

2 Corinthians 12

Once again good morning and thank you for joining us. Would you please turn in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 12.

This morning, we're going to take our last deep dive of this book and only study verses 1-10. We'll conclude 2 Corinthians next week. We'll move back to the OT and begin our study of 2 kings in August

SHOW PIC Well, if you can believe it, in less than 60 days, both college and professional football teams will begin their seasons. And if you listen carefully, you'll hear a familiar sound each week, in every winning team's locker room. What's the sound I'm referencing? It's the sound of players thanking God for the victory. They'll credit God for their success! It's almost a football tradition.

CLOSE PIC

But have you ever noticed, no one in the losing team's locker room ever gives God credit for their loss? I dare you, open your ears large, and wide, and you'll never hear a player on the losing team claim that coming up short was God's will for their team.

Of course this faulty mindset occurs much more often than just the sportsworld doesn't it? People thank God for the job promotion, but never in losing the job. Folks thank God for the new relationship, but rarely for the breakup.

Our mentality is to thank God for a win, yet rarely do we thank God for a perceived loss. But here's the painful realization we come to when we study God's word. God allows pain in our lives,

and sometimes He allows the pain to stay. And perhaps nowhere is this taught more clearly than in 2 Corinthians 12.

We're only going to study the first 10 verses this morning, and the title of this morning's message is EMBRACING THE THORNS
Let's pray

1 It is doubtless[fn] not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: In our studies the last few weeks we saw there was a huge problem in Corinth—there were false teachers who had questioned Paul's credibility. To stand up for the Gospel he preached, Paul had been forced to defend himself.

As we saw last week, Paul's trials, hardships and scars proved the legitimacy of his ministry. But the worldly thinking that made the Corinthian Christians think little of Paul also made them think little of Jesus, so Paul continues to speak of himself.

2-3

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. 3 And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— Scholars are pretty much unanimous about who the person is here in verse 2, and that person is Paul. It would seem that Paul is so uncomfortable with his boasting, here he resorts to speaking in third person. Verse 7 alludes to this being Paul but refusing to mention his own name.

Since we're unable to say exactly when Paul penned 2 Corinthians, it's impossible to pinpoint exactly where this occurrence took place 14 years earlier.

Again we can't say for sure, but it's very likely this trip to heaven took place when Paul was in Lystra.

Do you recall what happened in Lystra? **Acts 14:19 Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead.**

He may've been dead or just near-death - he wasn't sure - but verse 2 tells us he was "caught up."

This is the Greek word used to describe the rapture. Could it be God arranged a mini-rapture for Paul? Maybe his body was whisked off to heaven, then brought back... Or, his body might've been under a pile of rocks, while his spirit was transported to heaven. So what happened exactly? Well if Paul didn't know, we aren't gonna know.

Notice Paul describes "the third heaven." **such a one was caught up to the third heaven**

What does that mean? The third heaven doesn't suggest different "levels" of heaven (although this is what some ancient Jewish Rabbis believed).

Instead, Paul is using terminology common in that day, which referred to the "blue sky" as the first heaven, the "starry sky" as

the second heaven, and the place where God lives and reigns as the third heaven.

Like God did with Isaiah, and Ezekiel, and John on the Isle of Patmos, God gave Paul a peek into heaven.

4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Notice how verse 4 describes God's throne-room. "Paradise" is a Persian word which refers to "a walled garden." Wealthy desert sheiks would dig deep wells. They'd import lush flowers, shade trees, and spice bushes to plant around the spring. Then they'd enclose their garden with a wall. It was a private oasis. And this is the picture the Bible provides us of heaven.

There are only 2 other times the word Paradise is used.

1-Jesus on the cross **Luke 23:43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."**

Do you know the other?

Revelation 2:7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."

Forget about sterile, white hospital corridors - or a barrage of fluffy white clouds floating in thin air - that's not heaven. **SHOW PIC**
Heaven is perfect paradise! Tahiti, Hawaii, and the Caribbean combined can't touch heaven. **CLOSE PIC**

Notice the end of verse 4 Paul's description...**which it is not lawful for a man to utter**. Paul had literally been into heaven - yet notice- he stayed silent about it for 14 years!

