

Faith Under Fire, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: Paul's Thorn: Grace Sufficient

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson handles one of the most pastorally important passages on unanswered prayer and chronic suffering, and it carries a significant doctrinal guardrail. Paul, an apostle who healed others, prayed three times for his own thorn to be removed and received God's no, along with the promise of sufficient grace. Your central aim is to use this passage to dismantle the teaching that enough faith will always secure healing or relief, and to comfort believers whose thorns have not been removed. Make no claim of miraculous healing on demand or of present-day sign gifts; the comfort Paul receives is grace to bear the thorn and the power of Christ resting on his weakness, not the thorn's removal. This is consistent with the church of Christ conviction that the age of miraculous sign gifts has served its purpose and that our hope rests on God's Word and the resurrection, not on guaranteed present healing.

A second guardrail concerns the mystery that the thorn is both "a messenger of Satan" and something "given" for God's good purpose. Teach this so as to hold two truths together: God is sovereign and works good purposes even through the thorn, yet God is not the author of the evil that harasses Paul. This guards against both blaming God for evil and denying His purposeful sovereignty, the same balance struck in Lessons 3 and 5. God can sovereignly use even the enemy's harassment to humble and strengthen His servant without being the doer of evil. Keep God's providence fully consistent with earnest prayer and human responsibility; Paul prays hard, and God's answer engages rather than bypasses that prayer.

Formationally, this lesson aims to reorient your students' relationship with their own weakness. The world, and our flesh, treats weakness as something to hide and strength as something to project. Paul, having met the God whose power is perfected in weakness, learns to boast gladly in his weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on him. Aim to send your students home able to bring their unremoved thorns to God, to receive His sufficient grace, and to discover that the place of their weakness is precisely where the power of Christ is most fully revealed.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says the thorn was given "to keep me from becoming conceited" because of the surpassing greatness of his revelations (v. 7). What does it reveal about God's priorities that He would allow a painful, lasting affliction to guard Paul from pride, and what does this teach about the good purposes God may have in suffering He does not remove?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the startling purpose Paul names: the thorn was given “to keep me from becoming conceited” because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations he had received. God’s priority, in this case, was Paul’s humility over Paul’s comfort.

Let students feel the weight of that priority. We instinctively assume God’s first concern is to make us comfortable; Paul’s thorn reveals that God’s deeper concern is our character, our humility, our dependence. He allowed a lasting pain because pride is more dangerous to the soul than a thorn is to the flesh.

This teaches that God may have good purposes in suffering He does not remove. The thorn was not a malfunction or an oversight; it was, in part, a safeguard. What looked like an affliction to be escaped was also a mercy guarding Paul from a worse danger, the conceit that spiritual privilege can breed.

Apply this carefully. We should not presume to diagnose the precise purpose of every trial; Paul knew his because God revealed it. But we can trust that God is capable of weaving good purposes, including the guarding of our humility, into sufferings He chooses not to lift. The unremoved thorn may be doing unseen good.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The thorn was given to guard Paul from conceit (2 Corinthians 12:7)
- God’s priority can be our humility and character over our comfort
- God may have good purposes in suffering He does not remove
- Pride is more dangerous to the soul than a thorn is to the flesh

Discussion Prompts

- What does it reveal about God’s priorities that He allowed a thorn to guard Paul from pride?
- Why might an unremoved affliction actually be a mercy?
- What good purposes might God weave into a suffering He chooses not to lift?

Question 2

Student Question:

Be honest about the role pride plays in your own heart. Can you see any way God might be using a weakness or limitation in your life to keep you humble and dependent on Him? Why is it so much harder to thank God for what humbles us than for what exalts us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question turns the spotlight on pride, the very thing Paul's thorn addressed. Pride is subtle and pervasive, and most of us underestimate its grip. Spiritual blessings, gifts, successes, and even knowledge can quietly feed it.

Invite honest reflection on how God might be using a weakness or limitation to keep students humble and dependent. The limitation we resent may be functioning, like Paul's thorn, as a guardrail against a conceit we cannot see in ourselves.

Name the difficulty squarely: it is far harder to thank God for what humbles us than for what exalts us. We readily praise Him for successes and gifts; we rarely praise Him for the weakness that keeps us low. Yet the weakness may be the greater mercy.

