

**ON THE GO FOR GOD**

# **A FELT WEAKNESS**

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“The only way to learn strong faith  
is to endure great trials.”

**—GEORGE MULLER**

# PROLOGUE

Paul experienced much suffering during his ministry. All believers will go through trials. In this study, Pastor Marvin R. Knight unfolds for us six reasons for appointed trials in our lives.

<sup>7</sup> 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! <sup>8</sup> Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. <sup>9</sup> And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. <sup>10</sup> 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.

**2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10**



# 1.

## INTRODUCTION

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One of the real thoughts that run around in our minds from time to time is the thought of “Will I have enough?”

- Will I have **enough money** to pay for what I need?
- Will I have **enough food** to get me to the next pay period?
- In case of an emergency, do I have **enough resources** to take care of things?
- If you're a parent, will I have **enough physical energy** to fulfill my responsibilities?
- Or as many of you are, as a seasoned saint, **will I have enough**...you fill in the blank.

Jeff Shinabarger, the founder of Plywood People, a non-profit in Atlanta, recently challenged Christians to “*redefine the idea of enough...and emphasized the importance of drawing a line in the sand on our choices as consumers and argued that generosity is the key to freedom in a greedy world.*”

But in our text, the Apostle Paul gives God's divine answer for freedom in a greedy world. Instead of challenging us simply to be more *generous*, which some of you are to a fault, the Word of God challenges us to find our answer in this thing we call, *grace*. The personal question that we are confronted with in this text is, “**is grace enough?**” Is it enough for your life as a Christian in this world? Is it enough for your marriage, for your troubles and challenges at the present time? Is it enough for your health?

We sing in church, *“He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater...”* and, *“Amazing grace how sweet the sound...,”* but the question is still, is grace enough? We sing, *“Grace, grace, God’s grace, grace that will pardon and cleanse within... Grace, grace, God’s grace, grace that is greater than all our sins...,”* but do we really believe that grace is sufficient for the situations that we find ourselves in right now? Let’s begin by setting forth the main truths that anchor this text.



## 2.

# THE MAIN TRUTHS

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Just as a diamond has many facets, grace has many elements [saving grace (Eph.2:8-9), serving grace (1 Cor.15:10), sustaining grace (2 Cor.12:7-10)]. Each shade or element of grace is beautiful all by itself, but when seen in the clay setting of a sinner's life, it shines brighter than any of the Crown Jewels of the United Kingdom. Two great truths can be found in this section.

- The first is that **God's purpose for all Christians in suffering is: more contentment in God and less satisfaction in self and the world.** And if there is something we need more of, *it is contentment in God.*
- The second is that **the sufficiency of Christ's grace is much greater than we could have ever imagined.** And in suffering, the power of it is zoomed in on and made large in our eyes. In other words, God's grace is enough. **The main point** of the text before us is how grace works in the most difficult circumstances.

As we come to the text, it's important to keep in mind that the challenges Paul faced are not to be seen as just those he encountered only when preaching or ministering, but rather, they cover the whole of his life. We know this because he explains this to us in verse 10.

- Therefore I am well content with weaknesses [a general word for every kind of physical and moral weakness], with insults [abuses], with distresses [accidents], with persecutions [opposition], with difficulties [bad breaks], for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

But by adding **for Christ's sake**, Paul is reminding us that the stresses and trials that he speaks of are not *self-inflicted hardships*. If we are to interpret this properly, I believe that we must see the trials that Paul speaks of here as more than just **ALLOWED TRIALS** but **APPOINTED TRIALS**. And *God has planned appointments with trials in our lives for many reasons*. Let me lift out six reasons from the text.

# 3.

## 6 REASONS FOR APPOINTED TRIALS

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### 1. **Appointed trials are designed to keep us in touch with our limitations.** (v.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.

What were these **revelations** (*apokalupsis*), and why were they given to Paul? The word for revelation describes the communication of knowledge previously hidden to man and incapable of understanding without divine aid. He tells us what these revelations were in verses 1-6. He speaks of himself in the third person. He was “*caught up*” to the third heaven (v.3), and he explains that it was *paradise or heaven itself* (v.4). He was not sure whether he was in body and soul together or if just his soul was taken there, but it did not matter. Why? Because he was not permitted to speak about what he *saw* and what he *heard*. The mysteries and glories of heaven were allowed to be *seen* but not *spoken* of by the Apostle. But why? Why were they given to Paul if he could not speak about them?

