**The Strength of Weakness, Part 2**

***2 Corinthians 12:1-21***

Faith in Jesus shapes more than our eternal destiny. Faith in Jesus also changes our way of life. Every person who receives the grace of forgiveness also receives the grace of transformation. There is no justification without sanctification accompanying it. Our thinking is elevated above the philosophy of this world. Our values reflect the values of heaven and not of this world. Our relationships pursue the glory of God. Our behavior submits to the commandments of the LORD. Every part of our being is impacted by Jesus. We identify as foreigners in this world and as citizens of heaven.

Justin Martyr born around 90 AD and called “Martyr” because he was beheaded for Jesus. Justin wrote about the impact of Jesus upon the lives of His followers, *“We who formerly delighted in fornication, . . . now embrace chastity alone; we who formerly used magical arts, dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to everyone in need; who hated and destroyed one another . . . now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them and pray for our enemies.”*

*“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:18* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._3:18)*)*

**Main Idea: God works all through our lives to transform us into the image of His Son.**

**Question: How does God sanctify us?**

The primary and central means that God uses to reconcile us to Himself and to transform us into the image of Jesus is the Word of God which is the Gospel of Jesus.

*“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” (John 17:17* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#John_17:17)*)*

**Application: If you wish to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus, immerse yourself in the preaching of the Word, the reading of the Word, the meditating upon the Word, the memorization of the Word and the praying through the Word.**

With that fundamental understanding, we open our Bibles to 2 Corinthians 12 where Paul reveals four spiritual experiences that God uses to sanctify His people. Paul uses himself as an example of God’s working through these four experiences.

**Four Sanctifying Experiences in the Believer’s Life**

**Experience #1: Joyful Elevation**

God often uses elevated spiritual experiences in our lives to show us His glory and to strengthen our faith. He places us on top of the mountain to ignite our discouraged hearts with joy. Yet God’s deepest work of sanctification does not take place on the mountaintops. God’s deepest work happens in the lowest valleys of our lives.

**Experience #2: Painful Declination**

*“So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.” (2 Corinthians 12:7* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._12:7)*)*

**Paul moves from God’s use of the sublime to sanctify us to God’s use of suffering**. After such a euphoric experience with God, Paul understands that he could have become conceited and self-exalting. Nothing hinders spiritual growth and fruitful ministry like pride. So God is gracious to Paul and He sends him what Paul calls a “thorn in the flesh” to sanctify him and preserve his character.

**Question: How vulnerable must we all be to the soul-destroying sin of conceit that God went to such lengths to protect even Paul from it?**

Notice WHO gives this thorn to Paul. Paul says it is a messenger from Satan to harass him. He knows that the devil uses pain to discourage and disrupt faith. Suffering in itself is not sanctifying. Suffering can be VERY destructive to our soul. Satan purposes to knock Paul away from worship like he did Job in the OT. Satan is often behind the sickness and heartaches that we endure.

**But notice also another Hand at work!** *“So to keep me from becoming conceited . . . a thorn was given me.”* Did Satan want to keep Paul from becoming conceited? NO!!! **Paul is talking about God’s purpose in the thorn**. God gave him this thorn for His good purposes. **The same God who gave Paul the joy of an elevated experience is the God who gave to Paul an agonizing thorn.**

Joseph told his brothers who sold him into thorny slavery, “Man meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” Job when he learns of the thorny death of all his servants at the hand of the Chaldeans and then of the thorny death of his sons and daughters by means of a powerful wind, he falls on his face and worships the Lord saying,

*And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.” In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.” (Job 1:20–22* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Job_1:20)*)*

**Truth: The devil is often involved in our lives, especially in our afflictions. But the devil is never ultimate. God uses the devil to bring His kind purposes into our lives. The devil has been conquered by Jesus and has no power to do anything apart from God’s wise permission.**

Many have tried to guess what this thorn is. The list of possibilities is endless: malaria, epilepsy, bad eyesight, nerve pain from his beatings to name a few body pains. Some suggest that his thorn is a hostile person who hounds Paul with slander and accusations. Others suggest that the thorn is a temptation to some specific sin. While others believe that the thorn is a literal demon who constantly harasses Paul. **BUT Paul does not tell us anything more specific about this thorn in the flesh.**

**Why does Paul speak in such general terms about this thorn?**

I believe that Paul is general in his description so that we all would identify with his struggle with trials. When we read of Paul’s thorn, we think, “Yeah, I have a thorn too.”

