

Sermon outline and notes:

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## 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 “Finding Strength in Trials”

Intro. In my years of ministry, I have noticed something that may seem a bit disturbing. Some of God’s children go through some very difficult problems, including some very dedicated Christians. Sometimes, they bear with these problems their entire life. Why is this? Well Paul shares with us in these verses one answer, right out of his own experience. So if you’re going through a trial, or if you have had some ongoing problem that has plagued you for years, you especially need to listen up today.

Something else that our text will reveal is the secret of experiencing the Lord’s power in our lives. You know, life can be difficult. Every Christian should humbly acknowledge that we need the Lord’s strength. First of all, we need strength for living. The demands of life can be great indeed, including the challenges of a family and work. Don’t you want to be strong when you face the difficulties, trials, and temptations of life? Do you want victory instead of failure? The only way to be victorious in living is through the strength of the Lord. We also need the Lord’s strength for service. If you are a Christian, you are to have a ministry for the Lord. And we ought not to be serving God in our own meager strength. We can and should serve the Lord in *His* strength. I don’t know about you, but I want to experience the power of God in my life and in my ministry. Is there evidence of the Lord’s power in *your* life and ministry? Well listen carefully this morning, and you will learn the secret of strength from the Lord.

First, let me give a little background to my text. Much of 2 Corinthians is a defense against the charges of Paul’s enemies, who slandered him and engaged in self-praise. This forced him to vindicate himself and even boast to some degree. He really didn’t want to do it and yet they forced his hand. Did his enemies boast of their religious experiences? Well, Paul says, I suppose I can boast too, and he tells of an amazing experience in his own life. So in the first part of our text, we see our first lesson:

### I. PRIVILEGES CAN LEAD TO PRIDE

God gave many privileges to Paul. In the last of v.1 says, “I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.” Furthermore, in v.7 he says that he had received an “abundance” of revelations. That should not be surprising. After all, he was an apostle, and he was to proclaim *God’s* Word, not his own. So I want us to see from our text:

A. The Delineation of Paul’s Privileges - Let me give a few other examples. First of all, he had personally seen the Lord Jesus Himself in all His glory on the road to Damascus. Then, during his second missionary journey it was by a vision that he was called to turn west and go across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia (Acts 16:9). Sometime later he was ministering in Corinth, and things must not have been going very well in that wicked city. He was very discouraged. So God gave him a night vision, and told him not to be discouraged or afraid, “for I have much people in this city” (Acts 18:10). Paul stayed and ended up having a great ministry in that city and many people were saved.

Then, beginning in v.2, he gives an example of a revelation from the Lord that was the most wonderful of all, and that was actually going to heaven. He wrote in v.2, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago — whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows — such a one was caught up to the third heaven.” He humbly told of the experience in the third person, but I do believe he was describing his own experience, based on what he wrote beginning in v.7. He did not know if he was caught up in his body, like Elijah, or if it was an out of body experience. He also says in v.2 that it took place 14 years ago, which would probably be during the time he was at home in Tarsus, not long before he went to serve in Antioch and then began his first missionary journey.

Now notice what happened. Paul was “caught up” to heaven. That is the same word (*harpazo*) that is commonly used to refer to the rapture, when believers will be caught up to the meet the Lord in the air when He returns (I Thess. 4:17).

Where was he caught up to? Paul identifies the place in two different ways. First, in the last of v.2 we see that he calls it the third heaven. You see, the first heaven is where the birds of heaven fly. The second heaven is where you see the sun, moon, and stars. Then, the third heaven is the special abode of God, where He is surrounded by the Angels and heavenly saints.

Then, in v.4 he uses another word to describe this place. He says “he was caught up into Paradise.” So here, Paul likens heaven to paradise. That word (*paradeisos*) was originally a Persian word, denoting a beautiful park, or a walled royal garden, full of flowers, trees, and fruit, much like the Garden of Eden. The concept is intended to give us a little idea of how *wonderful* heaven must be. Psalm 16:11 says, “...In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” It is the word which Jesus used to the thief on the cross: “Today you shall be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).<sup>1</sup> Yet because of sin Paradise was lost. But through the Savior, Paradise will be regained! So the main point is this: based on the experience of the apostle, we can say that heaven is for real and it is a wonderful, beautiful place. I’m looking forward to going to heaven, aren’t you? It will be a place of joy and peace and no pain. So no matter how bad things get for the child of God, we are assured of the hope that God will ultimately deliver us from pain to paradise!