The answer is *they were personal evidences of the favor of God to him as an apostle.* For example, when a father wants to assure his son of love and care, he privately might give him a family token or show him a gesture of love. The context is key to understanding this and where Paul is going.

In chapters 10-11, Paul has had to defend himself and his apostleship against false teachers seeking to tear him down and pervert the Gospel (11:1-15). If given the choice, Paul would never talk about himself because his calling and his charge are not to “*preach himself but Christ Jesus as Lord*” (2 Cor.4:5; 1 Cor.2:2). Paul’s critics at Corinth prompted him to dwell so directly and fully on his weakness as he wrote this letter.

They were looking for evidence of his apostleship or proof of his divine mission. They boasted in their skills, possessions, and status in the world, but Paul felt, and rightly so, that *boasting in what you can do or in your status is not what Christians*, and certainly not what an apostle, is to do.

And therefore, he said in 2 Corinthians 12:1, “*Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable....*” In other words, this idea is boasting does not become me. Nothing is to be gained by it. It does not contribute to set my apostleship in a clearer light. There is a better way of proving my divine mission than by boasting. So he says in verse 1, “*I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord....*” In other words, I want to pass on to something else. What I want to tell you about is NOT the vision and the revelations because I am not permitted to speak to them, but I want to tell you about *the goodness of God in the appointed trials in my life.* There is better proof of my divine mission, and it’s *how in weakness, I am strong with the strength of Christ!*

### **What was this thorn in the flesh that Paul was given?**

- Some suggest that it was *eye trouble*. (Gal.6:11; 4:13, 15)
- Others suggest that it was a *disease like malaria*.
- Some suggest that it was a *bombardment of fiery darts or evil suggestions from the devil*.

- Others still suggest that it was some prominent adversary that Paul faced.

Here is what we know for sure.

- It was given by God**—and it was *from* God that he sought deliverance (*v.7—there was given me...*)
- It came at the agency of Satan**—he called it *a messenger of Satan*. In the Bible, the idea is often presented that bodily diseases are at times produced by the direct agency of Satan so that they may be regarded as his messengers or something sent by him (*Job 2:7*).
- It was a permanent affliction**—the present tense is used, which indicates that *it was something that he continued to suffer from*.

Whatever it was, we can say with certainty that it was physical and painful, or it would not have been called “**a thorn in the flesh**.” The word for thorn (*skolops*) describes a *pointed stake*. But beyond this, we do not know what it was, nor do we need to know.

**What is clear is that God’s purpose for the appointed suffering was to do something in particular...and the first thing we are told is to keep him in touch with his limitations**. It appears twice in verse 7, “**To keep me from exalting myself**.” *No matter how much he was exalted by the favor of God, nothing would teach him how weak and limited he was like that of suffering and trials.*

Now, whether we want to admit it or not, we are prideful people by nature. Sin causes us to exalt ourselves (*Proverbs 16:18—“Pride goes before stumbling and a haughty spirit before stumbling”*). Although Paul was determined not to let men think too highly of him, here he tells us that *God provided something in this life so that he would not think*

*too highly of himself.* Who could imagine the great Apostle being tempted with pride? If anyone ever judged his own heart and plumbed the depths of its wretchedness, surely it must have been Paul. John Ritchie was right when he said,

*“The weed of pride is so deep-rooted that no matter how severely it is pruned, it will sprout up again and flourish as though it had never been touched.”*

God knew this about Paul, and He knows this about us. Our tendency is to exalt ourselves. We are told this in several places (*Gal.6:3; 1 Cor.10:12; 3:18; Jer.9:23-24a*).

**John Piper**—“I have never heard anyone say, ‘The really deep lessons of life have come through times of ease and comfort’...but I have heard some strong saints say, ‘Every significant advance I have ever made in grasping the depths of God’s love and growing deep with Him has come through suffering.’”

**Charles Hodge**—“The experience of God’s people shows that bodily pain has a special office to perform in the work of sanctification.”

God has decreed three blows to pride’s ego. Conversion is the decisive blow (*2 Cor.4:3-4*), sanctification is the progressive blow (*2 Cor.12:7ff*), and glorification is the final blow (*1 John 3:2*). Until that time of glorification, God appoints trials to keep us in touch with our limitations.

## 2. **Appointed trials are designed to drive us to seek God’s face.** (v.8)

Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.

