

LESSON 3

Love in Weakness

Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself. Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness." Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me. So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

— 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

A congregation loves by bringing its weakness into the open, because the supply it runs on is handed out at the exact place its own strength gives way.

Introduction

MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU, 2 CORINTHIANS 12:9. This is the sentence that sits behind our study in this workbook. How much weight will grace hold?

Now, let's go back to verse 7. Watch the verb. A thorn in the flesh *was given to me*. It is the same wording behind the gifts of Romans 12:6 and the grace of Ephesians 4:7. Here it describes a subtraction rather than a supply. God gives by adding *and* by taking away, and Paul calls both gifts.

Most of us would rather our weaknesses not come up. We manage them, work around them, and hope nobody asks about them. Paul writes his down and then boasts about it. He asked God three times to take it away; God said no, and that answer became the supply he needed.

2 Corinthians 12:1-6: A Boast That Goes Nowhere

The Boast He Set Down

2 Corinthians 12:1-6 - the one credential he refused to spend

1

A MAN IN CHRIST

"I know a man in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago"

2 Corinthians 12:2

Third person. The strongest experience of his life, and he will not put his own name on it.

2

FOURTEEN YEARS QUIET

"was caught up into paradise and heard inexpressible words"

2 Corinthians 12:4

What he heard, a human being is not allowed to speak. He lived among them a year and a half and never told them.

3

THE ONLY BOAST HE KEEPS

"I will boast about this person, but not about myself, except of my weaknesses"

2 Corinthians 12:5

The credential goes down. What stays on the table is the weakness.

He wants to be valued at exactly what he is worth in plain sight.

Boasting is necessary. It is not profitable, but I will move on to visions and revelations of the Lord, 2 Corinthians 12:1.

Paul is being forced into this. Men came into Corinth with credentials, and the church weighed him against them. So, he plays their game for one paragraph, and the way he plays it gives everything away.

I know a man in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago, 2 Corinthians 12:2. Caught up into paradise, where he heard inexpressible words, which a human being is not allowed to speak, 2 Corinthians 12:4.

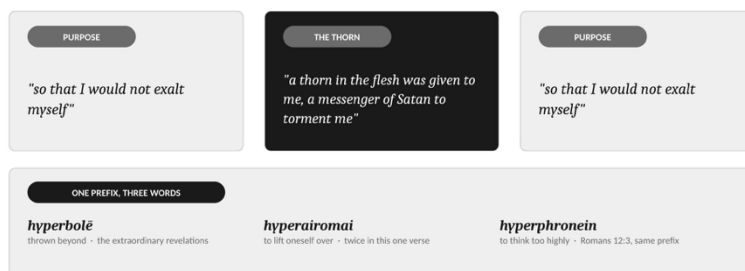
Notice three things about how he tells it. He tells it about a man in Christ, as though it happened to somebody else. He sat on it for fourteen years. The Corinthians had lived with him for a year and a half and never once heard about it. And he will not report a word of what was said, because he is not permitted to. Then he says: *I will boast about this person, but not about myself, except of my weaknesses, 2 Corinthians 12:5.*

He holds the strongest credential in the room and sets it down. His reason comes in the next verse: *so that no one can credit me with something beyond what he sees in me or hears from me, 2 Corinthians 12:6.* He wants to be valued at exactly what he is worth in plain sight. That is Romans 12:3 being lived by the man who wrote it.

2 Corinthians 12:7 – A Gift That Subtracts

Held in a Vise

2 Corinthians 12:7 - Paul says why at the front, and again at the back



Satan meant it for torment. God meant it for humility.

Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself, 2 Corinthians 12:7.

Count the purpose clauses. Paul says why at the front of the sentence and again at the back. The thorn sits between them.

The Greek is worth hearing. The revelations were *hyperbolē*, which

means “thrown beyond, more than a man is built to hold.” And the danger was that Paul would be lifted up over everyone around him, *hyperairomai*.¹² The same prefix does both jobs in one verse. What God gives in excess is exactly what tempts us to overestimate ourselves. Paul had warned another church about that very thing with a word built on the same prefix, *hyperphronein*, Romans 12:3.

So, God attached a weight to him.

Skolops is a pointed stake or a splinter, something driven in and left there.¹³ Generations have guessed at what it was. Scripture never says, and the silence is a mercy, because it lets each of us put our own thorn into the sentence. Most of us have one. A body that will not cooperate. A temper. A marriage that never became what it was supposed to be. A child who walked away.

And notice who hands it over. The verb is passive, and the giver behind it is God, even though the courier is *a messenger of Satan*. Satan meant it for torment. God meant it for humility, and Paul focused on God's purpose.