Now Paul says nothing about what he saw or what he felt but only mentions what he heard. So notice in the last of v.4 Paul said he “heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.” So he could not repeat what he heard. The words were only intended for his own personal benefit. This was evidently some special encouragement that God gave to Paul right before he began his missionary work. God knew that he would suffer much (Acts 9:16), and you can read about his sufferings in 11:23-28. As if to forearm him against all of it, and so that he might not break down in his spirit under this frightful, never-ending load of suffering, the Lord let him have a taste of Paradise, and hear these encouraging words. You see, you can bear much pain, and death itself, when you have the sure hope that the Paradise of heaven awaits you immediately after death!

What an awesome transcendental experience had been granted to the Apostle Paul! Yet even though Paul experienced some wonderful privileges, note with me:

B. The Danger of Privilege - There is indeed a danger to privilege and success, and that is pride. Paul says in v.7, “And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations....” It would have been very easy for Paul to become full of spiritual pride after his trip to Heaven! Exciting spiritual experiences have a way of inflating the human ego. Furthermore, Paul

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<sup>1</sup> It is also used in Rev. 2:7, “...To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.” Thus it seems to be that the Garden of Eden on earth was patterned after a heavenly paradise.

said in 1 Cor. 8:1, “Knowledge puffs up.” He was given special knowledge of heaven and special revelations.

Yet I don’t know of anything worse than spiritual pride. That’s the sin of the devil. I’ve known some preachers that have experienced the blessing of God upon their ministries in a marvelous way, and yet they have become so proud that God is no longer using them as in the past.<sup>2</sup> Some have left the ministry altogether. However highly the Lord Jesus favors and blesses His ministers, He is able to use none unless they are lowly as He Himself once was when He walked on earth (Mt. 11:29; Jn. 13:3-5, 12-15).

One manifestation of pride is boasting. Paul was aware of this potential problem, so he says in vv.5-6, “Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool...” It would have been very natural for Paul to have boasted about this experience. After all, what other apostle had until this time been in heaven and back? (John did years later).

Can you imagine what would happen today if somebody were caught up to Paradise for a while? The first thing they would do is write a tell-all book, and the publisher would put them on a speaking tour! That is exactly what has happened in recent years.

Yet Paul was reluctant to speak of such an experience. In fact, we have here a biblical example of one who was *forbidden* to repeat what he heard in heaven! He may have kept silent about this great experience for 14 years. If God gives you some great spiritual experience, you had better be careful how you tell others about it, lest you boast as if you were the cause of that experience.

Paul’s great experience in heaven could have ruined his ministry on earth. So how could Paul have such a great experience and still remain humble? Well let’s look to our text for answers. Here we see another important lesson:

## II. PROBLEMS CAN PRE-EMPT PRIDE

Paul says in v.7, “And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.” After the glory came the pain. Life has a way of balancing privileges with problems. So many of God’s greatest servants have had problems or afflictions in their lives. The great hymn writer Fanny Crosby was blind pretty much her whole life. Years ago at West Rome Baptist I heard Evangelist David Ring. As he walks and talks, it becomes obvious that he has Cerebral Palsy. So he has a memorable introduction as he addresses a new audience. He says with some difficulty, “I am David Ring. I have Cerebral Palsy. What’s your problem?” We all experience problems of various kinds. What are *your* problems? Do you have health problems? Do you or a family member have mental health problems? Do you have a disability? Do you have relationship problems? Do you have a financial problem? Growing old can be a very humbling experience! Paul was not exempt from such problems, even though he was a very dedicated Christian.

So let’s see first of all:

A. The Nature of Paul’s Problem – Paul mentions in v.7 that “a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me...” The word translated “thorn” (*skolops*) in secular Greek could even refer to a stake that could be used to impale someone, but I think Paul has in

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<sup>2</sup> It was said of King Uzziah in 2 Chron. 26:15, “he was marvelously helped till he became strong.”

mind the image of a painful, imbedded thorn.<sup>3</sup> He doesn't tell us what it is, but he gives us some hints. First of all, it was probably:

1. A Physical Problem - The phrase "in the flesh," probably denotes that it was a bodily, not a spiritual, affliction. In v.9 of our text Paul indicates that it was a "weakness" of some kind "in the flesh" (see also Galatians 4:13). Many commentators believe Paul's problem was very poor vision. He was temporarily blinded after he saw the glory of Jesus on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:9). Paul said the Galatians would have plucked out their eyes and given them to him (Galatians 4:15).<sup>4</sup> It could have been some other physical problem such as chronic migraine headaches,<sup>5</sup> rheumatism, some nervous disorder, or gout. It is commonly believed that he had epilepsy, which in the ancient world was attributed to demons.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps he was ugly or disfigured. But the fact is we just don't know and what I have suggested is hardly more than speculation.

