

God's Power and Our Weakness

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[0 : 00] 12 and we'll read the first 10 verses, 2 Corinthians 12, reading the first 10 verses. This is Paul speaking, Paul speaking of visions and revelations that he had, very unique visions and revelations that he had himself, and that he'll go on to explain or not to be considered the measure of his being an apostle, but as we'll see that God gives him that thorn in the flesh to humble him, but let's read verse 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. I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven, whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know, God knows, 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, and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast except of my weaknesses, though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I'd 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.

So, therefore, 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. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 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.

Amen. All of us, whether preacher or hearer alike, all of us are aware of our many weaknesses, our insufficiencies, our struggles. Perhaps these aspects of our lives are made the more poignant at this time of lockdown, the battling that's going on in our minds and even in our bodies to sustain a kind of grip on the realities of this present situation. And above all, the spiritual warfare that exists at all times. And we cry out, cry out that we're utterly insufficient for the work that God has given us to do. We even echo the words of Psalm 34, verse 19, the troubles that afflict the just, the number many be. There's so much that pains our hearts, so much that causes us to cry out to the Lord, to plead with them, to remove these things that dig so deep into our hearts and cause so much distress to our souls. We pray and we pray again that God would remove them to remove them to be removed from our hearts, our minds, our lives, those things that are causing us so much pain and continued pain. When that happens, so often we hear God's voice speak to us in our need. My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

[3 : 58] And so we're comforted, comforted by the assurance that the God, that God who loves his children, that he's not going to permit you to endure anything that you can't withstand. You're his beloved.

And so be assured then with the truth of the words that we sing so often in Psalm 103, just as a father loves his child, so God loves those who fear his name. And to know that in that love, in that perfect love, God will permit you to endure what Paul would speak of here in relation to his own suffering. God will permit you to endure at times, indeed many times, a thorn in the flesh.

We'll come to explore what that means in a moment, but just to keep that before us at this time. A thorn in the flesh, but not to harm you, not to somehow spite you, not in any sort of malicious sense, but to teach you, to teach you to rest in him, to know that someone once said many years ago, in my own presence, God is too kind to be cruel. And when God does permit you to endure that thorn in the flesh, remember, it's for your good and for his glory. And so in this second Lord's Day service of this day, what we might call our evening service, and we're still afternoon this evening service, in this time of worship, then I pray that what we're going to consider this evening will be a comfort and

a blessing to you all. But these days that we're living in and living through, these are days that are causing for everybody an increased weight of strain. These times are very much times of testing and trying, testing of your faith, trying of your faith. In these times of difficulty, remember, God hasn't abandoned you. Lord Jesus has promised to be with you always, even to the very end of the age. Your times are in his hands, his safe, secure hands. God's working with you and through you, even in these times of struggle, the struggles that you're facing even now, whether it be through these times of restriction, whether it be in particular circumstances, particular providences that God has given you. Be aware that he is with you always. And to be aware the more that his power and weakness, your weakness, my weakness, his power, God's power, reveals his great love for you and brings you to have that utter dependence upon him and him alone, on God without whom you or I would be nothing.

And so be encouraged then to see God's purposes in permitting, you know, these times of weakness that we all have. That these times of weakness actually bring good through them. And to be encouraged with the passage that we read there in 2 Corinthians 12, where Paul writes of his thorn in the flesh. And to consider firstly, this aspect of humbling, God humbling a believer through what God permits in this thorn in the flesh. As we read in the first half of the chapter, Paul had been given, many years before he writes this, but Paul had been given a very special revelation of heaven.

Paul had been permitted in vision to see and to hear things that ordinarily human beings, certainly the sign of eternity, are not permitted to experience. He'd been permitted to experience such sights and such sounds of heavenly glory that brought an elation that he could have boasted before others about.

