

# How to Suffer Successfully

by Warren Wiersbe

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*Paul's experience teaches us that suffering can be a servant, not an enemy, and that we can enlist it to build us up and make us stronger in our faith.*

**Duration:** 38:49

**Scripture:** Exodus 19:5

**Topics:** "Suffering Well", "Gods Grace"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of not relying on feelings or circumstances, but instead turning to the word of God. He highlights the example of the apostle Paul, who found strength and guidance in God's promises. The speaker also mentions the concept of grace, explaining that it is something we don't deserve and should not try to bargain with God for. He then outlines five steps that Paul took to turn suffering into a servant and build his faith, including accepting suffering from God's hand and giving it back to Him.

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## Transcript

Reading the Word of God from 2 Corinthians chapter 12, verses 1 through 10. Because of the accusations of his enemies, Paul is forced to glory, give glory to God in some of the experiences of his life. It is not expedient for me, doubtless, to glory.

I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, whether in the body I cannot tell or whether out of the body I cannot tell, God knoweth, such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, whether in the body or out of the body I cannot tell, God knoweth, how he was caught up into paradise and heard unspeakable words which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

Of such an one will I glory, yet of myself I will not glory, but in my infirmities. For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool, for I will say the truth. But now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me.

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan, to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then am I strong.

My grace is sufficient for thee. The apostle Paul had a secret. He had carried this secret in his heart for fourteen years.

And he would never have revealed this secret except his enemies forced him to, and he did it only to the glory of God. The secret was that Paul had gone to heaven and come back again. While he was in heaven, he had heard words that no man had ever heard before.

Now the reason that Paul brings this up is not to magnify his privileges, but rather to magnify the grace of God. Because of all of these revelations that Paul had had, God had to balance his blessing with burden. And to keep Paul from getting proud and arrogant, God permitted Satan to buffet Paul with a thorn in the flesh.

The word thorn can also mean a stake, the kind of a stake that enemies would be impaled on by their conquerors. And so Paul was suffering physically. Not only was he suffering physically, verse 10 of 2 Corinthians 12 informs us he was suffering also emotionally and spiritually with infirmities, reproaches, necessities, persecutions, distresses.

And so Paul was a man who suffered. We don't know what his thorn was, and it's a good thing we don't, because no matter what may be the cause of your suffering, Paul's experience can speak to you. I feel sometimes that emotional suffering is far worse than physical suffering.

Sometimes one leads to the other. And there are people listening to me just now who are going through intense spiritual suffering. Satan is just besieging the citadel of your soul, perhaps with fears or doubts.

And therefore, Paul's experience in 2 Corinthians 12 can speak to us today and help to answer the question, how shall we deal with suffering? How shall we deal with suffering? You say, well, pastor, today I'm not suffering, good. But tomorrow you may be or you may meet someone who is. How shall we deal with suffering? Now, Paul's experience teaches us that there are three possible responses to suffering, whether it be the suffering of the body or of the mind or of the soul.

There are three possible responses. We can seek to escape it, or we can seek to endure it, or we can seek to enlist it. If we escape it, we look upon suffering as an enemy.

If we endure it, we look upon suffering as a master. But if we learn to enlist it, we look upon suffering as a servant. And that, of course, is the highest response of all.

Let's take this first response, and Paul responded this way, we can seek to escape suffering. For this thing, for this reason, I besought the Lord three times that this thing might depart from me. Now, this is a normal response.

I've heard people criticize King Hezekiah because he prayed when God said to him, you're not going to live. That's a normal response. When a person is sick, his normal response is, dear Lord, would you take this sickness away? When there's some kind of accident or affliction or burden or crisis, your normal first response is, as a natural human being, oh God, remove this thing from me.

Paul prayed that way three times. I wonder if he wasn't imitating our Lord Jesus who prayed three times, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Some of these super spiritual people who say, no, don't pray about that, had better remember Jesus prayed about it.

If it be possible, let this cup pass from me. You see, when suffering comes, we should not ignore the means that God provides to help us. If I were to fall down and break my arm, I would pray about it, but I would also find myself a doctor who would set the arm, put a cast on it, and give me some medicine.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above. All of the good things that we have today to ease pain and to heal bodies and to help the suffering are gifts of God. When I walk into the coronary care units of the various hospitals in Chicago, I think I'm in Star Trek or something.

All of this equipment, and here are these trained people watching dials and gauges, computers are working, and I say to myself, thank you, Lord, that somebody devised all of this in your wisdom to help your people. The normal response is to seek to escape suffering. Now, this would be especially true of the Apostle Paul because he was a Jew.