Then the fact that it was compared to a "thorn" indicates that it was not only a physical problem, but also:

2. A Painful Problem - Though the thorn was associated with the flesh, the pain was not necessarily limited to the flesh. It could have resulted in emotional pain since it is called "a messenger of Satan," who no doubt tried to get Paul to question God's love for him. His condition tended to cause people to "despise or reject" him whenever they saw a manifestation of this "thorn in the flesh" (Gal. 4:14; cf. 2 Cor. 10:10). This resulted in emotional pain and some degree of humiliation. Furthermore, this thorn in the flesh was:

3. A Permanent Problem - This thorn was deeply imbedded, and not able to be removed. That thorn was there to stay, since we see from vv.8-9 that the Lord declined to remove it.<sup>7</sup> Knowing he would have this "thorn" for the rest of his life made it especially difficult.

What kind of ongoing problem or burden do you deal with? You may have a problem in your family that is never resolved. That can be painful!

We have some idea of the nature of his problem. Now let's see:

B. The Source of His Problem – God did not directly cause this affliction, but he *allowed* Satan to afflict him with this problem. I say that because Paul identifies this problem as "a messenger (*angelos*) of Satan," which could indicate that a demon had a hand in causing this trouble for Paul. Also note that this thorn in the flesh would be used of Satan to "buffet" Paul. Derived from the word for "knuckles," it means to strike with the fist so that the hard knuckles make painful and crushing blows. Have you ever felt like the devil was beating up on you? Well, Paul did!

Though Satan can attack us with problems, we must keep in mind that God is sovereign over any problem that comes into our lives. Do you know that Satan cannot do one thing against

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<sup>3</sup> The word is only used here in the New Testament. It is found in the LXX in Num. 33:55, "σκολοπες εν τοις οφθαλμοις υμων..." thorns in your eyes. In Ezek. 28:24 it says, "The house of Israel will no longer be hurt by prickling briars" (σκολοψ πικριας). Hosea 2:6 says, "Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns" (σκολοψιν). So in the Bible that Paul used, this word referred to a thorn or brier, not a stake.

<sup>4</sup> In Galatians 6:11, we find that he mentions that he had to write in large letters, which could indicate that he did not see well.

<sup>5</sup> Tertullian and Jerome held to this view. These piercing headaches could have come from a malaria fever that haunted the coast of the eastern Mediterranean (Barclay, p.288-289).

<sup>6</sup> In the ancient world when people saw epileptic they spat to ward off the evil demon. In Galatians 4:14 Paul says that when the Galatians saw his infirmity, they did not reject him. The word in Greek literally means "you did not spit at me." (Barclay, p.288).

<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the present tense of the verb "buffet" in v.7 indicates that this pain was either constant or recurring for the rest of Paul's life.

the child of God until the Lord gives him permission? That is one lesson of the book of Job. So no problem that comes into your life takes God by surprise. If he allows it, He has a reason. So let's see in the last of v.7:

C. The Purpose of this Problem – Paul states the purpose twice in v.7, “lest I be exalted above measure.” God allowed this problem in Paul's life to prevent the sin of pride. It must have had the effect of keeping him humble. So the problem he had did not come to his life because he was sinning, but actually to keep him *from* sinning. And notice in v.7 that the thorn was “given” to him. What a gift! So be assured, dear child of God, that there is a purpose in any suffering that comes into your life. You may not like God's purpose, but He will work some good out of that problem that you are facing according to Rom. 8:28. Only when you have the right perspective you can view your problems as a gift from the Lord, and not respond with despondency. That is how Paul could say in v.9, “most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities...,” and also say in v.10, “Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities...”

There could be other purposes in God allowing problems into your life. Paul taught in Rom. 5:1-5 and James 1:2-4 that suffering is also a tool God uses for building godly character, including perseverance. Certainly, Paul was a man of rich Christian character because he permitted God to mold and make him in the painful experiences of his life. Or God may allow suffering in your life to get your attention. That is the only way some folks will turn to Him. The story of the Prodigal son is the classic example. He had to hit bottom before he would repent of his sin and return home.

I once heard of a man who was very wealthy and lived in a lovely and magnificent house. He had grown up without having a relationship with God, and then was struck with paralysis, and for many years he had to be wheeled about in a chair, and as a result of that affliction, unable to get out and enjoy the things of the world. But through his affliction his heart turned to the things of God and he found Christ. They used to wheel him down to the gathering of the saints, and trying to half raise himself in that chair he would praise God and say, “O God, I praise Thee for my dear paralysis” (cf. I Thess. 5:18). He knew that if God had not permitted that infirmity to come upon him, he might have lived and died in independence from God.

