

**08/02/2026 How God Uses Suffering
2 Corinthians 12:1-10**

Welcome...

We are studying the book of 2 Corinthians, with three messages left after today. Starting Aug 30th, we'll do a three-part series on our ministry theme, Faithfulness — to God and His Word, to one another, and in ministry. After that we will start a new series in the book of 1 Thessalonians.

Now, let's read our text for today, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10...

Every October, here on the central coast, the olive mills start running again. Trucks back up to the hopper and dump in tons of olives, and within minutes that fruit is crushed — pit and all — into a dark green paste, then pressed under mounting weight until olive oil begins to weep out and run down into the vats. If you only watched the first thirty seconds of that process, you'd think you were watching something get destroyed. You are not. You are watching the only way olive oil has ever been made. The olives have to be pressed. There is no other method. The olive was made to be crushed. The very thing that looks like violence to the fruit is the process that releases what the fruit was created to give.

In our text today, Paul is standing in the press of suffering.

Main Point: 2 Corinthians 12:1–10 explains three purposes for which God uses suffering so that we rely on the Lord's sufficient grace and gladly boast in our weakness.

- I. God Uses Suffering to Produce Humility (verses 1-7)**
- II. God Uses Suffering to Teach His Sufficiency (verses 8-9a)**
- III. God Uses Suffering to Display His Power (verses 9b–10)**

My prayer for you is that you would know, in whatever thorn you're carrying, that God has not forgotten you. I pray that pride would loosen its grip on your heart, and that you would depend on Christ rather than on your own strength, your own answers, your own control. My prayer is that you would hear from the Lord, as clearly as Paul did, the words “My grace is sufficient for you” — not as a distant promise, but as a present reality for whatever you are facing this week — and that in your weakest moments, the power of Christ would rest on you so unmistakably that others would see it is Him, and not you, sustaining your life. That you would powerfully know Christ and make Him known.

Let's begin with point one:

I. God Uses Suffering to Produce Humility

At first glance, Paul's vision of heaven may seem out of place in a passage about suffering and weakness. But it fits the argument perfectly.

The false apostles had impressed the Corinthians with claims of spiritual power, visions, revelations, and extraordinary experiences. They wanted people to believe their spectacular stories proved their spiritual superiority. The Corinthians had been captivated by them and had begun to look down on Paul because his ministry seemed marked more by suffering than success.

So, Paul reluctantly answers them on their own terms. He begins in verse 1, “Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.” Notice the tension: boasting is necessary,

but not profitable. Paul does not want to talk about himself. He only does so because the Corinthians are being deceived by men who use spiritual experiences to gain influence.

Paul continues in verse 2: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven.” Paul speaks about himself in the third person; verse 7 makes that clear. He simply says, “I know a man in Christ.” The experience of visiting heaven did not happen because Paul was impressive. It happened because he belonged to Christ and because God sovereignly chose to give it to him.

Paul also tells us this occurred fourteen years earlier. For fourteen years, Paul said nothing about it. Think about how unusual that is. Most people struggle to keep good news quiet for fourteen minutes!

I want to take us back for a moment to Paul's catalogue of suffering in 11:23-28: five times whipped nearly to death, three times beaten with rods, once stoned and left for dead, three shipwrecks, constant danger from every direction, sleepless nights, hunger, cold, nakedness, and "the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches." That is not a man who occasionally stumbled. That is a man beaten down, year after year, by every kind of hardship the ancient world could inflict.

No ordinary motivation sustains a man through that list. Ambition burns out. Reputation isn't worth that price. Something had to be underneath Paul's endurance that was stronger than the suffering itself.

That something was heaven. The *third heaven* at the end of verse 2 is the same as “Paradise” in verse 4. Thanks to modern science, men today have visited the heaven of the clouds (we fly above the clouds) and the heaven of the planets (men have walked on the moon), but man cannot get to God's heaven where God dwells in glory without God's help.

How did Paul get a visit of heaven? Paul does not know. Twice he says: “Whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows.” God suddenly and sovereignly caught him up. That is the force of the phrase “caught up” - God took the initiative.

