

# Power Perfected in Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

By Phil Johnson

Our text for this week is 2 Corinthians 12:1-10.

Last month we took a hard look at several psalms that all had one thing in common: They traced the pathway from suffering to glory. And along the way I have found myself repeatedly quoting verses like Romans 5:3: "suffering produces endurance." Second Thessalonians 1:4-5, where Paul says to be "[steadfast] and faith[ful] in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. [Because] this is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering." Second Timothy 1:8: "Share in suffering for the gospel." This becomes a running theme in 2 Timothy. Chapter 2, verse 3: "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus." Chapter 4, verse 5: "endure suffering." And chapter 3, verse 12 says, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Notice: most of the suffering described in those passages involves suffering for righteousness' sake. The New Testament portrays persecution and worldly opposition as the expected consequences of a faithful life.

If you are a true believer, and if you are faithful to the word of God, you *will* experience suffering. And much of the suffering you experience will be in the form of deliberate persecution at the hands of worldly people. You will be called upon to endure "weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities" on your way to *glory*. That is one of the paradoxical realities of the Christian life. Suffering is a prelude to glory. And in a way that is comforting knowledge to have. If you suffer, it doesn't mean God has cast you aside or abandoned you to your suffering. All of us are in that same boat.

Peter wrote two epistles to saints who had been scattered from one end of the empire to the other. Rome had sacked Jerusalem, and both Jews and Christians had been sent into exile. Many had suffered the loss of everything they owned; they were living in strange lands; their lives were in daily jeopardy; and their suffering was almost unspeakable. And near the end of that first epistle, Peter writes (1 Peter 5:8-9): "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. [But, he says,] Resist him, firm in your faith, [now listen to this:] knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world." That's some kind of encouragement, huh? And there is a sense in which misery loves company. It is some small comfort when we suffer to know that we're not suffering alone. God has not turned His back on me in some singular, punitive way as payback for some secret or unknown evil I'm guilty of. All Christians suffer. But the next verse (1 Peter 5:10) is the key. Peter goes on to say, "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."

Do you see what Peter is saying? God has a plan and a purpose in our suffering. Second Corinthians 4:17: "This light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." That's what makes our pain bearable. God is doing something *good, and gracious* with it. More than that; He is doing something *glorious* with it. Suffering is simply the pathway to glory. Peter says, "the God of all grace . . . has called you to his eternal glory in Christ." That is an amazing promise. God has "called" us—and He is bringing us by grace—to glory. And along the way, He "will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you." He will do *everything* necessary to uphold you and to conform you to the image of Christ.

But remember that Christ suffered, And "you have been called [to suffer], because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). If you are going to be conformed to the image of Christ, then the instrument by which God will "restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" must involve suffering. Without sharing in "the fellowship of his sufferings, [and] being made conformable unto his death"—you cannot be fully conformed to the likeness of Christ.

That's what the apostle Paul says in Philippians 3:9-10. He puts into as few words as possible the true heart's desire of every regenerate believer. It is the very essence of faith to have this desire: "that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."

Now, I need to clarify something about this, because as soon as I say suffering is the pathway to glory, there are some who will hear that and think, *That's not so revolutionary. Lots of religions teach that. The price of nirvana is self-denial. The cost of true happiness is stoicism. The key that unlocks the portal to heaven is affliction or austerity, or asceticism, or abstinence of some kind.*

As if your suffering somehow could earn you a place in glory. That's not what we're saying at all. Suffering is not meritorious. You don't secure your own eternal welfare—even in part—by your own self-denial or through the infliction of pain. Our miseries are no kind of atonement for our sins.

This is the central truth of the gospel: *Christ's* suffering earned glory for His people. Hebrews 2:10: "It was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering." *Jesus'* suffering was the price of our salvation, paid in full. His death paid the penalty of our

sins. His righteousness is all the righteousness we need for a right standing with God. That's what Paul was saying in the text I just quoted from Philippians 3:9, where he says he desires to be found in Christ, not with a righteousness of his own, but with the righteousness that we obtain by faith. He is talking there about the righteousness of Christ, imputed to our account. Because Christ's righteousness is better than any righteousness we could ever achieve on our own—His is *perfect* righteousness from start to finish. And we could never obtain such a righteousness on our own.

