

The King's Thorn

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[0 : 00] 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verse 9. The Lord Jesus Christ says to his servant Paul, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

We've been in 2 Corinthians for a long time now. It's been plenty of months and we're nearing the end. We have a couple more weeks left. But in this passage, in these words from the Lord and Savior to the Apostle Paul, we reach the summit.

Friends, this is the climax. This is the crescendo of the whole entire book. My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

These are strengthening words from the lips of our Savior. And if you think about our Savior's life, it actually gives more depth and meaning to these words. Our Savior is not one who stood aloof from human weakness and was a distant observer.

He was one who entered into the very depths of it. The Lord Jesus Christ knew all the pain and all the helplessness and all the vulnerability that comes with human weakness.

[1 : 15] You can just think of the Garden of Gethsemane pleading with the Lord. And yet when Paul asks this Lord for healing, Jesus doesn't give it.

For now the thorn of weakness remains and it becomes the arena of God's blessing. My grace is sufficient for you, Paul. My power is made perfect in weakness.

Now Paul mentions this thorn in the most interesting place, doesn't he? He's just spent the first six verses of chapter 12 telling us about how God drew him up into the heights of heaven.

He says, I was brought all the way to the third heaven, which is just a Jewish way of saying into the highest of highest. Very, very close to God. He even says, I was brought up into the paradise of God.

Paul saw visions and revelations of God. He heard things that human words cannot convey and that human minds cannot comprehend.

[2 : 19] He saw God in all of his beauty and glory. And yet in verse 7, Paul tells us that he's being pinned down to the earth.

He's given a thorn in the flesh. He's experiencing deep weakness. And I find it very interesting in a letter where Paul is at pains to convince the Corinthians that they can have confidence in him once again.

He spends so much time highlighting his utter weakness. Notice how in verses 1 to 6, Paul speaks about these revelations of his in the third person.

Look at verse 2. I know a man in Christ. Verse 3. I know that this man, and then verse 5, on behalf of this man.

These are Paul's revelations, and he's referring to himself in the third person. It's a bit of a weird thing to do. But it's a rhetorical move of humility. Paul is saying, I had these visions, and I had these revelations, and I could boast about them, but I'm actually going to distance myself from them.

[3 : 28] And it's not until verse 7, when he mentions the thorn of weakness, that Paul starts to use the first person and say, a thorn was given to me.

Because Paul wants to be identified with his weaknesses very, very intentionally. Now, why does Paul do this?

Why? I think there's a couple reasons. First, because he wants us to understand the upside-down nature of the gospel. God's power is experienced, lo and behold, not most powerfully in our great moments of ecstasy and revelation and vision, not when we feel strongest.

But God's power is revealed in the midst of weakness, most intensely. That's upside-down nature of the gospel. But secondly, Paul wants us to see, and this is where I want to land for a little while, he wants us to see our personal weakness in the light of Christ's grace and power.

I think that's why the thorn is anonymous. Did you ever think about that? Paul talks about a thorn, but he doesn't give us a whole lot of detail about what in the world this thorn is.

[4 : 46] I mean, it clearly doesn't sound like a very fun thing. And there's many guesses that have made throughout church history about this. I mean, we could go on for ages about all the guesses people have made about it.

But they're kind of grouped up into two categories. Some people think this is something physical. Maybe Paul was going blind. Maybe he had a physical disease or ailment, something that was nagging him and reminding him of his physical weakness.

And some people think it was something more relational. Paul had opponents. Paul had people who didn't like him. Paul had people who wanted to put him down and were a constant nagging pain in the rear end.

So maybe it was people. But no one really knows. No one knows what the thorn is. And I think Paul leaves it anonymous very intentionally and for pastoral reasons.

Because by leaving it anonymous, he invites us to see our own weaknesses, which are many and varied, in the thorn.

[5 : 52] We can identify with the thorn. We can say, I have my own thorn. And thus we can come to receive Christ's words to Paul as Christ's words to us here and now.

My grace is sufficient for you. For my power is made perfect in weakness. Paul needed strengthening words.

And so do we. We need strengthening. Because we're weak. We're helpless. We don't like it. And we don't like to admit it. But we are weak. Weakness has infiltrated every area of our lives in one way or another. You know, each of us experiences weakness in different forms.