So Paul had a debilitating problem of some kind. Yet God used it for good, to keep him humble.

So we have seen that pride can be pre-empted by problems. Now let's see another lesson from our text:

### III. PROBLEMS LEAD TO PRAYER

What is the Christian is to do when facing a problem? Paul shows us what to do in this text of Scripture. We are to take it to the Lord in prayer. Rather than pouting about it ... he prayed about it! Every problem is a call to prayer! That's another good thing about problems. Later, Paul wrote in Phil. 4:6, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.” So let's see from our text:

A. The Request of Paul – He says in v.8, “Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.” He not only prayed this for his own benefit but he probably perceived that this problem would hinder his ministry. So Paul did what we normally do. He prayed that the problem would go away. Now there is nothing wrong with asking in this manner. Sometimes God is glorified and His purposes fulfilled by granting marvelous deliverance

from our problems. But we are going to see that it is not always God's will to deliver us from our problems. Now we not only see the request of Paul, but we also see:

B. The Repetition of Paul – Notice again in v.8 that he “pleaded with the Lord three times.” He prayed, and waited for deliverance, which did not come. So he prayed again, and waited for deliverance, but the heavens were silent. The thorn was still there. So he prayed yet again a third time. There was nothing wrong with such praying, for Jesus taught His disciples to “keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking” (Mt. 7:7-Greek). In one or more of His parables He encouraged persistence in prayer (Luke 18:1ff).

Furthermore, Paul's petitions were an echo of Gethsemane. There, Jesus prayed three times that the cup might pass from Him, yet He also prayed, “Not my will, but your will be done.” And so here the servant, emboldened and instructed by the example and teaching of the Master, reiterates his human and natural desire for the removal of the problem three times.

So dear child of God, keep on praying and never give up until you get an answer from God. He'll either say “yes” or “no” or “not now.” Keep praying for the salvation of that loved one. Then, after the third time, Paul got his answer. In v.9 we see:

C. The Refusal of the Lord – Paul asked God to remove his thorn, but instead God said<sup>8</sup> to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Basically, His answer was, “I am not going to take your problem away. Instead, I'm going to give you the grace to deal with the problem.” That's because God had a purpose in his problem.

Have you a thorn, some great trial, some weakness, something that is just burdening your heart? You have prayed and prayed, “O Lord, deliver me from this,” and yet, nothing seems to happen? Well, it may not be the will of God to deliver you (cf. 1 John 5:14). Some teach that it is never God's will for the Christian to remain sick and afflicted. They say that if you have enough faith, God will remove the sickness or affliction. But that is not what Paul is teaching here. What a stunning rebuke to those who preach a health and prosperity gospel and who view affliction and weakness as the absence of God's blessing. What you need to do is stop telling God what to do and start listening to what He wants to do in your life!

So God is not granting his request, but He *is* solving Paul's problem and accomplishing His purposes. And so that leads to my last point that we see in our text, which tells us another good thing about problems in our lives:

#### IV. PROBLEMS CAN LEAD US TO EXPERIENCE GOD'S POWER

Paul says in the last of v.9, “Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” Do you want an easy life, free of trials? So many do. But you know, such a life is void of victory. The real victory does not belong to the cheering fans in the stands, but to the players on the field who endure pain in the conflict. Well, the apostle Paul led one victory for the Lord after another (2 Cor. 2:14). He could only do so by the strength of the Lord. So in the last of v.9 we see that Paul was more than willing to endure the pain and humiliation of his thorn, “that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” The Greek word translated “...may rest upon” (*episkenoō*) conveys the idea of God's power taking up residence in his body, the way His presence was in the tabernacle! As a result, Paul wrote in Phil. 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.”

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<sup>8</sup> The perfect tense of “said” suggest that this reply of God was to settle the matter.

You see, there are two ways of lightening a burden. One is removing the burden, and the other is increasing your strength to bear it more easily. And the latter is normally God's way.

So what power do you want for living? Are you going to rely upon the strength that *you* can muster up, or are you going to trust in the omnipotent Lord to supply you the strength that you need each and every day? In fact, notice the contrast in v.9 between Paul's reference to "my infirmities" and the Lord speak of "My strength." Isn't the Lord's power greater and better? Sure it is! By His power the Lord created the Universe. By His power He healed the sick, calmed the raging sea, and even raised the dead. It is much better to have the Lord's power than our own.