[8 : 11] He could have used what he'd seen and what he'd heard to boast of himself as an apostle, to add to his credentials that he could have given towards others. He'd been given what ordinarily, as we said, saints of God had not been given to hear and to see. But Paul wouldn't boast of his unique experience. Instead, he's going to show that that unique experience of heavenly splendor must not influence other people to think of Paul more highly than they ought. Yes, Paul was an apostle of the Lord. Paul makes clear that he's to be regarded by others as the Lord's servant. The Lord's servant whom God had given a particular work to do in proclaiming the gospel to the gospel to Jew and to Gentile. And so Paul tells us here in verse 7, therefore, so therefore, to keep me from being too elated by 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 being too elated.

Paul's telling us here that he needed to be humbled. Paul needed to be kept from any conceit, any arrogance, any self-importance about himself because of the privilege that he'd been given in hearing the signs of heaven and seeing the sights of heaven. And so to keep Paul from that conceit, God has given him this thorn in the flesh or permitted Paul to have this thorn in the flesh. If Paul had exercised this arrogance and conceit, that would have damaged his work as an apostle. That would have damaged his servant nature. And so God has given him this thorn in the flesh to humble him. And you who profess and confess the Lord Jesus in your life as a Christian, in the life that God's given you as a believer, you've been given privilege after privilege. You've been given that privilege to know God.

You've been given that privilege to walk with the Savior. You've been empowered by the Holy Spirit. You've been given that privilege to know God. You've been given that privilege to serve the freedom to serve God.

There will be particular times when particular thorns in the flesh will be given to you. That God permits you to endure for your sake, for your growth in grace, for your continued dependence in God and your growth of faith in him and in him alone. Well, we've spoken a lot about this thorn in the flesh, but what of that thorn? What's Paul speaking of here?

That indeed God permitted him to endure that God permits you to endure? Well, remember Paul had been given a special revelation of, in fact, of the source of that thorn. We're told that, in fact, a messenger of Satan. In the mystery of divine providence, God had permitted Satan to torment Paul to cause Paul to have a particular affliction that was so grievous to Paul.

[11 : 40] Just in the same way, remember that God permitted Satan to torment Job. You go to the Old Testament, Job was tormented by particular, by many torments that Satan was permitted to give to Job.

These afflictions that were there to test Job's faith in God. You read in Job chapter 1 that even through the horrors of these afflictions, Job did not sin or charge God with wrong. Neither did Paul, and neither must any of us when we experience these sore providences, these sore providences that come our way, all under the sovereign purposes of God. What was that thorn in the flesh that Paul speaks of here? Well, I'm certainly not going to speculate simply because there's no detail in the passage. Paul doesn't specify exactly what that thorn was, what that affliction was.

But there's no doubt that Paul suffered through what God had permitted him to have. There's no doubt it was extremely painful. The very word that Paul uses here for thorns speaks of something that was very sharp.

[12:53] Something like a splinter or maybe a pointed pole that's driven into the ground. You know what it's like if you've got a splinter in your hand or a thorn that's wedged in your finger.

If you've ever had a fish hook that's stuck in your finger, you know exactly how painful that can be. So Paul's speaking of something so painful, so intense in that pain.

Something that wouldn't go away. As I said, we're not going to speculate exactly what that painful experience was. We can certainly bring application to our own and often very varied and difficult providences that God permits us to endure for your good.

To humble you, to humble you before God and to humble you before others too. In fact, to keep you dependent on God at all times. Maybe particular thorns that at the moment you're enduring under the express permission of God.

To mention two particular thorns. Of course, there are many, but two particular thorns that Christians are given by permission of God. And through these thorns, God is glorified.

[14:13] to think, first of all, of what ecological struggles. But it's given each one of you particular personalities.

Particular personalities with particular aspects to these personalities that many of you, many of us are very self-conscious about. Maybe an introvert as opposed to an extrovert.

Or a retiring personality as opposed to having an out-to-night personality. But God has given you that personality. God has, if you like, made you, you. You're formed in personality as God has granted you.

And we see that in the disciples, for example. Peter, the impetuous, rash disciple. Or James and John, the brothers whom Jesus nicknamed the sons of thunder.

Obviously, I mean, very fiery personalities, very fiery natures. Or Nathaniel, Nathaniel, a man in whom was no deceit. And then there are the quiet disciples of whom we know very little about.