Move toward gratitude and dependence. Encourage students to consider thanking God, even tentatively, for a humbling limitation, recognizing it as part of His care for their souls rather than only as a burden to be escaped.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pride is subtle and pervasive, often fed by spiritual blessings and successes
- A resented limitation may function as a guardrail against unseen conceit
- It is harder to thank God for what humbles us than for what exalts us
- Recognizing a humbling weakness as part of God's care for the soul

Discussion Prompts

- Can you see a way God might be using a weakness to keep you humble and dependent?
- Why is it so much harder to thank God for what humbles us than for what exalts us?
- What would it look like to thank God, even tentatively, for a humbling limitation?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul calls the thorn both "a messenger of Satan" and something that was "given" by God for a good purpose (v. 7). How can the same affliction be an instrument of the enemy and a tool in God's hands at the same time, and how does this guard us against both blaming God for evil and denying His sovereign purposes in our pain?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question addresses the striking double description of the thorn: "a messenger of Satan to harass me," and yet something "given" for God's good purpose. The same affliction has two sources named in one sentence, and the doctrinal guardrail requires care.

Explain the mystery without resolving it falsely. The thorn is genuinely the work of an enemy who means harm; Scripture does not pretend Satan's malice is good. Yet God, in His

sovereignty, permits and uses even this harassment for a good purpose, Paul's humility and the display of Christ's power. God is not the author of the evil, but He is the master of it.

This guards against two errors at once, the same pairing we saw in Job. On one side, blaming God as the direct author of evil, as though He were the one harassing Paul. On the other, denying that God has any purpose in the pain, treating it as random misfortune outside His care. The truth runs between: real evil, real enemy, and a sovereign God who bends even this toward good.

Recall Joseph's words: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). The same event, two intentions. The brothers' malice was real evil; God's purpose was real good; and God was not the author of the malice. Paul's thorn works the same way. This is the heart of a mature theology of suffering.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The thorn is both a messenger of Satan and given for God's good purpose (2 Corinthians 12:7)
- God permits and uses the enemy's harassment without being the author of the evil
- This guards against blaming God for evil and against denying His purposeful sovereignty
- The pattern of Joseph: real evil intended by others, real good intended by God (Genesis 50:20)

Discussion Prompts

- How can the same affliction be a messenger of Satan and a tool in God's hands?
- How does this guard us against both blaming God for evil and denying His purposes in our pain?
- How does Joseph's statement in Genesis 50:20 illuminate Paul's thorn?

Question 4

Student Question:

When you are suffering, do you tend toward one of two errors, either blaming God as the author of your pain, or feeling that your suffering is random and outside His care? How does Paul's perspective help you hold God's goodness and His purposeful sovereignty together without making God the author of evil?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question names two opposite errors believers fall into when suffering. Some swing toward blaming God, holding Him directly responsible for their pain as its author. Others swing toward a practical deism, feeling their suffering is random, meaningless, and outside God's care altogether.

Help students locate their own tendency. Both errors are understandable responses to pain, and both miss the biblical balance. The first makes God a villain; the second makes Him absent. Neither can sustain trust.

Offer Paul's perspective as the way between. God did not author the thorn's evil, so He is not to be blamed as its source; yet God was sovereignly at work in it for good, so it was not random or beyond His care. Both God's goodness and His purposeful sovereignty stand.

Invite a concrete reframing of a current pain. Encourage students to hold both truths about a specific trial: that God is not its evil author, and that He is not absent from it but is able to work good through it. This is the mature posture the whole study is cultivating.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Two opposite errors in suffering: blaming God as author, or feeling the pain is random and uncared for
- The first makes God a villain; the second makes Him absent; neither sustains trust
- Paul's balance: God is not the author of evil, yet He works purposefully and sovereignly in it
- Holding God's goodness and His purposeful sovereignty together about a specific trial

Discussion Prompts

- When you suffer, do you tend to blame God or to feel your pain is random and uncared for?
- How does Paul help you hold God's goodness and His sovereignty together?
- How could you reframe a current pain so that God is neither its villain nor absent from it?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul "pleaded with the Lord three times" that the thorn would leave him (v. 8), and the answer was no. Why is it important that an apostle prayed earnestly for healing and did not receive it, and how does this confront the teaching that enough faith will always secure healing or relief?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a doctrinally weighty question with major pastoral implications. Paul "pleaded with the Lord three times" for the thorn to be removed, echoing Jesus' threefold prayer in Gethsemane, and the answer was no. An apostle who had healed others prayed earnestly for his own relief and did not receive it.

Let this fact land with full force against the teaching that sufficient faith always secures healing. If anyone had the faith to be healed, it was Paul. His thorn remained not because his faith failed but because God, in wisdom, had a greater purpose. The unhealed thorn of an apostle forever refutes the claim that unanswered prayers for healing prove weak faith or hidden sin.

