

**Power in Weakness**  
**By David Feddes**  
**2 Corinthians 12:1-10**

The apostle Paul has been defending his ministry to some people who were doubtful about it and preferred other kinds of leaders. He says: "I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me."

Here Paul is talking about himself but speaking indirectly so as not to be too boastful. Paul has been to heaven and back again. However, he says, "I'm not going to talk about that because I don't want you to overestimate me. I want you to go by what you see and what you hear from me, not by the fact that I saw the risen Lord Jesus Christ when I first was converted, or the fact that I've been to heaven and back. I can't put what I saw into words, and if I could, I'm not allowed to tell you anyway." Paul doesn't want them to think of him too highly, and he doesn't want Paul's glimpses of heaven to be the main thing they think about when they see God's power at work in Paul.

Paul continues, "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. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 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 upon me. 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."

"God will never send you anything you can't handle"—that's a fairly common cliché. "God will never send you something you can't handle." I'm here to tell you: yes, he will. And he does. A lot. With a lot of different people. God will send you many things that you can't handle, that overwhelm you, that crush you, that weigh you down, and you wonder whether you're going to be able to make it through the next day. God will send you things that you cannot handle.

If you belong to Jesus, you will find that he sends grace and that he sends strength so that even in your weakness he will carry you. But don't ever believe that he's going to send you just a nice, well-modulated little life that you can pretty much handle because you're a pretty smart, you've got everything together, and you're a strong person. God sends things that are overwhelming for us, and then supplies his grace so that we can say with the apostle that God's grace is sufficient, that in our weakness we've found a greater strength

## Thorny questions

- What was Paul's thorn in the flesh?
- Who sent the thorn to Paul?
- How should we pray in affliction?
- When should we stop requesting?
- Why would a thorn not be removed?

When you read this passage about Paul's thorn in the flesh, there are a number of thorny questions that come up.

### *What was Paul's thorn in the flesh?*

There have been many educated guesses on what the thorn in the flesh was. None is certain, and Paul himself doesn't say. So I'm not going to try to say either. There are some who speak of the possibility of it being a physical affliction, or something that terribly affected his eyes. There are some indications in the Bible that he had serious eye problems (Galatians 4:13–15). There may have been other health conditions. There are some who think it was the ferocious opposition that he continually faced (2 Corinthians 11:23–27). Many other possibilities could be mentioned, but if Paul doesn't tell us, it might be wisest that we don't spend too much time guessing.

I think there's a reason he didn't tell us. Paul was a pastor and a great leader of people, and he knew that they would also be dealing with very difficult things in their life. If he told them exactly what his thorn was, they might be tempted to say, "That's different from what I've gone through." When we're facing a thorn of our own, we don't need to know exactly what Paul's thorn was. Whatever it was, his thorn in the flesh was something very painful and very difficult, and something that was chronic. It wouldn't go away.

### *Who sent the thorn to Paul?*

The first thing Paul says is, "It was given me" (2 Corinthians 12:7). And he uses the passive tense: "It was given me." Often in the Bible, "it is given" or "it is done" is called the divine passive. God is the one at work when something "is given." But in the very next breath, Paul calls it "a messenger of Satan" (2 Corinthians 12:7).

So who sends that thorn to Paul? Is it God or is it Satan? It obviously can't be both. But it is. It is both. The thorn comes from Satan, *and* it comes from God. Satan's intent in sending the thorn is very different than God's intent for that thorn. But both God and Satan are involved in ways that we're not going to be able to get all figured out and tidy up in a nice system.

It's not the only time in the Bible where Satan is involved and God is also involved. Think back to the book of Job. Satan goes around looking for someone to target. Job is the best guy in the world, devoted to God. But Satan tells God, "Job is only good because you pay him well." So God allows Satan to afflict Job (Job 1:6–12; Job 2:1–7). And at the end of it all, it is proven that Job will hold on to God no matter what. He says, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (Job 13:15).

Job is never told that Satan was involved. At the end, he has a tremendous encounter with God, and God reveals his greatness to Job, but God never breathes a word about Satan to Job. God doesn't say, "Hey Job, it wasn't really me at all—it was Satan." God never uses the Satan excuse. Job knew very well that if something came into his life, ultimately God was involved. Satan might have been the direct cause, but God was the one who arranged Job's life the way it was. And God had different purposes than Satan did. Satan wanted to show Job to be a phony. God was going to give Job a greater encounter with himself than he had ever experienced. And at the end of the book, Job says, "My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5). God's intent was to bring Job into a deeper encounter with God than he ever had before.

