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THE GIFT OF GRACE



If you could have a lifetime supply of any product, what would you choose?

QUESTION #1

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BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE **97**

THE POINT

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



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.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

2 Corinthians 12:2-7a

² 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. ³ I know that this man — whether in the body or out of the body I don't know; God knows — ⁴ was caught up into paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a human being is not allowed to speak. ⁵ I will boast about this person, but not about myself, except of my weaknesses. ⁶ 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, ^{7a} especially because of the extraordinary revelations.

When was the last time you experienced a genuine sense of lasting joy in Christ, rather than a fleeting moment of happiness? When was the last time you found yourself full of gratitude—not asking for anything in prayer, but rather spending the whole time in thanksgiving and praise? When was the last time you sang out with the psalmist, “My soul, bless the LORD, and all that is within me, bless His holy name” (103:1) rather than “God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (51:10)?

Without God's grace, we would never know such joy, gratitude, or praise. Without God's grace, we would not be able to experience true and lasting joy in Christ. We would instead be endlessly seeking the next thrill—to our own demise. Without God's grace, greed would fill our hearts, causing us to take from others rather than giving out of our fullness in Christ.

Lastly, without God's grace, we would be perpetually looking for ways to appease our guilt and remedy our stained conscience, rather than rejoicing and expressing gratitude because Jesus said, “It is finished” (John 19:30).

How would you summarize Paul's experiences in these verses?

QUESTION #2

Without God's grace, Paul would not have experienced the visions and revelations he described in 2 Corinthians 12. During this time, false teachers were trying to convince the Corinthian church to follow them based on their own claimed visions and revelations of the Lord (see 2 Cor. 11:4-14). Paul responded by sharing his own experience with visions and revelations. He refused to boast about his incredible experience—the great honor and blessing he received from God. In fact, he even spoke about those experiences in the third person, as though he were talking about someone else.

Paul chose not to elaborate on what he heard; it was a private moment between himself and the Lord. In doing so, Paul demonstrated to the Corinthian church that experiences like these are not prescriptive for all believers. This was a unique event that others should not expect to experience before God can use them for ministry.

Certainly, we should rejoice in any “mountaintop” moments—those times when we feel especially drawn into the presence of God. But God's grace also comes to us in other ways. In fact, as we'll see in the next section, it may be more typical to experience God's grace through difficulty and hardship.

2 Corinthians 12:7b-8

^{7b} 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. ⁸ Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me.

Pride is a tricky matter. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines pride both as “a feeling that you respect yourself and deserve to be respected by other people” and “a feeling that you are more important or better than other people.” The former is a positive, while the latter is both negative and toxic, especially in the context of relationships.

Why is pride such a powerful and dangerous temptation for followers of Christ?

QUESTION #3

GOOD PRIDE, BAD PRIDE

Pride can be both helpful and harmful in our lives. Use the space below to describe both facets of pride in a way that's comfortable for you—sketch a picture, make a list of adjectives, give an example, and so on.

Bad Pride

Good Pride

How does following Jesus help you reject the harmful aspects of pride?

"Grace is God as heart surgeon, cracking open your chest, removing your heart - poisoned as it is with pride and pain - and replacing it with his own!"

—MAX LUCADO

So, how can we keep ourselves from landing on the wrong side of pride? How can we prevent pride from overtaking our hearts and infiltrating our souls in a negative way?

