

## SESSION 3

# THE GIFT OF GRACE

### ▶ **The Point**

God's grace allows me to face anything life throws at me.

### ▶ **The Passage**

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

### ▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

Can we have too much of a good thing? The answer is yes if we're talking about ice cream, coffee, or roller coasters. But there's one thing all of us could use in an endless supply: grace.

An unlimited supply of grace is available—and fully accessible. We're just not always aware of it. When our lives are going well, we often rest in those things that appear to make life great. But when the circumstances of life knock those props out from under us, what's left? Grace. Grace is there. God's grace was always there, but we become more acutely aware of it.

No one accidentally stumbles onto the grace of God when they're wallowing in success and wealth. Rather, it's precisely when we're down and out, or at the end of our rope, that we're in a position to understand and experience the grace of God. The life of the apostle Paul exemplifies this awareness of grace. He faced numerous challenges and hard times, but he found great strength in the grace God poured out on him.

### ▶ **The Setting**

The apostle Paul wrote Second Corinthians while in Macedonia around A.D. 56, about four years after his first visit to Corinth (see Acts 18). While First Corinthians had been written to correct a variety of erroneous beliefs and practices within the Corinthian church, Paul wrote Second Corinthians primarily to defend himself against charges raised by false teachers in Corinth who claimed he was not a true apostle and could not be trusted.

# What does the Bible say?

## **The third heaven**

(v. 2)—Scripture does not mention elsewhere anything about different levels of heaven. Thus, we must understand this simply as a place in heaven beyond our known universe.

**Revelations** (v. 7)—The Greek term means a “disclosure.” In New Testament usage it typically refers to the revelation or disclosure of some truth (or truths) of God.

## **A thorn in the flesh**

(v. 7)—Describes an affliction of an uncertain nature God allowed Paul to experience so he would not become proud due to the heavenly visions he experienced.

## **A messenger of Satan**

(v. 7)—A parallel to “thorn in the flesh,” the term indicates that Satan, the chief adversary of God, was the immediate cause of Paul’s affliction.

## **2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

**<sup>2</sup> I know a man in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago. Whether he was in the body or out of the body, I don’t know; God knows.**

**<sup>3</sup> I know that this man — whether in the body or out of the body I don’t know; God knows —**

**<sup>4</sup> was caught up into paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a human being is not allowed to speak.**

**<sup>5</sup> I will boast about this person, but not about myself, except of my weaknesses.**

**<sup>6</sup> For if I want to boast, I wouldn’t be a fool, because I would be telling the truth. But I will spare you, so that no one can credit me with something beyond what he sees in me or hears from me,**

**<sup>7</sup> especially because of the extraordinary revelations. Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself.**

**<sup>8</sup> Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me.**

**<sup>9</sup> But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.”**

**Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may reside in me.**

**<sup>10</sup> So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.**





## 2 Corinthians 12:2-7a Commentary

### **God honors and blesses us in Christ.**

**[Verses 2-3]** Paul spent much of 2 Corinthians correcting the Corinthian believers and defending his ministry. Then because the Corinthians seemed so enamored by the boasting of the false teachers, Paul reluctantly borrowed a page from the false teachers' playbook. Rather than boast about his successes and accomplishments, however, Paul focused on his hardships and sufferings. Then he continued to share further boasting about his weakness and what he had learned from an overwhelming experience with the Lord many years earlier.

Paul began by referring to an unnamed person: **I know a man in Christ**. It's obvious Paul was writing about himself in the third person, so perhaps this was Paul's humble way of moving away from the self-centered boasting that the Corinthian believers had heard from false teachers. Paul was **caught up to the third heaven**. That Paul was "caught up" indicates it was an act of God, not something Paul initiated or pursued. Scripture does not mention elsewhere anything about different levels of heaven, thus we must understand "the third heaven" simply as a place in heaven beyond our known universe. Wherever this is, it's a place beyond this earth and the heavens of our atmosphere. It refers to the dwelling place of God and His saints. Paul noted that his experience had occurred **fourteen years ago**. The New Testament gives us no other record of the event. Paul did not know if he was physically taken up to heaven or if it was some sort of vision. Only **God** knew the full extent of what really happened.