Or take another example, the supreme example, of Satan and God being involved at the same time. Satan entered into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus Christ (Luke 22:3). Satan was at work in the mob and in the wicked leaders of the people who murdered and crucified Jesus (John 13:27; Acts 2:23). Yet the Bible says it all happened by God's plan and purpose (Acts 4:27–28). Both Satan and God: the crucifixion is the work of the devil, and it is the greatest revelation of God's love and the greatest act of God in saving his people.

Martin Luther once said, "Satan is still God's devil." Even though he's in rebellion, even though he's very wicked, Satan cannot go beyond the bounds of God's permission. When Satan is up to something in the life of one of God's people, God is working, and God is going to bring about wonderful things. Who sends that thorn to Paul? It is a messenger of Satan, and it is from God, in order to keep Paul from being conceited and to carry out God's purposes in Paul's life (2 Corinthians 12:7).

That may give you a headache. So be it. If you want your faith to be something that fits on a bumper sticker—"God will never send you anything you can't handle," or "If something bad happens, it's never anything to do with God, must have been the devil"—well, even if the devil was involved, it does not mean that God is not in the picture and that God's purposes are not being carried out.

### ***How should we pray in affliction?***

How are we supposed to pray when something comes along that is very painful, that we don't want, that we wish were gone?

Pray the way Paul did: "Lord, get rid of it." That's the first thing. When we're praying and dealing with an affliction, we pray that it go away, that God remove it. Even if it came by God's arrangement and plan, that doesn't mean it's his will and intent to leave us with it. It may well be that he wants to remove it. So pray that it be removed. Pray that we be healed. Pray that this season of affliction will be ended. We're studying a passage where a request wasn't answered as hoped (2 Corinthians 12:8–9), but that does not mean you should assume God never intends to answer a prayer for relief and restoration. Don't say, "I know God's probably not going to answer this prayer anyway, but I'll ask because I'm supposed to pray."

No. We should go to God expecting that God is interested in our situation. God's normal approach is going to be to remove the afflictions that come into our life. Healing is the work of

Jesus Christ, and he is the great healer still today. We can come to him and ask him for healing, for strength, and come expectantly, come with anticipation of what he's going to do. This kind of passage is not meant to throw a wet blanket on all prayer and all expectation that God is going to answer prayer in wonderful ways.

### ***When should we stop requesting?***

If we're meant to ask for removal of the affliction, or healing of the illness, or removal of whatever problem we're facing, when do we stop? Paul stopped when he knew that God was not going to remove it, because God told him so (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Now, there are different ways to think about that. One is, after you request several times and it hasn't come about, you say, "Well, I guess it's not God's will to answer in the way I was hoping, and so now I simply accept it as God's will, and I learn to live with it."

Another way of looking at it might be this: Paul prayed for the affliction to be removed, but then he received a direct revelation from Jesus Christ himself that it wasn't going to be removed, and that God was going to supply sufficient grace (2 Corinthians 12:9). So if God doesn't give me a strong and direct sense that it's not his will that it be removed, I'm going to keep praying that it gets removed until it is—or until I have a very strong indication from God that he's not going to.

When should we stop requesting? When we know God's will in the matter. If we don't know, I'd say: keep on asking God to remove the affliction. If you've been afflicted with something for years, that doesn't necessarily mean you say, "I guess it's not meant to be." It's still okay to keep praying if you haven't received a strong and clear message from the Lord that his will is that you're going to just keep living with the problem. We shouldn't always assume that an affliction is meant to be ongoing without end just because it's been going on for quite a while. It may well be that God will lift it in a different season. So pray and keep on praying till you know that God doesn't want you to pray about that anymore.

### ***Why would a thorn not be removed?***

This may be one of the hardest of the thorny questions that come out of this passage. Why wasn't Paul healed of that thorn in the flesh, whatever it was? Why doesn't God always remove our thorn when we ask him? There are various reasons why a prayer might not be answered in the way we were hoping, or why we're not rescued from a predicament. The Bible gives a number of them. They don't all apply at the same time to the same situation, but here are some possibilities.

