

Main Idea: In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 we learn that God has given us sufficient grace for living, and particularly for dealing with the inevitable painful realities of life. There are four scenes in this passage.

- I. The pain (7)
 - A. The thorn was a gift from God.
 - B. The thorn was intended to prevent pride.
 - C. The thorn was a messenger of Satan.
 - D. The thorn produced intense suffering.
- II. The pleading (8)
 - A. Paul begged the Lord to remove it.
 - B. Paul stopped begging the Lord to remove it.
- III. The promise (9a)
 - A. My grace is enough.
 - B. My power is seen most clearly in your weakness.
- IV. The power at work (9b-10)
 - A. I will boast in my weakness.
 - B. I am delighting in the difficulties of life.
 - C. I am experiencing what Jesus promised.

The Bottom Line: We have sufficient grace for whatever we face in 2019.

In our “Amazing Grace” series, we’ve been looking at some of the great grace texts in the Bible. We’ve learned that in Christ we have grace for salvation, grace for sanctification, and grace for service. This morning we’re coming to a text that says we have grace for the suffering that is coming in 2019.

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

We’re going to talk about thorns today. Nobody likes a thorn. You might name your baby girl *Rose*, but I’ve never heard of a child named *Thorn*. We consider a thorn a bad thing. We don’t like thorns. We don’t plant them, and we don’t want them around, not in our gardens, not in our flower beds, not in our fingers. Thorns are a nuisance, and we do everything we can to get rid of them.

If you have a thorn in your body, you take immediate action, and the action isn’t to learn coping skills to accept and learn to function with the thorn. The action is to get rid of it.

“Honey! Where are the tweezers? I need them *now*! I have to get this thorn out of my hand. It’s killing me!”

That’s the way it is with thorns. Thorns are bad. Thorns bring pain and should be avoided at all costs and eliminated when present. You don’t want thorns in your life.

Everyone agree?

“I don’t.”

Who said that? You might be surprised. There is someone in the universe that sees amazing potential in a thorn, and He actually gives them to people, and not to His enemies, but to people He loves very much.

Who would do such a thing? God. God has a different view of thorns than we do. That shouldn’t surprise us because God has a different view of a lot of things than we do. God’s ways are often surprising and paradoxical. He gives a barren couple a son and then tells the father to kill that beloved son on an altar. Strange, isn’t it? That’s an odd

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see the message in the “Promises to Live By” series 1/13/13.

way to show a couple you love them. But the ways of the Infinite One often seem strange to finite minds.

Friends, we belong to a God who defeats a giant, not with a bigger giant, but with a shepherd boy and a slingshot. He gives His chosen people a godly young king named Josiah and then lets him get killed before he reaches the age of forty. He chooses James to be an apostle and then lets King Herod behead him before he gets to first base. And of course, He sends His own Son into the world to save sinners, but then lets those sinners nail His precious Son to a tree.

Strange, isn't it? William Cowper, a godly man who battled suicidal depression all his life, said it well, "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform."

So this morning we're going to talk about thorns, and specifically, something God always gives us when He allows a thorn to enter our lives. Sufficient grace.

In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 we learn that God has given us sufficient grace for dealing with the inevitable painful realities of life. There are four scenes in this passage.

I. The pain (7)

Notice verse 7, "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me."

Our text begins, "To keep me from becoming conceited." Paul is speaking, and he's writing these words to the church in Corinth. Conceited is what some rivals in the church were saying Paul was. In 2 Corinthians Paul responds to these attacks by being very transparent.

In the first part of this chapter he told them about a unique experience he once had. According to verse 2 he was caught up to heaven. He calls it paradise in verse 4, and he says he saw "inexpressible things that man is not permitted to tell."

Now that could puff you up, knowing you've seen something no one else on the planet has ever seen. But the Lord wants His servants humble, not puffed up. So Paul says something was given to him.

A thorn in the flesh. The Greek word for thorn is *skolops*, and this is the only place it appears in the NT. A *skolops* signified anything pointed, such as a stake or the end of a fish-hook, or a splinter, or a thorn. Paul said it was *in his flesh*. And he said it *tormented* him.

So what was this pointed object that wracked Paul's flesh? Let's notice what Paul says about it first, and then we'll make some conjectures as to its identity.

A. The thorn was a gift from God. It was *given me*, says Paul. Who's the agent of this passive verb? You say, "It's Satan. He sends painful things our way." No, Satan didn't send this thorn. Paul says he's the messenger who delivered the package, as we'll see in a moment, but Satan isn't the ultimate source of this thorn.