Connect this to the church of Christ conviction regarding miraculous healing. We do not claim healing on demand or present-day sign gifts; we pray earnestly for the sick and entrust the outcome to God, who may heal through providence or may, as with Paul, give grace to bear the affliction instead. Our hope rests on God's Word and the resurrection, not on a guarantee of present healing.

Pastorally, this lifts a crushing burden off suffering believers. Those tormented by the suggestion that their continued illness reveals a deficiency of faith can look at Paul and be free. God's no to a faithful prayer is not a verdict on the pray-er; it is sometimes the doorway to a deeper grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul, an apostle who healed others, prayed three times for healing and received God's no (2 Corinthians 12:8)
- His thorn remained not from failed faith but from God's wiser purpose
- This refutes the teaching that sufficient faith always secures healing or relief
- We pray earnestly for the sick and entrust the outcome to God, making no claim of healing on demand or present-day sign gifts
- God's no to a faithful prayer is not a verdict on the one praying

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it important that an apostle prayed earnestly for healing and did not receive it?
- How does Paul's experience confront the teaching that enough faith always secures healing?
- How does this free a suffering believer from the guilt that says their faith was too weak?

Question 6

Student Question:

Think of a prayer for relief that God has not answered the way you hoped. How do you keep trusting and keep praying without sliding into either the despair that says God does not care or the false guilt that says your faith was too weak?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question addresses how to keep trusting and praying through unanswered prayer, avoiding two ditches: the despair that concludes God does not care, and the false guilt that concludes one's faith was too weak.

Help students see that God's no to Paul was neither indifference nor a rebuke of his faith. God answered, He just did not answer with removal. This means an unanswered prayer for relief is not evidence that God is absent or that the pray-er has failed; it may be the form God's deeper grace takes.

Teach the difference between surrender and resignation. Resignation gives up on God; surrender keeps trusting Him with the outcome. Paul did not stop trusting when God said no; he received the grace God offered instead and kept following. We can keep bringing our requests to God while resting in His wisdom about the answer.

Invite a concrete posture toward an unanswered prayer: to keep praying without the despair or the guilt, holding the request with open hands and asking, as well, for the grace to bear what God has not removed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Two ditches in unanswered prayer: despair that God does not care, and guilt that one's faith failed
- God's no to Paul was neither indifference nor a rebuke of his faith
- The difference between resignation (giving up on God) and surrender (trusting Him with the outcome)
- Continuing to pray while resting in God's wisdom and asking for grace to bear

Discussion Prompts

- How do you keep trusting through a prayer God has not answered as you hoped?
- What is the difference between resignation and surrender in unanswered prayer?
- How can you hold a request with open hands while also asking for grace to bear?

Question 7

Student Question:

God answered, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9). What does it mean that God's grace is "sufficient," and why might sufficient grace to bear a trial be a greater gift than the removal of the trial itself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 9 contains the lesson's central promise: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." God's answer to the unremoved thorn is sufficient grace, grace enough to bear what He does not take away.

Unpack "sufficient." It means enough, adequate, equal to the need. God does not promise grace that makes the thorn painless or that removes the struggle; He promises grace that is genuinely enough to bear it, to keep standing, to keep following, even under the weight. The grace is matched to the burden.

Explain why sufficient grace to bear may be a greater gift than removal. If God removed every thorn, we would learn to trust His gifts; by giving grace to bear them, He teaches us to trust Him. The removed thorn leaves us comfortable; the borne thorn, sustained by grace, leaves us closer

to God and more conformed to Christ. The deeper gift is not the absence of the thorn but the presence of sufficient grace and of God Himself in it.

Apply it to the present tense. God's grace is sufficient now, not only after the thorn is gone. Many believers postpone rest until the trouble lifts; Paul learned to rest in sufficient grace while the thorn remained. The grace is already enough, already available, already promised.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's answer to the unremoved thorn is sufficient grace (2 Corinthians 12:9)
- Sufficient grace is grace genuinely enough to bear the burden, matched to the need
- Grace to bear may be a greater gift than removal, teaching us to trust God rather than His gifts
- The grace is sufficient now, not only after the thorn is gone

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God's grace is "sufficient" for the burden you carry?
- Why might sufficient grace to bear a trial be a greater gift than its removal?
- Where do you most need to hear God say "my grace is sufficient for you" right now?

Question 8

Student Question:

Where do you most need to hear God say "my grace is sufficient for you" right now? What would change this week if you stopped waiting for the thorn to be removed before you would rest, and began drawing on the grace God promises is already enough?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question presses the sufficiency of grace into present experience. It names a common pattern: postponing rest until the thorn is removed, living in a holding pattern of waiting for relief before allowing ourselves any peace.