### **Why not healed?**

- Failure to ask
- Lack of faith
- Refusal to repent
- Don't want health
- Bound by demon
- Divine purposes

One is *failure to ask*. James says, “You do not have, because you do not ask God” (James 4:2). He’s talking to a particular audience of people, and they just haven’t bothered to pray. They haven’t bothered to talk to God about it. So if you have a situation in your life that you wish were different, but you’ve never gone to God with it in urgent prayer, makes sure you ask him!

Sometimes people are not delivered or healed because of a *lack of faith*. That’s not always the reason. Sometimes people of great faith, such as Paul, are not delivered or healed. There are stories in the Bible where faith brought healing and where lack of faith prevented healing, but it’s a mistake to turn this into a one-size-fits-all principle, where you say, “If you’re not healed, or if an affliction is not lifted, that means you didn’t have enough faith, because we know that everybody with enough faith is always healed.” That’s baloney. Even so, there are times where lack of faith is a problem, and where presence of faith is what brings God’s blessing.

Often Jesus would say to someone, “Your faith has healed you. Go in peace” (Mark 5:34). Sometimes *shalom*, or peace, means health. “Your faith has healed you. Go in peace. Go in health.” Faith is an important element in receiving answers from God.

The opposite is also true: sometimes lack of faith blocks healing. Jesus came to his hometown. “He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith” (Mark 6:5–6). That’s a very strange and strong way to put it: “Jesus could not.” Jesus can do anything! But lack of faith shut the door to help from Jesus.

Clearly, faith has an important part to play in receiving God's healing. But what kind of faith? It's not always simply believing that I'm going to get what I ask for. Faith is believing that God is sufficient, and that God is able, and that Jesus is a mighty healer.

A man came to Jesus and said, “Lord, please help me. If you're willing, I know you can heal me” (Mark 1:40). Jesus took that as faith. The man didn’t know if Jesus wanted to heal him, but he knew that if Jesus wanted to, he certainly could. Sometimes faith is taken to mean, “I know what the outcome is going to be. I know what Jesus is going to do.” But in this case, the man said, “I know that if you're willing to heal me, you can.” Jesus said, “I am willing. Be healed” (Mark 1:41). So faith is simply trusting in God and trusting in the power of Jesus to rescue, to save, to heal, to deliver.

Sometimes healing or rescue didn’t come because of *refusal to repent*. The apostle James speaks of this: “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well. The Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:14–16). It seems that sometimes, at least, there can be an unconfessed, unrepented sin in a person’s life that is blocking God’s blessing from coming into that person’s life.

I'll take an example from a different area. The apostle Peter at one point tells husbands: "Husbands, be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect... so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (1 Peter 3:7). So if you're a jerk of a husband and you're treating your wife like dirt, and then you're praying, “Lord, pour on the blessings,” it might not

happen. Peter says, “so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” Sometimes living in sin and refusing to repent can block our prayers from getting through and receiving God's answers.

Sometimes healing doesn't come because we **don't want health**. Whatever we might be telling ourselves, there may be the danger of not really wanting our situation to change. It sounds very strange, but sometimes, once you get into a situation where you can go on as a victim, where you can go on as the person who's just in this muddle and not much is expected of you, do you really want to be back on your feet in great health?

Jesus came to a man who had been crippled for many years and said to him: “Do you want to be healed?” (John 5:6) What kind of question is that? The man has been unable to walk for years and years and years. Why would Jesus even ask, ‘Do you want to be healed?’” The man did say, “Yes, I want to be healed” (John 5:7), but the very fact the question was asked does indicate that there may be times where we don't really have a deep desire to have the kind of health and strength and fullness that would enable us to live responsible lives. We might rather remain the victim where somebody else has to take care of us.

Another barrier to healing or deliverance from affliction is being **bound by a demon**. There was a woman who for 18 years had been bent over by sickness. Jesus said that this woman had been bound by Satan for all those years, and Jesus set her free and healed her (Luke 13:10–16). In the passage we're studying, there was an element of demonic attack and activity in the affliction that Paul had to face (2 Corinthians 12:7).

