

2 Corinthians 12:7-13 – “Strength in Suffering”

“After a minister had preached a searching sermon on pride, a woman who had heard the sermon waited upon him and told him that she was in much distress of mind, and that she would like to confess to a great sin. The minister asked her what the sin was.

She answered, “The sin of pride, for I sat for an hour before my mirror some days ago admiring my beauty.”

“Oh,” responded the minister, “that was not a sin of pride—that was a sin of imagination!””¹

Paul had much reason to boast, and this was not because of his imagination, this was because of his revelation. Paul was taken to heaven and heard things he couldn’t begin to talk about. He had much reason to boast, especially when compared to these false apostles causing a ruckus in the church at Corinth. Paul’s been used by God; he’s bearing in his body the marks of the Lord (Galatians 6:17), he’s been through it all and seen it all. Yet, in all of this, Paul doesn’t want to come across as better than others. In fact, we read last week at the end of our study: *“But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me”* (2 Corinthians 12:6).

- This is why when he talks about his heavenly visit, he speaks in the third person, as though he’s speaking of someone else. But now when he begins to talk about his suffering, he will refer to it as happening to himself.

Paul has learned the importance of humility, but it’s also something the Lord helped him with as we’ll see.

And it’s something I think we all need help with. It was the sin of pride that caused Satan his fall, and you can bet it’s pride with which he loves to tempt us. In fact, it’s been said that pride is the ground in which all other sins grow.

- The thing about pride is that the proud person is usually the last to recognize it. They’re too proud to see it. Pride is the only disease known to man that makes everyone sick but the person who has it.
- **Proverbs 29:23**, *“A man’s pride will bring him low, But the humble in spirit will retain honor.”*

You see, after Paul’s great revelation of heaven, it would have been very easy for him to become prideful having had such a glorious encounter. He could have

¹ Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (p. 1100). Bible Communications, Inc.

written books, gone on tour, re-enacted his whole experience with a theatrical production. But things went in a different direction for Paul. Paul learned what it means to truly live a humble life, and the means necessary to walk in humility.

“John Ruskin said, “I believe that the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I do not mean by humility, doubt of his own power. But really great people have a curious feeling that the greatness is not in them, but through them. And they see something divine in others and are endlessly, foolishly, incredibly merciful.””²

Andrew Murray said, “The humble man feels no jealousy or envy. He can praise God when others are preferred and blessed before him. He can bear to hear others praised while he is forgotten because... he has received the spirit of Jesus, who pleased not Himself, and who sought not His own honor. Therefore, in putting on the Lord Jesus Christ he has put on the heart of compassion, kindness, meekness, longsuffering, and humility.”

“Humility is something we should constantly pray for, yet never thank God that we have” (M.R. De Haan).

Let’s look at how this all played out for Paul...

12:7 - *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.*

Again, Paul could have had a real propensity for pride. He’s had an **abundance** of **revelations** he says. He knows this could cause him to feel exalted above others.

- "A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you."³

So to help Paul have a balanced view of life, God allows some difficulty to come his way. You might think, *‘That seems cruel! Why can’t we have a life of consistently good things?’* As much as I would like that myself, there’s something to be said about the lessons learned, and the godly character built, through suffering (see Romans 5:1-5; James 1:2-4).

² Swindoll, Charles R. (1998). *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart* (p. 281). Word Publishing.

³ Lewis, C.S. (1952). *Mere Christianity*

Notice a couple of things:

1. It was **given** to Paul. He didn't fight against it or curse it. He saw it as something given to Him by God.
2. It was delivered by a **messenger of Satan**. Here's an important thing we need to understand, God is in control! Satan cannot do anything unless God gives him permission to do so. We see a similar account with Job. I'm sure Paul didn't find this very easy, but at the least, he knew God had a purpose for it.

And that's just it. We don't have to run around and think that every difficulty is some attack from Satan, as though he actually has some control in the matter. Now certainly Satan is real and we can't underestimate him. He is crafty as we talked about in our VBS this week. But he still answers to our God. And God will allow Satan to carry out various things in our lives, but then God turns it around and works it for our good. You'd think Satan would begin to get onto this somehow and just give up. But he's like the little brother who when in a rage attacks the bigger brother knowing he's gonna get walloped every time. But in his rage he doesn't even think about the outcome.