2 Corinthians 12:8-9: Three Prayers and One Answer

Three Prayers, Twice

2 Corinthians 12:8 and Matthew 26:36-44 · the same asking, and the same answer

PAUL <i>"Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me."</i> 2 Corinthians 12:8 He asked, then asked again, then asked a third time. The thorn stayed.	Three	CHRIST <i>"let this cup pass from me"</i> Matthew 26:39 <i>"If this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done"</i> 26:42 <i>"prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more"</i> 26:44 The cup stayed.
<i>"For he was crucified in weakness, but he lives by the power of God."</i> 2 Corinthians 13:4		

When the answer to our own asking is no, we are standing exactly where He stood.

Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me, 2 Corinthians 12:8.

Three times. Paul wasn't resigned to the thorn, and he didn't treat it as too holy to complain about. He asked, then asked again, then asked a third time. Whatever else it was, it was bad enough that an apostle begged for it to be taken away.

The answer came, and it wasn't the one

he asked for.

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness," 2 Corinthians 12:9.

Two words here are worth slowing down for. *Arkei*, "is sufficient," stands in the present tense. It means enough right now, and enough again tomorrow, with nothing promised about the thorn.¹⁴ Grace was offered as what would hold us inside the trouble.

The second word is *teleitai*, "is perfected." It means "brought to its goal," carried all the way to what it was for. Weakness is the place where God's power finishes its work. If we have no weak place left, we have given that power nothing to complete.

One Word, Six Times

2 Corinthians 12:5-10 · weakness against power, until the last line reverses them

"except of my weaknesses"	2 Corinthians 12:5	WEAKNESS
"my power is perfected in weakness"	2 Corinthians 12:9	POWER · WEAKNESS
"boast all the more about my weaknesses"	2 Corinthians 12:9	WEAKNESS
"so that Christ's power may reside in me"	2 Corinthians 12:9	POWER
"I take pleasure in weaknesses"	2 Corinthians 12:10	WEAKNESS
"when I am weak, then I am strong"	2 Corinthians 12:10	WEAKNESS → POWER

arkei is sufficient, present tense: enough right now, and enough again tomorrow.
teleitai is perfected, brought to its goal and carried all the way to what it was for.

Weakness is the place where that power finishes its work.

Here is where most of us quietly disagree with the text. We reach for whatever will make the ache stop, and there is no shortage of people willing to sell it to us. Those things can get us through an evening. They also spend the hour in which we might have learned that grace is enough.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 –

Where the Boasting Lands

Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me. So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong 2 Corinthians 12:9-10.

Count how often weakness turns up here. Paul names it in verse 5, twice in verse 9, and again in verse 10, and the last line closes on the verb.¹⁵ The word power runs alongside it, and the two trade places until the last clause puts them in reverse.

Reside deserves a moment. The verb is *episkēnoō*, and it appears nowhere else in the New Testament. It means to pitch a tent over something. It is built on the noun John uses when the Word became flesh and *dwelt among us*, John 1:14.¹⁶ Paul is asking for power spread over the weak place the way a tent is spread over a camp.

Then verse 10 turns the worst weeks of a man's life into a list of things he takes pleasure in. He is not pretending the insults stopped stinging. The clause at the end tells us how he can say it: *for the sake of Christ*. Lift Christ out of that sentence and all that remains is a man making his peace with misery.

Here is why this belongs in a study of love. Earlier in the same letter Paul asked, *Who is weak, and I am not weak?* 2 Corinthians 11:29. Once we quit hiding our own weakness, we're free to sit down in somebody else's. A congregation where everyone is fine is a congregation where nobody gets helped.

Looking to Christ

Paul pleaded three times and the thorn stayed. He was not the first to pray the same prayer three times.

Going a little farther, he fell facedown and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will," Matthew 26:39.

He went back a second time and prayed the same thing. Then *he went away again and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more*, Matthew 26:44. Three prayers, one request, and the cup was never taken.

Something in that garden is easy to walk past. Before He prayed the second time, He told the three men with Him that *the flesh is weak*, Matthew 26:41. The word He used is the one Paul builds his whole boast on. In Gethsemane, the Son of God is grieved to the point of death, and He does not hide it from His friends. He tells them how it feels and asks them to stay awake with Him.

Paul says it again a chapter later. *For he was crucified in weakness, but he lives by the power of God*, 2 Corinthians 13:4.

Weakness *and* power. The same two words, in the same order, standing at the cross.

So, the grace that proved sufficient for Paul came at a price. It was purchased by a Man who asked three times and was told no. He was too spent to carry His own crossbeam up the hill. On the third day the power of God raised Him.