So those are some of the reasons why a person sometimes remains in affliction, remains in a predicament, and doesn't get delivered from it: failure to ask God, or lack of faith in God's power to save and rescue, or living with unconfessed sin and refusing to repent, or simply not wanting health or a change of situation, or being bound by demonic powers that are causing the affliction.

Having said all that, those are not the only reasons to consider when we haven't been rescued or healed. Above all, God has **divine purposes**. You might be a person who has asked God, and you asked in faith, and you asked with all of your sins repented and laid at the foot of the cross, and you really do want the blessing from God, and you really are free from a demonic bondage—and still you don't get the deliverance. You still don't get the healing.

Why not? Very often God is up to something, working for your good, and there are divine purposes in your affliction.

Before we go further into that, it's important to remind ourselves not to misuse this list of possible reasons why someone is not rescued or healed. Don't use this list to judge other people and say, “I know why God hasn't rescued you.” That's too easy and too harmful. Some very bad theologies latch onto one or another of these reasons, and they've got the instant explanation for why you aren't healed: “If you would just shape up and have a little more faith, or repent of this, or deal with the demon of the common cold, all would be well.” These reasons all appear in the Bible at one point or another, but if they're turned into a system or used as a means of explaining everybody else's problems for them, they cause far more damage than good.

Still, the Bible does talk about these various things that might block deliverance. So without judging others, and without inflicting additional burdens on ourselves, we should be open to considering these possibilities and examining ourselves. “Lord, have I been praying for help? Am I living in faith? Am I repenting of all known sin? Do I really want things to change? Do demonic powers have a foothold in my life?” We can examine these as possibilities during a season of affliction, so that just in case one of these things is blocking restoration, we don't remain stuck in a self-inflicted problem.

Having said all that, it's very possible that our ongoing affliction is not caused by any of these things. There may well be divine purposes, and we need to think about what those might be.

### **Various thorns**

As we get into those divine purposes and God's power for us in weakness, let me expand on various thorns in our life. Paul doesn't define what his thorn in the flesh was, but let me mention some of the possible thorns that come into our own life as afflictions.

Sometimes it's being ill. It can be chronic pain that doesn't go away. It can be ongoing fatigue and weariness and weakness.

It can be a problem that just sticks with you and bothers you and you wish were different.

It might be the way you look. You weren't blessed with the fabulous looks of somebody else and you wish you were, but you're a little plainer looking than some people.

You might be painfully shy and have a hard time talking to people. It makes it hard for you in your work life or in some of your relationships because you just can't come out and say what you're thinking or feeling.

You might be a person who's uneducated, and you feel ill-equipped in difficult conversations. When all those smarter people get to talking, you remain silent because you feel dumb around others.

You might just be unpopular. People don't take to you the way they do to other people.

You might be poor. You just don't have a whole lot of money. You can't meet your basic needs and pay all the bills that are coming your way. Your employment situation might be very bad. You might be without a job entirely.

A thorn in the flesh might be fragile emotions, mental illness, a vulnerability. And you might look at others and think, “Those people seem to have it together. They've got energy, they've got happiness, and I just seem to be stuck.”

Sometimes it's circumstances, overwhelming challenges, where you start feeling more and more powerless. I think of the last couple of weeks. Just in the circle of people that we know: a guest pastor preached here on Sunday, and Monday found out that his bladder cancer was back. My

sister-in-law had surgery for cancer. Another person I know well was diagnosed with cancer. And my little grandson ended up in the intensive care unit, where he still is after a week.

Then there are the chronic things that just keep going and going that people have had to bear for months and even years on end. The difficulties weigh on us, sometimes with a weight greater than we feel able to bear.

Sometimes our thorn in the flesh, our weakness, is just getting old. It happens to everybody. You might say, "You should just get used to it. We all get older. Deal with it." That's easy to say. But when your memory starts slipping, when your health starts weakening, you can't do much about it. It's not just happening to somebody else; it's happening to you. And it's hard.

It may be a disability.

It may be straying kids. You see other people's kids, and they seem to be on a great path. But you've got one or more children who are breaking your heart. You've prayed for them for years on end, but the situation still hasn't changed.