So why is it necessary for us to suffer on the way to glory? In the text we are going to look at this morning, Paul answers that question in detail with an amazing testimony from his own experience. 2 Corinthians 12. We're going to work our way through verses 1-10. Here's the context:

This is the apostle Paul's account of his thorn in his flesh. We don't know the nature of that thorn. It was a persistent affliction or a protracted trial of some unspecified sort. Some think it was a troublesome individual, and it may well have been, because Paul refers to the thorn in verse 7 as "a messenger of Satan to harass me"—as if he is speaking of a *person*. And indeed, that's what it may have been. There were plenty of people like Hymenaeus and Philetus, the original hyper-preterist heretics; Demas, the worldly co-worker, who was with Paul for a long time but forsook the faith when the cost of following Christ became too costly. Perhaps Demas's worldly shenanigans or half-hearted faith were like a thorn in Paul's side. Then again, in 2 Timothy 4:14, Paul mentions "Alexander the coppersmith [who, he says,] did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds." Then, of course, there were the Judaizers, who followed Paul around the empire, sowing the tares of false doctrine wherever he had brought the gospel to the Gentiles. Perhaps the "thorn" Paul talked about was their ringleader, a true "messenger of Satan" if there ever was one. Whatever or whoever Paul had in mind, it very well could have been any of those people, or someone else in the same vein. S. Lewis

Johnson suggested it could have been all of them combined—that the thorn that tortured Paul was a constant awareness that even the people closest to him (people who had sat under his ministry for years) didn't even seem to understand the message clearly or believe it earnestly. Any preacher can understand that.

Most commentators seem to lean toward the view that Paul's thorn was a physical affliction of some kind, because he calls it "a thorn . . . in the *flesh*." All kinds of suggestions have been made: malaria, ophthalmia, epilepsy, Malta fever, migraine headaches, gout, kidney stones, and sore teeth. Tertullian thought it was a chronic earache. Chrysostom said, no, it was the headache. One author took it literally, saying Paul must have had a splinter that got abscessed.

Since Paul doesn't describe anything specific about this thorn in the flesh, it simply can't be important for us to know what it was. It seems to me Paul himself was being deliberately vague, so it's a waste of time to speculate about the specific nature of this ordeal he suffered. It's simply not important.

What we *do* know is that it was a continual torment to him—a chronic affliction, or a tenacious enemy, or a persistent frustration of some sort that troubled him continually and unrelentingly—so much that he had repeatedly prayed for relief from it.

Now let me expand the context for you a little bit: Paul was under assault in Corinth. His character and apostleship had been openly questioned, and people in the Corinthian fellowship had become confused about whether Paul was someone whose teaching and leadership were trustworthy. And that was undermining the gospel in Corinth. The church was flirting with apostasy. On top of all the problems Paul had addressed in *1 Corinthians*, the church was now teetering on the brink of abandoning the truth altogether.

Now, bear in mind that this church, which Paul himself had founded, consisted largely of people whom he knew personally. Paul himself had brought them the gospel and

led them to Christ out of pagan backgrounds in that debauched city. He was their spiritual father. He also held apostolic authority over them. And yet, in his absence, false teachers had come along. These were men who falsely claimed an even higher level of apostolic authority for themselves. In verse 11, Paul refers to them as "super-apostles." (That's the ESV. The NASB says "the most eminent apostles." But Paul isn't talking about the most eminent of the Twelve. He's making a sarcastic reference to what these false teachers claimed about themselves. The Greek word has the connotation of someone who is haughty, self-important, and scornful of others. The expression "super-apostles" perfectly captures Paul's disdain for these men.) He uses the same expression in 11:5. These false teachers had moved into the Corinthian church, teaching error and undermining the church's confidence in Paul's leadership.

Second Corinthians is therefore dominated by Paul's defense of his apostolic authority—not for selfish or self-aggrandizing reasons, but because an attack on Paul's authority would open the door for heretics and their false doctrines, and that was a threat to the very life of the church in Corinth. So throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul is defending his apostolic credentials, and his self-defense reaches a kind of climax here in chapter 12.

Let me read the first 12 verses of the chapter. Paul has spent several chapters answering the attacks against himself—defending his character, reminding the Corinthians what they already knew about him, refuting his opponents' false accusations, and explaining his motives and his ministry style. All of this is very foreign to Paul's usual style. He was a humble man. He didn't like talking about himself. But in order to defend the true gospel, he had to defend his own apostolic credentials.

The false teachers evidently had boasted of great works and stunning revelations. What God had revealed to them and what they had to teach the Corinthians surpassed anything Paul could ever claim, they said. Paul had to

answer that argument, too. So he responds. I'm going to start at the beginning of chapter 12 and read through verse 12. Here is Paul's response to the super-apostles' claims about dreams and visions and private revelations:

12:1 I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.