For some of us, it is physical. It's physical ailment and it's physical degeneration. For some of us, it's relational. We know what it's like to have broken relationships that no matter how hard we try, they're never mended.

[6 : 57] And we know what it's like to lose relationships that were so dear to us. There's financial, there's intellectual, there's moral brokenness in all these areas.

And each of us responds to weakness differently. Some of us work harder to compensate for our weakness. Maybe I can fix it. Some of us give up in despair and surrender to our weakness.

Some of us constantly try to prove ourselves to others as if we're trying to make up for our weakness. And some of us withdraw from others trying to hide our weakness so they can't see it. And when we experience weakness, there's a myriad of feelings and emotions that are drawn up within the depths of our souls. Feelings of pain and shame, of fatigue and exhaustion, of inadequacy and failure.

Of fear and vulnerability. And it's in the midst of this torrent of emotions and in the midst of deep weakness that the restless and pained human soul begins to ask questions.

[8 : 13] Life's deepest and most important questions often come up when we're feeling weak. Like, what's the purpose of this? What's the purpose of this? How should I live and respond in the midst of this?

What in the world is God doing all this? These deep questions that arise in the midst of weakness. So I want to spend the rest of our time asking these questions a little bit.

What is the purpose of my weakness? See, brothers and sisters, it's in the midst of weakness that we often feel like it's meaningless. This question haunts us.

Why? Why this? And it can lead us to despair and depression. It can lead us to cynicism and bitterness. I remember meeting with a dear friend of mine a few months ago who's had this physical illness for some years now.

And he said, this is the question that haunts me in the middle of the night, Jordan, when I can't sleep because of pain. Is what is the purpose of this? Now we need to be careful in answering this question.

[9 : 29] Because we dare not wade too deeply into the mysterious depths of divine providence. There are things we just don't know. And there are times when we just, it's wiser just to be silent. But I think our passage gives us at least two purposes.

At least two. Which are closely related. Verse 7. It's mentioned twice in verse 7. At the beginning and at the end. So to keep me from being conceited, because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh.

A messenger of Satan to harass me. Here it is again. To keep me from becoming conceited. Somehow, weakness helps bring us to a place of humility and dependence on the Lord. And then the second is in verse 10. Look at verse 10. For the sake of Christ then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities, says Paul. For the sake of Christ. Christ. So somehow, for the goodness of Christ's kingdom, somehow to honor Christ's name and to bring him a glory, there is weakness. [10:49] So in a mysterious way, it's for our good and Christ's glory. Now don't misunderstand me here. I understand this is very hard to comprehend. Because when we experience weakness, we have two kind of instinctual gut reactions.

Either God is punishing me for my sinfulness or lack of faith or something. Which is completely wrong. Because if Paul is in weakness, surely he was the least sinful and the most faithful of all of Christ's followers.

But there's also this gut reaction that we have is, maybe God's indifferent towards me. Maybe he doesn't care. Maybe he doesn't actually love me. And we can start to doubt the goodness and the faithfulness of God to us.

But what Paul is doing is he's actually claiming the exact opposite here. He's saying that weakness can actually, in one mysterious sense, be a gift from God in which we come to depend on his grace more deeply.

In weakness, we come to recognize our need more deeply. And it humbles us. And we realize we need to lean more deeply into the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[12:04] And interestingly, when that happens, the grace and the strength and the sufficiency of Jesus' power in the midst of weakness starts to shine through our lives so that people start to see his power and his beauty in very unlikely circumstances.

And Jesus Christ's name starts to be lifted high. His grace starts to be highlighted. His power starts to be seen. And so you get this interesting dynamic that the purpose of weakness is in some sense to bring us to greater dependence on Jesus and in some sense to highlight the greatness of Jesus in our lives.

Friends, I can't tell you why that's the case. I just feel like the scriptures are saying that's where you have to go with this. Now let me try to give you a couple examples to illustrate down to earth a bit what I'm actually talking about.

First example, J.I. Packer. What a man. What an example. Friends, it's important for you to know that this man, who is such a prolific author and has blessed so many lives, the fruit of his labors have come out of intense weakness.