Now how can we experience God's power to help us overcome our problems and weaknesses? First of all:

A. God's Power Is a Gift of His Grace – God told Paul in v.9, "My grace is sufficient for you." He is not talking here about saving grace but *enabling* grace. Grace is the abundant provision of God that He freely bestows upon His children to meet every need in your life. Do you have a need? God has the grace to meet it! 1 Peter 5.10 tells us that our God is "the God of all grace."

Notice also in v.9 that God's grace is sufficient. There is never a shortage of God's grace. It is sufficient for any problem you face, or any need that you have. If you have sinned greatly and need forgiveness, God's grace is greater than your sin. If your problem today is a heavy heart, God's grace will comfort you. If your problem is a temptation, God will give you the victory in that temptation. If you need strength, God's grace will provide strength. Whatever you're facing, God's grace is sufficient and you will never exhaust His grace. You could no more exhaust God's grace than a fish in the ocean could run out of the water it needs to live. When the multitude was hungry in Galilee, His grace was sufficient to feed them, even with five loaves and two fish!

Not only will God's grace give you the power that you need, but secondly, we see that:

B. God's Power Is Perfected in Weakness – He wrote in v.9 God's reply, "My strength is made perfect in weakness. Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Then in the last of v.10 he wrote in conclusion the great, abiding principle, "when I am weak, then I am strong." That seems like a paradox! Yet here is the explanation. The weaker I am the better opportunity Christ has to manifest *His* power in me. God works with broken, weak vessels. As long as we sinners imagine that we are strong, we are likely to rely upon our own strength. But when we recognize our weakness, and trust God to supply His strength, then we can have the power of God in our lives. So if a trial, an incapacity, a limitation, or a weakness deepens our sense of dependence upon Him, it is a blessing, and not a sorrow.

The same principle applies to salvation. You will never trust in the Lord Jesus for forgiveness and salvation as long as you think you are a good person. If you think you can get to that heavenly paradise on your own merits, you will not trust in the merits of Jesus and His atoning death on the cross and His saving grace.

Here, then, is a lesson for those who have to carry some cross of affliction and know they must carry it throughout life. Only when they are emptied can they be filled. I challenge you to understand the paradox spoken by Paul, "When I am weak, then am I strong." God doesn't need our perceived strengths, if that is what we depend upon. He wants to turn our weaknesses and inadequacies into a strength that *He* supplies and receives glory for.

Conclusion: Learning this lesson has been such a blessing to me. You see, as long as I can remember, I had a chronic problem of my own. I had a pretty significant speech impediment

growing up. I stuttered and stammered when I tried to speak. I grew up with the emotional pain of kids making fun of me. Bodily, I was skinny and weaker than most. I would usually be picked last in athletic games. My only strengths were music and math. But I was always self-conscious of my weaknesses.

But through the ministry of West Rome Baptist Church, God began to work in my heart. At youth camp in 1974 I even began to sense that God was calling me to preach. I could not understand it. I thought to myself, "I must be misinterpreting God's call." The very qualities I needed to be a preacher I did not have. I could not speak, and I hated to read due to poor comprehension. I was also shy. But then God helped me to see this truth, "When I am weak, then am I strong." I learned that God would supply me with the strength that I needed to do what He was calling me to do. All I had to do was depend upon Him and the sufficiency of His grace. Sure enough, when I announced my call to preach and began preaching, God helped me to speak freely. In fact, my brother Frank told me just a few months ago that when he heard me preach for the first time, he just about fell out of his chair!

Now do you see why God delights in using weak vessels? Here's the reason. It is stated in 2 Cor. 4:7, "that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God and not from us." You see, when a weak vessel is used of God, then God gets the glory, and not man. 1 Cor. 1:27 & 29 says, "...God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty... that no flesh should glory in His presence." Oh, the wisdom of God!

So if you have a weakness; if you have a problem and God doesn't remove it, remember that God has a purpose in your problem and He will strengthen you to overcome your problems and weaknesses by His grace!

Sources: William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956); Dr. Ernest L. Easley (notes from his sermon on this text dated 5/30/99); E. P. Gould, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Corinthians in An American Commentary on the New Testament*, Alvah Hovey, ed. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887); R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006); H.A. Ironside, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1939); R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 14 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); G. Campbell Morgan, *The Corinthian Letters of Paul* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1946); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:10] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2011); Alan Redpath, *Blessings Out of Buffetings: Studies in Second Corinthians* (Old Tapan, NJ: Revell, 1965); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text dated 11/10/85); Warren W. Wiersbe, *"Be" Series: New Testament Volumes 1 & 2: 2 Corinthians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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