And you must remember that under the Old Covenant, God promised the Jews, if you obey me, you won't suffer. If you disobey me, you will suffer. If you obey my statutes, I will send rain from heaven.

I'll bless your flocks and your herds and your crops. I'll defeat your enemies, and none of the diseases that you saw in Egypt will come upon you. That was an Old Covenant promise to God's Old Covenant people.

He promised to make them rich if he would obey them. He promised to keep them healthy if they would obey him. God never promised that under the New Covenant.

The first thing Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount was not, blessed are you rich for being obedient. He said, blessed are the poor. Our Lord Jesus was the poorest of the poor.

Paul tells us in previous chapters of 2 Corinthians, all the suffering he went through, and Paul was obedient. If anyone comes up to you and says, oh, I know why you're going through what you're going through, you've sinned against God. Now, God has promised that if you obey Him, none of these things will happen to you.

To whom did He give that promise? He never gave it to His disciples. He said, I send you out like lambs among wolves. He never gave it to the Apostle Paul.

He said, I want you to know, Paul, that stripes and afflictions abide you every place you go. You be very careful when you sing that song. Every promise in the book is mine.

Every promise in the book is not yours. Now, God can take any promise and apply it to your life. God has taken Old Testament promises and applied them to my life, and I've believed them and He's worked.

But God is under no obligation to remove my suffering simply because I'm an obedient Christian or you're an obedient Christian. But this would be the attitude that a Jew would have. You see, the reason God pampered Israel was because they were in the childhood of their development.

Paul tells us in the book of Galatians chapter 4 that the law was a schoolmaster to prepare the Jews for maturity. Now, children understand only two things, pain and pleasure. They don't understand philosophy.

They don't understand theology. They do not understand anatomy. All they understand is pain and pleasure.

So how do you raise children? If you obey, I'll reward you. If you disobey, I'll spank you. And so the child gets to a point in life where he thinks that all of life is this way.

If you're always obedient, you're always having pleasure. If you're disobedient, you'll always have sorrow. And yet, you and I know people in this world who disobey God, who don't even believe in God.

They're not going through any pain. And yet, we know saints of God who serve God, who pray, who love the Lord, and they're going through intense suffering. Why? Because when God finished that revelation to the children and brought in the maturity of the new covenant, He said, now things have changed, folks.

Sometimes I'm going to bless you more by your suffering than by your reward. So the first response is to seek to escape suffering. Let's suppose you can't escape.

Let's suppose the doctor says there is no way to cure this. You have to live with it. Let's suppose the lawyer says there is no way to untangle this knot.

You just have to live with it. Let's suppose your wife or your husband, your son or your daughter says, look, this is the way it's going to be. Then what do you do? I know what some people do.

They get bitter against God. They say, oh God, I prayed and I sacrificed and I fasted. Oh God, I wore sackcloth.

I sat in the ashes and this is what You do to me. It's sort of a childish response, I suppose, that if we can't escape suffering, we have to get mad at somebody. And a lot of folks get angry at God.

They get bitter against God. Some people get bitter against other people. They get envious of those who aren't going through what they're going through.

And they lash out against those who may love them the most. Sometimes people give up on life. Suffering comes, difficulty comes, they can't escape it, so they say, I'm going to give up.

Let somebody else take care of me. If I'm not really sick, I'll pretend like I'm sick. But somebody else is going to have to fight these battles for me.

I give up. As a consequence, if you get bitter or hostile or you give up, you never grow. You exchange the battleground for a playground.

You become a child and somebody has to watch over you. That's no way to live. Paul said, here's response number one, you can seek to escape it.

I tried that, didn't work. Wasn't God's will. Sometimes it is God's will.

Sometimes it is the will of God to heal. Sometimes it is the will of God to untangle knots that are so tangled. Sometimes it is the will of God to change people.

But sometimes it isn't. So what is your next response? Well, the second response a person can have, if you can't escape suffering, is to endure suffering. And that's what Paul did.

Paul did what you and I would have done. He clenched his fist and he gritted his teeth and said, well, I'll put up with it. Now, this too is a normal response.

It's a very noble response. This is not the Jew in Paul, this is the Roman in Paul. Because the Roman people lived on discipline, endurance.

The great Stoic philosophers who said, learn to cooperate with the inevitable. If you cannot change it, endure it. Prove the nobility of your character by just enduring it.

