

Faith Under Fire

Lesson 8: Paul's Thorn: Grace Sufficient -- 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Paul had seen things he was not permitted to describe. He had been caught up, he says, into the third heaven, into paradise, and had heard words too sacred to repeat. If anyone had grounds to feel spiritually elite, untouchable, it was this man. And so God did something that, at first glance, seems almost harsh. He let a thorn lodge in Paul's flesh, a persistent, painful affliction that would not go away, "to keep me from becoming conceited." Whatever the thorn was, and Paul never tells us exactly, it was real, it hurt, and it stayed. The apostle who had been to paradise lived with a wound that paradise had not removed.

We are not told what the thorn was, and that silence is a gift, because it means anyone who carries a chronic pain can read their own name into the blank. The recurring illness that no doctor can fix. The disability that defines the shape of every day. The weakness, the limitation, the unwelcome companion that prayer has not made leave. Paul calls it "a messenger of Satan to harass me," and yet he also says God gave it, for God's own good purpose. Here is one of the mysteries of suffering laid bare: the same affliction can be an instrument of the enemy and, in God's hands, a tool of grace.

Paul did what any of us would do. He prayed for it to be taken away. Not once, but three times, the same way Jesus prayed three times in Gethsemane for the cup to pass. This is important: Paul, an apostle who had healed others, pleaded with the Lord for his own healing, and the healing did not come. The thorn stayed. Let that settle the question for anyone tempted to think unanswered prayers for healing mean weak faith or hidden sin. The most faithful missionary in history prayed earnestly for relief and heard God say no.

But God's no was not silence, and it was not abandonment. It came with a promise that has carried suffering saints for two thousand years: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." God did not remove the thorn; He gave something better than its removal. He gave grace enough to bear it, and He revealed that His power shines most brightly not in our strength but in our weakness. Paul, astonishingly, comes to 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." This lesson invites us to bring our own unremoved thorns to God, to hear what He says when He does not say yes, and to discover the strange strength of a grace that is sufficient.

Group Discussion: Paul prayed three times for his thorn to be removed, and God's answer was not to take it away but to give sufficient grace to bear it. Why do we so often assume that the only good answer to a prayer for relief is the removal of the suffering? How might Paul's experience expand our understanding of how God answers prayer?

Personal Reflection: God told Paul, "My power is made perfect in weakness." Most of us spend enormous energy hiding our weaknesses and projecting strength. Where in your life are you

most tempted to rely on your own strength, and what might it look like to let God's power rest on you in a place of genuine weakness instead?

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7–10

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 2 Corinthians 4:7, we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God; Matthew 26:39-44, Jesus praying three times in Gethsemane that the cup would pass; Philippians 4:11-13, I can do all things through Him who strengthens me, learned in want and plenty; Isaiah 40:29-31, He gives power to the faint and strength to the weak; 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, we were so burdened that we relied not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.