Fourteen years before he wrote these words, Paul had been caught up into the very presence of God and had heard words no human being is permitted to repeat. He had seen — however briefly, however inexpressibly — what lies on the other side of every shipwreck, every beating, every sleepless night in a cold cell. He knew, not as a doctrine memorized but as a reality witnessed, that the sufferings he lists in chapter 11 were momentary and light compared to the eternal weight of glory waiting for him.

The vision of heaven did not remove the pain of the whip or the cold exposure of floating in the sea. But it fixed a horizon behind the pain. Paul could walk into an imprisonment or a beating knowing, firsthand, what was on the other side of this life — not as a hope he was talking himself into, but as a place he had already been.

Can you imagine that? Every grief silenced, every wrong made right, every tear personally wiped away by the hand that was pierced for you. Christ Himself, not distant, not a memory, but standing in front of you. That is not wishful thinking. That is where you are going, if you belong to Him.

If you are discontent, restless, feeling like your life has fallen short — let heaven recalibrate your expectations. You were never meant to find your full joy here; this world is never going to satisfy you completely, because it isn't your home.

And if you are grieving today — a marriage that ended, a diagnosis you didn't see coming, a loved one you buried — let heaven hold your grief without dismissing it. Paul didn't pretend his sufferings weren't real; he carried

actual scars. But he carried them toward a vision he had already seen. Your grief is real, but it is not the last word. There is a Person on the other side of it, and His name is Jesus.

The Corinthians were captivated by men who promised them their best life now — spiritual highs, visible success, an easier road. Paul offered them something better: a Savior worth suffering for, and a home worth waiting for. Don't trade the eternal weight of glory for a few more comfortable years down here.

This is why the sequence of chapters 11 and 12 is not incidental. Paul lists his sufferings in chapter 11 to answer the false apostles on their own terms. But by chapter 12 he reaches for something they couldn't claim: he had been shown, ahead of time, where all of this was going.

A soldier who has seen the battle already won fights differently than a soldier who isn't sure of the outcome.

Yet the vision of heaven, while it emboldened him to endure suffering, did not become his platform. Paul continues in verse 5, "On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses." Paul could truthfully boast about this experience. Yet he refuses, he says in verse 6 "I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me." Paul wanted to be evaluated by his present faithfulness, not by a past spiritual experience.

Now Paul brings us to the real reason he mentioned the vision. Look at verse 7: "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh." The danger of such an extraordinary experience was pride. If anyone could have been tempted to think he had reached a higher spiritual level than everyone else, it was Paul. So, God gave him a thorn.

We do not know exactly what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. The word translated "thorn" refers to a sharp stake, not merely a small splinter. Whatever this thorn was, it was painful, persistent, and deeply troubling.

In verse 7 Paul calls it "a messenger of Satan to torment me." Satan was permitted by God to afflict Paul, probably hoping to nullify the effectiveness of his ministry. Instead, Satan succeeded only in putting Paul in the circumstance where he learned, experientially, the sufficiency of God's grace and that the Lord's strength is made perfect in our weakness. Thousands of believers since have leaned on God's words to Paul at that moment.

Satan's purpose was to torment Paul. God's purpose was to humble him. The same event had two very different intentions.

A skilled gardener sometimes cuts back a fruitful vine — to an uninformed observer, pruning looks destructive, but the gardener is preparing the vine to bear more fruit. In the same way, God permits painful experiences not to destroy us, but to protect us from pride and make us more fruitful. Through adversity we can say with the Psalmist in Psalm 119:71, "Lord, it was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees."

Paul repeats God's purpose twice: "to keep me from exalting myself." The thorn was not merely an attack. It was also a gift. The thorn was not evidence God had forgotten Paul, but evidence God loved him enough to protect him from the greater danger of spiritual pride.

We usually think of suffering as something that threatens us. But pride threatens us far more deeply than pain ever could. Pain may weaken the body; pride can make us spiritually useless while convincing us we are strong.

Paul did not merely accept the thorn silently. He took it to the Lord. The suffering that humbled him also moved him to pray. And through that prayer, Paul would learn that God's greatest answer is not always the removal of the burden but the sufficiency of His grace.

That leads to the second purpose:

II. God Uses Suffering to Teach His Sufficiency

The thorn humbled Paul, but it also drove him to the Lord. Look at verse 8, “Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.” Paul’s first response was the same response most of us would have: “Lord, please take this away.”