**[Verse 4]** The Greek word translated **paradise** is probably equivalent to the third heaven, and may have been used simply as a more descriptive term. It refers to the place where the dead in Christ dwell with God (see Rev. 2:7). Paul **heard inexpressible words** he was **not allowed to speak**. Similar to what the apostle John experienced when he was forbidden to write what he heard (see Rev. 10:4), Paul also was prohibited from sharing what he heard. Note that he mentioned nothing about what he saw.

**[Verse 5]** While the incredible details of Paul's vision would have surpassed anything the false teachers had experienced, he wrote nothing else about it. Paul didn't hesitate to **boast about** the experience of **this person**, but refused to brag about himself except for his **weaknesses** (see 2 Cor. 11:30). Evidently this was quite different from what the false teachers had been doing as they told of their strengths, experiences, and accomplishments.

**[Verses 6-7a]** Paul noted that if he had chosen to **boast**, he would not have been **a fool** because his words were **the truth**. This stood in stark contrast to the foolish boasting of his opponents, who told about things that were not true, probably hoping to captivate and control the Corinthian believers. But Paul did not want the Corinthian believers' opinion of him and his apostolic authority to be based on any type of **extraordinary revelations** he had received from God. Instead, Paul wanted them to respect and follow his teaching and guidance because of what they had seen in his life and heard from his mouth (see vv. 16-33)—solid facts that could be confirmed rather than fanciful claims that could not be verified.



## 2 Corinthians 12:7b-8 Commentary

**Hardships can keep us from pride.**

**[Verse 7b]** To prevent Paul from becoming proud over his experience, he received **a thorn in the flesh**. This was some type of trouble or disability Paul experienced throughout his life. The majority of Bible scholars have thought it refers to some physical condition that caused pain and difficulty. However, it could have been an extreme emotional issue or even a severe spiritual burden (such as depression, despair, or doubt). Others have suggested it may have been related to issues of persecution or opposition to Paul's ministry. Apparently, whatever the thorn was, the Corinthians already knew about it. Whatever the malady, Paul never specifically identified it.

What Paul did mention, however, was the source of this thorn and the reason behind it. The Greek verb translated **was given** is used elsewhere in Paul's writings to indicate favor or blessing from God (see Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 4:14). Paul's use of the term here emphasized that his thorn ultimately came from God.

Notice that twice Paul pointed out God's purpose in this: **so that I would not exalt myself**. The thorn was intended to humble Paul—to keep him from thinking himself superior to others because of the heavenly revelations he had received or using the experience for sinful purposes.

While God was the ultimate source, He allowed **a messenger of Satan** to afflict Paul with this thorn. This is similar to the experience of Job, when Satan was given permission by God to bring pain and trouble to Job but not to kill him (see Job 1:6–2:7). In a way that is difficult for us to understand, God used Satan for His purposes. While Satan thought he could bring down the apostle or cause him to turn away from the Lord, God knew the suffering would strengthen the man and his relationship with God.

The word **torment** is a translation of a Greek term that means to beat with the fist or buffet with punches. A modern picture would be of a boxer or street fighter who repeatedly beats or punches another person. This is the way of Satan, who continually strikes us and exploits our vulnerabilities like the thief who seeks "to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10; see 1 Pet. 5:8–9). It's the same term used to describe the abuse Jesus suffered during His trial before the Sanhedrin prior to His crucifixion (see Matt. 26:67; Mark 14:65).

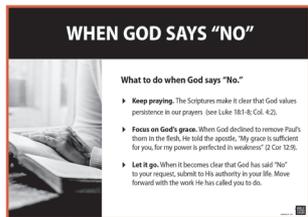
**[Verse 8]** Pain and suffering were not a part of God's original creation. They came into the world as a result of human sin. Thus, it's not normal for humans to enjoy these difficulties. Rather, we naturally seek relief for our discomfort and an end to our distress. Paul was no exception. He didn't like the messenger and whatever means used to torment him. So Paul prayed to God and asked **that it would leave me**. He **pleaded with the Lord** for permanent relief. **Three times** may reflect the pattern of Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (see Matt. 26:36–44), or it could simply emphasize the intense and repeated requests for healing Paul made of God.