God is. Nothing happens in God's universe outside of His intent and control. This thorn was *given to me*, says Paul, and the unspoken understanding is that the Giver was God Himself.

Why would God do that? Paul tells us.

B. The thorn was intended to prevent pride. "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations." That's what privilege can do to a person, create pride. But pride offends God, and He loves His children too much to let it grow. So along with the privileges, God sent Paul a thorn.

C. The thorn was a messenger of Satan. Literally, “an *angel* of Satan.” Angels are “ministering spirits,” according to Hebrews 1:14. But this thorn was a ministering spirit of a *fallen ministering spirit*, Satan himself. So God designed it, but Satan administered it.

The classic example of this is Job. Why did Job suffer? Because Satan attacked him, right? Satan threw a series of painful experiences at Job, and Job lost his possessions, his ten children, and then his health. Boils all over his body. Satan did it, yes, but he didn’t send one thing into Job’s life until first receiving permission from the Almighty.

D. The thorn produced intense suffering. Paul uses the word *torment*. The Greek *kolophizo* means “to beat, to strike with a fist, to cuff.” It’s what they did to Jesus at His mock trial in Matthew 26:67 as they “struck him with their fists.” That’s what this thorn did to Paul. It smashed him in the flesh and produced excruciating agony.

So when did Paul receive this gift of a thorn, intended to prevent pride, administered by Satan, that produced intense suffering? It must have happened *after* the heavenly revelations Paul received, for he says in verse 7 that this thorn was given to keep him from becoming conceited because of those visions. So when did Paul see those visions and revelations? According to verse 2, it happened fourteen years prior to writing this epistle. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians around AD 56. That would put his experience of seeing heaven at around AD 43. So the thorn was given some time after that.

Can we be more specific? Let’s think for a moment. What was going on in Paul’s life in AD 43? To answer that, let me give you some rough dates for a context.

According to the book of Acts, Paul was present at Stephen’s stoning which happened around AD 32 (that’s Acts 7). He then began to persecute the church, from around AD 32-34 (that’s Acts 8). He was blinded by Jesus on the road to Damascus around AD 35, and became a follower of Christ, but immediately faced a skeptical response from the believers (that’s Acts 9).

In Galatians 1:17 Paul says he then went into Arabia, then later returned to Damascus. Three years later, according to Galatians 1:18, he went to Jerusalem and spent 15 days with the apostles. After leaving Jerusalem, he went to Syria and Cilicia, according to Galatians 1:22, and ended up in Tarsus, based on Acts 9:30. That’s where Barnabas found him in AD 46, and recruited him to help the church in Antioch.

So Paul’s trip to heaven happened just three or four years before Barnabas took him to Antioch. It was from Antioch that Paul began his missionary journeys (which we read about beginning in Acts 13). Paul’s first missionary journey took place in AD 46-49, his second from AD 50-52, and his third from AD 53-58. Again, he wrote the letter we’re studying, 2 Corinthians, during this third journey in AD 56.

So based on this reconstruction, Paul saw his vision of heaven around AD 43 (during the ten so-called “silent years,” as Bible scholars call them, between AD 35-45²). He received his thorn in the flesh at some point after this heavenly experience, and we would assume, sometime before he started his missionary work. My sense, based on verse 7, is that Paul received this thorn *soon after* he was caught up to the third heaven. That would indicate Paul had felt the pain of this thorn close to fourteen years.

² Observation by Murray Harris, *2 Corinthians*, p. 395.

So what was this thorn? As mentioned earlier, *skolops* refers to a pointed object, something sharp. Paul says this sharp object was placed in his *flesh*. Some think he's speaking metaphorically, others literally.

According to commentator Colin Kruse, there are three broad categories of interpretation. One group says Paul's thorn was some sort of spiritual harassment. A second says it was persecution. A third says it was some physical or mental ailment.³

William Barclay offers a helpful discussion of the possibilities, and here's his summary.⁴ Some have taken the thorn to mean *spiritual temptation*, the temptation to doubt and shirk his Christ-given duties as an apostle. That was Calvin's view, according to Barclay. Luther felt it was the persecution he had to face, the constant opposition he encountered by those who tried to stop his work.

Another view is that the thorn in the flesh refers to carnal temptations. Barclay explains, "When the monks and the hermits shut themselves up in their monasteries and their cells they found that the last instinct that could be tamed was that of sex. They wished to eliminate it but it haunted them. They held that Paul was like that; and this is the common Roman Catholic view to this day."⁵

But, as Barclay objects, these proposals don't work for three reasons. One, the word *stake* indicates "an almost savage pain." Two, "the whole picture before us is one of physical suffering." And three, "whatever the thorn was, it was intermittent, for, although it sometimes prostrated Paul, it never kept him wholly from his work."

