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## 2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-10

### 2 Corinthians Series

[PRAYER] Lord, our hearts are grieved when we see another shooting takes place on a high school campus, as did on Friday in Santa Fe, Texas. The loss of ten lives and many other people wounded makes our hearts sink with the sadness. The sadness that a hurting world is in need of you. Young people today just suffering in so many different ways. We see also suicide taking place among high school students. It grieves us to live a world where brokenness exists and it just continues all kinds of problems all around. So Lord, it's in those moments we are particularly grateful for you. We just thank you for what you've done in our lives, how you've given us your grace and your mercy. Lord, thank you. Give us a passion to share that with other people. Those people around us, we never know what kind of things are going on in people's hearts and lives right around us, but we know that they need you. So Lord, I pray for that passion in our own hearts that would grow so strong that we just want to wear a t-shirt or talk about you or want to share with people that there is a message of hope that you've designed our world in such a way that we can find you even in the midst of crises and trials and problems, whether they be in another state or right in our own lives and our own homes. So we come before you, Lord, acknowledging our weakness and asking for your strength to empower us. We ask you to reveal that power. This morning we're asking for a glimpse of that as we look at your word. Teach us through it. In Jesus' name, amen.

This morning I'd like to look at a problem that I think exists in many people's thinking today when it comes to Christianity. Maybe not in your mind, but you certainly see this in the lives of other people. Maybe you experience this too. That's when bad things happen in your life and don't seem to go away then maybe God is punishing you for some past sins or something like that. There are a lot of people who believe that when something bad happens to them God must be balancing the scales. Justice getting back at me. That's a problem. It's a problem to think that way. It's not an accurate way of understanding who God is.

It often comes out this way: "I prayed, God, for something and you didn't give it to me." So people pray for things and then they feel like, "Why didn't God give it to me? Maybe I haven't earned enough grace, I haven't earned enough favor in His mind for Him to answer my prayers. He says He's going to answer prayers, but He didn't answer mine. I must not have done what I needed to do in order to get what I want from God." There are some in the midst of all of that who walk away from the faith because they say, "Well God doesn't give me what I want." I think it's a pretty serious problem when we start looking at our issues and we start saying, "Well God must be causing this problem in my life for something, for some payback."

One of the things we must understand about our faith is that God does require justice and He does require payback. But that was all paid at the cross of Jesus Christ. He took the penalty of any of our sins, past, present, or future. He took the penalty for those and they are paid for. They are done with. So our understanding of God must include this idea of grace and mercy.

So how do we deal with the problems that seem to linger that don't go away? How do we deal with the prayers where the answers seem to be no? That God doesn't take away something that we wish He would take away is the question that Paul addresses today by example. He's going to share an example in His own life today and we're going to learn from that some very special things that I hope will help you as you deal with some of the challenges that you face that don't seem to go way.

I remember when my children were younger we would be at the dining room table or the kitchen table and we'd be talking and it would be great we would think to have some discussion starters. What can we do to get conversation going around the table in a positive way. One of the questions we would like to ask is, what was your highlight and what was your lowlight of the day? I remember going around to the different children and asking that question. My favorite answer to what was your highlight for today is this: "It hasn't happened yet."

I think that this idea of highlight and a lowlight is what Paul is sharing with us in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. He's going to look back at his whole life and tell us the highlight and the lowlight of his whole life. Fourteen years ago two things happened and he says I'm going to share those things with you. That's what we're going to see in our passage today which is in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10.

You can open up your Bibles to that passage. Stand with me as I read this passage from 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. *I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord* for \$1,000. That's what it sounds like to me as he's saying this. *I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations.* That's the highlight. These revelations of the third heaven that he got to see this amazing thing.

Now comes his lowlight. *Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

You may be seated.

