



## 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

### He Gives More Grace

One of the most amazing men I have ever read about was Saul of Tarsus. He fell in love with Jesus Christ and his life was never the same after that experience. The risen Christ pursued him on the road to Damascus while he was looking for believers in Jesus Christ in order to persecute them for their faith. God chose Saul and when he saw the risen Christ put his faith in Him as his Savior. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the dominant theme of his preaching and his letters to churches in the first century of the Christian era. Paul wrote: if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation (Romans 10:9-10).

Paul had an intimate personal relationship with Jesus Christ that demanded his whole being. He made himself available to his Lord and Master. Paul considered himself a bondsman of Jesus Christ. There was a time when Paul almost lost his life because of his commitment to Christ. He was on the west coast province of Asia Minor when he was burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us . . . (2 Corinthians 1:8-10a).

Later he wrote in the same letter responding to some arrogant individuals in Corinth about some other experiences:

They say they are Hebrews, do they? So am I. And they are descendants of Abraham? So am I. They say they serve Christ? I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in jail more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled many weary miles. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the stormy seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be Christians but are not. I have lived with weariness and pain and sleepless nights. Often I have been hungry and thirsty and have gone without food. Often I have shivered with cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.

Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of how the churches are getting along. Who is weak without my feeling that weakness? Who is led astray, and I do not burn with anger?

If I must boast, I would rather boast about the things that show how weak I am (2 Corinthians 11:22-30, *New Living Translation*).

Then Paul goes on to tell us about his experience with a thorn in the flesh. What a life!

## THE PROBLEMS PAUL FACED

Perhaps nothing in his life was more frustrating than his thorn in the flesh. ” Yet, even in that experience he gained victory through Christ. Paul wrote in 12:7, “Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me —to keep me from exalting myself! ”

### *“Thorn in the flesh” (12:7-8)*

Paul’s thorn was more like a stake that induced savage pain. It was something sharp stuck painfully deep in the flesh which cannot be pulled out but continues to cause aggravating pain. The word in the original means something pointed, primarily p<sup>h</sup>ale, or stake used for impaling or torturing someone, as sharpened wooden staff, then thorn or splinter. What ever it was in Paul’s life it produced a terrible pain. It was physical, painful, humiliating; it was also the effect of Divinely permitted Satanic antagonism ” (Vine). There have been many suggestions including: malaria fever, bad eyesight and epilepsy. It could have been anything. The Reformed theologians and many early Christians saw it as spiritual in character for the purpose of humbling Paul’s arrogant pride. I really don’t know what it was. I don’t think anyone knows and perhaps that is for a good purpose. W. E. Vine commented:

The verbs rendered “to keep me from exalting myself” and “to buffet” are in the present tense, signifying recurrent action, indicating a constantly repeated attack. Lightfoot interprets it as “a stake driven through the flesh,” and Ramsay agrees with this. Most commentators adhere to the rendering “thorn.” Field says “there is no doubt that the Alexandrine use of *skolops* for thorn is here intended, and that the ordinary meaning of stake must be rejected. What is stressed is not the metaphorical size, but the acuteness of the suffering and its effects.

The buffeting was like a closed fist repeatedly and constantly hitting him. The word means to strike with the fist, to beat. God gave him this thorn in the flesh and it just kept on constantly jabbing him.

### *When God says “No”*

In verse eight Paul tells us how he prayed over this matter. Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. Just like Jesus prayed three times, “Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me,” Paul prays three times. Perhaps he bargained with God a lot like we do: “Lord your ministry could be better served if you heal this. Your name will be glorified . . . I can serve you better if . . . Do you ever find yourself bargaining with God when you are suffering pain and distress? Three

bargaining with God when you are suffering pain and distress? Three times it is a figure of speech meaning untiringly, continually, over and over again crying out to God in prayer. It is our privilege and our duty to call upon God in time of trouble, because troubles are often sent for this very purpose, to bring us nearer to God and conform us to Christ.

### *God's greater purpose*

If Christ is Lord and Master of my life then He knows what is best for me and He has the right to choose the thorns. His purpose for thorns is "lest I should be exalted above measure."

Twice in verse seven Paul stressed the purpose of this thorn: "to keep me from exalting myself, . . . there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me —to keep me from exalting myself!"