[15:18] James, son of Ophiis, evidently such a quiet individual. Someone who preferred to remain in the background. And you know, there can be times when we find that the personalities that God has given you, we can sometimes find that they might appear to be a trial and a burden.

But God's ways are perfect. Even the way that he's formed you to be a servant. To use the personality that God has given you to encourage others of a similar personality.

To do what we're going to see in a moment, to reveal the power of God shining even through that personality. To show God's power that triumphs over weakness.

And then there are the physical struggles. It seems very much from various passages of Paul's letters that Paul had defective eyesight. Now whether that was the thorn in the flesh that Paul's speaking of, we don't know.

But there's no doubt that, yes, over the centuries, the Lord's people have known particular physical disabilities that, by their very nature, have been very, very painful and distressing.

[16:31] And yet, at the same time, through these physical disabilities, through these physical hardships, that we can still testify to God blessing us through these ailments and God using them for his glory.

There's many examples, so many examples of Christian believers through the centuries testifying to the truth, the truth that the world scoffs at, but the truth that God uses for his glory, that God will use and use through are various weaknesses.

People like Joni Erickson, the well-known Christian author, the lady who was paralysed from the neck down age 16 in a diving accident, and yet 50 years later still proclaiming God's goodness through her pain, through her intense physical disability.

As her carer commented, or recently commented, she doesn't rant or grumble even though she's immersed in chronic pain and cannot use her body. Suffering is her constant companion, yet the Spirit of God is her comforter, so she's always gracious.

There are many, even in her own congregation, some kind of physical illness, physical disability, physical affliction, some kind of ailment that God has permitted you to have that, that in fact is a blessing.

[18:00] As Paul declares here, God's power made perfect in your weakness. God revealing his power through you, despite, you might say, even because of your weakness, for God's glory and for God's praise.

And we've mentioned these two kinds of thorns that God does permit us to have, that God doesn't take away. He doesn't take away these things that are and can't be so painful.

We still pray for the removal as Paul prayed that God would take away his particular affliction. We see that in verse 8. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that the thorn should leave me. Paul was in so much pain through this unspecified affliction. Three times he prayed that God would take away that affliction. On three separate occasions he's praying he's in such distress that he's pleading with the Lord, take this severe affliction away from me.

The fact that we're told three times indicates just how serious that pain was. But three times God answered him with a no.

[19:14] And with that no, Paul in his faithfulness submits to the will of God and following the example of Jesus. Jesus remembered when he prayed to the Father in Gethsemane that the cup of Jesus' intense suffering be removed from him.

And God declares, no, that you will drink of that cup and drink to the full. And Jesus declares, not my will, but your will be done. Maybe you've been praying that prayer that God removes from you a particular thorn in the flesh and God hasn't answered your prayer according to your desire.

You still remain faithful to him. You still bow to his will. You still trust him for his grace. You still trust him. Oh, that frowning providence that hides his smiling face.

And it's that grace that Paul acknowledged in what surely is one of the greatest word of encouragement to any distressed believer. Verse 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. As we said, Paul's prayed these three times for that thorn to be removed.

[20:33] But the answer that Paul receives there as we read is not what he expected. The thorn would remain, but something else remained in his heart and in his mind.

That was the assuring word of God, the assuring word of the God of all comfort. God's grace would be that constant in Paul's life. That grace that saved Paul.

That grace that continued to save Paul. That grace that would be sufficient for Paul to be more than a conqueror through Christ who loved him. Paul would continue in his suffering.

Paul would continue to have the impact of that thorn in the flesh in his life. But his faith in God wouldn't diminish. His service for Christ wouldn't falter.

The power of God that enabled Paul to rise and rise above his afflictions and bear witness to the grace of God. That remained. The grace that saves and keeps saving Paul would testify too because that grace was upon Paul and that grace was sufficient for him.

[21:44] So Paul could testify that God's grace was perfectly adequate for Paul in his life and in his ministry. Paul had never forgotten God's word that God gave him that these 14 years before and God said my power is made perfect in weakness.

