

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: Hard Pressed but Not Crushed: Labor, Suffering, and Sufficient Grace

2 Corinthians 11:23–33; 12:7–10

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson turns from the narrative of Acts to Paul's own words in 2 Corinthians, written around A.D. 56, to look honestly at the cost of his ministry and the grace that sustained him. The historical setting is a conflict in Corinth, where polished rival teachers, whom Paul sarcastically calls 'super-apostles,' boasted of their credentials and belittled Paul. Forced to 'boast,' Paul does the opposite of what they expect: he catalogs not his triumphs but his sufferings, then tells of a 'thorn in the flesh' God refused to remove, answering instead, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'

The doctrinal themes here are vital and pastorally rich. Suffering is normal, not abnormal, for the faithful servant of Christ; it is not evidence of sin or failed faith. God is sovereign even over our afflictions, able to use what Satan intends for harm for our good and His glory. His grace is sufficient, and His power is perfected in our weakness, which overturns the world's measures of strength and success. The heaviest doctrinal block (Question 9) uses Paul's 'strength in weakness' to confront the prosperity or health-and-wealth teaching directly, setting out what the New Testament actually promises believers about suffering and sustaining grace.

This lesson aims deeply at the heart, because every student is either in a season of suffering, coming out of one, or heading into one. Many carry a quiet, unspoken theology that faithfulness should be rewarded with comfort, and they are wounded and confused when it is not. Help them brace honestly for the cost of following Christ, embrace rather than hide their weaknesses, and trust God's sufficient grace where He has said 'no' to their prayers. Hold up Paul not as a superhuman but as a real, scarred, praying man who found Christ's power in his weakness. Send students home strengthened, not by the promise of an easy life, but by the promise of sufficient grace.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul lists an astonishing catalog of sufferings, beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, dangers, hunger, and the daily pressure of his concern for the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23–28). What does this list teach us about the true cost of faithful service to Christ, and why is suffering not a sign that something has gone wrong in a believer's life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Read the catalog slowly with the class; its sheer length is the point. This was not one hard season but a lifetime of accumulated suffering, physical, emotional, and spiritual. The man who wrote ‘rejoice in the Lord always’ was beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, hungry, and sleepless, and carried the daily weight of anxiety for the churches. Faithfulness cost Paul everything.

Correct a common assumption. Many believers half-expect that walking with God should smooth the road, and they conclude, when it does not, that they have failed or that God is displeased. Paul’s list demolishes that idea. His sufferings were not punishment for unfaithfulness; they were the result of his faithfulness. The most devoted servant in the New Testament suffered the most.

Set this in the wider teaching of Scripture. Jesus promised, “in the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33), and Paul taught that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). Suffering is woven into the normal Christian life, not an exception to it. This is sober but freeing; it means hardship does not signal that God has abandoned us.

Note the last item on the list: ‘the daily pressure of my anxiety for all the churches.’ Not all of Paul’s suffering was dramatic; much of it was the daily, hidden weight of caring for people. Help students honor the quiet, ongoing burdens of faithfulness, which can be heavier than the visible trials.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Suffering as a normal part of faithful service, not a sign of failure (John 16:33)
- All who live godly in Christ will face persecution (2 Timothy 3:12)
- Correcting the assumption that faithfulness should bring an easy life
- Honoring the hidden, daily burdens of caring for others

Discussion Prompts

- What does the length of Paul’s list tell us about the cost of faithfulness?
- Why is suffering not proof that something has gone wrong?
- Which of Paul’s burdens surprises you most, and why?

Question 2

Student Question:

We often quietly expect that following Christ should make life smoother and easier. What have you actually risked or suffered for the sake of Christ, and has your picture of the Christian life left room for hardship, or have you assumed faithfulness should be rewarded with comfort?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question surfaces the comfortable assumptions many of us carry. In a prosperous culture, it is easy to absorb the idea that a good life with God should be a smooth one, and to feel secretly cheated when it is not. Paul's example confronts that expectation head-on.

Invite honest reflection on cost. Some students have genuinely risked or suffered for Christ, a strained relationship, a lost opportunity, ridicule, real hardship. Others may realize their faith has cost them very little, which can be its own kind of wake-up call. Neither observation is meant to shame, but to align expectations with reality.

