

God is sufficient in our suffering - 2 Corinthians 12 v1-10

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[0 : 00] Christine is going to come and read for us now, thanks. Okay, that's 2 Corinthians chapter 12 on page 1166, beginning at verse 1.

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows. And I know that this man, whether in the body or apart from the body, I do not know, but God knows, was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.

I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations.

[1 : 24] Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me, 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. Thanks very much, Chris.

So keep your Bibles open, please, to 2 Corinthians 12. There's pens and notes being passed around, if you find that helpful to follow along, or write down any questions you'd like to ask afterwards, or chat through.

They're available. Just put your hand up and one will be given to you. As they're doing that, there's a little sheet at the back on the table.

[2 : 56] Connor is going to be doing something rather strange. Connor O'Neill. Maybe that's not surprising, is it? You can ask Connor what that is.

Really exciting. And it's for compassion, so you can just have a chat to Connor about that afterwards. He'll be here next week as well, if you don't get talking to him.

So, just to keep everybody together on the same page, we've been going through a series entitled Healing Through Suffering. And this is the last in that series.

And I trust that this talk, what we look at today, is in some ways a summary. It's bringing together all the different elements that we've looked at over the last number of weeks and bringing it together to conclusion.

So, a wonderful passage. 2 Corinthians 12. Let's ask for God's help as we look at it together. Amen. And God is able to bless you abundantly so that in all things, at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

[4 : 30] Father, we need you to bless us now with your Holy Spirit so that we may abound in life and in all that we do.

We need your grace. We need your help. So, help us. Amen. So, paradise or thorns?

What would you prefer? Enjoying an experience of heaven or walking through the realities of suffering? Well, I know what I would choose.

It's a bit of a no-brainer, isn't it? Well, Paul, it seems, the writer of this text, has tasted both. He had an experience of heaven.

Have a look at verse 2. He says, I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Well, it seems like he's actually talking about someone else.

[5 : 44] He starts off by saying, I know a man in Christ. I know this guy. But, as we read on, it becomes clear that he's actually talking about his own experience. So, have a look down in verse 6.

He says, even if I should choose to boast, even if I should boast about my experience of heaven, I would not be a fool because I would be speaking the truth.

But I refrain. I'm not going to do it. So, no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say or because of these surpassingly great revelations.

So, this is Paul's experience. But what's he actually experienced? Well, look at the rest of verse 2. He's talking about the third heaven.

We'll get to that in a minute. He says, whether it was in the body, an out-of-body experience almost, or of the body, was it a vision in his mind?

[6 : 45] He says, I do not know. It was so amazing. I couldn't quite comprehend it all. But God knows. It was real. It was tangible.

Verse 4. I was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.

It's as if God has taken the Apostle Paul and given him a tour of paradise itself. An experience of being in God's presence.

No words could describe the wonder of all that he saw. Can you imagine this? Wouldn't you want to experience this?

taken into paradise just for a moment of time, escaping this world of all its struggles and all its hardships.

[7 : 49] How amazing that would be to be basking in the beauty and the brilliance of God. Wouldn't you want that?

Well, paradise was not his only experience. There was also the reality of thorns or suffering.

Have a look down at verse 7, the middle of verse 7. Therefore, in order to keep me from being conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh.

I was given suffering. A messenger of Satan to torment me. From paradise to thorns.

From heaven to suffering. Paul faced the reality, jump down to verse 10. He describes what it was like.

[8 : 50] Weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, difficulties. Now here's the surprise as he kind of shows us these two experiences.

He's telling us that the thorns were of greater value than the vision of paradise. How could that be? How could the daily grind of suffering be of more value, be worth to him something far greater than a moment's glimpse of heaven?

Well, he tells us in verse 9. He said to me, God 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 about my weaknesses. I'm not going to boast about the experience of paradise, but I'm going to boast I'm going to tell you all about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me.

[10 : 08] You see, a one-off experience of paradise, as great as it may be, lasts, well, just a moment. But the daily pain of thorns leads to a continuous experience of grace and God's perfect power in your life.

You see, we learn more and we grow more through the thorns of life. Paul Mallard, that's one of the, the author of one of the books we've been encouraging people to read.

It was called Invest Your Sufferings. He put it like this. Suffering, he says, is the best commentary on God's character.

And pain is the finest exposition of his excellencies. We discover more about God's grace when we come to an end in ourselves.

You will never know that God is all you need until God is all you have got. You see, the thorns we experience in life pin us to God so that we know him, love him, and enjoy him, and know in a deeper way the blessings that he has to give us.

[11 : 36] So let's see how all this is true. We're going to focus our attention on the last few verses of what we read. Okay, how do we know all this is true?

First, God is sovereign over our thorns. The thorns that we experience in life are all under God's sovereign loving control.