Three times, Paul said he pleaded with the Lord, his Master, about this. You recall that Jesus Himself asked the Father three times if *the cup would pass from Him* (*Matt.26:39-44*). The Lord whom he knew to be not only a Savior, Lord, Master, but also a Healer. But the Lord’s

answer was this, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.”*

So, Paul went **unhealed**, though not **abandoned**. And the same is true of you—you may be unhealed, but you are not abandoned. One paraphrase version of the Bible interprets this passage, *“Satan’s angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees.”* That is exactly the point. Appointed trials are designed to drive us to seek God’s face!

Now I think it is safe to say from our viewpoint that **there is a difference between seeking God’s hand and seeking His face in our troubles. In the seeking of God’s hand**, we often think simply of assistance, but in **the seeking of God’s face**, there is *the implication of seeking His mind. His purposes. His favor. His pleasure.* One vivid example comes to mind. It was during my son Jordan’s freshman year. I bought him a scooter to get around called a Vespa, and he got into an accident near the mall on the way to work. I can remember my heart beating so fast, hoping and praying that he was not seriously injured. When I arrived on the scene, the firetrucks and paramedics were there, and of course, I thought the worst had happened. But he was sitting there, scraped up pretty badly. When I arrived, all he focused on was my facial features. He did not need my assistance; he wanted to know if he had my approval or disapproval.

What is it about seeking God’s face or favor in prayer that we really need?

When the disciples were confused about where Jesus was going and what it all meant, Philip said, *“Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us” (John 14:8).* And do you remember Christ’s answer? *“Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has*

*seen the Father;” All the glory of the Father is in Christ. And appointed suffering is designed to drive us, like the law, to seek the Lord’s face.*

Like the crowds who sought Christ for temporary satisfaction in John 6, we too can seek Christ for deliverance from *temporary things* instead of seeking to please Him in whatever circumstances we face. Make no mistake about it, *God is a God who delivers, and sometimes He delivers by granting you the endurance to make it through.* But this is only found in *prayer*—seeking His face at the throne of grace.

- **Hebrews 4:16**—Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

### 3. **Appointed trials are designed to teach us the sufficiency of God’s grace.** (v.9a)

And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you...”

Paul’s prayer was answered, but the answer was different from what he expected. The words, “He said unto me...” imply a direct communication to him from the Lord so that he was not left with any doubt.

The answer that Paul received is powerful. It is two-fold:

- First, *it is a promise of sufficient grace to bear the trial.*
- Second, *it is a statement that his weakness would allow God to perfect His strength in him.*

In the first statement, he is told **how needless it was to have the evil removed**; in the second statement, he is told **how beneficial it would be for him to have it remain**. What he assumed was *a serious disadvantage*, he is given understanding so that he sees it as *a great asset*.



Notice carefully that the answer was not something in the past. He didn't say, "My grace was sufficient for you then...", but rather, "My grace IS sufficient for you now..." in the present tense and continues to be.

One commentator said, "These words should be engraved on the palm of every believer."

When Christ speaks of His grace, what does He mean? He means, **My love is enough for you**. He says to those who seek deliverance from pain and sorrow, "**Is it enough that I love you?**"

Someone says, "Pastor, I don't know. Really." Isaiah 54:8 and Psalm 30:5 remind us that "*His lovingkindness is better than life.*" His love, grace, favor, and Holy Spirit are enough because with them come all the other good things and benefits of a saving relationship (*Rom.8:31-39*).

4. **Appointed trials are designed to put God's power on display in your life.** (*v.9b*)

...for power is perfected in weakness.

In simple but plain language, we are told that God's strength is perfected—or clearly revealed as accomplishing its end—in weakness. Or, if we might put it another way, "weakness," according to God, "*is the condition or the sphere in which God manifests His power.*" The weaker we are, the more conspicuous God's power is in sustaining and delivering us. Human weakness opens the way for more of Christ's power and grace.