And this is another testament to Paul's character and integrity. Most preachers would've jumped on the talk-show circuit to speak of their experience, or publish a book about what they saw, or launch "paradise.org." And you can be certain most would mention their experience in their fundraising letters.

Yet what Paul experienced at God's throne was too sacred, too holy to be reduced to earthly terms.

This is what makes me highly suspicious of preachers today who lay claim to supernatural experiences. If Paul the wordsmith, the man God chose to pen the lofty theology of the NT, stayed silent for 14 years, if he felt his feeble expressions couldn't do heaven justice - who are these guys today to flaunt their visions and revelations?

Please notice too in verse 4 that in describing this heavenly vision, Paul doesn't relate anything he saw, only a shadowy description of what he heard.

The Bible does give us bits and pieces of what heaven is like... It's colorful, it's brilliant... there's thunder and lightning. Yet there's a crystal sea - not a ripple on the water - it's amazingly peaceful... There's the throne, there's the praise, there's the songs, there's the Lamb! Trust me, no one will be disappointed with heaven.

5 Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. Paul essentially says that this “nameless” man who had the vision really had something to boast about. But “Paul himself” really could only boast in his infirmities, which was exactly what he did in 2 Corinthians 11.

6 For though I might desire to boast, ” pause here. We can’t forget that Paul was a flesh and blood person like you and I. And like all of us, there was something in Paul that liked the attention of others.

We all enjoy the adulation and congratulations and attention of others for who we are and what we’ve done. Deep down we all have a desire to boast. But when Paul remembered that all he had accomplished was by God’s power and grace, he realized any boasting was foolish.

6 For though I might desire to boast, ”I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me. Rather than try to impress the Corinthians with what he’d done - which was a lot... or where he’d been - to heaven no less... Paul was content to be who God made him to be. He spoke of his heavenly experience because it was true, not to stroke his ego or inflate his own reputation.

Of course, God knew Paul’s tendency. Our Lord knows all of us are prone to pride. Especially someone with Paul’s amazing privileges...

It's easy for any of us to get the big-head, especially when we're used by God.

Pride is such a subtle, sneaky enemy. And this is why God took steps to guard against pride and arrogance in Paul's life.

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.

This thorn was more than a pebble in his shoe, or a splinter in his finger-some simple irritation. **SHOW PIC** The Greek word translated "thorn" means "a sharp stake used for torturing or impaling." **CLOSE PIC**

So next time you read this verse or hear it quoted, make no mistake this is no papercut. This was more like be being stabbed with knife or an icepick.

Our God is a master teacher. He is relentless in constantly teaching us lessons He wants us to learn. And it's always for our benefit.

Because God is almighty and all powerful and all knowing, no day in the year is ever wasted with God. No disappointment is ever outside the realm of His appointment for us. No test we face is ever needless or pointless.

The sudden unwelcome surprises that arrive unannounced in our lives are neither sudden nor surprising to God. He's got it all wired

and put together beautifully because remember, He is the Potter and we are the clay.

That means that God is instructing us and changing us, shaping and reshaping us. And yes, even correcting us. Why? Because His desire is to shape us into the image of his Son Jesus Christ.

As a follower of Christ, have you noticed that God's most effective lessons to teach us to trust Him, are by reminding us how helpless we are at times. How little control we really have?

God teaches us patience by making us wait for what we want. He teaches us values by escorting us through the consequences of our wrongdoings.

He teaches us wisdom by allowing us to fail.

He teaches us grace by not stopping difficulty or hardship.

Finally, He teaches us humility by sending thorns that rip away our pride.

If there is anything God despises in the realm of sin in our lives, it is pride. In the list of things God hates in Proverbs chapter 6 the very first sin in the list is that of a proud heart.

God despises pride. Why? Because pride devices us into thinking we don't need God

So just like He allowed a thorn in Paul's life to keep him humble, our Lord will sometimes do the same for us. Please notice God will not do it TO us, but FOR us.