Look at verse 7 again. Therefore, in order to keep me from being conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

Now, of course, it's not a literal thorn that he got when he was out picking blackberries. It was a kind of painful suffering. We're not quite sure what it was.

It could be physical, it could be an illness or a disability he had. It might be spiritual, a temptation or a struggle in his life. It could have been all the opposition and persecution or a combination of the whole lot.

[12:41] Whatever it was, verse 7, we're told it caused him torment. It was an ongoing painful experience.

But this thorn is not a random event which God has no control over. Look again at what he says in verse 7. He says, I was given a thorn.

This is something from God. Well, you say, hang on a minute, how can it be from God? Did you not read what it says? Because it says it's a messenger of Satan.

But it is something God has allowed and God is in control of. Let's have a look more about that.

Keep your finger in 1 Corinthians 12 and go back to Job chapter 1.

You remember we looked at Job a few weeks ago. Job chapter 1. Job was a good and faithful man who suffered terribly in his life.

[13:54] There were many thorns that he experienced. He lost his financial security. All his animals were slaughtered or taken away.

He lost all his children and their wives and husbands in natural disasters. And he lost his health, a terrible skin disease.

One thorn after another he experienced. Now the story or the account of Job tells us how all this suffering came about. Chapter 1 verse 8.

Then the Lord said to Satan have you considered my servant Job? Now isn't that interesting? It's God who initiates the conversation.

God comes he says Satan you know Job have you thought about him? There's no one like him on earth. He's blameless and upright a man who fears God and shuns evil.

[14:55] Well what's Satan's reply? Well does Job fear God for nothing? Satan replied have you put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?

Well I mean you've blessed him with the works of his hands so that his flocks and herds are spread out throughout the land but you stretch out your hands and strike every thing he has and he will surely curse you to your face.

I mean the only reason why Job is following you is because you've blessed him so much you remove those blessings and you'll see what happens. Verse 12 the Lord said to Satan very well then everything he has is in your power but there's limits on the man himself do not lay a finger then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and if we read on we see there's where the suffering starts but let's be clear Satan may bring terrible affliction God God may allow Satan and give him permission but it's God who is in control Satan needs God's permission he can't do anything without God say so in fact the author of Job wants us to see that the suffering that Job experienced is ultimately from

God go to the very end of the book of Job chapter 42 right to the very end where we have a conclusion chapter 42 verse 11 have you got it chapter 42 verse 11 all Job's brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house they comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the Lord had brought on him let's go back to 2nd Corinthians now I think what we've just seen in Job's life is what we're seeing in Paul's life

God is the one who is ultimately in control that means for us nothing happens in your life without God say so the thorns that you experience in life the illness you may struggle with the heartache of a loss of a loved one the pain of our disappointments they're not random chance events your life is in the sovereign hands of God and nothing happens without his say so and if God is in supreme control of our life and our world and all that goes on then it means he is a God who not only helps us but uses it all for good purposes so second God uses our thorns for good

[18:31] God had given to Paul an experience of paradise he had had that vision but here was the danger his experience the visions the revelations he had could make Paul proud in other words it could make him self reliant where he could kind of boast about himself and go well because of this

well I don't need God anymore so he tells us in verse seven the middle of verse seven therefore in order to keep me from being conceited to stop me from becoming proud I was given a thorn in my flesh it's like he's telling us I don't want to become so proud in my life that I think that I can go through life without God so God gives to Paul a thorn in his flesh to keep him from becoming self sufficient self reliant you see most of the time we see self reliance and independence as a good thing we celebrate it in the well known poem

Invictus do you know that poem Invictus Invictus is the Latin for unconquered listen to how the last verse goes of that famous poem it goes like this it matters not how straight the gate how charged with punishments the scroll I am the master of my fate and I am the captain of my soul but the reality is we are not invincible or unconquerable we do not control our destinies and suffering reminds us of that every time we stand around the grave of a loved one to say goodbye we're confronted with the fact that I am not the master of my fate I'm not the captain of my soul now this is not saying that suffering is good in and of itself and that

God takes pleasure and delight in seeing the struggles we go through but God uses the thorns for good purposes it makes us humble it helps us to see our desperate need of God in some ways our thorns our suffering make us like a little child dependent on their parents just like baby Elodie is dependent on her parents can't do life without them without the parents she won't survive and in a sense that is what happens with us the thorns we experience in life strips away our independence undermines our self reliance banishes our pride and drives us humbly to our loving saving God so God is sovereign over our thorns God uses our thorns for good and third God is sufficient in our thorns our natural reaction when we suffer is to ask God to take it away isn't that our first response to suffering and it's how Paul responded to look at verse eight he says three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me now I know many of you have been there crying out through your tears shouting in frustration to God groaning in your hurts Lord take it away please heal me remove this thorn and some of you pray this very same thing for your loved ones as you watch on and as you look on in their struggle and their heartache and their pain you cry out to the Lord Lord would you take it away from them well God does hear and God does answer rather than remove the thorn he gives grace and power to make us strong if you have ever prayed this same kind of prayer to God and ask the Lord to remove that thorn in your life and it is still there listen to what God says to you verse nine my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness I read this week the story of a guy called Daniel Ritchie listen to what he says it goes like this he says