So, understand that the Lord allows the enemy at times to bring affliction upon us, but it's not to hurt us. God uses that affliction to bring about a greater purpose in us. Sometimes it is to break us, or refine us, or strengthen us by seeing our need all the more for the Lord. But God uses it for His purposes. We don't always understand why God does what He does.

- For instance, do you ever wonder why God created mosquitoes? Now what purpose could they possibly have other than to prepare us for some plague around the bend? But listen to this:

Did you know that mosquitoes pollinate as many flowers as do bees? These pesky bugs are also a food source for birds. Mosquitoes cause deer to migrate to higher country. As the deer move upward to get away from the insects, they prune the lower branches of trees, allowing light to penetrate to the new growth of grasses and plants near the base of those trees. And the deer also fertilize as they feed in those areas. So the next time you see a mosquito ready to draw some blood out of you, appreciate it for a moment, and then smash the guts out of it!

God has a purpose for everything we go through. And when we have that understanding we will be more prone to praise Him rather than pout.

Now what was this thorn?

- Some say it was a temptation of a spiritual nature, or carnal nature.
- Some say it was the opposition he faced and the persecution we read of in the previous chapter.
- Some say it was epilepsy that he suffered with.
- Some think it may have been a chronic fever common in this day (ie. malaria or Malta fever).
- A common belief was that he suffered from an eye problem that caused him to suffer with great discomfort and headaches. Without being able to know for sure, this one seems to make the most sense. It's possible this was an injury caused by the stoning he received. When writing to the Galatians he said, *"For I bear witness that if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me"* (Galatians 4:15). And at the close of the letter he said, *"See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!"* (Galatians 6:11).

Ultimately, it's probably good we don't know so that we're left with the thought that it could have been anything. In other words, we can't look at Paul's situation and think it's not applicable to us. We can't excuse ourselves and say he didn't have a thorn like my thorn. We don't know. But here's what we do know...

To keep Paul grounded after flying in the heavens, God allowed this thorn to buffet him. And as nice of a word as buffet is for us today (think nice long food table), this is not what we're talking about. This was not just a little bump and push. This word **buffet** means *to beat or strike with the fist*. This was no ordinary little thorn that could be an irritant if stuck in your shoe. The word **thorn** in the Greek is *skolops*, and it means a pointed piece of wood, like a tent peg, or wood you would impale someone on. This was no minor inconvenience!

12:8 - *Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.*

Paul didn't put on some stoic phoniness and try to act tough. No, he pleaded in prayer for this discomfort to be taken from him. And you see, it's in that process of turning to the Lord and seeking His help that we are comforted and strengthened. We recognize there are times where we need to be reminded of our weakness so we can come to see God's strength.

- Doesn't this sort of put to flight the notion that we should be living in perfect health and wealth. The prosperity gospel doesn't like verses like this.

And you see, it's in this process that Paul heard one of the more encouraging things that would have moved him along with perseverance in ministry...

12:9 - *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.*

What comforting and encouraging words these must have been: ***My grace is sufficient for you***... I'm sure Paul must have brought these to remembrance many times:

Put in prison – My grace is sufficient...

Shipwrecked – My grace is sufficient...

Beaten with rods – My grace is sufficient...

Now you may be asking, *Grace? How does grace remove the discomfort? Isn't that like giving someone a bike when they need to get from Vancouver to Paris?* You kind of want to say, *Thanks for the gesture, but that's not going to help.*

Well let's look at this word ***grace*** and what is being referenced.

Grace is the Greek word *charis* and it means: 'that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness: grace of speech. Good will, loving-kindness, favour.'

- We know grace is getting that which we don't deserve. Well Paul listed a bunch of stuff in Ch. 11 that he got which he didn't really deserve. But grace afforded him to have joy and peace, and delight in all these things because it was the grace of Christ! Through each episode it allowed Him to see Jesus more clearly. He began to realize that what he really needs on a day-to-day basis is just Jesus!
- God could have removed that thorn quite easily, but God wanted to do something better through it. What Paul needed most was to experience the strength and power of God at work in His life, and the way to experience that is to remain in a place of weakness.

This is why Jesus further says: ***My strength is made perfect in weakness***... Isn't this an oxymoron? How is this so? Because Paul saw in his weakness that there was less of himself to rely on. He needed Jesus. It was in weakness and despair that Paul saw He needed to depend on Jesus. And it's when we turn to Jesus in surrender that we come to know His strength. He will let us struggle and fight and try to help ourselves. He won't interfere in that until we cry out and ask for His help. And it's when we do, that He shows Himself strong!