3 And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—

4 and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

5 On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.

6 Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.

7 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships,

persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

11 I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing.

12 The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.

So here's what is going on: Paul has been forced to display his own apostolic credentials—to boast of his own spiritual qualifications—against his own wishes and contrary to his normal style. He recounts for the Corinthians an amazing sacred privilege he was given. He was caught up into heaven. It's an event he talks about nowhere else. In fact, he says very little about it here. He quickly turns to another, almost paradoxical subject—a troublesome affliction he suffered. And he uses this contrast to make a significant point about the sufficiency of divine grace.

In fact, grace is the theme that permeates Paul's testimony in this passage. As he moves through those first ten verses, he talks about three significant gifts he received from the gracious hand of God. Three totally different *kinds* of gifts, but knit together like this they give us a wonderful lesson about the sufficiency of God's grace. Gift number 1 is—

#### 1. PARADISE

Paul was transported into "the third heaven." That is a reference to paradise, the abode of God and the dwelling place of "the spirits of the righteous made perfect." The first heaven is the atmospheric heaven, the firmament—earth's atmosphere. It's called heaven in Genesis 1:6-8. The second heaven is space, the realm of the stars and planets. It's called heaven in Genesis 22:17 and a host of other passages that speak of "the stars of heaven." The third heaven is the place where God dwells.



In 1 Kings 8:27, Solomon says, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you." Literally, the expression is "the heavens and Heaven of the heavens cannot contain You." So the third heaven is uniquely the domain of God—and yet it cannot contain Him.

Paul was taken there—"caught up" into paradise, carried into the very throne room of God, where he saw and heard things it is not possible to describe—and not even lawful to try. This was an experience virtually unparalleled in human history; an honor that as far as we know, was equalled only by the experience of the apostle John, who years after this, on the Isle of Patmos, had a similar vision. And perhaps it was similar to the experience of Isaiah, who says in Isaiah 6:1 that "In the year that King Uzziah died [he] saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple."

Paul's experience was so vivid and so real that he says in verse 2 he couldn't tell if it was in the body or out of the body. He might have been literally transported bodily to heaven, or this might have been a vision or trancelike out-of-body experience. Even Paul himself did not know for sure, but he tells us that the experience was intense and authentic, not hazy or dreamy. It was a true and genuine revelation of Christ in person to the apostle Paul.

As a young Christian I read this and it didn't occur to me immediately that Paul was describing his own experience in verses 1-5, because he describes the experience in the third person. "I know a man in Christ . . . And I know that this man was caught up . . . and he heard things . . . this man." Third person, all the way.

But make no mistake; this was Paul's own experience. He makes that clear, and even explains *why* he gives his own testimony in the third person like that. Verse 5: "On behalf of this man [third person I will boast, but on my own behalf [first person I will not boast, except of my weaknesses." So when he's got a story to tell that honors himself and exalts

his experience, he tells it in third person. When he has something to say about his weakness, he shifts into first person. Verse 6: "Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me." In other words, if he told this story in a boasting way—vividly describing the details of the experience—he would not be guilty of lying or exaggerating. But he is restraining himself from speaking in the first person, and he is not saying all he might say about this experience, just so that no one would think of him too highly—"so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me." In other words, he wanted people to judge him according to what they see him do and hear him say. He is not looking to be placed on a pedestal because of the special revelation that was entrusted to him.

In fact, Paul stays as far away from boasting as possible, giving very scant details about his experience in the third heaven. His testimony makes a refreshing contrast with the kind of claims people make on charismatic TV channels nowadays. There's no shortage of people today who claim they have been transported to heaven and back. Invariably they will write a book and make a career on the speaking circuits recounting in dramatic detail what they supposedly saw in heaven. Put all these accounts together and they are a mass of contradictions and fanciful claims. The bestselling book from any Christian publisher in 2011 was a book called *Heaven Is for Real*, published by Thomas Nelson (the same publisher who publishes most of John MacArthur's books). It's an account of heaven from a child's perspective, supposedly describing the experience of a 4-year-old boy who had a near-death experience during surgery and came back to tell the world what heaven is like. The book went to number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The boy's father who is a pastor of some sort, wrote the book, he says, from stories his son told. But it's filled with ridiculous claims: people in heaven have wings and halos, the boy sat

on Jesus' lap and watched him shoot power through his hands down into his father while the father was preaching. (Problem is, the kid's unconsciousness lasted less than 3 minutes, and for that entire time the father was in the surgical waiting room, not preaching.) So the whole thing is straight from someone's imagination or dream, embellished over time.