Friend, what is your thorn? Perhaps a physical pain. Before my neck surgery, I felt confident that Paul had a ruptured disk in his neck. I could not fathom worse physical pain that what I experienced during those days. Perhaps a broken relationship. A marriage. A conflict with a son/daughter. Perhaps an emotional burden. A deep unshakeable depression. Perhaps a sorrowful loss. The death of a child. Perhaps

Whatever it is, know that God has a kind purpose for it. God is using your thorn for His eternal purpose of drawing you near to Jesus, to make you like Jesus and to experience His sufficiency.

The disciple of Jesus gladly accepts thorns, painful though they be, if they lead us deeper into Jesus. Knowing Jesus is worth any cost.

If you were given a choice:

Option #1: Keep your thorn and be brought near to Jesus.

Option #2: Lose your thorn and lose your connection to Jesus.

Which would you choose?

**God most often uses painful thorns in the lives of His children to help us grow in faith and to conform to the image of Jesus**. We think of Job as a prime example. But nearly every story of God’s faithful is one of suffering: **Joseph** enduring his brother’s betrayal. **David** enduring Saul’s hatred. **Moses** enduring the people’s grumbling. **Daniel** enduring the lion’s den. **Peter** enduring prison.

Why does God design such suffering for His children? Because He loves us. He knows that we need these trials keep us from sin that will kill us and to move us toward righteousness that will bring us life.

**Truth: Christian, if you are experiencing a painful trial, know that it is not an expression of God’s hatred, but of His love for you. God has designed your sorrowful thorn to be an instrument that brings you eternal joy. Our eternal happiness does not depend upon pleasant circumstances, but upon our growth in holiness.**

So Paul does not resent this thorn. He prays for its removal, but he does not question God’s goodness over it.

*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2–4* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#James_1:2)*).*

*In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:6–7* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#1Pet._1:6)*)*

**Truth: God often brings us low to raise us up!**

Martin Luther boiled the process down to three influences in our life: prayer, meditation on the Word and affliction sent from God. Christian, if you reflect upon your life, do you not find it true that the times you grew the most in your faith were the times when you suffered the most extreme trials? Very little spiritual growth comes to us apart from our suffering.

Do you have a thorn in the flesh? What pains you to the point of distraction and discouragement?

**Truth: Our thorns are our greatest assets. God has a kind, sanctifying purpose behind them. The power of God is not manifested in us through our strengths and triumphs, but through our weaknesses and our sufferings.**

*“Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.” (2 Corinthians 12:8* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._12:8)*)*

We are right to cry out to God when we are in anguish! Paul did! Jesus did in the Garden and from the cross. Sometime God DOES remove our thorn! Let us pray for ourselves and for each other! But sometimes God’s answer is better than our request.

**Truth: In our suffering we discover God and His sufficiency.**

**Main Idea: God works all through our lives to transform us into the image of His Son.**

**Experience #1: Joyful Elevation**

**Experience #2: Painful Declination**

**Experience #3: Ample Provision**

*“But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest (dwell) upon me.” (2 Corinthians 12:9* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._12:9)*)*

Someone notes recently how the word “sufficient” does not seem to do justice to the truth of God’s grace. The words “lavish”, “extravagant”, “abounding” seem better suited to describe grace. But sufficient is the word here. Why?

**I think Paul uses “sufficient” in an understated way to point to the anxious thoughts that often adorn our sufferings.** We ask, “Will God’s supply be enough to help me in my need?”

I think of a starving man who is taken by the King to a castle for a meal. He thinks, “I am starving here. Will there be enough? As he approaches the banquet hall, he boldly tells the King, “I hope this is not rude, but I am really, really hungry. Will there be enough food for me here?” As the King opens the door to the banquet hall where table upon table is filled with the finest meats, fruit, vegetables, desserts, soups and seafood, the King smiles, *“My banquet is SUFFICIENT for you!”*

If you were one of the hungry 5000 waiting for Jesus to break the 5 loaves and 2 fish into pieces. And if you were sitting in the back row, your growling stomach might have been asking, “Will there be enough for me?” Then the disciples pass the food to you and say, “Take as much as you want!” And it is so much that when the disciples pass baskets around to put all the leftovers, you put some of the food back in!! “And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over.” (Matthew 15:37 [ESV](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Matt._15:37)) “My grace is sufficient for you!”