There was nothing sinful about that — Scripture repeatedly encourages believers to bring their burdens to God. The word translated “implored” is strong; Paul was pleading earnestly, believing the thorn might hinder his ministry.

Perhaps he reasoned, “Lord, I could preach more powerfully, travel more freely, and minister with fewer limitations if You would only remove it.”

Have you ever prayed that way? “I could serve You better if I were healthier.” “I could accomplish more if You would change my circumstances.” We often assume relief would make us more useful to God. But God sometimes knows that the very weakness we want removed is the means through which He intends to make us useful.

Paul prayed three times — perhaps three seasons of intense prayer, and perhaps intentionally recalling Jesus in Gethsemane, who three times prayed concerning the cup of suffering yet each time submitted to the Father’s will.

Paul followed the same pattern: honest, repeated, submissive prayer. Persistent prayer is not a lack of faith; it is often an expression of it. But eventually Paul had to learn that faith does not only trust God’s power to change our circumstances — faith also trusts God’s wisdom when He chooses not to.

There comes a time when we must move from asking, “Lord, will You remove this?” to asking, “Lord, will You teach me what You want me to learn through this?”

Verse 9 begins, “And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you.’”

God did not change Paul’s situation by removing the affliction; He changed it by adding a new ingredient: grace.

What is grace? It is God’s provision for our every need when we need it. God in His grace gives us what we do not deserve, and in His mercy He does not give us what we do deserve. But grace is more than God’s undeserved favor at salvation — the grace that saves us is the grace that sustains us.

Scripture calls God “the God of all grace” (1 Peter 5:10) and His throne “a throne of grace” (Hebrews 4:16), promising that “God gives more grace” to the humble (James 4:6). No matter how we look at it, God is adequate for every need we have.

The Lord did not explain why the thorn was necessary — He gave Paul a promise instead. We often want explanations, but God frequently gives us promises instead: we ask, “Why did this happen?” and He says, “Do not fear for I am with you.” We ask, “How long will this last?” and the Lord says, “My grace is sufficient.” Explanations may satisfy our curiosity, but promises sustain our faith.

The Lord does not say, “Paul, your faith is sufficient,” or “your courage is sufficient.” He says, “My grace is sufficient for you.” The emphasis falls on Christ, not Paul. Our hope in suffering is not that we will prove strong enough to endure it, but that Christ will prove sufficient in the middle of it.

The sufficiency of grace does not mean the suffering is small. It means Christ is greater. That also means unanswered prayer is not necessarily rejected prayer. God did not give Paul what he requested, but He gave Paul what he needed.

The Lord continues in verse 9, “For power is perfected in weakness.” The thorn would not merely teach Paul that grace was enough — it would become the very setting in which Christ’s power was most clearly displayed.

III. God Uses Suffering to Display His Power

Paul had asked God to remove the thorn so he could become stronger. But the Lord taught him that divine power is not displayed by eliminating every weakness — it is often displayed through weakness. Look at verses 9-10...

The word translated “perfected” means brought to completion, fully displayed. Christ's power does not become stronger, because His power is already infinite; it becomes more visible when it works through someone with no strength of his own to claim.

We often think we will be most useful to God when we feel confident, capable, and in control. But God often does His deepest work when we are out of answers, out of options, and out of strength. No Christian is too weak for God to use. But many Christians are too confident in themselves to depend fully upon Him.

Once Paul understood this, his entire perspective changed. He writes in verse 9b, “Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”

Earlier, Paul had been reluctant to boast. Now he says he will boast “most gladly.” What changed? The subject of his boasting changed. He would not boast about being caught up to heaven, about visions, revelations, or spiritual superiority. He would boast about the weaknesses that made it clear that everything good in his ministry came from Christ.

The word translated “dwell” at the end of verse 9 carries the idea of pitching a tent, spreading a shelter over someone — recalling God dwelling among His people in the tabernacle. Paul was a fragile earthly tent, but Christ's power had made its home upon him.

Think of a lamp shining in a well-lit room — its light is hard to notice with so much other light around it. Turn off every other light, and its brightness becomes unmistakable. Suffering often turns off the lights of our own strength — our plans fail, our health declines, our wisdom reaches its limit. Then the light of Christ's power becomes visible in a way it might not have been otherwise. People look at a believer who keeps trusting, serving, and worshiping in the middle of suffering and recognize that such endurance cannot come from human strength alone.