Help students see the freedom Paul found. He did not wait for the thorn to leave before he rested; he drew on the grace that was already sufficient while the thorn remained. This is the difference between a faith that can only rest after deliverance and one that can rest in the middle of the trial.

Invite the shift from waiting to drawing. The grace is described as a present, available reality, not a future reward. The question is whether we will draw on it now or keep ourselves in suspense until the circumstance changes.

Ask for a concrete step: identifying where they have been waiting for a thorn's removal before resting, and choosing this week to draw on God's sufficient grace in the midst of it, resting now rather than later.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The pattern of postponing rest until the thorn is removed
- Paul rested in sufficient grace while the thorn remained, not after it left
- The difference between resting only after deliverance and resting in the midst of the trial
- Drawing on grace as a present reality rather than waiting for circumstances to change

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you waiting for a thorn to be removed before you will let yourself rest?
- What would change if you began drawing on God's sufficient grace now, in the middle of it?
- What is one concrete way to draw on that grace this week rather than waiting for relief?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul reaches a place where he can say, "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" (vv. 9-10). How does this turn the world's understanding of strength and weakness upside down, and why does God's power rest most fully on those who have stopped relying on their own?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block, and it overturns the world's entire calculus of strength and weakness. Paul concludes, "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." Weakness becomes the very place where Christ's power is displayed.

Explain the reversal. The world hides weakness and boasts in strength, treating self-sufficiency as the goal. Paul, having met the God whose power is perfected in weakness, does the opposite: he boasts gladly in his weaknesses, because they are the stage on which the power of Christ becomes visible. The treasure shines precisely through the cracked jar of clay (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Explain why God's power rests most fully on those who have stopped relying on their own. As long as we lean on our own strength, we crowd out God's; we are running on self-sufficiency. When our strength fails and we have nothing left but God, His power has room to rest on us. Our weakness is not an obstacle to His power but the doorway for it.

Help students feel the strangeness and the liberation of this. "When I am weak, then I am strong" is nonsense to the world and wisdom to the saint. It means we no longer have to manufacture and defend our strength; we can acknowledge our weakness honestly, even gladly,

knowing it is the place where Christ's power comes to rest. This is the secret of a sustained life in suffering: not self-generated strength, but the power of Christ resting on acknowledged weakness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Paul boasts gladly in weakness so that Christ's power may rest on him (2 Corinthians 12:9)
- The world hides weakness and boasts in strength; Paul reverses this entirely
- God's power rests most fully on those who have stopped relying on their own (2 Corinthians 4:7)
- Weakness is not an obstacle to God's power but the doorway for it
- "When I am weak, then I am strong" frees us from manufacturing and defending our own strength

Discussion Prompts

- How does Paul turn the world's understanding of strength and weakness upside down?
- Why does God's power rest most fully on those who have stopped relying on their own?
- What would it mean for you to boast gladly in a weakness so that Christ's power could rest on you?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 as a whole, the thorn given, the prayer for its removal, God's sufficient grace, and power perfected in weakness. Name one specific weakness or unremoved thorn you can begin to bring to God this week, not only asking for its removal but asking for grace to bear it, and naming how Christ's power might rest on you there.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone gathers the whole passage and turns it toward practice. Retrace Paul's journey: the thorn given for a good purpose, the three prayers for its removal, God's answer of sufficient grace, and the discovery that Christ's power rests on acknowledged weakness.

Invite students to name one specific weakness or unremoved thorn to bring to God this week. The formation is in the particular: not weakness in the abstract but this thorn, this limitation, this prayer God has not answered with removal.

Then expand the prayer beyond removal. Encourage them not only to ask for the thorn to be taken away, which is right to ask, but also to ask for grace to bear it and to name how Christ's power might rest on them in that very place. This is the Pauline shape of prayer in chronic suffering: asking for relief, receiving sufficient grace, and welcoming the power of Christ in weakness.

End on the sufficiency of grace. Whatever thorn remains, God's grace is enough, and His power is made perfect in the weakness we would rather hide. Send your students out able to bring their unremoved thorns to God and to discover, with Paul, that in their weakness Christ is strong.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Retracing Paul's journey: thorn given, prayers for removal, sufficient grace, power in weakness
- Naming a specific weakness or unremoved thorn to bring to God
- Expanding prayer beyond removal to include grace to bear and Christ's power resting on weakness
- Resting in the sufficiency of grace whatever thorn remains

Discussion Prompts

- What specific weakness or unremoved thorn can you bring to God this week?
- How can you pray not only for its removal but for grace to bear it?
- Where might Christ's power rest on you in the very place of your weakness?