So there are many different thorns, many forms of weakness. We're desperate to understand, and we ask, What could God be up to as I go through such things? Each of you, as you reflect on your own situation and on your own life, will be able to identify seasons where you felt something was too much. What is God doing? Let's consider some of God's purposes in affliction, some of the ways that his power can work through our weakness.

### **Power in weakness**

- Protection from pride
- Faith in sufficient grace
- Closer union with Christ
- Stronger inner self
- Able to comfort others
- Giving all glory to God

Sometimes God sends weakness to provide **protection from pride**. Paul says the thorn in his flesh was given to him so that he would not become puffed up and proud (2 Corinthians 12:7). Paul, despite his growth in godliness, was still vulnerable to sin, and God knew it. He knew that somebody who's been to heaven and back, who's been in paradise and then comes back to this earth, might be in danger of pride. Paul's heart was completely known to God. So when Paul had this tremendous revelation, the God who gave him the revelation also gave him the thorn, so that the revelation would achieve its purpose in Paul's life without inflating his pride.

Sometimes we might say to ourselves, "If only God would give me a more spectacular experience! If he would take me to heaven and then put me back on earth, or give me some other tremendous experience of himself, then at last I would be the kind of person God wants me to be. If I just knew with greater certainty, if I just had the fantastic joy that comes from that kind of experience, then I would really make a difference in the world."

But maybe not.

Maybe what we most need to become more like Jesus is not simply the spectacular revelation but the carrying of the cross, the walking of the path that we didn't want to walk, and walking it because we're faithful to God.

Paul was protected from pride. For many of us, affliction humbles us. Affliction may tell me: I'm not as strong as I thought I was. I thought I had things together. But in affliction I find out I am helpless in the face of what can be thrown at me.

Affliction may tell me: I'm not as virtuous as I thought I was. I thought I was a person of much faith. I felt spiritually strong. But when affliction struck, I felt paralyzed. I felt like I couldn't go another step. I felt like God had betrayed me. I got really mad at God.

That is not a pleasant thing to go through, but it has a way of humbling you. You discover, "I'm not one of these great and mighty heroes of the faith. If God doesn't help me, and help me soon, I'm not going to have any faith at all." That realization can be depressing: "My faith is pathetic. My faith cruises along pretty well when life is going smoothly, but when life gets really hard, my faith goes pfft."

You might say, "God should make life better for people so that it would be easier for them to have faith." We all have good suggestions for God on how to be God! But God knows us, and he wants us to know ourselves. Sometimes the only way to know yourself is when the avalanche of trouble comes on you and you find out how you handle it. Maybe you didn't handle it very well. And you say, "That affliction had the opposite effect that God wanted it to have. He just made me a wreck, and made me bitter, and made me feel like I didn't even want to serve the Lord anymore." But you know what? It can be helpful to find out that's who you are unless there is a tremendous outpouring of grace for today, to realize that I am helpless unless God comes through.

God often uses affliction to develop **faith in sufficient grace**. We might want to live on a built-up supply of spiritual savings and capital enough to last a lifetime. We might want God give us enough grace for the next 40 years till we show up in glory. But God has a habit of giving us grace one day at a time, where last week's grace isn't going to get me through this week. I can't say, "Thanks for that huge dose of grace, Lord. I think I've got enough to get me through the next month." That's not how it works. The sooner we realize that, the better. We are helpless and weak apart from God's grace, and we need a fresh supply each day.

In this way, we develop faith in God's sufficient grace. Paul heard Jesus say to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). It was in his weakness that Paul became more and more the mighty man of God that God wanted him to be. It was not so much Paul's visit to heaven (although God had purposes for that) as Paul's weakness that made him more and more the man God wanted him to be.

Earlier in 2 Corinthians he says: "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this

happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead” (2 Corinthians 1:8–9). When you feel like you’re left for dead, when everything is a wreck and a ruin, you only have one option: count on God who raises the dead. We’d like to get through life and feel like we’ve got it under control. But in the end, all we’ve got left is faith in God’s sufficient grace for each day, faith in God who raises the dead. Paul says this is so that “we would not rely on ourselves but on God” (2 Corinthians 1:9).

And don’t forget what Paul said in this first letter to the Corinthians, right at the beginning: “The foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength” (1 Corinthians 1:25).