Move toward a sturdier faith. A faith that expects only comfort will collapse when suffering comes; a faith that expects to share in Christ's sufferings (Philippians 3:10) can stand. Encourage each student to examine and, if needed, revise their picture of the Christian life, so that hardship deepens their faith rather than shattering it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Examining the cultural assumption that faith should bring ease
- Counting the real cost of following Christ (Luke 14:28)
- A faith sturdy enough to expect hardship
- Sharing in Christ's sufferings as part of knowing Him (Philippians 3:10)

Discussion Prompts

- What has following Christ actually cost you?
- Does your picture of the Christian life leave room for suffering?
- How can you build a faith that hardship deepens rather than shatters?

Question 3

Student Question:

Rather than parading his credentials like the 'super-apostles' in Corinth, Paul said, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (2 Corinthians 11:30). Why does Paul deliberately boast in weakness instead of strength, and how does this overturn the world's, and the church's, usual measures of greatness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the scene: Paul's rivals boasted of their eloquence, credentials, and successes, and the Corinthians were impressed. Paul refuses to play that game. If he must boast, he will boast of weakness, of the things that prove he is not impressive, so that any power evident in his ministry is plainly God's and not his own.

Explain the deep logic. Boasting in strength draws attention and credit to ourselves; boasting in weakness directs it to God. Paul wants the Corinthians to see that the fruit of his ministry came not from his abilities but from God's power working through a weak vessel. This is the principle of 'treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God' (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Show how this overturns our measures of greatness. The world prizes the strong, the impressive, the self-sufficient; the gospel exalts the humble and works through the weak. God 'chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong' (1 Corinthians 1:27). Even the church can fall into worldly admiration of the gifted and successful while overlooking this central truth.

Apply it to honesty before God and others. Boasting in weakness means we stop performing and pretending, and let God's strength be displayed in our acknowledged need. This is not self-pity or false modesty; it is the freedom of people who no longer have to appear strong because their confidence is in God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Boasting in weakness directs glory to God, not self (2 Corinthians 4:7)
- God's power displayed through weak vessels
- God choosing the weak to shame the strong (1 Corinthians 1:27)
- The gospel's reversal of the world's measures of greatness

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul boast in weakness rather than strength?
- How does this overturn the way we usually measure greatness?
- How can the church fall into the world's admiration of strength?

Question 4

Student Question:

We are trained to project strength, competence, and having it all together. Where are you most tempted to boast in your strengths or hide your weaknesses, even before God? What would it look like to stop pretending and let God's strength show up in your acknowledged weakness?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses Paul's boasting in weakness into the student's daily posture. We curate impressive images of ourselves, on social media, at church, even in prayer, reluctant to admit need. The fear of being seen as weak keeps us performing and exhausted.

Help students locate their pretending. Where do they most need to appear strong, capable, spiritual, in control? Often it is precisely there that God's power is blocked, because we are

relying on our own. Acknowledged weakness is the doorway through which Christ's strength enters.

Move toward authenticity. Invite each student to name one area where they will stop pretending, before God and perhaps before a trusted believer, and to ask God to show His strength in that very weakness. This may mean confessing a struggle, asking for help, or simply being honest in prayer about their need.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The exhausting work of projecting strength and hiding weakness
- Acknowledged weakness as the doorway to Christ's power
- Authenticity before God and trusted believers (James 5:16)
- Dependence rather than self-reliance

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to hide your weakness?
- What does pretending to be strong cost you?
- Where could you let God's strength show up in your weakness?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says the thorn was given "to keep me from becoming conceited," and he calls it both "a messenger of Satan" and something given by God's purpose (2 Corinthians 12:7). How can the same affliction be a tool of Satan to harass and yet be used by God for Paul's good, and what does this teach about God's sovereignty over our suffering?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Hold both descriptions together, because Paul does. The thorn is 'a messenger of Satan to harass me,' yet it was 'given' (a divine passive) 'to keep me from becoming conceited.' Satan meant it for harm; God meant it for Paul's humility and good. The same affliction served two opposite purposes under two very different hands.

This is the pattern of God's sovereignty over evil throughout Scripture. Joseph told his brothers, "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Satan afflicted Job only within the bounds God set. The cross itself was the worst evil ever done and the greatest good ever accomplished. God does not author evil, but He sovereignly rules and overrules it for the good of His people (Romans 8:28).

Draw out the comfort and the caution. The comfort is that no affliction is outside God's control or beyond His power to use; even what the enemy intends to destroy us, God can bend toward

our good. The caution is that this does not make suffering itself good or call us to pretend it does not hurt; Paul still begged for relief. We can hate the thorn and still trust the God who allows it.