The word “sufficient” is the word which means “that which fully satisfies a person.” God’s grace fully satisfies . . . regardless of how massive the need, His grace is more. God is God’s infinite supply to match our desperate need.

*“My grace is sufficient for you,* ***for my power is made perfect in weakness.”***

Our power does not come from our talents, our resources, our experiences, our impact, our strength. Our power comes from God who loves to give His strength to a weak people.

**Truth: Only the weak come to God for help. If we are not weak, we will never know His power.**

*Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest (dwell) upon me.” (2 Corinthians 12:9* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._12:9)*)*

*“. . . the worst trial a man may have may be the best possession he has in this world; that the messenger of Satan may be as good to him as his guardian angel; that it may be as well for him to be buffeted of Satan as ever it was to be caressed of the Lord himself; . . . The worst form of trial may, nevertheless, be our best present portion.” Charles Spurgeon*

The word “rest” or “dwell” in verse 9 point us to the tabernacle of the Old Testament. At the tabernacle, God met with His people. Here our life’s pains and struggles are the point of God “dwelling” with us. We know that God is near in our pleasant days. But it is in the dark, difficult seasons that God reveals Himself as our Father who loves us, as the Creator who provides for us, as the KING who protects us and as our Shepherd who tenderly cradles us in His arms. We KNOW His power in those moments.

“Rest upon me” is the vocabulary of the tabernacle from the time when God pitched his tent with his people (cf. Exodus 40:34). It is also the language used of Jesus when “the Word became flesh and dwelt [literally, *pitched his tent*] among us” (John 1:14). So here in 2 Corinthians 12:9b, Paul employs the same awesome image to teach that the all-powerful Christ “pitches his tent” with his people in their weakness.16

R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*, [Preaching the Word](https://accordance.bible/link/read/PTW-36#87618). Accordance electronic ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 215.

Friend, can I convince you to take this promise personally? God’s grace IS sufficient for you!

His grace is sufficient to comfort you in your mourning.

His grace is sufficient to uphold you in your faltering.

His grace is enough to satisfy you in your yearning.

His grace is sufficient to win the battle in your in your fighting.

His grace is sufficient to guide you in your confusion.

His grace is sufficient to supply for you in your desperation.

Whatever you are going through . . . His grace is sufficient FOR YOU!!

*“For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:10* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._12:10)*)*

How do you think others will know of the power of Christ in your life? Not your riches. Not your talents. Not your strengths. Not your triumphs. Jesus’ power is put on display through our weaknesses. For when we are weak . . . then and only then are we strong!

**The THEME of Power in Weakness is central to the Gospel of Jesus.**

*For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.” (2 Corinthians 1:8–9* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._1:8)*)*

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.”(2 Corinthians 4:7–13)*

*“but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; . . . through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.” (2 Corinthians 6:4–10* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._6:4)*)*

Yesterday, my two-year old granddaughter asked me to read from the Bible story book. She wanted me to read a particular story from it. She searched through the pages and she gave me the book when she found the page that she wanted me to read. I looked and it was the picture of Jesus hanging on the cross. His body is bruised and beaten. He has a tear falling down his cheek.

Aleksi looked at me and said, “Bad men hurt Jesus.” I said “Yes.” And then she asked me, “Why?” I told her that Jesus could have called 10,000 angels to protect Him from the bad men. I told her that Jesus could have spoken a word and He would have been free from this suffering. But Jesus died on the cross for her sins and for mine. And Jesus did this by His OWN CHOICE! Jesus did this because He loves us! We both paused in that solemn moment to consider this act of love. And then we turned the page to the picture of the empty tomb and then to the picture of the resurrected Jesus’ meeting with his disciples!

Aleksi exclaimed, “New body! New body!” Yes, little one, Jesus’ has a resurrected body . . . one that no longer suffers. He rose in power from the grave. He is victorious over sin and death!!

Friends, the heart of the Gospel teaches us that POWER IS PERFECTED IN WEAKNESS. Jesus became weak so that we might be made strong!!! Without the weakness of the cross, we would never experience the power of Jesus’ resurrection.