So Barclay gives other possibilities. Some say the thorn was Paul's physical appearance, based on what critics said in 2 Corinthians 10:10, that Paul was "unimpressive," or in another translation, "His bodily presence is weak." "It has been suggested," says Barclay, "that he suffered from some disfigurement which made him ugly and hindered his work."⁶ But that interpretation doesn't do justice to the pain Paul says he was in.

A common view is that Paul had epilepsy. The oldest of all theories, says Barclay, is that Paul suffered from severe and prostrating headaches. Both Tertullian and Jerome believed that.

"That may well lead us to the truth," says Barclay, "for still another theory is that Paul suffered from *eye trouble* and this would explain the headaches." The eye trouble theory makes sense when you consider a few of things. One, Paul was blinded on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:9). Two, he said the Galatians would have plucked out their eyes and given them to him, if able (Gal 4:15), perhaps indicating his eyes never fully recovered. And three, he finished his letter to the Galatians with the note, "See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand (Gal 6:11)!" That seems to indicate he had trouble seeing the words on the page.

But Barclay says there's a more likely explanation. "By far the most likely thing is that Paul suffered from chronically recurrent attacks of a certain virulent malarial fever which haunted the coasts of the eastern Mediterranean. The natives of the country, when they wished to harm an enemy, prayed to their gods that he should be 'burnt up' with this fever. One who has suffered from it describes the headache that accompanies it as being

³ Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, p. 206.

⁴ William Barclay, pp. 257-9.

⁵ Barclay, p. 257.

⁶ Barclay, p. 258.

like ‘a red-hot bar thrust through the forehead.’ Another speaks of ‘the grinding, boring pain in one temple, like the dentist’s drill—the phantom wedge driven in between the jaws,’ and says that when the thing became acute it ‘reached the extreme point of human endurance.’ That in truth deserves the description of a thorn in the flesh, and even of a stake in the flesh. The man who endured so many other sufferings had this agony to contend with all the time.”⁷

Yet the bottom line is, we don’t know what Paul’s thorn was, and that’s intentional. If we knew, we’d narrow the promise that follows and conclude, “Oh, this promise only applies if you suffer from *this* specific thorn, if your pain is physical, or relational, or mental, or whatever Paul’s specific pain was.”

But the good news is, the promise of sufficient grace that God gave Paul will sustain you no matter what your thorn is. We too have the promise of grace that is sufficient for whatever suffering we may face in 2019.

But we’re not ready for the promise yet. While we don’t know what the thorn was, we do know it produced, and that brings us to scene two.

II. The pleading (8)

Paul says in verse 8, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.” The verb is *parakaleo*, “to ask for earnestly, to beg.” Have you ever begged the Lord for anything? I mean, you were in such agony that you concluded that if He didn’t do something, you would die? That was Paul.

A. Paul begged the Lord to remove it. To “take it away,” to “cause it to leave.” And he did so three times.

Who else pleaded with God three times? Our Lord did in Gethsemane. And so, as did his Lord, so Paul says He cried out for something to be removed.

Take this cup from me. Take this thorn from me.

Paul’s begging to be healed is quite remarkable when you think about it. One of the marks of an apostle was the ability to do signs, wonders, and miracles (Heb 2:3-4), and as an apostle, Paul had that unique gift, and used it at times.

Remember Eutychus? He’s the young man in Acts 20:9 who fell asleep during Paul’s sermon and fell to the ground from the third story. But Paul threw himself on the guy, put his arms around him, and restored him to life.

Remember the crippled man in Lystra? According to Acts 14:10 Paul told him, “Stand up on your feet!” And the man jumped up and began to walk!

So there were times when the Lord enabled Paul to heal others, but not himself. In fact, at the very time Paul healed Eutychus and this cripple in Lystra, Paul was plagued by this thorn in his own flesh. And he had pleaded for the Lord to touch his own body.

But the Lord said *no*. Three times Paul pleaded, and three times the Lord said *no*.

So what did Paul do? Did he become bitter and start living with a bitter chip on his shoulder? No. What strikes me is something Paul says he didn’t do.

B. Paul stopped begging the Lord to remove it. He says he asked the Lord *three times*. That means there was no *fourth* time. That’s amazing to me. The implication of this is once the Lord responded to Paul and said *no*, Paul stopped asking and determined to live with this thorn in a Christ-exalting way.

⁷ Barclay, pp. 258-9.

You say, “How could he do that?” It’s because the Lord did give him something in that prayer closet, not the healing he requested, but something else that enabled him to develop a very different view of his thorn. As it will for us.