Do you know that when he was 10 years old, he was hit by a truck? And he had a hole in his skull that he had to have a metal plate covering for a whole decade after that.

[13:43] It meant he couldn't play sports. It meant he couldn't really interact very well with his schoolmates. And so he had a lonely and isolated childhood in many respects.

But you know what his parents did after he came home from the hospital when he was 10 years old? They bought him a typewriter. And they gave him his first typewriter.

And he started to learn to write. And while he didn't stop writing, and to this day, he writes every word of every lecture, every word of every sermon, and every word of every book on that typewriter that he got when he was 10 years old.

And people just transcribe it to make it into books, put it on a computer or something. But it's this wonderful picture of a way in which what seems like an awful, horrible situation of weakness, and it is, God uses it.

God shows his grace to Jim. And he uses him in his weakness to bless many, many, many people. Another example, Paul Miller in a praying life.

[14:52] Paul Miller, if you guys want to know about the dynamics of God's power in your weakness, you should read this book. It's called A Praying Life Connected with God in a Distracted World by Paul E. Miller.

This is pretty much one of the greatest books I've read on prayer, on understanding how God's grace works in our lives, and on parenting. All in one go. It's incredible, and they're all related. He talks about this story. He talks about this story, which is a bit different from Jim Packer. Jim Packer is a very public figure. This is very private.

And he talks about his daughter, Kim, who's autistic. She has autism. And Kim would wake up at 5 a.m. every morning as a kid, and she would anxiously pace around the house, like really intensely. He said, making so much noise that it would wake people up and cause disruption at 5 a.m. every morning. And she was compulsive, so she would do this all the time. And Paul said that during most of his morning prayer sessions, he went from prayer to yelling at Kim out of just supreme frustration that she wouldn't stop, and he couldn't concentrate on praying to God and getting on with spiritual things.

[16:11] And after 10 years of this, he said, it finally dawned on him while he was praying and she was pacing that Kim's pacing wasn't Kim's problem.

It was his problem. And what God was actually doing was highlighting his personal weakness, his impatience, his lack of grace with Kim.

And what needed to happen is he needed to grow in grace in that relationship with his daughter.

God wanted to do something in his life through Kim's anxious pacing.

So something that seemed like the biggest thorn in his side actually became an opportunity for him to discover more deeply the grace of God in a relationship with his child.

God's grace in Paul's weakness. The next question is how should I respond when I'm weak?

[17:14] This will be shorter, I promise. How should I respond when I'm weak? It's a very practical question. And the answer is simple. Plead.

Plead with the Lord. Verse 8. Paul says, three times I pleaded with the Lord about this that it should leave me. Notice the three times Paul's prayer mirrors Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane before he goes to the cross.

Three times Jesus prayed, Lord, take this cup from me. And yet the answer he gets from the Father is actually, no, this is my will for you in your life. Paul goes to the Lord Jesus Christ who knows what it's like to personally experience weakness because he knows he is a very present help in time of trouble.

And notice that Paul's prayer shows us that weakness in itself is not a virtue. And this is really important, friends. God uses weakness. His grace comes to us in weakness, but weakness itself is not a virtue.

Christianity is not masochist, it's not fatalist, it's not defeatist. we should be praying to God for healing. Deep, honest prayer for healing is a part of the Christian life.

[18:35] Don't be ashamed of that. Yet, Paul accepts the will of the Lord when the answer is not what he wanted. The Lord does not remove the thorn and Paul knows that the Lord could have removed it.

He knows the gospel stories of all the times when Jesus touched people and instantly they were healed. And yet, when Jesus decides not to hear, he accepts it.

And more than accepting it in verse 9, he actually boasts gladly in his weakness because in it he can know the power of Christ. Paul trusts the Lord.

So, friends, how should you respond when you're weak? You should plead and then you should trust. And finally, and this is the question, our final question, how does Jesus minister to me in my weakness?

How does Jesus minister to me in my weakness? Once again, all the riches are in verse 9. I'm going to read it and we're going to plunge in. Verse 9. He said to me, my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.

[19:48] Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Three things. The first is sufficient grace.