“This is one of the most important lessons every ambassador of Jesus Christ must learn. Both natural weakness and supernatural power are constantly at work in us, as they were in Paul and in Jesus. The Cross is the greatest example of divine power working through human weakness. The greater we sense our weakness, the more we will sense God's power (cf. Eph. 3:16; Phil. 4:13). 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.”⁴

Notice the Lord says: My grace **IS** sufficient. This is in the present, active tense. It's not something Paul has to work for or wait for. This grace of God is **already** sufficient. And the grace of God is enough for you today. Whatever you may be dealing with or struggling through, God wants you to know that His grace is enough to carry you through it in His strength.

Paul has come to know this personally and experientially, and this is why he says: ***most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.***

Regardless of what Paul goes through, he sees it as an opportunity to see Christ at work. He's gone from Paradise to pain. From exaltation to affliction. But either way it provided the means to see Jesus more clearly. And that is a win for Paul.

“Roy Campanella was an All Star catcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers before he lost the use of his arms and legs in a terrible car accident. Roy was paralyzed. But Roy Campanella had an amazing attitude.

He was inspired early in his recovery by a plaque hanging on the wall of a New York City hospital. Countless times Roy rolled his wheelchair past that plaque. One day he stopped to read it, then he read it again. Here's what was engraved on the plaque:

"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 great 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 for God... I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life. I was given life, that I might enjoy all things...

⁴ Constable, Dr. Thomas L. <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/2corinthians.pdf>

I got nothing I asked for, but everything I had hoped for. I am among men the most richly blessed.”

And this was the attitude of the Apostle Paul. Rather than grow mad that God had failed to remove his *thorn in the flesh*, Paul learned to view it as a gift from God. (Sandy Adams)

Paul came to know that everything he was given was not always what he asked for, but it was always the better thing.

- Just like when I prayed for patience – God gave me 4 children 😊. It wasn't how I thought I would receive it, but it was the better way!

When we learn to accept our trials and sufferings as opportunities to press into the Lord and see His strength at work, then we can rejoice in our weaknesses. This is what Paul speaks of next...

12:10 - *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.*

To the average Joe, this could almost sound like demented thinking. But Paul knew that whatever trial he had to walk through, it was an opportunity to see God do greater things than he could do on his own.

- Don't we need those reminders often? I don't know about you, but I feel pretty confident that I can do most things. That with a little determination and grit, I'm going to accomplish what's needed. The problem is, I'm wrong! I falter and fail and make a mess of things on my own. I need to let God do His work His way.
- It's when I recognize my weakness and my need for God that I truly find strength – strength that is beyond me.

12:11 - *I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing.*

Again, Paul comes back to the foolishness of boasting. He's hating having to talk this way because he knows he has nothing to boast in except in the Lord. But it's because of the Lord that he feels he should have been commended above those that the Corinthian Christians viewed as the ***most eminent apostles***.

Notice Paul's attitude, ***though I am nothing***. If Paul would make a statement like that, how much more should we be living with that kind of attitude.

- **Philippians 2:3**, *"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself."*
- That's humility. Someone defined humility as not thinking less of yourself, but not thinking of self at all.

12:12-13 - *Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. ¹³ For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong!*

As the church was being founded and established, the apostles moved in great signs and wonders and mighty deeds. This was a way of showing their authenticity and legitimacy. (Remember even Paul's handkerchiefs were being used to heal people – Acts 19).

So Paul had no reason to be doubted or dismissed.

The church at Corinth was not lacking in anything. They weren't inferior in any way just because they had Paul ministering to them. Paul says the only thing you may have missed out on was in taking up an offering to support me. And to this Paul facetiously says, ***forgive me this wrong!***

- I can just see this letter being read out in the church and everybody getting excited at this apparent shortcoming. Suddenly they suggest taking an offering and the jeers quickly turn silent. Who's the dummy who complained on this issue?

Application Points:

1. Our prickly problems in life don't need to be viewed as curses to be removed, but rather blessings to be received as we learn to lean more heavily on Jesus.
2. Jesus is enough! He provides just what we need for every challenge.
3. Our sicknesses are not always a product of sin. Sometimes they are an allowance of God to produce a greater purpose in us.
4. Rejoicing in your strength leads to pride and an inevitable downfall. Rejoicing in your weakness is the path of humility and being more greatly used of God. It's where His strength becomes all the more seen.