Now, that is a good philosophy to a point. I've seen this even in unsaved people. I have seen some unsaved people show more strength, and more courage, and more discipline than some Christians.

There are those people who by strength of character, by some discipline of character, are able to say, I am the master of my faith. I am the captain of my soul. But what if you can't? Let's suppose someone today says, well, pastor, I'm facing a situation that's driving me up the wall.

It's not necessarily physical suffering, but there is mental pain, there is emotional anguish, there's loneliness, there's heartbreak, there's ingratitude, there's treachery. Oh, what am I going to do? I'll just endure it. But what if you can't? And some people just aren't made that way.

I heard about a young preacher who went to preach on a rescue mission. Now, when you go to preach on a rescue mission, there's only one thing you preach. Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures.

He was buried and he rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures. Don't get into anything else. But he decided to challenge these men to a better way of life, and he used Kipling's marvelous poem, If.

You've read that poem. We had to read this in high school. If you can keep your head when those about you are losing theirs, etc., etc.

And, of course, it ends up by saying, If you can this, if you do this, then you're a man, my son. And the preacher got to that dramatic place in his sermon. And if you do, you are a man, my son.

And some half-drunk fellow in the back of the mission hollered out, Yeah, but what if you can't? Now, he had more sense than the preacher. What if you can't? Each one of us is different. There are people listening to me right now who can stand pain.

I mean, God has given to you, either through your inheritance or your training, a discipline to stand pain. And if someone says to you, How are you? You say, Fine. There are others of you who can't stand to have the dandruff fall on your shoulders.

It unnerves you. You're different. So suppose you can't endure.

Suppose you can't clench your fists tightly enough and grit your teeth hard enough. Suppose you can't. Then what? How do you endure? But even if you do endure, you're spending all of your time and all of your energy and all of your mental power focused on yourself, just keeping yourself going, and you have nothing left to live with.

That's one of the sad things about the wrong use of suffering. Suffering can make a person very, very self-centered if we aren't careful. And let's suppose I'm able somehow to muster together enough courage and discipline and strength not to complain, but to endure.

I discover something. I discover that I'm using all of my energy on the inside, on myself, and I have no energy left on the outside for anybody else. So I can't be the right kind of a husband to my wife, and the right kind of a father to my children, the right kind of a friend to my friends, and the right kind of a worker to my employer.

And so I would say that even though enduring suffering is a higher level than escaping suffering, if God so wills, there must be something higher. And there is. That's what Paul discovered.

Paul discovered that suffering doesn't have to be an enemy. That suffering doesn't even have to be a master. That suffering can be a servant.

He did not escape. He did not endure. He enlisted.

He said, alright, if I have to live with this thing, it's going to work for me. I'm not going to work for it. And it's going to work for me and not against me.

Paul was praying one day, and he said, Lord, I'm having a hard time enduring. I've got letters to write. I've got churches to preach in.

I've got people to help. And God said, Paul, there's a higher way to deal with this thing. Why don't you do it my way? What is your way, Lord? Let's put suffering to work in your life.

Alright, you have a circumstance you can't change. You fight against it, it breaks you. Let's not take that approach.

You've got a person you have to live with, and that person is slowly driving you out of your mind. What are you going to do? There's something we can do, says God. Let's enlist suffering and make it work for us and not against us.

Now, how do we do this? I want to suggest to you five simple steps. Now, five seems like a large number. There's no special merit in the number five, but it just happens to work out this way.

Paul took five simple steps to turn suffering into a servant and to enlist it to build him. Friends, do you know why Paul was what he was? Not because he went to heaven. Paul was what he was because he knew how to take heaven down to earth.

You say, oh, I could do what Paul did if I'd gone to heaven. Don't kid yourself. If you and I had gone to heaven, we couldn't have kept it quiet 14 seconds, let alone 14 years.

We would have written a novel or a book about it and sold it to Reader's Digest. Paul was what he was not because he went to heaven, but because when he faced hell on earth, he knew how to take heaven with him. That's what we're talking about.

Step one, accept suffering from the hand of God. You say, wait a minute, Satan was doing it, but God was permitting it. Go over Satan's head and accept suffering from the hand of God.

Paul finally came to the place where he said, all right, Lord, I'm not going to quit. I'm not going to give up. I'm not going to argue.

I'm not going to fight. Here is this thorn in the flesh. I'm going to accept it as a gift.

You gave it to me. There was given unto me. Now, when God gives you a gift, you better take it.

We have no problem accepting the gift of salvation, the gift of His Word, the gift of His Spirit. Oh, but when it comes to the gift of character, God wants to build character, so He gives us suffering. We can't accept that gift.

