forces beyond us have taken over. Maybe we become a little more eager to listen. And what would God say to us? What lessons does He want us to learn? I'm going to give you some of those, just a list taken from a number of passages of Scripture. But let me tell you what God is doing in your life and my life in this time of trouble.

Number One: God uses trouble – and this in a general sense, this in a broad sense, but it's applicable in a specific sense – God uses trouble to test the strength of our faith. God uses trouble to test the strength of our faith. And now, by the way, He doesn't need to test it for His information, He knows that. But He tests it for our information.

Listen to Exodus chapter 16, verse 4, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction.'" Will they go out and

take just enough for a day and believe God that the next day He will provide more bread, and the next day, more bread? And on the sixth day, they can bring in twice as much because there won't be any bread on the Sabbath. "Will they do what I command them to do?"

There's a test. The test was they needed food. They didn't know where that food was going to come from. Would they be willing to do what God said when essentially they were putting their lives on the line? The notion probably would enter the mind of any Jewish person out in the wilderness at that time, "I'm going to get everything I can get."

They would do with the bread what everybody's doing with the bread now in the market. There's a panic toward hoarding, which is a test of faith. Do you think God's going to provide the next day? He told you, one day at a time. This is a test to see if you really trust Him.

In Deuteronomy chapter 8, God is still testing the people of Israel: "All the commandments" - verse 1 - "that I am commanding you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to give to your fathers. You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna." In other words, everything that's happening in terms of a deprivation pushes you into a category of trust to find out the strength of your faith.

Another illustration of this can be found in the prophecy of Habakkuk. Habakkuk sees doom on the horizon and he says in the opening of his prophecy, "The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw. How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and You will not hear? I cry out to You, 'Violence!' You do not save. Why do You make me see iniquity, and cause me to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises. Therefore the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; justice comes out perverted." "Are You looking? Look at the nations! Observe!" says God back. "Because I'm doing something in your days - you wouldn't believe if you were told." It doesn't look good. "Trust Me. Trust Me." That's the

lesson. This was a test of Habakkuk's faith.

How did he do with the test? Well, over in the third chapter of Habakkuk there's one of the most wonderful portions of Scripture anywhere. Verse 16, the end of chapter 3, the end of the prophecy: "I heard, I heard from God, and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise who will invade us." He's terrified because the prophecy's telling him that invaders are coming, and they're coming with power and judgment on the Jewish people.

But notice his faith, verse 17: "Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines, though the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls," – look, he's an agrarian guy, he lives in an agrarian culture. If everything that is predictable – fig trees blossoming, fruit showing up on vines, olive oil not failing over hundreds of years from the same tree – if everything that is normal and routine is changed dramatically, "yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' feet," – like mountain goats' feet – "and He makes me walk on my high places." And actually, he gives instruction to turn it into a song for the choir director on a stringed instrument. "If everything in my world that I know is routine and normal goes away, disappears, is so dramatically altered as if to non-exist, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength. I'm like a mountain goat on high places."

This is why God brings trouble. Doesn't need to explain anything to us. What He does in that trouble, first of all, is test our faith in Him. Second Chronicles 32:31 says about Hezekiah, "God left him to test him, that He might know what was in his heart." Not that God might know, but that Hezekiah might know. God knows what's in our heart. God knows everything. The test is for us so that we can do an honest evaluation of our faith.

So how are you doing in this momentary chaos of a virus? How's your faith? You should be rejoicing, according to Peter in 1 Peter 1:6, "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you've been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of

your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Peter is saying, “You ought to be grateful you’re going through a trial because that trial is going to prove the validity of your faith.” This is the reason that as far as believers are concerned, God allows those trials for us, to test the strength of our faith.

Secondly, I would say – and it kind of flows out of that – God has a second purpose, and that is to humble us. I would suggest to you that anyone going through a test of faith legitimately and honestly is going to say, “I need more faith, I need more faith,” and you’re going to be humbled. The severest test of faith on the most faithful person is not likely to cause that faithful person to be proud about his or her faithfulness; but rather, the most godly and spiritual person in the midst of the trial would say, “Lord, I believe. Strengthen my faith.”

In 2 Corinthians chapter 12, there’s a text that speaks so directly to this. Paul is suffering a thorn in the flesh. This thorn in the flesh is not likely a physical ailment. This thorn in the flesh is described as a messenger of Satan. A messenger is *angelos*. A satanic angel is a demon. Most likely this demon was tormenting him not on a personal level, but tormenting him by leading the attacks on his beloved Corinthian church; and this became painful and agonizing for Paul that demon-led false teachers were tearing up his beloved Corinthian church.