Apply it to the student's suffering. We rarely know in the moment what God is doing, but we can trust His character and His sovereignty. Paul could later see at least one purpose: the thorn guarded him from pride. Encourage students to trust that God is at work even when His purposes are hidden.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's sovereignty over suffering, ruling even what Satan intends (Job 1–2)
- What is meant for evil, God can mean for good (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28)
- God does not author evil but overrules it for His people's good
- Trusting God's character when His purposes are hidden

Discussion Prompts

- How can one affliction serve both Satan's aim and God's purpose?
- What does this teach about God's sovereignty over suffering?
- How do we hate the thorn yet trust the God who allows it?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul's thorn was a source of ongoing pain that God chose to use rather than remove. What is the 'thorn' in your own life right now, an illness, a limitation, a difficult relationship, a loss? Are you mostly fighting it in frustration, or beginning to ask what God might be doing through it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites students to name their own thorn. God left Paul's affliction vague, perhaps so that every sufferer could find themselves in his story. Help students identify the persistent, unwanted hardship they would most want removed, the chronic pain, the limitation, the relationship, the grief that will not lift.

Acknowledge the legitimacy of the struggle. Paul prayed three times for relief; wanting the thorn gone is not faithlessness. The question is not whether we wish it removed, but whether, in the meantime, we are open to what God might be doing through it. Frustration and trust can coexist, but trust must grow.

Move from fighting to asking. Without minimizing the pain, encourage each student to begin asking God what He might be forming in them through the thorn, humility, dependence,

compassion, hope, and to receive His grace in it even as they continue to bring their request to Him. The shift from 'why me?' to 'what now, Lord?' is itself a work of grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming our own persistent affliction honestly
- Wanting relief is not faithlessness (Paul prayed three times)
- Openness to God's formative purposes in suffering
- Moving from frustration toward trust and inquiry

Discussion Prompts

- What is the thorn you would most want God to remove?
- Are you mainly fighting it or asking what God is doing?
- What might God be forming in you through it?

Question 7

Student Question:

To Paul's repeated prayer, the Lord answered, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). What does it mean that God's grace is 'sufficient,' and why might His refusal to remove the thorn actually be a deeper answer than the healing Paul requested?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Define 'sufficient.' It means enough, fully adequate, lacking nothing for the need at hand. God did not promise to remove the difficulty; He promised that His grace would be enough to carry Paul through it. This is a different and deeper provision than relief: not the absence of the burden, but the presence and power of God within it.

Show why this is a greater answer. Had God simply removed the thorn, Paul would have had relief but not the lesson, comfort but not the deeper experience of Christ's power resting on him. By saying 'no' to the request and 'yes' to sufficient grace, God gave Paul something better than healing: a profound, lived knowledge of divine strength in human weakness. God's 'no' was in the service of a greater 'yes.'

Guard the balance. This does not mean God never heals or never removes our trials; He often does, and we should keep asking. But when He does not, His grace is not a consolation prize; it is the very thing we most need. The sufficiency of grace means we are never left without enough of God to face whatever He allows.

Apply it to the present tense, 'is sufficient.' Grace is not a stockpile for the future but a present, moment-by-moment supply. As students face their thorns, encourage them to draw on grace today, trusting that it will be there tomorrow, fresh, like the manna that came each morning.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The meaning of sufficient grace: enough of God for every need
- God's presence and power in trial as deeper than mere relief
- God's 'no' in service of a greater 'yes'
- Grace as a present, moment-by-moment supply (Lamentations 3:22–23)

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God's grace is 'sufficient'?
- Why might God's 'no' be a deeper answer than healing?
- How do you draw on grace for today rather than worry about tomorrow?

Question 8

Student Question:

Think of a prayer God has answered with 'no' or 'not yet.' How did you respond, with resentment, confusion, or trust? How does Paul's experience reshape the way you think about unanswered prayer and the goodness of God when He does not give what you ask?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question addresses one of the most common sources of spiritual pain: the prayer God does not grant. Many believers quietly nurse disappointment or doubt because God did not heal, restore, or rescue when they begged Him to. Paul's thorn gives a framework for that experience.

Help students see that unanswered prayer is not unheard prayer or unloving refusal. God heard Paul, answered Paul, and loved Paul, and still did not remove the thorn. A loving Father sometimes withholds what we ask because He is giving something better, even when we cannot yet see it. 'No' from a good God is itself an act of love.