Thus the whole idea of the t-shirts is that I am weak, but I am experiencing the power of God. Paul is thinking back upon his experience over his life and he's thinking there's this amazing thing that happened fourteen years ago. Although he's not using himself, he's not describing himself in these words, he is actually talking about himself. We can see that not only in his text, but it was common those days when someone is referring to something grand like this to refer to themselves in the third person. That's what he's doing here.

Fourteen years before God had done something with him in a vision to allow him to see heaven, to experience heaven. Today people see that and they write a book about it. The point is, he sees heaven and it is just so magnificent for him that it is really powerful.

Now visions and dreams were not uncommon for Paul. We know that even in his salvation experience. Do you remember that when he got saved it was like a lighting bolt from heaven knocked him off the horse? He falls on the ground and he hears Jesus speaking to him, "*Why are you persecuting me?*" There was a vision right there of Jesus Christ audibly speaking to him.

There was a time when he was over in Asia and he's trying to say, "What do I do?" like we do sometimes. "I don't know what direction. Should I go this way, should I go that way?" He says the Spirit of the Lord prevented me from going here, from going there, and then in the night he had this vision. He had a vision of a man from Macedonia calling him over and he knew that was God leading him. So this idea of visions was not distant from Paul's experience with God.

In the midst of that he has this grand, apparently this best vision ever when he was caught up to the third heaven where God is and he got to see a little bit of heaven. It was so amazing for him to experience that. That was his highlight.

His lowlight was about the same time, it appears, about fourteen years ago, that he experienced some kind of a difficulty he calls a thorn in the flesh. This was a problem that didn't go away.

I want to use this idea of the thorn in the flesh to talk about the problems that we have that don't seem to go away. We might not call them thorns in the flesh. We might call them pains in the neck. But the idea is that there are some things that are lingering things that continue. They could be physical, financial, relational. They just don't seem to go away. We pray that they would go away, but they don't go away. That seems to be this idea of the thorn in the flesh.

So let's draw attention to some of the things right out of the text to understand what it's saying. Let's look at three truths, first of all, about the thorn in the flesh so we understand what it is.

First of all we can see that a thorn in the flesh is any affliction. I would suggest it's any affliction in our lives that could produce self-pity and bitterness on the one hand or it can be a reminder of our brokenness and need for God's power in our lives. In Paul's experience, he calls it the thorn in the flesh, but we don't know what the thorn in the flesh is. There are people who do tons of research on this subject. There are all kinds of articles and research done about what it might have been. Because what they do is they look at Paul's life and they figure out well look, there are all these things about him, maybe it was this. And maybe they're right. I don't know.

Some people say that because he wrote in his own hand in one of the letters, but mainly was using like a secretary to do the writing, maybe he had an eye problem. So maybe his eye problem was his thorn in the flesh.

Others suggest that because he lived in the area around the Mediterranean, was on those ships all the time and traveling that maybe he contracted malaria and that the symptoms of that malaria continued on over a long period of time.

Or maybe because he had so many hardships (we read about the hardships remember in chapter 11, so many of them) that maybe he experienced depression that came on him regularly. So he suffered from that.

Others believe because he was a Pharisee he must have been married (because all Pharisees were married), but we never hear about his wife. Maybe she was a thorn in the flesh somehow.

I don't know. But I do know this. The fact that we don't know what the thorn in the flesh is really good. Because it allows us to put any lingering problem that we have in that place. I mean if it was malaria, you might say, "Well it works for malaria, but it doesn't work for cancer." Or if it was his wife, "Well I can see why that would work for him, but I'm having a problem a work." He doesn't do that. We do not know what the thorn in the flesh is, which allows us to put our lingering challenge that doesn't seem to go away (even though we pray about it) into that place.

Another thing that we can see about this thorn in the flesh in the passage (notice in verse 7 of chapter 12) is Satan wants to use the thorn to defeat us. *Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.* Satan is looking for situations in our lives, often lingering situations to use to get a foothold, to twist around, to mess with us, to damage us.