My grace is sufficient for you. It could literally be translated, my grace is enough for you in your weakness. weakness. I take this to mean that Jesus' grace will fulfill the deepest needs of our lives, which I think are spiritual and relational needs in the midst of weakness.

We have this deep fear, I think, when we're weak of being alone and not having our most fundamental desires and needs met. And Jesus is saying to us here, my grace is enough for you in weakness.

I will fulfill and meet your deepest spiritual and relational needs. And remember what grace is, brothers and sisters. Grace is not some airy-fairy pie in the sky, a word that we throw around all the time.

Well, maybe it is that sometimes. But grace, grace, theologians often talk about grace as the love and goodness of God actively oriented towards creatures who are undeserving, weak, and sad. [21 : 10] It's the act of love and goodness to God, to creatures who are undeserving, weak, and sad. It is God for you in the deepest possible way.

So the promise is of sufficient grace. Jesus meets our deepest needs. And then we see perfect power. For my power is made perfect in weakness.

And I take this to mean two things. First, I take it to mean that Jesus' power will sustain us in our powerlessness. And I mean quite practically.

Like, Jesus' power will actually help us get out of bed in the morning when we're so depressed we don't want to leave the bed. Jesus will actually minister to us and help us keep pursuing the healing of a broken relationship even when pursuing that healing means we have to face pain after pain and disappointment after disappointment.

That Jesus' power will sustain us in our sense of powerlessness. And the second thing I think it means is that Jesus' power will achieve its purposes in our lives.

[22 : 22] The word, the verb here to be made perfect can actually mean to, has a nuance of achieve its proper purpose. and this is really good news because in the midst of weakness we often have a question of are God's purposes for my life actually ruined?

Can God actually do something in me in the midst of this weakness or is it going to be a hindrance? Am I actually going to be of any good or use to anybody in the world because of this weakness?

And I think what this is saying is that God's power will still achieve its purposes even in the midst of our weakness despite our weakness. He will form us into the image of Christ.

He will use us for his kingdom purposes and he will make us fit for heaven. And finally Christ's indwelling presence comes to us.

Look at verse 9. The end of verse 9. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses. Why? So that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

[23 : 31] Jesus will be intensely near to his people and dwell in them in a special way when they are weak. This verb, friends, is a very, very unique verb.

It's seldomly used in the New Testament. May rest upon. It could actually be translated dwell in. It's the verb that's used in the Old Testament when God's glory comes and dwells in the tabernacle. It's the verb that's used in John 1.14 when he says the word became flesh and you know it dwelt among us and we have seen his glory. It's the same word that is used in Revelation 21.3 when the heavenly Jerusalem comes down to the new earth and it says God's dwelling place is now with humanity.

humanity. This verb is the New Testament's way of describing the intensest form of God's presence with his people and here it says he will dwell with them in the midst of weakness.

I take that to mean that Jesus is very real and very present to us in a unique and special way when we experience weakness. I take that to mean I should probably stop here because I think I've taken a lot of time.

[24 : 56] Allow me a few more minutes for a story. A few years ago I had the opportunity of going on a pastor's retreat where the main speaker was Jim Houston who is one of the original co-founders of Regent College.

At the time his wife Rita was 90 years old and she was nearing the end of her earthly life. She actually died about three months later. She had advanced Alzheimer's disease.

It had set in intensely so she literally by this point couldn't remember anything. And therefore she couldn't talk and she couldn't even hold a coherent conversation anymore.

So Jim was telling us on the retreat that he didn't know what to do with her. You do if you can't talk. But one day it dawned on him he might as well ask if she can pray. So he asked her he said Rita do you want to pray together?

And Jim said much to his surprise she opened her mouth and words actually started coming out. She could pray and not just pray.

[26 : 05] She could pray with perfect awareness with perfect coherence and with perfect clarity. And so Jim was telling us that they started to pray together and for the last few months of their marriage together they prayed for hours a day because that's all they could do.

And Jim remarked that in the midst of deep sorrow and deep helplessness and deep weakness he had never been closer to his wife Rita before. Such is the power of God's grace.

grace. And the Lord Jesus Christ said to Paul he said to Rita and to Jim and he says to us now my
grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.
Thanks be to God for that. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.