Why, you may be asking. In the context Paul told about a vision he had years before (12:1-6). It needs to be kept in mind that he waited fourteen years before he even mentioned the ultimate Christian experience, and he mentions it only once in all of his writings. It was at a time when these arrogant individuals in Corinth were pressuring him. Charles Hodge suggests, "It would seem that Paul's opponents were boasting about their visions, and Paul now counter-attacks them on their own ground. He speaks of himself only because circumstances have compelled him to do so. All this foolish glorying of the carnal Corinthians has forced him to speak. Paul speaks of himself in the third person and says God lifted up the veil to disclose something unknown before. The Lord is the source of the visions and revelations. Paul is reluctant, but says he was caught up to the third heaven, the highest heaven, which is the eternal dwelling place of God, where saints and angels are with Christ. The third heaven and Paradise are synonymous terms meaning heaven. The apostle is suddenly seized and snatched up to heaven with suddenness and rapidity. He was conscious of what was happening, but remained entirely passive during the experience, which was in no way self-induced. Paul is granted the sight of the glory that lies ahead. In the profound mysteries of God he received a revelation of God's glory. God used this experience to strengthen him to endure patiently all the suffering which awaits him in the years ahead in Jerusalem and Rome. He was conscious of the transfer, and he vividly remembers that for a time he was in heaven. But he is not sure of the relation in which his spirit was to his body during this experience. He simply doesn't remember.

They were pushing Paul boasting of their great revelations and spiritual blessings. In essence Paul was saying I have had just as great revelations from God, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weakness. For if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one may credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me (vv. 5-6). You have been around those kinds of individuals, too. It is enough to make you want to puke. It is nothing more than arrogant religious pride. I am greater than you spiritually because I have had great experiences than you. That attitude is carnal. It is sinful and it will never bring glory to God. Only those who relish a hysterical crowd on TV enjoy such carnality. There is a kind of religion that produces immediate action but it falls to the ground prematurely and rots. It is fleshly.

Paul tells us that God gave him a thorn to keep him humble. Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me —to keep me from exalting myself! (v. 7). If Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives then we can well afford to let Him choose the thorns. He has an eternal purpose in what He chooses for us.

Someone wrote: "God is too kind to do anything cruel . . . Too wise to make a mistake . . . Too deep to explain Himself. When we know the Who, we can stop asking why?"

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The longer I live the more I am convinced with all my heart that nothing in this world happens outside the will of God. Literally nothing. There are no failures and there are no loose ends in the ultimate plan of God. I ask myself what can I learn when I have blown it, or things go wrong? What is God teaching me? What does He want to say to me in this? What is He doing to make me more like the Master? What are the rough edges He is knocking off?

One of the martyrs in Ecuador, Jim Elliott wrote in his diary: “. . . to gaze and glory and give oneself again to God . . . What more could a man ask? Oh, the fullness, pleasure, sheer excitement of knowing God on earth! I care not if I never raise my voice again for Him, if, only I may love Him, please Him . . . If only I may see Him, touch His garments, and smile into His eyes —ah, then, not stars, nor children shall matter, only Himself. ”

### ***What is your "thorn?"***

Perhaps you are facing intense physical pain. It may be cancer, or a loved one suffering terminal illness. It may be emotional pain that comes from broken relationships, rejection, loneliness, stress, slander, gossip, being misunderstood, or harsh unjust criticism. You may be a hurting parent, or a hurting child going through the divorce of your parents. It may be financial losses or a bankruptcy.

Perhaps the most difficult pain is spiritual. Paul says, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me . . . Simeon observed, though Satan may be the agent that *inflicts* the stroke, *God* is the kind friend that *gives* it: and though Satan intends us nothing but evil, God overrules it for our good. ”

On the other hand, if you are suffering the pain of sin, guilt, temptation let me remind you that God has a bar of soap. It is found in 1 John 1:9. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ”

Yes, Paul's problem was grievous, but God gave him a principle that not only encouraged him but offers us hope. Paul took his trouble to a throne of grace. He asked the Lord to extract this thorn, and to relieve him of his pain and God gave him something better.

### **PAUL'S PRINCIPLE (12:9-11)**

Paul discovered, "Man's extremity is God's opportunity."

Jesus said to Paul, My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness. And Paul responded, Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me (v. 9). What Jesus said (perfect, indicative, active) remained with Paul as an abiding source of assurance and comfort. The answer was not simply something past, but something which continued in its reassuring power.