So if there is a relationship you're involved in that has some real challenges over a long period of time and you're praying that God would take it away, Satan can actually use it to damage you and damage other people. If you have a physical problem that doesn't seem to go away, even though you pray that God would take it away, you can start developing a bitterness or some other emotional challenge inside because Satan wants to use the thorn to defeat us.

If we stay in the passage and also look at another thing about the thorn in the flesh, we come to this idea. He said God wants to use the thorn to reveal His power. So now we have either Satan can be used for us to find ourselves in more and more problems or troubles or reacting poorly to the situation, or God can use it to reveal power in our lives. That becomes then the real issue about how God uses thorns in our lives. How is He going to do that? How is God going to use this problem that seems to linger over and over again in your life to help you deal with it in a way that reveals God's power.

So he says in verse 9 – *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my 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.* If we handle this ongoing, persistent challenge that we have in a way that is responsive to the Lord and honoring to the Lord, then God can use His grace in our lives to do

something really powerful. That's the idea here. So we make a choice as to how we're going to respond to it. Either then excels Satan's work inside of us or God's work inside of us, depending on the choices that we make.

Which leads us to another question straight out of the text, I believe, and that is how God works through thorns. I'm going to share with you four things from our text today about how God works through the thorns or the pains in the neck that we have in our lives.

The first thing we want to see about this comes from verse 7 again. It's that it keeps me humble and hungry for God's grace. I can imagine if Paul, having experienced this amazing mountain top experience of seeing heaven, that he could develop some kind of a spiritual pride that says, "Hey, I've seen heaven. You haven't seen anything." He can kind of feel like he was above everyone else.

There are times if we (and I'm sure you've experienced this too) experience God in some cool way, maybe a vision or a dream certainly. Or maybe it's God does something to you sitting with a counselor and that counselor shares something with you and you go, "Yes, this is what I need. God, thank you for revealing this to me. Yes," and you walk away with that. Along with this great experience can be a spiritual pride that says, "I've got something you don't have. Therefore you have a problem and I'm better than you," or something along that line. Spiritual pride is a danger whenever we find ourselves experiencing God's power or seeing it. So Paul says this thorn in the flesh did something for me. It kept me humble.

If we look at the book of James, we see that there is a key to receiving God's grace. It says – *He opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble*. So one of the tickets to experiencing and receiving God's grace is humility. So Paul says there's this brokenness that I experience inside of me. We don't know what it is, this thorn in the flesh, but because of this brokenness that I have to live with day in and day out, I am reminded of my need for God, that I am weak. I don't have it all together. But I can experience the power of God in some super ways. So this idea of thorns is really important.

If you have that view of God that God is punishing me for the things that I've done wrong and that's why I have this affliction of some kind, then I think we miss out on the fullness of what God has for us. It's because of this misunderstanding of God and who He is. God doesn't punish us. God wants to empower us, which brings us to another one of the principles here.

God works through these thorns by driving us to prayer. You see that in the text. That's what happened to Paul. He pleaded with the Lord to "take it away from me" three times. Not just one time. Three times he comes before the Lord. Maybe for you it's three hundred times you come before the Lord and you're praying that God will take it away and He doesn't do it.

But isn't it amazing that God connects with us in a very special way during those prayer times. You see, because Paul didn't only talk in his prayer time. He listened and God said something to him. As you come before the Lord and as you pray and you say, "God, this thing that's here, you know it's disrupting my life. It's a problem. I wish it would go away," and then you listen to

what God has to say, He just might say something very special, theological, practical like “*my grace is sufficient for you.*”

In the midst of this prayer time, God did something very special inside of Paul that changed his perception of his affliction. Do you see the way he’s changing? You’ll see that as we get to the text. He says, “I’m glorying or I’m boasting in my weaknesses. “Why? Because I’m changing the way I look at them now. The problem I’m experiencing is really difficult. I have to live with it all the time. But I’m going to let God work in my life and He’s going to do something special in the midst of that.