It's shameful that supposedly Christian publishers and broadcasters confuse people by lending publicity to obvious lies like that.

But notice what Paul says about his experience: "He heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter." And beyond that he gives not a single detail about what heaven was like, how long he was there, who or what he saw, or any of the other kinds of details that are so prominent in the accounts you hear on the Christian celebrity circuit.

In fact, Paul does not want to talk about this. Verse 5: "On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses." Verse 6: "I refrain from boasting, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me." He doesn't want the Corinthians to revere him because he has experienced supernatural things. If they honor him at all, it should be for what they see in his life and what they hear from his lips when he teaches. His experience in paradise was a sacred experience, but an intensely personal one. The only reason he tells the story at all is to demonstrate that he can easily top the claims these super-apostles were making.

A trip to paradise was a great and gracious gift to Paul, but what he intends to focus on in this testimony is not this spectacular vision of heaven. Paul barely brings it up here, and then he drops the subject. Just when he gets to the point where the typical 21st-century charismatic celebrity would start giving all kinds of fanciful stories, Paul says the things he heard were both impossible and impermissible to express in human language. And he leaves the whole subject behind. He never mentions it elsewhere, either.

And what Paul ends up actually *boasting* about is a completely different kind of gift. Gift one: Paradise. Here's gift number 2:

## 2. PAIN

Verse 7: "So [Paul says,] to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited."

Notice, first of all, that the word "revelations" in verse 7 is plural. That's a subtle clue, but it suggests that the experience Paul described in verse 2 was not a one-time event in his experience. He seems to have had multiple revelations of this same caliber. But he doesn't recount them for us. He's finished talking about "visions and revelations."

And I don't blame him. Paul had a perpetual reminder not to be puffed up about his spiritual privileges. It was this "thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan." The word translated "thorn" in the Greek text is *skolops*. It signifies something very sharp-pointed, usually of wood. In classical Greek it often meant "stake," like a stake for a palisade or a pointed post from a picket-fence. It could also signify a tent-peg. Or it could denote a very large splinter or thorn. I'm inclined to think "thorn" is the right idea—the closest thing to what Paul had in mind. The size of this sharp object isn't nearly as important as the severity of the pain it inflicts. Clearly he is not describing some kind of fatal impalement, but a constant, sharp, vexing affliction that feels like a kind of slow torture. Paul chooses this word precisely because it evokes a wincing notion of pain.

Again, it is pointless, I think, to speculate about who or what the thorn in the flesh was. But the language Paul uses gives us a few clues about how troublesome this trial was, and I think there are some facts here worth pointing out.

First of all, the phrases "a thorn . . . in the flesh, [and] a messenger of Satan" are parallels. And the choice of words strongly suggests that the first phrase is simply figurative: "a

thorn . . . in the flesh." It wasn't a *literal* thorn, or a splinter, or a wooden stake driven into his body. If he meant this to be taken literally, I think he would have described something about the thorn, how it got there, what measures he had taken to have it removed, or whatever. But Paul himself doesn't treat this as a literal expression. Reading a phrase like this in any kind of normal prose, we wouldn't generally *expect* it to carry a literal meaning, especially coupled as it is with this appositive phrase: "a messenger of Satan." The thorn itself is a Satanic communiqué.

So we should read this first expression ("thorn . . . in the flesh") as a figure of speech very much like the one Jesus used with Peter in Luke 22:31: "Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat." Jesus was (of course) not saying that Satan had asked for permission literally to grind Peter to powder and put his ashes through a sieve, but that the devil intended to subject Peter to such a grueling test that when it was done, Peter would feel as if he had spiritually been forced through a strainer.

Paul is clearly using similar language—describing some kind of Satanic provocation, or annoyance, or affliction. It's not an actual thorn or splinter of wood; but it's an evil irritation directly from Satan that has deeply painful and potentially incapacitating consequences. Because this entails a "a messenger of Satan to harass," it seems to me more likely to be a *spiritual* attack rather than a *physical* one. (So I don't really think this had anything to do with eye problems or ingrown toenails or whatever.) But in any case, this is clearly a *personal* attack from Satan himself, and it is a relentless bother to Paul, causing him great pain of some sort.