### ***God's grace is all-sufficient for my personal needs (v. 9a)***

Grace covers all areas of our lives. We are saved by grace. I can never get enough of God's marvelous grace. It is the free, divine, unmerited and undeserved favor of God toward sinners. It is free, spontaneous, unmerited love of God to sinful men. R. C. Trench reminds us that in no other word has God so uttered Himself and all that is in His heart more distinctly than in this word grace. I am a sinner saved by grace alone,

Himself and all that is in His heart more distinctly than in this word grace. I am a sinner saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. The only way that I as a guilty condemned sinner will ever stand in the presence of a holy and righteous God is by His amazing grace. It is never by any merit, or works, or good deeds, or standing of my own virtue. It is exclusively by His free grace that I can have a right standing with God.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). Salvation is given the believing sinner out of the pure generosity of God's loving heart. The LORD God is always the fountain from which flows this saving grace. Jesus is the mediator of this saving grace to sinful men. The very moment we believe on Him as our personal Savior He saves us by His grace.

Moreover, we also live the Christian life by grace through faith in Christ. What Christ gives is sufficient, to be enough. He gives us grace for daily living. Jesus told Paul, *My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.* Let's paraphrase this and make it a little more personal. Jesus says to you and me who have been saved by grace, *My grace is sufficient for you Wil Pounds, for My power is perfected in your weakness. When I am weak the grace of God lifts, bears, carries me along. God is sufficient. God's power is perfected in my weakness. God's power is brought to completion, to perfection in my weakness. It is a continuous action my power is being perfected in weakness. Hughes suggests that Paul may be saying that the power of God descends upon him and makes its abode in the frail tabernacle of his earthly body. Hodge says, "The weaker my people are, the more conspicuous is my strength in sustaining and delivering them."* Where there is weakness, strength reaches completeness. Where it is manifest that man was powerless, God's power becomes more evident. A. T. Robertson says, *Power is continually increased as the weakness grows. The human weakness opens the way for more of Christ's power and grace.*

### *We receive divine power in exchange for our weakness (v. 9b).*

I come to Him in my weakness and say, "Lord, I hand over to you my need for wisdom in this hour, and He gives me His wisdom. He gives His wisdom in exchange for my lack of understanding. It is in moments like these that James 1:5 takes on rich meaning. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. Proverbs 3:5-7 says,

Trust in the Lord with all your heart  
And do not lean on your own understanding.  
In all your ways acknowledge Him,  
And He will make your paths straight.  
Do not be wise in your own eyes;  
Fear the Lord and turn away from evil.

The principle the apostle Paul learned in his pain was to exchange the weakness for God's strength. It is a principle the Lord is teaching us. "Lord I hand over to You my sin and guilt," and He gives me His forgiveness. "Lord, I hand over to You my weakness," and He gives me His strength. "Lord I hand over to You my failure, and He causes me to grow through this experience. "Lord I hand over to You my helplessness, and He gives me hope. "Lord I hand over to You my stress, and He gives me His power. "Lord I give Him my loneliness, and He gives me His presence. "Lord I hand over to Him my rejection, and He gives His belongingness.

When I am the weakest in my own power I am strongest in His presence.

### *What was Paul's attitude toward thorns?*

### ***What was Paul's attitude toward thorns?***

"Most gladly, therefore, I would rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (v. 9c-10).

I remember a few years ago a Medical Doctor standing in a worship service share time and saying, "Pray for me. I have a problem with lust." His beautiful young wife just looked up at him with a puzzled face. He looked down at her and said, "No, I haven't done anything! He was not spilling a gross immoral sin he had committed. He was simply stating a spiritual need and requesting the congregation to remember him in prayer. He, like Paul, was acknowledging his weakness so God could supply him with strength to gain the victory.

The more weak and contemptible Paul was in the eyes of the Corinthians the more they must be compelled to glorify Christ by whom he was strengthened in his spirit and made successful. If Christ might receive more glory by means of these thorns, he was not only willing to endure them, but ready to glory in them even unto death. Paul remained as weak as ever; but, being persuaded that Christ's power should be the more magnified through his weakness, he was satisfied. If we are conscious that we are wholly without strength, and can do nothing of ourselves, we shall be more simple and uniform in our dependence on Christ. In our weakness we find His strength and He alone is glorified.

Paul says I use my thorns for God's glory and my personal growth. What do you do with your circumstances? Let God speak to you through them. Let Him use them to conform you to the image and likeness of Christ.