When our own answer is no, we are standing exactly where He stood.

Conclusion and Application

Take four things home from this passage. A credential nobody can see is worth setting down. What God gives by taking away is still a gift. Grace carries us through trouble rather than around it, and weakness is where His power finishes its work, so admitting to none leaves that power nothing to do. The Man who prayed three times in a garden was given the same answer Paul was.

So put the questions to yourself. What is the thorn you would have removed today if the choice were yours? What have you been reaching for to keep from feeling it? Is there a brother or sister here who has

never once heard you say that something is hard? Is there someone whose weakness you have been quietly grading, when the honest thing would be to sit down beside them?

My grace is sufficient for you, 2 Corinthians 12:9. It was enough for a man with a stake in his side, and it is enough for whatever is in yours.

For Discussion

1. Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-6. Why does Paul tell the story of the third heaven as though it happened to another man, and why did he keep it to himself for fourteen years?
2. In 2 Corinthians 12:6, Paul refuses to be credited with anything beyond what people can see and hear in him. How does that line up with what he told the Romans in Romans 12:3?
3. The purpose of the thorn is stated twice in one sentence in 2 Corinthians 12:7. What is that purpose, and why would Paul say it twice?
4. Who gave the thorn, and who delivered it? What is lost if we keep only one of those in view?
5. Paul pleaded three times. What does asking more than once tell us about persistence in prayer, and what does the answer tell us about what God has actually promised?

6. *My grace is sufficient for you* is present tense in the Greek, meaning it is enough right now. What does that change for someone facing something that is not going to be removed?
7. What does it mean that God's power is *perfected* in weakness? Why would strength we manufacture ourselves get in the way of it?
8. Count the times weakness appears in 2 Corinthians 12:5-10. What is Paul doing by repeating the word that many times in six verses?
9. In Matthew 26:36-44, how many times did Jesus pray, what did He ask for, and what did He receive? What does His answer tell us about ours?
10. Name one weakness you have kept out of sight in this congregation. Who could be allowed to see it before our next class, and what might that free them to admit?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 4 – Love That Welcomes, Romans 14:1-12

Lesson 3 asked us to stop hiding our own weakness. Next week, we'll consider what love does with a brother whose weakness is not ours, whose conscience forbids him something ours permits.

Welcome anyone who is weak in faith, but don't argue about disputed matters (Romans 14:1). The word for weak is the one Paul has been boasting in throughout 2 Corinthians 12. That is easier to accept in a letter than it is from a man sitting three rows over.

Read Romans 14:1-12 before the next class. Notice how often Paul declines to settle the disputed matter itself, and watch where he moves the whole argument at verse 10.

¹² *Hyperbolē*, "excess, extraordinary quality," is built on *hyper*, "over, beyond," with *ballō*, "to throw." BDAG, s.v. ὑπερβολή. The verb in the two purpose clauses is *hyperairō* in the passive, "to lift oneself up over others, be haughty." BDAG, s.v. ὑπεραίρω. It occurs three times in the New Testament, twice here and once at 2 Thessalonians 2:4, a chapter that sits just above the text of Lesson 11. Romans 12:3 warns against *hyperphronein*, "to think too highly of oneself," formed on the same prefix.

¹³ *Skolops* occurs only at 2 Corinthians 12:7 in the New Testament and carries the sense of a pointed stake or splinter. BDAG, s.v. σκόλοψ. The Septuagint uses the word at Numbers 33:55 of what the remaining inhabitants of Canaan would become in Israel's eyes, which is the nearest background to Paul's image of something left in the flesh and not removed.

¹⁴ *Arkeō*, "to be enough, be sufficient," stands in the present indicative in the Lord's reply, describing grace that is continually adequate rather than a supply promised for later. BDAG, s.v. ἀρκέω. Behind "is perfected" is *teleō* in the passive, "to bring to completion, finish, carry out to the end." BDAG, s.v. τελέω.

¹⁵ The noun *astheneia* stands at 2 Corinthians 12:5, twice at 12:9, and at 12:10, and the verb *astheneō* closes verse 10 in the clause "when I am weak." Paul has been building the word through the letter: 2 Corinthians 11:29; 11:30; 13:4. Romans 14:1 uses the same root of the brother taken up in Lesson 4.

¹⁶ *Episkēnoō* occurs only at 2 Corinthians 12:9 and means "to take up residence upon, dwell upon," built on *skēnē*, "tent." BDAG, s.v. ἐπισκηνώ. The related verb *skēnoō* stands at John 1:14 and again at Revelation 21:3.