That brings us to verse 9. We’ve seen the pain and the pleading. Next...

III. The promise (9a)

It’s at the beginning of verse 9, “But he said to me.” *He* refers to *the Lord* mentioned in verse 8. That’s who Paul prayed to, and it’s referring not to God the Father but to Jesus Himself. Paul had taken his case directly to Jesus, the One who blinded him on the road to Damascus, when he pleaded for healing.

But Jesus said *no*, and gave Paul something instead of healing, an amazing promise. “My grace is sufficient for you; for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

There are two elements in Jesus’ promise, so let’s look at them one at a time.

A. My grace is enough. *My grace*, my unmerited favor and help. It’s *sufficient* for you, says Jesus. We find the same Greek word in 1 Timothy 6:8, “But if we have food and clothing, we will be *content* with that.” And in Hebrews 13:5, “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be *content* with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’”

Sufficiency and satisfaction go hand in hand. I found a good definition of this word *arkeo* that shows the connection: “to be sufficient or adequate for a particular purpose, with the implication of leading to satisfaction.”⁸

I know about the thorn, Paul, says Jesus, for I sent it your way, and I know about the pain, but I want you to know this. *My grace will always be enough for you.*

And know this too, my dear follower.

B. My power is seen most clearly in your weakness. Notice the connection between power and weakness, and specifically, between Jesus’ power and Paul’s weakness. *My power is made perfect in weakness.* And not just Paul’s weakness, for Jesus just says *weakness*, through anyone’s weakness, so this applies to us.

Interesting verb choice, too. *My power is made perfect* in weakness. In the Greek it’s *teleitai* from *teleo* which means “to complete, to finish, to end.” In a very real sense, it takes weakness to bring Christ’s power to its intended end.

It started with His own weakness. Christ humbled Himself by leaving heaven and became a lowly human being. The Creator took on the frailty of human flesh, and embraced weakness all the way, not just to a thorn of suffering that made Him want to die, but to a cross of infinite suffering where He did die. And not just die, but die as a slaughtered sacrificial lamb, in our place and for our sins, brothers and sisters, and for every other person who would receive Him as their Savior and Lord.

Yes, our Lord embraced weakness, and in the end He used that weakness to magnify His matchless power. He showed His power over death by leaving the tomb alive. He showed His power over the evil one by returning to His throne in heaven. And now He’s showing His power over sin, death, and the devil by delivering repenting sinners and building His church all over the world. And one day, the One who became weak will return to this planet and put on a display of power unlike anything you’ve ever seen. And every knee will bow and proclaim that He is Lord.

⁸ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Vol. 1: Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (598). New York: United Bible Societies.

And what the Lord did through His own weakness, He's now doing through ours. He's putting His power on display through the weakness of His own people.

That brings us to scene four. We've seen the pain, the pleading, and the promise.

IV. The power at work (9b-10)

Listen again to Paul, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

So here's Paul's response to his thorn and to Jesus' promise. He tells us three things about himself, and what he tells us shows us how to respond to our own thorns.

A. I will boast in my weakness. Boast. The Greek word is *kauchesomai*, which means "to be proud of, to brag about, to glory in, to rejoice in." In Ephesians 2:8-9 Paul says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can *boast*." So boasting in ourselves is out, but this kind of boasting is in. In Romans 5:2 Paul says, "We *rejoice* in the hope of the glory of God." Same word. In Philippians 3:3 he says that we "*glory in* Christ Jesus."

Therefore I will boast. But not just boast. Paul says, "I will boast all the more *gladly*." The word for *gladly* (*hedesta*) speaks of experiencing happiness because of pleasure derived. In Mark 12:37 we're told that the crowd listened to Jesus "with delight." That's this word.

Therefore I will gladly boast... about my weaknesses. He's putting Jesus' promise into practice, isn't he? Weakness. The Greek *astheneia* refers to "a state of weakness or limitation."⁹ Paul used this term all over his two inspired letters to the Corinthians. The word appears right here in 2 Corinthians 12 in verses 5, 9, and 10. It's also back in 1 Corinthians 2:3, "I came to you in **weakness** and fear, and with much trembling." And in 1 Corinthians 15:42-43, "So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in **weakness**, it is raised in power." In 2 Corinthians 11:30 Paul says, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my **weakness**." We read in 2 Corinthians 13:4, "For to be sure, he was crucified in **weakness**, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are **weak** in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you."