A chaplain was going through a field hospital after a battle. He saw a young lad there who had lost a leg, and he knelt down and said, son, I'm sorry that you lost your leg. And the boy said, chaplain, I didn't lose my leg.

I gave it. That's the philosophy. And so Paul came to the place where he accepted this from God's hand.

He wasn't even praying about it anymore. He wasn't even praying about it. He just accepted it.

He said, all right, Lord, this is your gift. You have a purpose to fulfill. I will accept it.

That's step one. Step two, he gave it back to God. He gave it back to God.

He said, all right, now, Lord, you gave it to me. Now, I'm going to give it to you, and together we're going to work this thing out. There are those who want God to do everything.

There are times when I read certain books about victorious Christian living that make me very unvictorious because they give the impression that all you do is become a puppet. All you do is become a muppet. You just yield yourself in some bland way to God, and he does everything.

Don't you kid yourself. Paul didn't say, Christ does everything instead of me. He said, I do all things through Christ.

So Paul accepted it, step one. Paul gave it back to God, step two, and said, Lord, let's work together on this thing. That's what the psalmist meant when he said, roll thy burden on the Lord, and he shall sustain thee.

The word burden means what he's given you. Roll what he's given you back on him. Not to get rid of it, but to be able to use it.

You see, Satan wanted to use this thing as a weapon to destroy Paul, but God wanted to use it as a tool to build Paul. But the only way God could use it was if Paul would accept it and then give it back to him. Step three, rest on God's word.

He has said unto me, my grace is sufficient for thee. Where did Paul get what he needed from the word of God? Now, he said it once. He didn't say it to him 50 times.

How many times must God speak to us before we'll listen to him and believe it? The child psychologists tell us that we should tell a child something only twice. If you say, now, don't do that, and he keeps on, you assume he didn't hear you. You say, now, don't do that, if he keeps on, you assume he heard you, and you take action.

I've had people say, oh, preacher, I've been looking for promises. The whole book is full of promises. How far do you have to look? How many promises does God have to give you? God said to Paul one statement, my grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness, period.

He didn't hand him an encyclopedia. He didn't give him a correspondence course. He gave him one simple statement, and Paul said, I've got it.

You rest on the word of God. That's step three. Now, Paul didn't rest on his feelings.

Feelings change. Paul didn't rest on his circumstances. Circumstances change.

Paul didn't run around talking to the saints. The saints can lead you astray. Paul just went right to the word, and God spoke to him from the word, and he said, thank you, Lord.

You've given me a promise. Accept it from God's hand. Give it back to God and work with him.

Rest on his word for it. Draw upon his grace. My grace is sufficient.

Annie Johnson Flint wrote that marvelous text, which our choir sang today. He giveth more grace. That beautiful quotation from James chapter 4. Now, grace means you don't deserve it.

Don't bargain with God. Now, Lord, if I do this and this and this, then will you do something? That's not grace. Grace is a child bankrupt coming to a rich father saying, I'm going to depend upon your grace.

Now, there are many kinds of grace in the Bible. What Paul needed was strengthening grace. Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

They go from grace to grace. And of His fullness have all we received and grace upon grace. My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

And those needs not only include material needs but physical needs. Depend on the grace of God. Now, here's a little secret that Paul learned that some of us have never learned.

Strength that considers itself strength is weakness. But weakness that knows itself to be weakness is strength. Now, I'm going to repeat that because it went right by some of you.

Strength that considers itself strength is weakness. Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. But weakness that knows itself to be weakness is strength.

A child knows itself to be weak and the whole city turns out to help that child. Paul depended upon the grace of God. My grace is sufficient.

My grace is efficient. There's plenty of it, Paul. I don't have anything, Lord.

Fine, I do. There's plenty of it. My strength is made perfect in weakness.

Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities, my weaknesses. You see, his enemies were boasting about their strengths. Paul said, fine, I'm going to boast about my weaknesses.

I am so weak that I can't do a thing apart from God's grace. Accept it from God. Give it back to God.

Rest on His word. Draw upon His grace. But there's a fifth step now and it's very important.

Right at the end of verse 10, he says, for Christ's sake, here's step five, use it for God's glory. Now, you can use suffering to pamper yourself. We can use suffering to get attention.

We can use suffering to be important. My mother used to talk about a relative of ours who enjoyed poor health and she took advantage of it and outlived all of her relatives. Paul said, here's step five, use it for God's glory.

Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities. Now, nobody in his right mind takes pleasure in infirmities. But for Christ's sake, you do.

In reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses. Of themselves, these things are not good. But for Jesus' sake, they become gold refined in the fire.

The rumor is going around that I am in very poor health and living on medication. This is why I have resigned. The strongest medication I take is an Alka-Seltzer.

Plop, plop, fizz, fizz. But in my day, I have had to take medicine prepared by a pharmacist. You know, you go into the pharmacy and here is the well-trained man in his white coat.

And you hand him the prescription written by a well-trained doctor. And he looks at the prescription and he says, oh yeah, I understand this. You didn't, but he can.

You know, my friend, the individual ingredients in that prescription, if you took them individually, could kill you. But when they're mixed together in their proper proportions, they heal you. Now, our Lord is the pharmacist.

He said, I know what you're going through. That thing by itself would break you. But let me get in there and mix things the way they ought to be.

And it won't break you, it will make you. That's the meaning of Romans 8, 28. And we know that all things are working together for good.

Our heavenly pharmacist, our great physician, knows that individually these things would kill us. But he's able to blend them together and then add to it his own ingredient of grace. And instead of breaking us, it makes us.

Instead of making us bitter, we have love. Instead of getting selfish, we seek to glorify His name. Instead of magnifying our infirmities for our pampering, we magnify our infirmities for His power.

That's what happens when you enlist suffering. Accept it. It's God's gift.

Give it back to Him. And say, Lord, let's work this out together. Rest upon His word, not your feelings.

Draw upon His grace, which is sufficient. And then live for His glory. You say, well, all that sounds rather magical and mystical.

Does it work? Yes, it works. It worked for Paul. And you and I would not be reading 2 Corinthians chapter 12 if Paul had not known that it worked.

But you know what makes it work? This is the best part of the message. Satan said, God, I want to get Paul. He's been to heaven.

I want to get him. See, Satan has access to heaven. God says, all right, Satan, you can give him a thorn in the flesh, but you can't take his life.

Satan gets his best thorn. I don't know what it was. He goes after Paul, buffeting him.

Black and blue, buffeting Paul. Not just one hour a week. Day after day and week after week, Paul is going through buffeting.

A thorn, a thorn. God had a roll call one day and Satan showed up and God said, have you considered my servant, Paul? You've been beating on him now for quite some time. How's it going, Satan? Can I take the thorn away? Why do you want to do that? I didn't think it would end up like this.

He's a better Christian today than he was when I started. Let me take the thorn away. No, keep the thorn.

Keep the thorn. Now what made it that way? I'll tell you what made it that way. How is it that God is able to take thorns? Thorns on which we are impaled.

Thorns that the messenger of Satan takes like some hellish brass knuckles and beats upon us. How can God do that? Ah, because one day his son took some thorns and he made a crown out of them. He made a crown out of them.

And he accepted that crown on his brow. And he took that crown to a cross. And on that cross, he died for Paul, and he died for you, and he died for me.

And from that day on, God has said, don't ever be afraid of thorns. My son takes thorns and builds crowns out of them. And he takes crosses and turns them into glory.

That's why it's great to be a Christian. Even if there is nothing on the other side, and there is, but even if there is not, I would rather be a Christian and be able to walk with the Lord and go through the trials and difficulties of life and make crowns out of them than to be a victim. What shall we do with our suffering? Escape it? If it's God's will, give Him thanks.

But it may not be. Endure it? It may wear you out. Enlist it.

Don't let suffering be an enemy or a master. Let suffering be a servant. And listen to God as He says to you from Calvary, My grace, My grace, not your grit, My grace, is sufficient for you.

A moment at a time, an hour at a time, a day at a time, My grace is sufficient for you. If you've experienced His saving grace, then you can draw upon His suffering grace, His sustaining grace, His sanctifying grace for His glory. Thank you, Father.

Thank you so very much that your grace is available to us from Calvary. Thank you that thorns can be made into crowns, that we can conquer. Yea, we can be more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

Now, we have our sufferings, Lord. Some of them are minor. Some of them are very, very difficult.

We're going to come to you, Father. And we're going to ask you to help us to enlist our suffering to work for us and not against us. I pray for the one here today who just needs this word of encouragement.

Speak to that heart. Bring to bear upon that heart your words to Paul, My grace is sufficient. Help that lost sinner to come and find saving grace.

And grant, oh God, that we shall not be whimpering victims, but rather we shall be victories bringing glory to your name even by the way we suffer. For I pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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