Now: If you're paying attention and following my outline, you might want to stop me right there. Because we're on point 2 of a three-point outline, and we're supposed to be talking about the second of three gracious gifts God gave to Paul. First was *paradise*. That makes sense. The second, we said, was *pain*. And this thorn, whatever it was, is the source

of Paul's pain. So was Paul's pain a provocation from Satan, or was it a gracious gift from God?

What's the correct answer to that question?

Both.

Satan meant it for evil; God meant it for good. And here is a little secret: that is true of every vexing problem the powers of darkness ever cause for you. Whatever is meant for evil, God employs for good. "We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." We've seen that same truth in so many places. It was the lesson of Joseph's life, and the triumphant culmination of his own brothers' attempts to get rid of him forever. After he has ascended to the second-highest position of power in Egypt, in Genesis 45:8, Joseph tells his brothers, "It was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt." Then he says in Genesis 50:20: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."

Even the most grossly evil act ever carried out under the scheming of the devil by the hands of wicked people was used by God for the greatest good in all of time and eternity. Acts 2:23: "Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, [was] crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." Was that an evil act, or was it the fulfillment of God's good purposes?

It was both.

So was Paul's thorn in the flesh a messenger of Satan, or was it a gift of God? It was both.

In verse 7 of our text, Paul writes: "a thorn was given me in the flesh." He uses the passive voice. Who gave it to him? Clearly Satan did—in the sense that Satan (or a messenger of Satan) was the immediate cause, the instrumental agent who afflicted Paul.

Yet we know that God was the *ultimate* Cause. As we see in Peter's case and Job's case in the Old Testament, Satan could not afflict a saint of God without God's express

permission. Satan had to *ask* to sift Peter like wheat; and he had to ask in order to trouble Job. He could not have afflicted Paul with a thorn in the flesh unless God bid him do it. And God would never have permitted such a thing without a *good* reason—and by that I mean it had to be something that was good for Paul, an expression of God's grace and favor, wrapped in the appearance of adversity.

Furthermore, Scripture expressly teaches that our sufferings always have a gracious purpose. Whenever we suffer unjustly, we *ought* to see that as a gift from God. James 1:2: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds." Romans 5:3: "We rejoice in our sufferings." First Peter 2:19: "For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly." Matthew 5:10-12: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." To suffer for Christ's sake or for righteousness's sake is a great blessing. First Peter 4:15-16: "Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name." In other words, when we have done nothing wrong to bring evil consequences on our own heads but we suffer anyway, we should welcome the suffering as we would welcome a gift, because that's what it is.

That word "*given*" in verse 7 signifies, I believe, that Paul himself had come to regard the thorn in his flesh as a favor. It is the very word you would use to describe a gift given with the intention of honoring someone. It's the same word the Prodigal Son uses in Luke 15:12 when he says "give me the share of property that is coming to me." And it's the same word translated "put" just ten verses later when the father says, "put a ring on his hand." It's the word translated "*give*" or "*given*" in all these biblical phrases: "Freely you received,

freely give." "Ask, and it will be given to you." "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given." It's also the word Satan used in Matthew 4 when he "took [Jesus] to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

So by using this word, I think Paul signifies that he had come to view the thorn in his flesh as a gift from the gracious hand of God. It was just that, because it had a good purpose. Paul even understood *what* the purpose was. He even repeats it twice in verse 7, once at the beginning and once at the end. So the news that Satan was afflicting him comes to us sandwiched between these two statements of God's goodwill toward the apostle Paul. Paul says (twice) that the purpose of the thorn was "to keep me from becoming conceited."

"Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations"—so that Paul would not become puffed up—God permitted Satan to imbed some kind of spiritual splinter under the apostle's skin, and it became a perpetual reminder of the absolute sufficiency of God's grace—as well as a motive for Paul to stay humble.

Now Paul says in verse 8, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me." The word translated "pleaded" is a potent one, signifying an urgent, importunate, pressing appeal for relief. It's the same word translated "begged" in Matthew 8:34, when Jesus sent the swine over the cliff into the water, Matthew says, "all the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region." Also the same word is used to describe the urgent pleading of Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue in Mark 5:23, when he fell at Jesus' feet "and implored him earnestly, saying, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live.'"



And Paul's threefold repetition of the prayer is also significant, I think. According to Matthew 26:44, Jesus repeated His prayer in Gethsemane for the cup to pass three times. This is reminiscent of that. And just as the cup did not pass from Jesus, the thorn in the flesh did not depart from Paul. But instead, he received a very specific answer from the Lord.