See God knows our hearts, that whenever we are tempted to applaud ourselves, our pride is quick to bow. So God will use His preferred method of thorn therapy to cut us down to size and knock us off our high horse.

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.

Verse 7 tells us the thorn came to buffet Paul. That word buffet is violent-it means constant beating. Whatever Paul's "thorn" happened to be, it was a perpetual problem - a pain that wouldn't go away.

What was Paul's thorn in the flesh? People have speculated for hundreds of years. One of the earliest suggestions was that of severe and crippling headaches. Early church fathers, Tertullian and Jerome believed Paul was the victim of reoccurring migraines...

Martin Luther believed Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was a reference to the constant opposition and persecution he encountered...

To this day a common view among Roman Catholics is that his "thorn" was a battle with sexual temptation.

Other commentators think Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was a physical disease - maybe epileptic seizures.

Others have identified his "thorn" as a strain of malaria common along the Mediterranean coast where he traveled. One sufferer of

malaria described its accompanying headaches, as like "a red-hot bar thrust through the forehead." Possibly a thorn in the flesh.

It's quite possible Paul's thorn was an infectious eye disease. In Galatians Paul speaks of the church's compassion toward him.

Galatians 4:15 What[fn] then was the blessing you enjoyed? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me.

In **Galatians 6:11 See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!** Possibly another indication he was having a problem with his vision at the time.

I think the Bible is purposeful for not detailing the thorn...we'll talk more about that later.

Let's read 8-9 together

8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for 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 Yet, despite his prayers, Paul's thorn didn't go away. Even after he prayed about it three times it remained. I believe there's a profound reason why Paul never spells out the exact identity of his infamous thorn. God leaves the blank empty so we can fill it in with our own particular thorns. And let's face it, we've all got em!

You will notice verse 8 Paul says three different times, he begged the Lord to take the thorn away. This is the Apostle Paul praying. He knew how to do that.

Again and again and yet again he pleads with God to take it away. And each response is the same from God-no, no, no.

We don't like being told no by anyone, but especially, being told no by God.

But thankfully God didn't just say no like some aggravated parent-'no stop asking me'. No God even explained to Paul, and us, why He doesn't remove the thorn...**9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."** God's power works best in our weakness.

We're now getting a glimpse of what's called paradoxical power. You'll never read about it in Fortune magazine or People magazine, or any magazine of today. You'll never read of it in the Wall Street Journal or hear of it in any Ted talks. You'll never hear it on the Evening News.

Verse 9 declares-God's strength is made perfect in weakness.

This verse is the crescendo, the peak of this entire letter. When Paul prays for relief from his most enduring trial and agony, God does not answer him - "Be healed!"

God does not say "Claim your victory now! Or, "Believe and receive!" No that's not what God tells him!

Jesus, the Great Physician, who could've healed Paul if He'd chosen - answered him instead, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."**

Rather than remove the thorn, God not only allowed it, but look carefully, allowed it to STAY!!

God allowed this thorn as a permanent reminder of how much Paul needed God.

And to keep us in a similar posture of dependence, God will often position a thorn in our lives. The question is, how do we respond? We'll end our study in verse 10

10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. Paul was stronger leaning on God in his absolute weakest moment than he could ever be at the peak of his own power. This is why Paul didn't panic in circumstances where he was overwhelmed and no longer in control.

He had to learn the hard way that a weak Paul, empowered by God's grace, was more effective than a strong Paul at peak performance.

Here is an example of God denying a prayer request because He wanted to give something better. But just because it was better, doesn't mean it's more comfortable. What we must learn, from what Paul told us about this thorn, is that God used it to teach the apostle dependence on God and the sufficiency of His grace.

Warren Weirsbe said this: "I venture to say that the greatest earthly blessing that God can give to any of us is health, with the exception of sickness. Sickness has frequently been of more use to the saints of God than health has."

See through this thorn God didn't cure Paul, but God did heal him. That is, God did not remove the thorn, but He used the thorn to heal Paul of his own self-sufficiency.