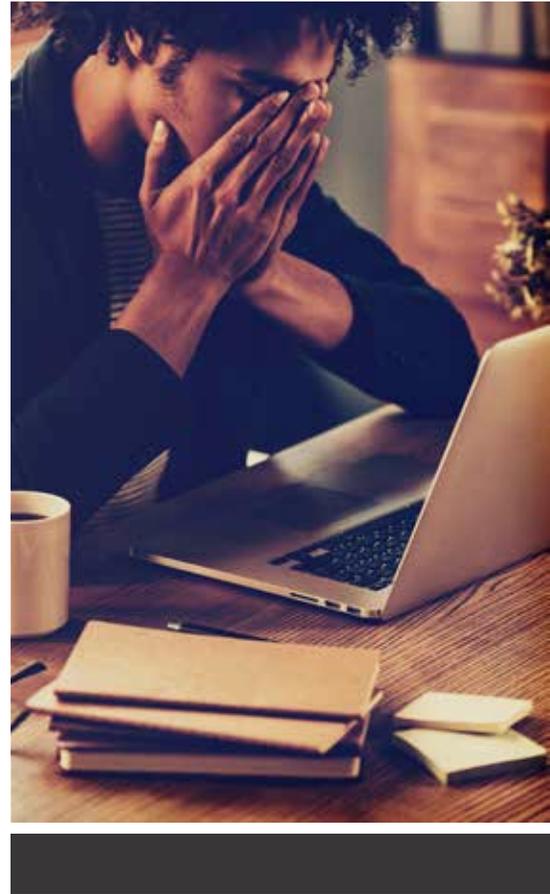
For Paul, God used “a thorn in the flesh,” which he also called a “messenger of Satan.” Paul gave us no more details regarding this sharp, painful, and persistent issue in his life. The thorn could have been his adversaries or the persecution he endured, but most scholars believe it was some type of physical condition—something ranging from eye or ear problems to malaria. We just don’t know. Whatever it was, this thorn was a hardship to his ministry at times (see Gal. 4:13-14), yet it also kept Paul humble before God. Therefore, Paul’s thorn in the flesh brought good into his life.

This is hard to realize when the ground is falling out from underneath you. When you are “downsized” five years away from retirement, or your children rebel, or your furnace and hot water heater break down in the same month, it is difficult to see how God is going to use this for His good. But He does. He always does (see Rom. 8:28). You might not see the results immediately, but God, in His providence and sovereignty, will strengthen you through these hardships. He walks with us and comforts us. That’s grace.

God allows us to go through hardships because He has a plan and wants to do something in our lives. He wants to remove the pride from our hearts and replace it with His love, mercy, and goodness. So when you go through hardships, humble yourself before God and pay attention to what He is doing in the midst of your hardship.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.



We have a natural aversion to pain. Yet pain can actually be a good thing. Yes, pain hurts, but it's also a signal that our bodies are functioning properly on a physical level. On a spiritual level, pain can also throw us into the arms of God. When we experience the pain of hardship—whether it was our fault or not—we discover God never leaves us (see Heb. 13:5). In fact, God often uses the pain of hardship to get our attention and reveal His grace and presence to us. After all, when Paul turned to God and pleaded for Him to remove the “thorn in the flesh,” the Lord responded, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.”

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). You are saved through the grace of Jesus, and His grace is able to build you up in any and every situation.

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.” This was not false humility, as when a person says, “My greatest weakness is that I care too much.” Rather, this passage is actually exhorting you to accept hardships when they come because God wants to shape you through them and use the difficulties to make you strong in Him.

In other words, through God's help that comes by His grace, He will give you the strength to endure anything. Don't ignore the power of such an incredible gift!

What are some appropriate ways to respond when God says “No” to our prayers?

QUESTION #4

What does it actually look like to delight in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

How will the reality of God's grace impact your actions and attitudes this week? Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ **Give thanks for grace.** Identify a hardship you're currently experiencing. Thank God for His presence in the midst of your trouble and ask Him for strength to move forward.
- ▶ **Search for grace.** Think back to previous hardships you've endured. Make a list of the different ways God demonstrated His grace in those times.
- ▶ **Share grace.** Pray for an opportunity to serve as an instrument of grace in someone's life this week. Ask God to use you as a way of showering His grace on those around you.

Too much of a good thing? Not with God. His grace is sufficient for you. His grace will allow you to face anything and everything that life throws at you. So walk with confidence.

My thoughts



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you will live out this study:
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