

The Book of 2 Corinthians

Lesson 12: Strength Made Perfect in Weakness -- 2 Corinthians 12:1-21

Paul had been to heaven and back. He tells us, almost reluctantly, of a man (himself) who fourteen years earlier was “caught up to the third heaven,” into paradise, where he “heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.” If anyone ever had a spiritual experience worth bragging about, it was this. And yet Paul almost refuses to talk about it. He will not build his ministry on his mountaintop moments. In fact, the heart of this chapter is not the trip to paradise at all. It is what God did to keep Paul from being puffed up by it: “So that I would not become conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh.”

We do not know exactly what the thorn was. Paul calls it “a messenger of Satan to harass me.” It may have been a physical affliction, a chronic pain or illness, a disability, the lingering damage of his beatings. Whatever it was, it hurt, it humbled him, and he wanted it gone. So he did what any of us would do. He prayed. “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.” Here is the great apostle, who had healed others and even raised the dead, on his knees begging God to take away his pain. And the God who could have removed it with a word said no.

But God did not leave Paul with a bare no. He gave him something better than the thing he asked for. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” God would not remove the thorn, but He would supply grace enough to bear it, and through that very weakness His power would shine more brightly than it ever could through Paul’s strength. This is one of the most important things the Bible ever says to suffering people. Sometimes God’s answer to our deepest prayer is not the removal of the trial but the gift of sufficient grace within it, and a strength made perfect precisely in our weakness.

This stands flatly against the false promise, so loud in our day, that faithful Christians can claim health, wealth, and an escape from every hardship if they only believe enough. Paul believed as much as any man who ever lived, and God left the thorn in place. The cross-shaped life is not a life without thorns; it is a life in which the grace of Christ proves sufficient through them. And so Paul arrives at a conclusion that turns all our instincts upside down: “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me... For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Read this chapter the next time you are begging God to remove a thorn He has not removed, and let Him teach you the sufficiency of His grace.

Group Discussion: Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to remove his thorn, and the answer was, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (vv. 8-9). Why is it so hard to accept that God sometimes answers our prayers not by removing the hardship but

by giving grace to bear it? How does this truth confront the popular teaching that faithful Christians should expect health, wealth, and freedom from suffering?

Personal Reflection: Paul learned to say, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (v. 9). Is there a weakness, limitation, or “thorn” in your life that you have only ever resented and asked God to remove? What would it look like to begin to see it as a place where the power of Christ could rest upon you?

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1–21

Study Questions

1. Paul recounts being “caught up to the third heaven” and hearing “things that cannot be told,” yet he refuses to boast in it, choosing instead to boast in his weaknesses (vv. 1–6). What does it teach that Paul will not build his ministry or identity on his most extraordinary spiritual experiences, and what does this say about the place of such experiences in the Christian life?
2. Do you tend to crave dramatic spiritual experiences or mountaintop feelings as the measure of your walk with God, and to feel let down by the ordinary, faithful, day-to-day life of discipleship? How might Paul’s example reorder what you expect and value in your relationship with God?
3. Paul says the thorn was given “to keep me from becoming conceited,” even though he calls it “a messenger of Satan” (v. 7). What does this teach about how God can use even painful, unwanted things, and even the schemes of the enemy, to accomplish good purposes in His people?
4. What “thorn” has God allowed to remain in your life despite your prayers, a chronic struggle, a limitation, a painful circumstance? Is it possible that God is using it to humble you or to form something in you that comfort never could?
5. Paul “pleaded with the Lord three times” that the thorn would leave him, and God did not remove it (v. 8). What does this teach about persistent prayer and about the fact that God sometimes lovingly answers our earnest prayers with a no, or with something other than what we asked?
6. How do you typically respond when God does not answer a heartfelt prayer the way you hoped, with anger, withdrawal, doubt, or quiet trust? What would it look like to keep trusting God’s goodness even when His answer is not the one you wanted?
7. Paul defends his apostleship not by impressive claims but by his selfless love, refusing to burden the church and gladly spending himself for them, even saying he will “be spent for your souls” though loved less in return (vv. 11–18). What does this teach about the kind of love that marks a true servant of Christ?
8. Where are you tempted to give love only in proportion to what you receive back? What would it look like to love someone the way Paul loved the Corinthians, generously and sacrificially, even when it is not returned?

9. When Paul pleaded for the thorn's removal, the Lord answered, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness," leading Paul to be "content with weaknesses... For when I am weak, then I am strong" (vv. 9-10). What does it mean that God's grace is sufficient and His power is perfected in our weakness, why does God sometimes leave the thorn in place rather than remove it, and how does this truth expose the falsehood of health-and-wealth teaching that promises faithful believers escape from all suffering?
10. Look back across the whole chapter, the refusal to boast in experiences, the thorn that remained, the unanswered prayer, the sufficient grace, the strength in weakness. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this passage, and what is your first step toward that change this week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Philippians 4:11-13, learning contentment and strength through Christ in every circumstance; Romans 5:3-5, suffering producing endurance, character, and hope; James 1:2-4, trials that make us complete and lacking in nothing; 1 Peter 4:12-13, sharing in Christ's sufferings rather than being surprised by them; Hebrews 12:7-11, the loving discipline of a Father that yields the fruit of righteousness