Friends, let us not fear the weakness of the cross. It is through this very weakness that God’s power is perfected in us! ***We must keep the cross in front of us!***

Isaac Watts great hymn speaks to us of the power of God perfected in weakness:

*When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,  
Save in the death of Christ my God!  
All the vain things that charm me most,  
I sacrifice them to His blood.*

**Main Idea: God works all through our lives to transform us into the image of His Son.**

**Experience #1: Joyful Elevation**

**Experience #2: Painful Declination**

**Experience #3: Ample Provision**

**Experience #4: Difficult Interactions**

*I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.” (2 Corinthians 12:11–12* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._12:11)*)*

Paul’s sharpest words of rebuke are found here in this last part of chapter 12. He unleashes a strong word of correction out of love with a mind to help the Corinthian believers avoid spiritual disaster. The Corinthians had no good reason to believe the lies of the super-apostles.

*“For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!” (2 Corinthians 12:13* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._12:13)*)*

His words drip with sarcasm, “Forgive me for not taking a penny of support from you. I know the super-apostles are scamming money out of you and you love them for it. Please forgive me for not doing the same!”

*Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls.” (2 Corinthians 12:14–15a* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._12:14)*)*

I never wanted your money. I wanted your hearts! I am planning a third trip to see you! I would give anything to be a blessing to you!

Notice that Paul’s spending himself . . . his time, his energy, his finances . . . all this reflected Jesus who though rich became poor so that we might be made rich!

**Truth: All true ministry seeks for ways to be spent in order to bring spiritual blessing to others. Let us we look for ways to spend our lives for the sake of Jesus’ church.**

*“If I love you more, am I to be loved less?” (2 Corinthians 12:15b* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._12:15)*)*

Paul is not asking for anything other than love in return for the love that he gives. He is not asking to be served. He is not asking for money. He is not asking for some favor. *Friend, do you know how much God loves you?*

*But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?” (2 Corinthians 12:16–18* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._12:16)*)*

Friends, when we enter into ministry for Jesus, we can expect our motives to be questioned and then twisted. The super-apostles had convinced the members of the church that Paul acted out of self-interest. Paul is asking for the proof.

T-shirt of a chicken and next to it: *I dream of a world where a chicken can cross the road without having its motives questioned.* I think Paul would have bought that shirt!

*Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved. For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.” (2 Corinthians 12:19–20* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._12:19)*)*

Paul gets to the heart of his concerns. If the people follow a false Gospel, the power of God will not work in them and they will become fleshly, worldly, dark and dead.

Every word that Paul writes is intended for spiritual upbuilding. Every line is written in prayer that God would use it to sanctify this church and every member in her.

Were Paul’s fears justified? Yes!!! Paul’s second visit to Corinth proved that these very sins can enslave God’s redeemed people. Satan can gain a foothold in our souls!! We must be alert to the devil’s strategy and arm ourselves with the true Gospel.

*“I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.” (2 Corinthians 12:21* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._12:21)*)*

If the people continued to listen to the super-apostles and not to Paul . . . to a false gospel and not the true Gospel, no repentance would take place. Where there is no active repentance from sin, death reigns.

**Application: Be careful who you listen to. If a believer listens to voices that are contrary to the Gospel, spiritual cancer will weaken and destroy their souls.**

All through the Bible God uses difficult people and difficult relationships to sanctify His own redeemed people. Job and his three friends. Abraham and Lot. Joseph and his brothers. Moses and his sister Miriam. David and Saul. Elijah and Ahab/Jezebel. Here Paul and the Corinthian congregation. God uses this wayward church to conform Paul to the image of Jesus.

Difficult interactions often have the opposite effect upon our soul. Instead of sanctifying us, they open the door to the devil and to spiritual darkness.

*Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” (Ephesians 4:26–27* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Eph._4:26)*)*

*“See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;” (Hebrews 12:15* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Heb._12:15)*)*

Thankfully, God ALSO uses encouraging interactions to sanctify His redeemed people.

*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:24–25* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Heb._10:24)*)*

Conclusion:

**Main Idea: God works all through our lives to transform us into the image of His Son.**

**God loves you too much to abandon you to your sin.** He first calls you to receive His redeeming love. Have you?

God then calls you to His sanctifying love. Are you?

Question: Are you being sanctified by Jesus through the Holy Spirit? Are you becoming more like Jesus?

May our souls rejoice in every instrument that God uses to shape us into the image of His own dear Son.