Man. When we come to that place in our lives, something really valuable happens on the inside. I don’t want this to sound simplistic because I know that there’s agony that many of you experience with the challenge that you’re dealing with on a regular basis. It’s just a problem. So I think with compassion, I want to say that we plead with Lord and sometimes the answer is “I want to teach you something else about me. I want you to get to know me more.”

How many times have I talked to a parent who says, “I have never prayed as much as I prayed when I had kids.” Because they see you can’t control a teenager who’s trying to do the wrong things. They’re just praying for that person. Or the person who’s struggling with a real difficult physical problem. As they struggle with it they’re drawn to prayer in a way that they never were before. Do you see what happens? I just want you to see that there’s something involved in these afflictions that don’t go away that is godly. God drives us to prayer and in the midst of that prayer we get a new understanding of our situation. We experience God in a new way and good things can happen.

A third way that God works through the thorns. That comes from verse 9. It makes us rely on grace. Rely on it. He says – “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*” This word *perfect* we’ll talk about in a moment. This idea of completeness. *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.*

*My grace is sufficient.* What does that mean? That means that there’s no problem that’s so big that God’s grace isn’t bigger. So if I can tap into God’s huge grace potential in my life. I’ll be able to learn from this experience. I’ll be able to deal with this. God’s grace is really big and His grace provides power.

Notice His grace is associated with power here. *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.* That power is something we need each day to do what we have to do. So the third thing we’re saying here is that God works through these thorns, through these things that don’t go away. It’s not because we’re not godly enough, it’s not because we didn’t do enough things to earn our way to an answered prayer. It’s because God is working in the midst of that challenge to do something new inside of us.

That’s okay. It’s not just okay. It is something that’s really powerful. Powerful enough for us in number four to offer praise to God for. See I think when you come to the place where you can say, “Lord, I want to praise you for what you’re doing in my life even in this affliction,” then we

understand this idea. It's big. Because he says – *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.* It allows me to offer praise to God because I don't just look at myself.

This is the challenge for any of us. When we find ourselves in a situation where we experience an affliction of some kind that's going on, we become self-focused. Self-pity starts to get in there. And then we can be angry about this or that. It starts to eat at us. But God's solution here is to change our perspective about our own weakness and brokenness to understand that these pains in the neck that happen in our lives are something that God wants to use to reveal His power and His grace. And we can praise Him in the midst of it.

Sometimes we think, "I'll be able to praise God when this is over." There's something being said here that Paul's saying. It allows me to offer praise to God or I will boast in the midst of my weakness. That's not easy.

So let's look at this idea of grace just a little bit more. Zero in on that verse 9 where it says – *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.* Now the word *perfect* is used in the next chapter toward the very end of the book where it says a really interesting statement. It's the only place in the Bible where it says it. It says *aim for perfection.* He's ending the book of 2 Corinthians saying *aim for perfection.* We're just going to look at that idea in the end of the book.

What is he talking about and how can we do that in our lives? This idea of being perfect in completeness. *My power is made complete in weakness.* So the weaknesses that we experience, the challenges that we have are something that God can use to bring about some completeness in our lives to reveal His power in some significant ways.

Now God's grace is very big and it's all encompassing. It's all encompassing. So it takes grace. You want God's grace in your life? You start with salvation. Because salvation is God's grace in your life to get saved. But then after you're saved, you need God's grace every day to live. It's like energy, I would suggest, that God gives when He says to Paul, "You have a problem and I'm going to give you grace to deal with it."

What do you need? You think about your own life. What do you need? You need the energy to get your feet on the floor in the morning because you don't feel like getting up. That's grace. You need the energy to keep your mouth shut when you feel like saying something that you shouldn't when someone's bothering you if it's a relationship issue. That's grace. You need grace to be able to experience God's peace in your life when things are chaotic around you. That's grace. It's this energy that seems to fill in all of the places of our weakness. Whatever it is, there's grace that can help you in that.

