

Stuck - Part 3 01.30.11
2 Corinthians 12:7-10 ESV

Introduction: The last couple of weeks we've been looking at the topic of being stuck. You know what I mean... some circumstance has you stuck - can't move forward, can't move back. Two weeks ago we learned that if you find yourself stuck, you're not alone. You're not the first and you'll not be the last. The key point we learned is that God keeps us. Last week we learned that it's possible that when you feel stuck, you're not really stuck. Like the couple stuck on the escalator, you have options. We learned 7 things to remember when you feel stuck to find out if you're really stuck or not.

But what if you're really stuck? This isn't imaginary. You have a real "stuck" situation. And, sadly, you've figured out this isn't a temporary condition. You are stuck and will be stuck for the rest of your life. Your health is on the permanent downhill slide. You've lost the one love of your life. The dream you've held all your life is permanently, irrevocably ripped away from you never to return. What do you do then?

I. Stuck is an integral part of the **CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE**.
"... a thorn was given me in the flesh, ..." 2 Corinthians 12:7b ESV

We don't know what Paul's "thorn in his flesh" was. It was probably a physical condition. It robbed him of the simple ability to move through life and do the things he had been accustomed to doing. It also might have been a reference to his theological enemies. Whatever it was, he was stuck with it. He pleaded 3x for it to be removed, but it wasn't. The fact is that stuck - suffering, troubles, tribulation - all are part and parcel of the Christian life. Christianity is not the philosophy for a life without pain, not a sure path to success.

Jesus told his disciples that he himself must "suffer many things."
Matthew 16:21, Mark 8:31, Mark 9:12, Luke 9:22, Luke 17:25

Paul: "We also have joy with our troubles, because we know that these troubles produce patience." Romans 5:3 NCV

Peter: "If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." 1 Peter 4:16 NIV

What I'd like to do today is #1 explain WHY stuck is part of the Christian life, #2 explain HOW we manage our very real stuckness, and #3- WHAT, give you 4 steps for dealing with your stuck situation.

Reason #1: To counteract **ARROGANCE**.
2X - "to keep me from becoming conceited."
2 Corinthians 12:7 ESV

Translators struggle with this word, conceited. In my earlier ESV translation, "too elated." We might say: keep me from being too full of myself! Here's how other translations put it:

GNT: "to keep me from being *puffed up with pride*."
NET: "so I would not become *arrogant*."
HCSB: "so I would not *exalt myself*."
MSG: "so I wouldn't *get a big head*."

This is a big deal for us as Christians. To get some idea of just how much God hates our own arrogance you should study the only other place this word is used: 2 Thess. 2:4. We should never put ourselves in God's seat, in His place. But when things always go our way, the natural human tendency is to forget about God and become gods in our own eyes. Stuck counteracts this. It's tough to think of yourself as the center of the universe, when you're stuck.

Reason #2: As part of a **_____ SPIRITUAL ATTACK _____**.

“... a messenger of Satan to harass me, ...” 2 Corinthians 12:7c ESV

We don't like to think about it, but we have a very real spiritual enemy. Sometimes our stuck circumstance is a direct result of Satan's attack. Look at the word Paul uses, “harass”...

κολαφίζω **kolaphízō** – **to strike with closed fist; to buffet;** this is harsh. Not subtle sometimes. Satan hates you because of Christ and wants to hurt you. Also note that the form of this verb is **continuous**; Satan hits you and keeps on hitting you! *Anyone who doubts this reality has only to read the book of Job...*

“Satan left God and struck Job with terrible sores.” Job 2:7 MSG

Reason #3: To redirect **_____ MY DEPENDENCE UPON CHRIST _____**.

“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.”
2 Corinthians 12:8 NIV

We'll talk more about this in a moment, but even in Paul's case - the super disciple who one would think was in continuous connection with Christ - his “thorn in his side” caused him to turn to the Lord. 3x.

Today I don't want the majority of our time to be spent talking about the reality or the “why” of being stuck. What should we do about it? Let's look at the “how” and then the steps we take...

II. How - A Christian Paradox: I'm stuck and yet **_____ NOT STUCK _____**.

As a Christ-follower, I should know that the Christian faith is filled with paradoxes, some theological and some pragmatic. Here's a pragmatic paradox - as a Christian it's possible that I'm stuck on the outside in my physical reality - but I never have to be stuck on the inside, in my spiritual reality.

When I'm stuck I'm in the perfect place to recognize 2 freeing truths:

Truth #1: Jesus' grace is **_____ SUFFICIENT _____** for me.