That word strengthened Paul then. It continued to strengthen Paul and Paul practiced that truth that God had given him all these years before.

And I pray that that testimony that Paul gives us here is your testimony in your weakness. These great words that we've got here that indicate that you who are in Christ yes, acknowledge your weakness but remember that what's the more evident is Christ's strength working through these weaknesses.

So thank God for the weaknesses that God has permitted you to endure. That through these weaknesses God's power is made evident. Of course that reality is seen supremely in the cross of Christ.

It was there in the cross the weakness of Christ was apparent there in the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. Jesus' life ebbing away. death taking the life of the life giver.

[23 : 08] But the power of God was demonstrated there on that cross. The Lord Jesus bearing the sins of his people. The power of God was seen in the cross and the defeat of sin and the defeat of Satan.

That power that would be demonstrated three days later in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. That's that power and weakness that Paul rejoiced in.

That's that power and weakness that you and I have to rejoice in as we seek to follow the Lord Jesus in our weakness and know that truly his grace is sufficient for us.

So Paul could rejoice in his weaknesses. The weaknesses that God had permitted him to endure that the more revealed the strength that Paul knew that wasn't from himself but that strength that he derived from the Lord Jesus.

I mean Paul could actually speak of his being content with his weaknesses you see there in verse 10. That grace of contentment that Paul tells us elsewhere in Philippians that the grace of contentment that Paul had learned through his weaknesses and through the abiding thorn in his flesh.

[24 : 25] I pray that's your testimony through your weaknesses. And Paul here could proclaim that when I'm weak then I'm strong. And he says these words not for his own sake but for the sake of Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Paul could proclaim that that strength that he had derived from the power of Christ in his life. That power that Paul could claim and proclaim and proclaim that power that enabled Paul to do everything that God asked him to do through Christ who strengthened him.

Paul's contentment wasn't any sort of quick fix contentment. It wasn't any kind of pie in the sky wishful thinking. Paul wrote these words from a heart that knew many afflictions and yet God used these afflictions to reveal his great power through Paul.

And so I pray that you're encouraged in the path that God has given you to walk on. A path that a course of life that God's given you and given you alone.

so don't despise these weaknesses that accompanied you in that path. Give thanks to God for them. Give thanks that he will have the glory through your abiding in Christ.

[25 : 52] That he will have the glory through Christ's power revealed through you in your testimony of faith and perseverance as you give God the glory and give God glory for all that he's given you.

for all things so that we can cry out in gratitude and thanks giving to God. Yes, for the weaknesses that he's given to you and to each one of us but that his power is revealed through his weaknesses for his name's sake and for his glory.

Amen. Let us pray. Our Lord and God and Heavenly Father you have given to us much affliction and yet Lord through these afflictions you bless us and you reveal that power and weakness even your power even that power that's revealed through weak individuals such as ourselves so that we can testify of your greatness of your love of your power of your might.

Lord that where there are these afflictions may we know that you do not give them to us out of any sense of hurt or pain or malice but that all things truly do work together for good to those who love you who are called according to your purpose and so Lord we rest in you you who are God you who are our Lord our Heavenly Father help us to know that you give to us that which glorifies your name and that seeks to further the cause of your kingdom even here and there use us we pray use us weak fragile jars of clay use us in the service of your name and we pray these things in Jesus name Amen Well we're going to close now in Psalm 36 Psalm 36 from verse 5 to verse 10

Your steadfast love is great O Lord it reaches heaven high your faithful this is wonderful standing to the sky Psalm 36 verse 5 to 10 to God's praise your steadfast love is great O Lord it reaches heaven high your faithful as his wonder rule your righteousness is very great my mountains high and sea your righteousness this is my ocean that O man is to thee how precious is your steadfast love put on the exit bombs

[29 : 50] He's within your hearts and within from streams of your delight.

For within you is the source of life in your life we see light.

To those who know you have said your God, your strength has loved in heart.

May it your righteousness to those of you have died.

Let's close with the benediction. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

[31 : 08] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.