[24 : 18] I was born without arms that is the best way to summarize my story I stepped into suffering at birth my pain almost swallowed me but Christ showed me how much greater he was I used to think that being born without arms was the most horrible thing that could ever happen to a person in Christ he has helped me to say that the worst and the most painful thing that has ever happened to me is also the best thing that has ever happened to me I am thankful for my pain all of the frustration that has come with it has reaped a bounty that I never could have produced on my own God stepped in and carried me along in my weakness letting me taste his grace and his strength and love in new ways in my pain he has magnified so many of his attributes in a mystery that we will always struggle to understand suffering is the channel or the conduit through which grace and power flow to us from

God suffering is the channel through which grace and power flow to us from God God allows the thorn to remain so that we may know and experience Christ in a deeper way far more than a temporary glimpse of paradise could ever give you see the place of healing comes when we no longer demand that God remove the thorn rather we humbly come and ask to receive of his grace one writer put it like this those in Christ are to allow the thorns to pin us to Christ who imparts grace to the sufferer our thorns bind us to

Christ so we never lose him and he is with us so in your cancer we can say Christ is sufficient in our disability Christ is sufficient in our battle with sin Christ is sufficient in our struggle and our fight with suffering Christ is sufficient in your darkest thoughts Christ will sustain you in your greatest fears his power will keep you look at the end of verse nine therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ power might rest on me so Christ is sovereign over our thorns he uses our thorns for good he is sufficient in our thorns and then

God exalts Christ through our thorns you see as we receive God's grace and are strengthened by his power we display the glory of Christ that's what we've been thinking about this morning we

talked about it earlier God blesses you abundantly gives you all that you need in all things and at all times all that you need but we receive all that we need we receive God's grace and his power so that we might display the glory of Christ look at verse 10 he says that is why for Christ's sake I delight in the weaknesses the insults the hardships the persecutions and difficulties for Christ's sake you see the sufferings that you and I might go through are not ultimately about me it's about Christ who supplies all that we need so that all might see that Christ is sufficient I'm going to say that again because I want us to grasp it the sufferings we go through are not ultimately about me and my life it's all about Christ who supplies all that we need so that all might see that Christ is sufficient Derek Redmond you might know him as an athlete was running in the semifinals of the Barcelona Olympics and as he rounded the last bend he fell in agony unable to get up and from the stands this man came running onto the track it was Derek's father he came to his son lifted him to his feet put his arm underneath his son's shoulders and they began to walk and as they crossed that line 65,000 people in that stadium rose to their feet to applaud not the winner of the race nobody knew who the winner was on that day not the athlete who was carried across the line but to applaud the father in my weakness in your weakness the grace of

[30 : 36] Christ comes alongside and lifts us up and gets underneath our shoulders and gives us his power so that the grace and the power and the wonder and the beauty of Christ would be displayed to the world so that all might know that Christ is enough in your struggles in our sufferings Christ gets the applause that is why verse 10 for Christ's sake for his glory I delight in weakness it's not a forced smile or jumping around with joy but that inner deep delight that when I am weak I am strong people will see grace in your life and he will get the glory what we're saying here is that the sufferings we go through are not about me and they're not about you in fact the thorns in our flesh point beyond us to the crown of thorns that pierced

Christ's flesh suffering my suffering points to Christ's suffering the one who received the thorn of judgment for me so that grace might continually and forever overflow to me Christ prayed in the garden three times Lord remove this cup from me not my will but your will be done and God answered that prayer and grace has flowed from him to us all that we need in all times in all of life a grace that is so sufficient a power that is so strong it will keep you in your worst days of sufferings and will bring you to paradise itself not just a glimpse or a moment vision of paradise but eternal joy forever and forever and on that day all heaven and all earth will join in unison and applaud the sufficient grace and power of

God for your life and my life Christ gets the glory through through your sufferings and people will see in your life that Christ is sufficient for you and for all who will turn to him applaud him he deserves it let us pray father we feel the tension we feel the wrestle in our own hearts and lives to understand these big questions of thorns and suffering that we experience but yet in the midst of our wrestle and struggle we have come to see that you are sufficient

Christ is enough we praise you we thank you today that you do not leave us or abandon us but will give us the power and strength that we need to ensure that we will go from this life into our eternal destiny that can never be changed the new heaven and the new earth we look forward to that and right now we say thank you for your grace that will sustain us in Jesus name we pray amen we are going to sing and it's a song we can sing in response Christ is my reward and all of my and things of life to love