Later Paul put this same principle into practice when he wrote from house arrest in Rome. He was chained to a Roman soldier twenty-four hours a day. In the harshest circumstances he said, "Rejoice and again I say rejoice . . . For to me to live is Christ and to die, well that's better yet." And we can, too.

### **PAUL'S POWER**

How do you put such a life into practice? How do you make it work?

Paul adds, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (v. 10).

### ***Christ wants to live His life in and through you.***

It is only the life of Christ—His activity, clothed with you and displayed through you, that ultimately will find the approval of God. It is not our carnal efforts displayed before man that impressed God.

Only what Christ does in you and through you merits God's approval. Jesus said, "Apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

### ***The saving life of Christ is a life of faith.***

From the moment you put your faith in Jesus Christ as your savior the Holy Spirit took up residence in you. You have a special relationship with Him. You are *in* Christ. He encircles you with His presence. You live and move and have your being in His presence. Paul prayed for the Ephesian believers to the Father that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . . Now to Him who is able to

the inner man; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith . . . Now to Him who is able to exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen (Ephesians 3:16-21).

That is a powerful truth for us to grasp in our daily life. Wuest expands the translation: Now to the One who is able to do beyond all things, superabundantly beyond and over and above those things that we are asking for ourselves and considering, in the measure of the power which is operative in us, to Him be the glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus into all the generations of the age of the ages. Amen. Literally, But to Him who is able above all things to do exceedingly above . . . exceeding some number or measure, over and above, more than necessary. It is intensified by adding *ek*, adding the idea of exhaustlessness, and *hyper* above. ” Thus Wuest translates, beyond all things, superabundantly and over and above. What a God! His grace and power is available to you and me.

Can any situation possibly arise, in any circumstance, for which Christ is not adequate? Can there arise any pressure, or promise, or any problem, or any responsibility for which the Lord Jesus Himself is not adequate? When I realize the total adequacy of Christ in me, is there any situation for which Christ is inadequate? If so then it is a clear indication that I am not in the will of God.

Christ is limited only by the measure of our *availability* to all that He makes available to us.

When I am under the influence and control of the Holy Spirit I draw upon the unlimited resources of Christ. Philippians 4:13 in the *Amplified Bible* reads, I have strength for all things in Christ who empowers me —I am ready for anything and equal to anything through Him who infuses inner strength in me [that is, I am self-sufficient in Christ s sufficiency]. ”

You see, the saving life of Christ, our daily Christian life, is Christ living in me. That was Paul s secret power to live the Christian life. Jesus says to us, I will exchange lives with you. All I ask is that by faith you trust Me. ”

### ***Let's get painfully personal in application***

The thorns should be the means of displaying, and magnifying the strength of Christ in us.

What are you doing with your sorrows, suffering, circumstances and pain? Please, don t waste your sorrows. There comes a time when we need to stop praying for the removal of the thorns, and draw from the transforming power of the cross and the resurrection of Christ! If we have the right attitude, thorns do not destroy, but they cause us to depend upon the Lord and grow. You can live above the chances, changes and circumstances in your life. God accomplished His eternal purpose in Paul s thorns. He does the same thing in us as we make ours available to Him.

When the pressures of life are applied to you what comes out? This morning before I brushed my teeth I picked up a tube of toothpaste. When I squeezed the tube of toothpaste out came toothpaste. Only what s in there will come out. What comes out when you are squeezed? What kind of fragrance are your thorns producing? Is there the sweet smelling aroma of Jesus Christ? Are the pressures of life making you more like Jesus Christ?

The apostle Paul considered his petition completely answered and God turned his sorrows into joy. He could glory in his tribulations and make his thorns the occasion of joyful triumph. The apostle James wrote, Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let the endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete,

produces endurance. And let the endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing (James 1:4-5).

Annie Johnson Flint says it better than anyone in her song, He Giveth More Grace (public domain).

He giveth more grace as our burdens grow greater,  
He sendeth more strength as our labors increase;  
To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,  
To multiplied trials He multiplies peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,  
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,  
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources  
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

Fear not that thy need shall exceed His provision,  
Our God ever yearns His resources to share;  
Lean hard on the arm everlasting, availing;  
The Father both thee and thy load will upbear.

His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,  
His power no boundary known unto men;  
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus  
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.

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