This is one of the most important lessons every follower of Jesus Christ must learn. Both natural weakness and supernatural power are constantly at work in us, as they were in Paul.

Someone has said that Christians live on promises, not explanations. This is one of the greatest promises that God has given us to live on. We may not have experienced as high spiritual highs, or as low spiritual lows, as Paul did, but we are in constant need of being aware of God's supernatural power.

We forget our success doesn't depend on our natural abilities, but on God's power working in and through us. Hey our frailties can be a profound blessing if it results in our depending more on God and less on self.

In the Christian life, we get many of our blessings through transformation, not substitution. Sometimes God does meet the need by substitution; but other times He meets the need by transformation. He doesn't remove the affliction, but He gives us His grace so that the affliction works for us and not against us.

10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong

Whatever Paul's thorn was, at first he didn't see it as a gift. But over time his view changed. His thorn kept him humble, trusting, and leaning on Jesus - and for that he was forever thankful.

By not answering the question, "what was Paul's thorn?" perhaps God is coaxing us into asking an even more important question, "what is my thorn?"

Is your thorn an illness... migraines, or allergies, or bad eyesight, or high blood pressure, or diabetes, or chronic bad pain, or even a reoccurring cancer?

Maybe your thorn is a personality trait - you're too timid, or too impulsive, or too abrasive...

Perhaps it's a temptation you battle. Maybe your thorn is a lack of confidence, or too much confidence - your thorn is an overinflated ego. Maybe your thorn in the flesh is a difficult relationship - with a mother-in-law, or a spouse, or a child, or a boss, or a neighbor.

Have you prayed and prayed - perhaps far more than three times - for God to remove your "thorn in the flesh," and He hasn't? Well, there's another option

Paul's thorn was still a thorn, and I doubt Paul ever enjoyed the pain it caused. But he did accept the thorn as a gift. When he saw how it kept him on his knees, and the power of Christ worked through him as a result, Paul was grateful for his "thorn!" In fact, it

was when Paul accepted his thorn as a gift, that God released His grace!

To our knowledge God never did remove Paul's thorn, instead He used it as the backdrop on which He continually displayed His strength. Up against Paul's weakness (whatever it was), God's power became stronger and more effective in Paul's everyday life.

No matter what you identify as your thorn - God's grace, His power, is more than enough to transform your weakness into a mighty show of His strength.

All too often we insist on the elimination of our weakness, yet God often opts for a transformation. We hope He removes the obstacle, by healing the disease, or changing their personality, or wiping out our enemies. Instead, God works to transform our weakness into a strength for His glory.

The Scottish theologian PT Forsyth once wrote, "It is a greater thing to pray for pain's conversion than for its removal."

If a thorn keeps us at God's throne; then mission accomplished.

Remember Paul wrote in **Philippians 4:13, I can do all things through Christ[fn] who strengthens me.**

Players quote that verse in regards to running touchdowns or sacking the QB. But that's not what Paul had in mind. He was speaking of doing life - thriving in any situation. In Christ he could

prosper or be poor - be full or be hungry. In all things, God's grace was sufficient.

Rather than get mad that God had failed to remove his thorn, Paul learned to view that thorn as God's gift. He rejoiced in the weakness it caused.

It was God's opportunity to demonstrate His supernatural strength. Make no mistake, it is entirely appropriate to ask God to take away our thorns.

Jesus did

Matthew 26 36 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go and pray over there." 37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Have you been sorrowful and deeply distressed? Jesus has

38 Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me." Notice Jesus brought friends with Him to pray-are you too proud to share your weakness with others?

39 He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; Jesus pleads-God if there's any other way!!

...39 nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will."

Matthew 26:42 Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done."

Matthew 26: 44 So He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words.

When we beg God, when we plead to take the thorn away, and He says no, are we willing to say "not my will, but yours be done"

This brings us to the communion table this morning...

Luke 22:19 And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me."

Luke 22:20 Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you."

If God is holding the thorn in place, I want to encourage you to memorize verse 10 **10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.** Quote it multiple times daily, and watch what happens to your countenance.