God’s sufficient grace, though it’s mysterious, though seems downright weird at times, turns out to give us what we need in our time of need.

Another way we experience God’s power in our weakness is a closer **union with Christ**. “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body” (2 Corinthians 4:10–11). We want the life of Jesus. We want the energy of Jesus, the joy of Jesus, the strength of Jesus. And we can have that. But we don’t get to have union with the life and the joy and the strength of Jesus apart from participation in the suffering of Jesus.

The triumph of the resurrection does not come without the anguish of the crucifixion. So in our union with Christ, when we’re united with him in his death, then we’re united with him in his resurrection. “We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Romans 8:17). And one of the joys of going through hard times is a closer union and identification with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Another blessing and benefit is a **stronger inner self**. Your inner being is strengthened. “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ... Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:6, 16–18).

Our inner self is "being renewed day by day," even though the outer self is "wasting away." Our body, our energies, our ability to do things—these might all be wasting away. And yet the real you, the you that God is concerned about, not just the you that’s going to be able to do something useful next week, but the you that’s going to be around for eternity—that inner self is being renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16). There are some people who, as they age, begin losing physical capacities and yet become mightier and mightier in their walk with the Lord and in their closeness to him. The inner self is strengthened.

The apostle Peter wrote the same way: “These [trials] have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:7).

The apostle James said: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2–4).

The maturing of a person happens through the valley of trial. We may wish it were not so, but it is so. Think of your own life. For some of you, maybe there were tremendous times of growth in a worship service of great joy and celebration, or a special retreat where you felt especially close to the Lord, and God did wonderful things in times of joy and in spiritual highs. But for many, it will be those low times, the times of anguish, where you matured more than at any other point in your life. You might not have chosen that affliction for yourself, but when it came, it made you more the person God wanted you to be. The strengthening of your inner self occurs.

Another way God’s power is made perfect in weakness is that you become more **able to comfort others**. Let’s go back to the very beginning of 2 Corinthians. The apostle says: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:6–7).

You become a greater channel of God's comfort to people enduring hardship when you yourself have gone through hardship and found God's presence encouraging you and comforting you. Let me just ask: Who is the greatest comfort to you when you're going through a hard time? The person who is smiling 24/7 and has never had a problem? Sometimes it is nice to be around cheery people. I like being around cheery people. But when you're going through troubles, you're often helped the most by those who have been through something really, really tough. They know what it's like. They know where you're at.

Greater ability to comfort others might not be the full explanation of why you're going through what you're going through, but it may be one good thing that comes out of it. It is a good thing when you have gone through something hard and then you share with other sufferers the comfort that you have received from Christ.

This past week, it was hard not to think back 35 years. 35 years ago I was ordained to the ministry of the Word. A few weeks after I was ordained to the ministry of the Word, Wendy went into the hospital, and she remained in the hospital for many weeks. Then she gave birth to twins, and those twins were in terrible danger for a long time. Rebekah and Rachel were on respirators and received all kinds of treatment. Rachel eventually got better, but Rebekah—almost six months later, after nine times off and on the respirator in—died.

We were part of a congregation of over 500 people. There were almost no deaths in that congregation during the entire three years I was there. Our baby died on May 12. Another couple in our congregation lost their baby the same day. Besides those two babies who died the same day, only one other person died in the three years I served there, a man in his eighties.. Those were the three deaths in our whole congregation during those years. Why did our baby die the very day somebody else's baby died? I don't know. And I wouldn't say, "It's good that our little daughter died so that I could be empathetic to somebody else." That's not the whole picture, but it's part of it. We can't avoid what the Bible teaches us, even when it hurts. Whatever God's purposes are that I don't understand, I do know that the other couple who lost their baby knew that their pastor understood what they were going through.

When we go through things like that—and each of you has had your own trials, some worse than I have ever faced—we again realize how weak we are, how little we are able to make it through these times without help from beyond ourselves.

When I see my little grandson lying there in an intensive care unit this week, I vividly remember his mother 34 years ago lying in the very same condition. Rachel doesn't remember any of it, of course. But I do.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

Sam Storms has written a wonderful set of meditations on 2 Corinthians. He says when we go through something hard, we often ask, “Why me?” He says sometimes it might be helpful to ask, “Who else?” Because we're not the only ones going through a hard time. And when we think not just about “Why me?” but also “Who else?” then we're starting to ask, “How? How can I be a comfort to somebody else? How can I receive the sufficient grace of God and overflow with that sufficient grace for somebody else?”