Understanding grace on that level is really big and it's sufficient. It's sufficient. There's enough of it to take care of your problem. Whatever it is, there's enough of it there for you and it fits into all the various crevices of your issue. There's nothing outside of God's grace that we miss if we're allowing God to use that grace in our lives. So it's really big.

If we think about this idea of our perception of God influencing how we perceive these problems that we have, an error might be to perceive that God is punishing me for this bad thing because of sins from the past. Misunderstands the grace of God, misunderstands the mercy of God and the fact that Jesus Christ died on the cross for my sins.

But let's just look at God for a moment because God gives us three different personalities of Himself that we can understand Him better of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. If we think about God as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, each one gives us a different perspective and understanding of God. A little bit more of who He is.

We think about the Father and we think the man with the plan. He's sovereign, He's got the plan, it's all under control. He's the loving, compassionate Father that interacts with me and I have this personal relationship with Him. That's all the fatherhood of God that we all need. That picture of fatherhood is especially important since we all have a father and all of our fathers are imperfect and have left holes in our lives. Parents have done that for us, not because of their fault, but because of their weakness. We need a Father who's perfect to step in and fill all of those things. This beautiful fatherhood of God that we all need.

And then there's Jesus. He's the one who fulfills all the plans. He's the one in the scriptures who's creating the world. He's the one who died on the cross for us so that we could have salvation. He's the one in the end that is the judge who's going to judge all things. So Christ is the one who implements a lot of the work of the godhead.

And then there's the Holy Spirit. Some people when they think of the Holy Spirit get a little bit afraid. Because you see the Holy Spirit and you think of something like the gift of tongues and it's a little strange. The gift of tongues is a real gift for today. Not everybody has it, but is one of the spiritual gifts that exists today. There are some people you see on TV that something happened in the name of the Holy Spirit that are pretty dramatic. I have no idea whether that's the Holy Spirit or not. What I'm saying is that we get these impressions about the Holy Spirit that make us run sometimes.

I would suggest if we look at the Bible and try to understand what the Bible says about the Holy Spirit, we start with when Jesus says, "Okay guys, I know I told you I'm going to go away and you're feeling a little bit anxious about this. Don't let your hearts be troubled. I'm going to send to you a comforter." See the Holy Spirit is this perception of God that God allows us to understand it as being this personal relationship empowerment daily in our lives that He does for us. I'm going to send Him to you. He's going to help you deal with your emotions here. He's going to guide you into all truth, Jesus says. So when we're struggling about what to do, the Holy Spirit empowers us to know what to do.

He illumines the Bible. So if you're having trouble studying the Bible, you pray, "God, would you please help me understand this? Give me the glasses," because the Holy Spirit is like those glasses that we put on and "Oh! I get something from that." It's the Holy Spirit that gives us the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, and those other things that are Spirit-empowered qualities that we need in our lives every day. It's the Holy Spirit that gives us spiritual gifts.



If you are saved and you're part of this church, this is your church home, God has given you a gift, a spiritual gift that you want to use. So you might have some natural talent to do something, but you want to infuse that with the Spirit's power in your life. I'm a teacher, so I prepare during the course of the week and then I stand up here and I teach on Sunday. So I do a lot of work. Some people think we rely on Spirit and don't do our work. But I do a lot of work to prepare. First of all to understand the passage, to allow God to work on it in my life, then to prepare it for you in a way that I think you'll be able to accept and be energized and inspired by, and then to memorize all of that so I can give it to you. And then when I stand up here, I want to say, "Lord, take all of that stuff. Would you empower it with your Spirit so the only the things that comes out that people need will be used by you."

See, it's the Spirit's power that we all need to be praying for. Whether it's a teaching gift in a Sunday school class, or it's moving chairs, or greeting people, or whatever it might be, that the Spirit would work in us. It's that empowerment that comes from inside. Then when that happens on a daily basis, we deal with these lingering challenges in our lives, these afflictions that we have. We need the Holy Spirit's power in order for us to just live life.