Move toward trust without pretense. Encourage students to be honest with God about their disappointment, as the psalmists were, while choosing to trust His goodness and wisdom. The goal is not to stop asking, but to rest in the One who answers, confident that His sufficient grace will meet them even in the 'no.'

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Unanswered prayer as heard, loving, and purposeful, not neglect
- God's wisdom in withholding what we ask for our greater good
- Honest lament joined with trust in God's goodness (Psalm 13)

- Continuing to ask while resting in the One who answers

Discussion Prompts

- How did you respond when God said 'no' or 'not yet'?
- How does Paul's thorn reshape your view of unanswered prayer?
- How can you be honest about disappointment yet trust God's goodness?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul concludes, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10). How does this 'strength in weakness' confront the popular teaching that faith should bring health, wealth, and an easy life, and what does the New Testament actually promise believers about suffering and the sufficiency of God's grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it speaks directly to a widespread error. Some teach that strong faith should produce health, prosperity, and a trouble-free life, and that sickness, poverty, or suffering reveal a lack of faith. Paul's words shatter that teaching at its root. Here is the greatest apostle, full of faith, who suffered constantly and carried a thorn God would not remove. If anyone's faith could have guaranteed health and ease, it was Paul's, and it did not.

Let the text reframe success. Paul does not merely endure his weaknesses; he is 'content' with them and even 'boasts' in them, 'so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.' The prosperity gospel measures blessing by comfort and possessions; Paul measures it by the power and presence of Christ, which he found most fully in his weakness. 'When I am weak, then I am strong' is the exact opposite of health-and-wealth thinking.

Set out what the New Testament actually promises. Not an easy life, but a sufficient grace (2 Corinthians 12:9). Not freedom from trials, but God's presence in them and good worked through them (Romans 8:28). Not escape from suffering, but that our 'light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory' (2 Corinthians 4:17). The promises are real and precious, but they are not promises of comfort; they are promises of grace, growth, and glory.

Name the pastoral damage of the false teaching, gently but clearly. The prosperity gospel heaps guilt on the sick and the poor, telling them their suffering proves weak faith, and it sets people up for a crisis when the promised health and wealth do not come. The truth is kinder and sturdier: faithful people suffer, God's grace is sufficient, and His power shines through weakness. This protects students from both false guilt and shattered faith.

End with the strange arithmetic of grace. In God's economy, weakness embraced becomes the place of strength, because it is the place where we stop relying on ourselves and lean wholly on Christ. Help students see suffering not as evidence of God's absence but as an occasion for His power to rest on them. This is the secret that turned a catalog of scars into a song of contentment.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The rejection of the prosperity, health-and-wealth gospel (Paul's faith did not bring ease)
- Suffering is not proof of weak faith or God's displeasure
- God promises sufficient grace, not a trouble-free life (2 Corinthians 12:9)
- Affliction working an eternal weight of glory (2 Corinthians 4:17)
- Contentment and Christ's power found in embraced weakness
- Protection from the false guilt the prosperity gospel heaps on sufferers

Discussion Prompts

- How does Paul's thorn refute the prosperity gospel?
- What does the New Testament actually promise about suffering?
- How can weakness become the very place of strength?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over Paul's scars, his thorn, and the grace that proved sufficient. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using this passage to form you, whether to brace you for the cost of faithfulness, to help you embrace a weakness, or to trust His grace in a place where He has said 'no' to your prayer.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson's threads: the cost of faithfulness, the strength found in weakness, God's sovereignty over suffering, and the sufficiency of His grace. Ask students to name one concrete way the Lord has met them rather than offering a general reflection.

Offer the three doors. Some need to brace honestly for the cost of following Christ, revising a faith that expected only comfort. Some need to embrace and stop hiding a particular weakness, letting Christ's power rest on them. Some need to trust God's sufficient grace in a place where He has said 'no.'

Close with hope. Paul's suffering was real, and so was the grace that carried him, enough to turn scars into boasting and a thorn into a throne for the power of Christ. The same sufficient grace is promised to your students. Send them home not with the false promise of an easy life, but with the truer comfort of a grace that is always enough.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Bracing for the cost of faithful discipleship
- Embracing weakness as the place of Christ's power
- Trusting God's sufficient grace in unanswered prayer
- Contentment grounded in the presence of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Which door does this passage open for you?
- What weakness or thorn is God asking you to entrust to Him?
- Where do you most need to believe that His grace is enough?