Paul concludes in verse 10, “Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake.” “Well content” does not mean Paul enjoyed pain. It means he accepted these trials as part of Christ's wise purpose for his life. He mentions weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties — every category of hardship he had personally experienced.

Yet the most important phrase comes at the end: “for Christ's sake.” Not every hardship is the direct result of faithfulness — some suffering comes from our own foolishness or sin. But Paul was speaking of suffering he endured because he belonged to Christ, preached Christ, and served Christ. That gave his pain meaning. He was not suffering for his reputation or personal success. He was suffering for the One who had suffered for him.

Christ had first demonstrated this pattern. Jesus was mocked, beaten, rejected, crucified. To the world, the cross appeared to be the ultimate defeat. Yet through the apparent weakness of the cross, God accomplished the salvation of sinners. As Paul writes in 13:4, Jesus was “crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God.”

The risen Christ now displays that same pattern through His servants — advancing His gospel not primarily through impressive, self-sufficient people, but through weak people who depend on His strength.

That leads to the great paradox at the heart of our passage, at the end of verse 10, “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Paul does not mean weakness magically becomes strength. He means, “When I am weak in myself, then I am strong in Christ.” When he reached the end of his own resources, he began drawing on the limitless resources of Christ.

But God does not give us His grace simply that we might “endure” our sufferings. Even unconverted people can manifest great endurance. As we heard Steve read from Romans 5, God wants to build our character so that we are more like our Saviour. God’s grace enabled Paul not only to accept his afflictions, but to glory in them. His suffering was not a tyrant that controlled him, but a servant that worked for him.

Our daughter's friend Katie got married last weekend. When Katie was 15, she lost her father to a heart attack, and shortly after, her mother was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer’s and died as well. At the wedding reception, after the toasts were made, Katie got up and told her guests, “I wish I could go back to my 15-year-old self and tell her, you have no idea the blessings God has in store for you. Through the grief of losing my parents I came to know Jesus as my Lord and Savior, and now God has blessed me with a wonderful husband, a wonderful church family, and friends who are like family to me. God has been so good and gracious to me.”

Paul began 2 Corinthians 12 speaking about one of the greatest spiritual experiences any human being had ever received — he was caught up to heaven, hearing words he could not repeat. But the greatest lesson of his life was not learned in Paradise. It was learned through a thorn.

Through that suffering, God taught Paul three purposes for our pain. God uses suffering to produce humility, guarding us from pride. God uses suffering to teach His sufficiency, showing us that His grace is enough for everything He ordains. God uses suffering to display His power, revealing Christ's strength through our weakness.

What is your thorn? Your body may be weak. Your heart may be grieving. Your marriage may be hurting. Your plans have collapsed. Your prayers seem unanswered. Do not assume that the thorn means God has forgotten you. It may be the very instrument He is using to protect you, draw you near, and display the power of Christ through your life.

Perhaps you are here and you know that you have not humbly come to God and trusted in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation. Maybe your suffering has made you angry with God, bitter toward others, or convinced that He does not care. But your greatest problem is not your thorn — it is your sin. Until your sin is forgiven, no amount of relief from suffering can reconcile you to God.

The good news is that God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, who lived the perfect life you could never live and died on the cross to bear the punishment your sins deserved. Three days later, He rose from the dead, conquering sin and death. Now He graciously calls sinners everywhere to repent and believe in Christ alone for the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life.

Come to Him today. Do not wait until your circumstances improve. Come in your weakness. Come with your burdens. Come with your guilt. Come with your brokenness. Christ does not promise to remove every thorn in

this life, but He does promise something infinitely greater — forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, eternal life, and His sustaining grace for every trial.

To those who believe, the Lord says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.”

An anonymous prayer captures the lesson Paul learned:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health, that I might do greater things;
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.

I asked for riches, that I might be happy;
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.

I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing that I asked for — but everything I had hoped for.
I am, among all men, most richly blessed.

God may not answer your prayer by taking the burden away. He may answer by giving you a deeper humility, a greater awareness of His grace, and a clearer display of Christ’s power.

His promise to Paul is still His promise to every believer, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.”

Let's pray...