“My grace is sufficient for you...” 2 Corinthians 12:9a ESV

Paul writes this in conversational terms. “He said to me...” Most of your Bibles interpret this as direct words from Jesus, and as a result, put the words in red. When you are stuck you are in the position to hear directly from Jesus: “My grace is sufficient for you.” It's enough to carry you. Seems to me this has 2 meanings, one of a futuristic kind and a second of a present tense time. #1 - Jesus' grace (God's riches at Christ's expense) fully paid the price for your sins. You may be stuck now, but because of God's rich and unmerited favor, you will not always be stuck. Heaven awaits. Jesus' grace is indeed sufficient.

I believe there is an important present-tense meaning to Jesus' grace being sufficient. His grace is more than just a future ticket to paradise. It's also enough to help you handle whatever stuck situation you find yourself in. Jesus' love is a very real salve for any pain. His grace is that you will experience His love NOW!

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 12:38-39 NIV

Truth #2: Jesus' **POWER** is made perfect in my **WEAKNESS**.
“... for my power is made perfect in weakness... so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” 2 Cor. 12:9b,d ESV

Let's be transparent. None of us voluntarily give up our own power to do things. If we have a choice in the matter, we like to be strong. We want to keep power. We'd rather do something without help. Jesus says, though, that His power is made perfect - meaning fully mature, fully capable, 100% - in our own weakness. The word Paul uses to describe Christ's power “resting” upon us is instructive:

ἐπισκηνώω **episkēnōō** – **to tent upon, to dwell, to reside upon, to abide.** Illustration - Have you ever tried to pitch a tent when the conditions were rough? We like to think of a calm, protected, soft spot on a clear night. What if it's raining, wind blowing, cold freezing? This is what it's like when Jesus tries to lay his power down upon us, but we continue to fight with our own strength.

This is the same word John used to describe Jesus coming to us in 1:14, that he “dwelt” among us. Jesus wants to still dwell upon you and me, but we can make it more difficult with our own strength. When we're stuck, Jesus' power is much more obvious!

III. What do I “do” when I'm really stuck?

1. At first I **PRAY REPEATEDLY**.
“Three times...” 2 Corinthians 12:8 ESV

Paul says he went to the Lord three times, meaning on three different occasions. It's important that we pray continuously until we feel we have received an answer. Even Paul prayed repeatedly

2. There comes a point when I **STOP PRAYING**.
“... I pleaded...” 2 Corinthians 12:8 ESV

However, there does come a point where we stop praying and begin applying Jesus' grace and power. Note the word, “pleaded.” In our English, we would call the form of this word, past tense - meaning it happened in the past. The Greeks had another special form of past tense; they called it Aorist. This meant not only past, but also finished, once, complete.

So this means that Paul pleaded... in fact he did it three different times. But he came to a point where he stopped pleading. His pleading changed to accepting and eventually into boasting!

3. I begin to **BOAST** of my stuck position.
“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses.”
2 Corinthians 12:9c ESV

His boasting is indicative, meaning continuous - over and over again, and future tense - meaning he will keep on boasting. Not in himself or in his accomplishments - his visions or his suffering for Christ (see context of chapters 10 and 11), but in Christ!

In same way we change the FEELING of our stuck position when we boast of Christ and His grace and His power in our lives when we are stuck. “Yeah, I’m stuck. But only on the outside. On the inside, let me tell you about Jesus!” *What this does for us is ultimately...*

4. I **CHANGE MY FOCUS** from stuck to Christ.

The ESV, Paul says, “I am content.” NIV: “I delight in weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, difficulties.” Honestly, without context, one would wonder if Paul isn’t just a bit off. Or if Christianity is about self-flagellation. Are we really supposed to delight in hardships? We don’t seek it out. But we recognize that it is a part of the Christian life AND that Christ is sufficient.

Eugene Peterson expresses the right idea here in The Message:
“*I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ’s strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitation that cut me down to size - abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks, I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.*”
2 Corinthians 12:9b-10 MSG

Two sides to this equation: quit focusing on stuck / begin appreciating gift. Everybody in life gets stuck at one point or another. But only Christians have the gift of Christ with His love, His grace, and His power. Only Christians have Christ to “take over” when the going gets really tough. Only Christians can fully realize that “the weaker I get, the stronger I become!”

Conclusion: Anyone here admit tonight that you are REALLY stuck? Not just imagination. Not just temporary. But a stuck that just won’t go away. You’re not alone. You’re not the first and you won’t be the last. And yes, God keeps you. Even more than that Christ wants you to experience His sufficient grace and His power made perfect in weakness.

Can you come to the place where you boast in your weakness? Are you finished putting up false fronts, of appearing as if you have everything put together. You may think you’re fooling other people. You may even think you’re fooling God. The only person you’re really fooling is yourself. Jesus wants to plant his tent of peace upon your life. Don’t make His job more difficult. Accept your weakness. Revel in your weakness. Brag about Christ’s strength... and in the process you’ll begin to experience what it’s like to be stuck on the outside, but free on the inside. **Let’s pray.**