# STUDY THE BIBLE

## Notes

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**ALTERNATE QUESTION:**  
*What role does our Christian community play in times of personal distress?*

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## 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

*<sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness." Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me. <sup>10</sup> So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

**READ:** 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 on page 102 of the PSG.

**DISCUSS:** Question #4 on page 103 of the PSG: **"What are some appropriate ways to respond when God says 'No' to our prayers?"**

**LEADER PACK:** Use Pack Item 10, "When God Says 'No,'" to offer a starting point for your group's discussion of Question #4, above.

**SUMMARIZE:** Help group members walk through the main points from page 103 of the PSG:

1. "We have a natural aversion to pain. Yet pain can actually be a good thing."
2. "God's grace is always sufficient. When you go through hardship, the same grace that was with Jesus (see Luke 2:40) is with you, since grace and truth come through Christ (see John 1:17)."
3. "As a result, instead of boasting in your strengths, it's actually more advantageous to boast in your weaknesses. Paul came to this conclusion 'so that Christ's power may reside in me. So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.'"

**DISCUSS:** Question #5 on page 103 of the PSG: **"What does it actually look like to delight in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties?"**

**GUIDE:** Refer back to "The Point" for this session: **"God's grace allows me to face anything life throws at me."** As time permits, encourage volunteers to share any final thoughts and questions.

## 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 Commentary

### **God helps us by His grace to endure anything.**

**[Verse 9]** God would not remove Paul's thorn in the flesh. God would, however, use that malady for Paul's good. The thorn caused **weakness** for Paul. Perhaps it had initially hindered Paul's preaching, teaching, writing, or traveling for the sake of the gospel. Paul had a commission from Christ and he wanted to fulfill it. But rather than finding strength through the removal of this thorn, Paul experienced strength through God's **grace**. Ultimately, Paul's ministry was not dependent on his health—be it physical, emotional, or spiritual. Instead, the most important thing he needed was God's grace. Paul frequently used the word "grace" in his writings. In this case, it pictures the presence of God encouraging, guiding, supporting, and strengthening him. Paul would have enough—all that was necessary—when he had God's grace.

The grace God gives to believers through Christ is inseparably linked to and expressed through His **power**. However, God's ways are not always easy to understand. Sometimes in the New Testament we read statements that are difficult to comprehend. An example is when Jesus noted that "the last will be first, and the first last" (Matt. 20:16). Paul heard a similar paradox when God told him, "**my power is perfected in weakness.**" It's in times of human weakness that God's power can best be seen and experienced. The most complete display of power comes from God when we are weak.

Rather than boasting about his strengths as the false teachers had been doing, Paul said he would **most gladly boast** of his **weaknesses**. Paul was not boasting in weakness for weakness's sake. Only in his weakness could he experience the fullness of **Christ's power**; it would **reside in** him to provide everything he needed to glorify God and fulfill His mission.

**[Verse 10]** Paul closed out this section of his letter by listing several things no human would desire: **So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties.** These are a summary of the extreme struggles and sufferings Paul experienced in his apostolic ministry (see 2 Cor. 11:23-28).

Paul noted that he took **pleasure** in these difficulties. It wasn't that he enjoyed them because he enjoyed pain; rather, he accepted and even desired them **for the sake of Christ** and His kingdom. Paul's greatest desire was for Christ to live out His will in him (see Gal. 2:20) so he could effectively "testify to the gospel of God's grace" (Acts 20:24). This could only happen when he was **weak** and Christ was **strong** in him.

Jesus predicted difficulties and troubles for His followers (see John 16:33). In their writings, both Paul (see 2 Tim. 3:12) and Peter (see 1 Pet. 4:12-13) affirmed this truth. Yet too often Christians today are surprised and frustrated because of their trials. Only when we lean into God in the difficult times, listen for His voice, and allow His grace to work through our weakness can we experience Him on a deeper level and bring glory to Him as He works in and through us.