Incidentally, when Paul says in verse 8 that he "pleaded with the Lord about this," I think he's talking about the Lord Jesus. Paul never uses that expression "the Lord" to refer to anyone *but* Jesus. So here's an example of a prayer addressed directly to Jesus. It's proof of His deity—and proof that he not only "make[s] intercession for" the saints; He also receives and answers their prayers. (Here's an interesting fact: whoever decides what words to make red in red-letter Bibles apparently agrees that Jesus is the One Paul is praying to, because in my Bible, the answer Paul receives is in red letters.)

Anyway, the answer Paul receives unveils for us gift number three. The first gift was *paradise*. The second was *pain*. Now third—

### 3. POWER

Here's the ultimate proof that Jesus is the one Paul was praying to. Look at the answer in verse 9: "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"

"My power." Whose power?

Paul immediately answers that question for us when he says, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." We don't know how Paul received the answer to his prayer. It might have been through an audible voice, in a dream or vision, or through some means involving the apostolic sign-gifts. It's not important for us to know *how* Paul received the message, or he would have told us. If it was through some apostolic gift or special revelation, it's not a means of hearing

from Christ that you and I are ever promised access to. So again, that's not what is important here. What *is* important is the message itself.

"My power," Jesus says, "reaches perfection in weakness." One of the hardest things in the world is to get Christians to embrace and believe this truth, but what Paul says here is consistently set forth as the divine strategy. In 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, we read, "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

But the best part is the opening phrase of the answer Paul received: "My grace is sufficient for you." Now, a thoughtless person reading this might think Christ heard Paul's prayer and the answer he gave was a "no." Paul himself did not see it that way. And we need to be wise in discerning the answers to our prayers. "Yes" isn't necessarily the answer we really want. And "no" doesn't necessarily mean the Lord has refused our request.

Remember how the Israelites prayed for meat rather than manna in the wilderness? God told them "yes." Then he sent diseased quails to them for food. Psalm 106:14-15: "They had a wanton craving in the wilderness, and put God to the test in the desert; he gave them what they asked, but sent a wasting disease among them." Sometimes God in His wrath will grant a prayer request to the letter.

But sometimes God in His love says "no" to our request so that He can give us something better. That is the case here. Would you rather have the absence of the thorn or an abundance of divine grace? And the grace in this case comes in the form of empowerment.

Jesus' answer to Paul's prayer is stated in the form of a *chiasmus* (ki AS mus), meaning that the form of the second phrase is an inverted mirror of the first phrase. This is a fairly common literary device in Scripture, and it sheds some light on the meaning of this promise. The word-order in

Greek goes like this: "sufficient *for you* my grace; my power *in weakness* is perfected. So the word *sufficient* mirrors the word *perfect*; the word *you* mirrors *weakness*; and the word *grace* mirrors *power*. And that means the "grace" Jesus is speaking of here is embodied in the power of Christ, unleashed in Paul's ministry.

So while Jesus did not answer Paul's prayer in precisely the way Paul asked, He gave him something better: grace sufficient for every need. Any doubt about whether Paul would find strength to fulfill his calling was thus removed from him, and that was far more of a comfort to Paul than the removal of the thorn.

And so the very thing that caused him pain became for Paul the reminder of Christ's power unleashed in his life—and therefore a reason to rejoice.

Verse 10: "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." That is an amazing statement. We think of contentment in terms of having what we want, getting our wishes fulfilled, and enjoying all the comforts and conveniences of life. For Paul, contentment meant merely having sufficient grace and the power of the Lord to sustain him. So he could make this remarkable affirmation: "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities." Nothing in that list that we would ever associate with contentment, but Paul had a truly Christ-centered worldview.

In the King James Version, verse 9 says, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities." The New American Standard Bible is similar: "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses." That word "rather" is there in the Greek text. Rather than what? What is Paul saying? To paraphrase, this is what it means: "*Rather than ask a fourth time for the removal of the splinter, I will (with supreme gladness) glory in my weaknesses.*"

At the end of this passage, Paul is as weak as he ever was. But because he now knows Christ's power will be

magnified through his weakness, the very trial that once seemed so troublesome has become his best reason for boasting—a boast he would rather make than talk about his "visions and revelations" of heaven.

If we knew the sufficiency of God's grace and the inexhaustible energy of Christ's power, we would have a similar perspective of our own trials.

May God give us such wisdom.