And when we go through all of this, we need to remember what Paul says again: “God's power is made perfect in weakness... Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me... For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9–10).

We heard a testimony last week: “I can't do the things I used to do. These hands, they just won't do it.” But do you think doing nice things with your hands brings more blessing than what's gone on in your heart? That great heart of love and courage and faith—God is at work. Of course, we pray that the affliction will be lifted. But in the meantime, let us not block ourselves off from the comfort that flows to us from God and that he then gives to other people through us.

The ultimate purpose in all this is **giving glory to God**. God's purpose is that we may rejoice in his glory and that he may be glorified. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:3). Amid the many things we don't understand, we understand this: he is the God and Father of Jesus Christ, who sent him into the world to bear burdens that nobody else could bear, to endure sufferings that nobody else

could endure. He's the Father of all mercies, the Father of all compassion. What a wonderful title to give to God—the Father of all mercies and the God of all comfort, the God of encouragement.

Paul endured the thorn in the flesh and many other sufferings. So how does he describe God? "God is the mean person who puts me through stuff I can't stand"? No. He says, based on his own experience, that he is "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort." Paul had tasted that comfort. He had received that encouragement. God had sent him something he couldn't handle, but then he found out that God's comfort was greater than an trouble he had gone through. And because of that, then he can glorify God.

When we're crushed, when our strength is not able to avail, then God gets the glory when good things happen. We don't get the glory because we were helpless without him.

The Bible speaks of that tremendous revelation where "God made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). What a treasure. That's comparable to that visit Paul had to heaven: God gives us a revelation of himself. And then the very next thing Paul says is: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7). There's this tremendous treasure—and it's plopped right into a crackpot. Just a jar that's not all that fancy, very vulnerable to getting smashed. But the treasure is there. Why does God do it that way? Why put such treasure in such a weak vessel? To show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

The apostle Peter says: "Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:13). "The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 5:10–11). So, in receiving encouragement and power from God in the midst of these terrible trials that we face as his people, God is glorified.

Our own strength has failed. Our own wisdom has failed to figure it out. But Christ crucified and risen, and the daily grace of God, turns out to be enough, and more than enough.

It's not true to say, "God will never send you anything you can't handle." God will sometimes send you things you can't handle. But he will send you things that **he** can handle. And he will receive the glory when he does.

I invite you, as we close this message, to listen to God and then confess with the apostle Paul: "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 upon me... For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9–10).

## **Prayer**

Father, show yourself again in our own lives to be the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. You know our weakness. You know our agony and sorrow over prayers that have not

gotten the answer that we hoped for, or the seasons of affliction we've gone through before things got better again. You know it all. May our experience may be that of the apostle, that your grace is sufficient and far more than sufficient for our need. Let your grace be so great that we may be channels of comfort to others who need it, that we may comfort one another in your love. In our own brokenness and struggles, help us realize that we're not alone, but that we have each other, and above all, we have you. As a community, weak and yet powerful in you, may your comfort overflow from us so that when we relate to others who don't yet know you, they'll experience us not as know-it-alls, not as those people who seem to have it all together or are too good for those around them, but instead, as just ordinary people—clay pots—but filled with your treasure. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

**Power in Weakness**  
**By David Feddes**  
**Slide Contents**

<sup>1</sup> I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. <sup>2</sup> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. <sup>3</sup> And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— <sup>4</sup> and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. <sup>5</sup> On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— <sup>6</sup> though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> 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 upon me. <sup>10</sup> 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.

**Thorny questions**

- What was Paul’s thorn in the flesh?
- Who sent the thorn to Paul?
- How should we pray in affliction?
- When should we stop requesting?
- Why would a thorn not be removed?

**Why not healed?**

- Failure to ask
- Lack of faith
- Refusal to repent
- Don’t want health
- Bound by demon
- **Divine purposes**

**Power in weakness**

- Protection from pride
- Faith in sufficient grace
- Closer union with Christ
- Stronger inner self

- Able to comfort others
- Giving all glory to God

**Power in weakness**

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 upon me... For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:9-10)