So verse 7, he says, “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!” Why would God allow demonically-inspired false teachers to do damage to the Corinthian church? The answer is, to humble Paul.

When you think of Paul, you think of the godliest of men without equal. And yet pride was a reality in his life because of the many revelations that he had had. And he says, “Even I in the midst of this trial recognize that God is humbling me. I implored the Lord three times that this might stop. 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'm weak, then I'm strong." Paul is being crushed in his heart. It's like a spear being driven through him.

The word "thorn" is much more than a small thorn. It's essentially a spear being driven through his body to see what's happening to the Corinthian church. But the Lord is allowing it to happen to humble him because he had so many revelations. He needed to be humbled. He needed to recognize that spiritual power is perfected in weakness.

The Lord puts us through trials then to test the strength of our faith, and in the testing, to show us that our faith is far less than it should be, even the noblest of us, and therefore, to humble us to the point where we would say with Paul, "I am well-content with weaknesses. Give me more of this if it humbles me." Is that something you've thought about? Whatever the distresses are currently, are you saying, "Lord, I'm not what I should be. I thank You for the reality of my faith, the truthfulness of my faith. It's the real thing. My faith holds and stands. This test has proven the validity of the faith You gave me in Christ." But can you say, "Lord, bring on more, whatever it takes to humble me; because I know Your power is perfected in my weakness"? "I will rather boast gladly about my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

It's a way of saying, "I never want to be the explanation for my usefulness to the Lord. I want it always to be His power in me." He is content, verse 10 says – and we'll say more about that next Sunday. He is content with weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions and difficulties for Christ's sake, because they drive him to the reality of his weakness, which then relates to the fact that he has to depend on God. So the Lord brings these things into our lives to test the strength of our faith. And in the testing, inevitably our pride, self-confidence, self-trust is exposed, and we are humbled. There are the two profoundly initial realities of what the Lord is doing in our lives.

I think there's a third principle. I think the Lord is weaning us from earthly things. The Lord is weaning us from earthly things. In Colossians, Paul says, "Set your affections on things above and not on things on the earth." We know that, we believe that, but that's hard to

do, because we are so engulfed with the things of the earth. And we're not living in a culture that would be like the biblical culture where the things of the earth were pretty minimalistic, where I don't think there were any local storage units that you had to rent in order to put your stuff in them. Life was meager. You had the clothes on your back and maybe a change or two. You had food for a few days and then you had to find a way to get more food. You had to grow that food, you had to process that yourself. But even in that world, it was easy to get caught up with the earthly enterprises. So Paul says, "Set your mind on the things above, not on things on the earth. For you have died, your life is hidden with Christ in God."

What are those earthly things you need to turn from? "Immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed. You once walked in those things; put them away, along with anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive speech. Don't lie. Put on the new self, renewed in a true knowledge according to the image of One who created him. Be marked by compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience; bearing with one another, forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart, to which indeed you were called into one body; and be thankful. And then let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your heart to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." Whoa. That's a godly life. That's what it means to set your mind on things above and not on things on the earth.

One of the benefits of a massive trial like this is the fact there's a certain sense in which the reset button has been set in all of our lives. We don't know what the next chapter's going to look like. But we do know this, that it's for our good, it's according to the will of God, and will bring Him glory. And so we approach this with joy and peace and love and purity and holiness and virtue and kindness. In other words, we grasp all those heavenly realities that have been vouched safe to us by the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

There's a fourth reality that is important, too, and that is this: Trials call us to heavenly hope. Trials call us to heavenly hope. In 2 Corinthians chapter 4, Paul closes this chapter

recognizing the difficulties. Verse 16 of 2 Corinthians 4, “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.” We’re not only focused on those things that are heavenly, but we’re focused in the midst of trouble on the renewal of the inner man. In other words, we’ve been weaned from the world, we’re now walking more in the Spirit and we’re in touch with what the Lord is doing in our hearts.

Verse 17, “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” – in other words, how you respond to the trial is directly related to your eternal reward – “while we look” – he says in verse 18 – “not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

He goes on to say, “We’re just in an earthly tent. And if this is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven.” When things begin to be stripped away from you in this world, your focus shifts to eternal glory. In the language of Romans 8, you are looking for the redemption of the body. You’ve already had the redemption of the soul, you’re looking for the redemption of the body, when we are changed into the very image of Jesus Christ.