The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, but He also convicts other people of sin, so when we're sharing Jesus Christ with people, we don't have to save them. It's not our job. All we do is share the message. Because God's already working in their hearts. Some people would say, "Yes, I want that." We go, "Yeah. That's so cool. God's working through us." That's the Holy Spirit. Empowerment.

So how do you get the Holy Spirit? You want the Holy Spirit empowering you totally in your life. How do you get it? You just need to understand this. One, you get it by being saved. Because when you are saved the Holy Spirit comes into your life. But that is not the end. There's more to this for you than just salvation and the Holy Spirit. You have to understand the scriptures talk about filling of the Holy Spirit. In fact Ephesians tells us to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit. That means that every day we get up and we say, "Lord, would you fill me today?" "Lord, I'm going into this staff meeting. Would you please give me your Spirit today to do this?" "Lord, I'm going in to do this task. I'm going in to get my car repaired. Lord, would you help me to be Spirit-filled in this?" "Lord, I'm going to be talking to my family or I'm going to be dealing with this thing or that thing or going to the doctor." Whatever it is, "Lord, would you fill me right now? I need the filling of your Spirit." And God fills us up with His Spirit. You don't want to go into life half full. You want to be filled up and you want to be praying regularly, "Lord would you fill me with your Spirit." It's a dynamic. It's something that's going on regularly in your life.

It's important to understand that because that's where the power is going to come from as we're relating to the challenges that we face. So God says to Zerubbabel (this is a quote from the Old Testament in Zechariah) – *"Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty.* We need that power that comes from God's Spirit inside of us. He wants to walk with us every day of our lives. He wants to coach us through the challenges of life.

The word for what He is is the word *paraclete*, to come alongside to help. As you face this lingering challenge that doesn't seem to go away in your life, I want you to know you're not alone. The Holy Spirit is walking through that process with you.

Now I want to say something else about this because I don't believe that all the problems that are lingering will linger forever. There are sometimes when God demonstrates His power by taking the problem away. He divinely speaks into a person's life and heals them from an addiction or heals their body and takes away the cancer or the disease or something like that. Or He miraculously works in a relationship and brings two people together. Or He miraculously takes a lingering problem and it's over. In that healing it's God's power working through God's grace to do that.

We pray. So if you come up today for prayer and you're asking for things, I'm going to pray that God will bring about the requests that you desire. That He would provide that job that you want or that He would heal you of that problem that you're experiencing. I'm going to pray for that because God works miracles in our lives. Sometimes, though, He does not answer our prayer with a yes. So at the same time, we're going to pray, "God, would you reveal your power in me? Help me to understand who you are. I want to trust you for great things. I want to trust you for great things where the problem is taken away, but I also want to trust you for great things as you continue to work in the midst of the problem."

I don't know whether God is going to take this lingering problem away from you or not. But I do know this. God's power is available to you either way. And God's grace is big enough to handle the removal of the problem and it's big enough to handle you as you're in the midst of that. That's the beauty of the Christian life. If we understand God and who He really is, then our lives sure become a lot easier. We're not blaming God for our problems and recognizing that God is not this person up here that's judging us for what's going on. He's over here empowering us to live in a broken world where bad things are happening and all kinds of things happen to us. It's just a hard place for us to live. God wants to empower us to move forward. That's what grace is. That's the power of the Holy Spirit. And that's what God is calling for us in our lives.

Let's stand together and pray.

[PRAYER] [audio glitch] this clarity about our understanding of who you are. We know, Lord, that if we could just understand you more, if we could get to know you better, our lives would make more sense. So use even the challenging things of our lives that don't seem to go away to bring about that power and grace in our lives in new and inspiring ways. Lord, we want to worship you in the midst of that and we want to draw attention to you. We want you to be honored in everything we do. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.