So this was Paul's resolve. *I will boast in my weakness.* And why? Again, because of Jesus' promise. *So that Christ's power may rest on me.* The word for *rest* is *episkenoō* and it means "to take up residence, to dwell in." The root term *skenos* means "tent." Christ's power is like a traveler looking for a home. Where does this traveler lodge? Not in people who are strong and mighty, but in those who are weak and admit their weakness to their Savior and others.

Let's remember the context. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians because some critics in the church were attacking his claim to be an apostle. They said he was a fraud, and one of their accusations was that he was weak and unimpressive.

So how does Paul respond? He embraces their accusation. "You say I'm weak. You're right. I am weak. But you're wrong, too, because I'm also strong. Weak and

⁹ DBL Greek

strong at the same time. Those are my apostolic credentials. Christ puts His strength on display in my weakness.”

I remember in my battle with migraines thinking many times, “I feel so weak and helpless. I could do so much more for the Lord if I was strong.” But in this text the Lord says to me, “I don’t need your strength. It’s through your weakness, through your *thorn*, that I intend to put my strength on display.”

This is true for every one of us. Embracing it is how Paul could respond, “I will boast in my weakness.” It’s also the key to a second response, as seen in verse 10.

B. I am delighting in the difficulties of life. It’s important to remember that Paul’s thorn, whatever it was, wasn’t Paul’s only source of pain. In verse 10 he uses the plural when he says “in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.”

If we go back to the previous chapter, we’ll hear Paul identify some of the other difficulties he experienced, on top of this thorn. This is 2 Corinthians 11:24-30:

“Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”

Now notice Paul’s choice of words in verse 10. He says, “I *delight* in weaknesses, in insults, etc.” He uses the verb *eudoko* which means “to be pleased with, to enjoy, to prefer.”

Wait a minute. Is Paul some sort of masochist? No. In 2 Corinthians 5:8 he said, “We are confident, I say, and would *prefer* to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” See the word *prefer*? It’s the same verb *eudoko*. In one text Paul said he preferred to be away from this broken down body. In another text he says he preferred weakness. So which is it?

Both are true. Paul didn’t enjoy suffering (no one does or it’s not *suffering*). But he delighted in considering what the suffering was producing, opportunities for Christ to put His grace and power on display. That’s how he could delight in *weaknesses*. And in *insults* (the word *hybris* means “shame, maltreatment, damage, harm”). And in *hardships*, a word (*anankais*) which identifies “distress, trouble.” And in *persecutions* (*diagmos*), which speaks of “harassment” and “oppression.” And in *difficulties*, from the Greek word *stenochoria*, which means “distress” and “hardship.”

So it started with the thorn, but Jesus’ promise is now affecting the way Paul looks at *all* his difficulties in life. And so he concludes, “When I am weak, then I am *dynatos*, strong, full of power.”

Do you hear what Paul is saying? Simply put...

C. I am experiencing what Jesus promised.

And we can too. We too can experience sufficient grace as we face the inevitable challenges that will come in 2019. To help us, let’s consider three questions.

One, what are you doing with your present suffering? In this sin-cursed world, we all suffer. What are you doing with yours? Are you seeing the hand of God in it, and turning to Him with it?

Two, what are you doing with Jesus' promise? He says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Do you believe Him? I urge you to memorize this verse, this promise, and affirm it every day. Say, "Lord, I believe Your grace is sufficient for me today."

Three, what can you do to help others experience this promise? What we've learned today is too good to keep to ourselves. Let's look for ways to share it with others, first, by entering into their suffering, through the ministry of presence, and then by calling to mind this wonderful word from Jesus, this promise of sufficient grace.

There's a song I've listened to many times when hurting, a song by Keith and Kristyn Getty. It talks about the implications of sufficient grace. Listen to the words of, "When Trials Come".¹⁰

*When trials come no longer fear
For in the pain our God draws near
To fire a faith worth more than gold
And there His faithfulness is told
And there His faithfulness is told*

*Within the night I know Your peace
The breath of God brings strength to me
And new each morning mercy flows
As treasures of the darkness grow
As treasures of the darkness grow*

*I turn to Wisdom not my own
For every battle You have known
My confidence will rest in You
Your love endures Your ways are good
Your love endures Your ways are good*

*When I am weary with the cost
I see the triumph of the cross
So in its shadow I shall run
Till You complete the work begun
Till You complete the work begun*

*One day all things will be made new
I'll see the hope You called me to
And in your kingdom paved with gold
I'll praise your faithfulness of old
I'll praise your faithfulness of old*

The Bottom Line: We have sufficient grace for whatever we face in 2019.

¹⁰ "When Trials Come," by Keith and Kristyn Getty. 2005 Thankyou Music.