Just a couple of other things to think about; this would be a fifth work of the Lord in this process of going through trouble: God designs trouble to reveal what we really love, to reveal what we really love. What do you love? This is the kind of situation that will reveal that. Is anything especially dear to you? It’s going to show up in a time of stress.

I can’t help but go anywhere in my thinking but to Genesis 22 when the most horrible of all situations occurs. A man is told by God to take the life of his beloved son, covenant son. The man is Abraham, the son is Isaac, and God says, “I want you to take his life.” All Abraham’s hopes and all of his connections to the promise of God were in Isaac.

“But Abraham took him,” – Genesis 22 says – “bound his son Isaac,” – verse 9 – “laid him on the altar, on top of the wood; stretched out his hand, took the knife to slay his son. But the

angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God.'" Fear, not in the sense of terror, but in the sense of respect. Abraham has so much respect for God, that when God tells him to take his son's life, he's ready to plunge the knife. The writer of Hebrews tells us what was in Abraham's mind and it was this, that he believed in the covenant promise of God so strongly that he knew God would raise Isaac from the dead to fulfill that covenant. There's no question that Abraham loved Isaac. There's also no question he loved God more.

That's what happens in times of distress. What you really love, who you really love becomes manifest. And if you really love God, then in the midst of all the distress, you're rejoicing because God is in the distress. It is His will for your good and for His glory.

Listen to Deuteronomy 13, verse 3: "You shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams," – a false prophet – "for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him." Is that what you're doing in this? You're finding out who you really love.

There's another principle that God is working in our lives through this: He is putting us through trials that will enable us to help others in their trials. I think of Luke 22 where Jesus says, "Peter, you're going to go through this. You're going to deny Me on three occasions multiple times. But in the end when you are converted, when you are turned around and go the right way, you will strengthen the brethren, you will strengthen the brethren."

"The God of all comfort" – Paul says – "comforts us, that we might comfort others." This is the work of God. We become more useful to others. We become more devoted to the Lord because we love Him more than anything else. And whatever else might be taken away from us only leaves us with less, which makes it easier to focus on the one who really matters, and that is God. Are you finding that you love Him with all your heart and with all your soul? That's the test.

And in the end, a final word is pretty simple: God does what brings Him glory. If you love Him, you rejoice in that reality. We sing about that. We sing what the angels stated, "Glory to God in the highest." We say that we want to give Him glory in everything. We use the word "glory." We want to bring honor and glory to God. That is what He is doing in all things.

God will receive glory from this current stress. We don't know exactly all the ways He will, but He does; that's why it's happening. The end of all that I have to say to you is this: you are a part of something God is doing, and you're on the top side of it if you're a believer. You're on the heavenly side of it. You're looking down on this from the heavenly perspective. You have God's view of it now. And again, it is within His will, every single element of it. It is for your good, and for His glory ultimately; and your highest good should be His greatest glory.

We don't worry because we know who our Father is, we know who our family is, and we know what our future is. We don't worry. But we do become learners through this kind of situation. We have the responsibility to learn the lessons that the Lord is teaching us. You can take a look at your own life and examine where you are in regard to the things we've talked about. But if you look at them rightly, you see this not as a threat, but as an incredibly wonderful, promising opportunity to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ and become more like the Savior, more faithful to the Lord, more obedient, more useful to Him, more joyful, more the source of all that is good and godly than you were without this trial. We ought to be the shining lights in the midst of all of this. And when it's done, if you have been a faithful *mathētēs*, a faithful learner or disciple, all these lessons will be for your good and His glory.

Father, we do thank You that we've been able to hear from You in Your Word this morning. Thank You for all those who have gathered with us around the world. And our hearts are encouraged. We rejoice today. We have no fear. We have nothing to fear. We have no worry or anxiety because You are in control of everything. It's all designed for Your glory through our good, as You pour out grace upon grace, mercy upon mercy on Your people, it redounds to Your glory through the increased worship of those who are recipients of that blessing.

Lord, show Your glory. Make it clear to the whole watching world that You reign and that You are a God of salvation who offers that through faith in Jesus Christ. And we will rejoice in the outcomes. Even though we don't know at the time what's happening in every situation, we do know that You're in control for our blessing and the glory of Your great name; and that is for us enough. And we thank You in the Savior's name. Amen.

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