There is an Old Testament parallel in Isaiah 40:31 of the believer exchanging their weakness for God's strength. Isaiah begins this section by laying out a string of God's

attributes beginning in verses 27-28. God is **omniscient** [Our way is not hidden from the Lord....justice does not escape His notice (v.27)]. God is, in fact, **eternal** [*“the Everlasting God”* (v.28)]. He possesses immortality—life that is unending. He is incapable of dying or perishing], **omnipotent** [*“The LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth”* (v.28), all-creating, all-sustaining, all-controlling, and all-victorious], **untiring** [*“Does not become weary or tired”* (v.28)—there is no time when He is not, there is no place where He is not, and there is nothing that flags His resources as deficient], and He is **wise** [*“His understanding is inscrutable”* (v.28)]—which means God rightly assesses people and situations based upon perfect knowledge, but He also exercises perfect judgment in selecting the best means to reach the greatest good, which is for His glory]. Now here’s the amazing revelation about God: He shares His strength, not as a whim or on occasion, but as a part of who He is.

- **Isaiah 40:29-31**—He gives strength to the weary,  
And to the one who lacks might He increases power.  
<sup>30</sup> Though youths grow weary and tired,  
And vigorous young men stumble badly,  
<sup>31</sup> Yet those who wait for the Lord  
Will gain new strength;  
They will mount up with wings like eagles,  
They will run and not get tired,  
They will walk and not become weary.

Even in the prime of our lives, we *“grow weary and tired”* because of a lack of inherent strength and the hardness of life. But because of His understanding, our unwearying God knows how to provide the antidote. Here is the key and the condition.

*“Yet those who wait”*—which means to hope in or trust—will *“gain”* new strength. The Hebrew word for gain (*chalaph*) means to exchange or renew their strength. It means to

put on afresh or keep putting on fresh strength. But it is a different strength. It is as if one sprouts eagles' wings—that is, they get an ability they did not have before. But what for? To “run” for the need of the moment or to “walk” in the normal course and grind of life. Isaiah concludes verse 31 by emphatically repeating the word “*they...they...they,*” which means they and they alone will receive divine strength.

The question is, are you waiting patiently and resting trustfully in the Lord?

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,  
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;  
To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,  
To multiplied trials, His multiplied 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.<sup>1</sup>

Alexander Maclaren rightly says, “*God works with broken reeds. If a man imagines himself to be an iron pillar, God can do nothing with or by him. All the self-conceit and confidence have to be taken out of him first. He has to be*

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Johnson Flint, *He Giveth More Grace*

*brought low before the Father can use him for His purposes. But the lowlands hold the water...”<sup>2</sup>*

5. **Appointed trials are meant to teach us that weakness is the way to Christlikeness.** (v.9c)

...Most gladly therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

Four times the word “**weakness**” (*astheneia*) is used, and it means to be deficient or lack some skill or capacity. Later on, in chapter 13:4, Paul said, *“For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God, For we also are weak in Him, yet we live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you.”*

The example of our Savior who died and hung upon a cross in such apparent weakness should make us beware of misreading or misunderstanding apparent weakness. Paul declares that Jesus is never feeble toward His people, but rather, He is strong. Those who represent Him are given all the power they need to accomplish what He calls them to do.

Clear evidence of that power is the ministry of the Holy Spirit helping us to pray. Listen to what Paul revealed to us about the Spirit’s intercession.

- **Romans 8:26**—In the same way [*as v.16 indicates*], the Spirit also helps [*that is, takes our burden upon Himself*] our weakness [*which is our entire lives morally, physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally*]; for we do not know how to pray [*content not manner*] as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/mac/2-corinthians-12.html>

In other words, in a way that is silent, the Holy Spirit helps us to *trust in God's sovereignty (Rom.8:28)*, *convinces us of the good God foreknew (Rom.8:29)*, and *convinces us of the logic of Calvary (Rom.8:32)*. In doing so, we discover that weakness is the way to Christlikeness.

Paul is not saying that *I would rather boast about my weaknesses than seek deliverance*. No, no, but once Paul heard the voice of Christ saying that **His strength would be put on display in his weakness**, he *stopped focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift*.

Now, this **boasting** was not something that Paul *had to feel in order to do*. It had a rational or thoughtful basis to it.

It was as if Paul is saying, “Because I understand now that my weaknesses will be the display ground of Christ’s all-sufficient power, I not only will choose to take my troubles in stride, but I will choose to find joy in the fact that He has chosen to make my life, and my sufferings the ‘dwelling place of His glory.’” It is in the context of our weakness that Christ shows us His power and shows others His power.

- **2 Corinthians 4:7-10**—But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; <sup>8</sup> we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.

In his unique way, Vance Havner said, “The Lord had the strength, and I had the weakness, so we teamed up! It was an unbeatable combination.” When the power of Christ dwells in us, progress is made, strength is felt, and perseverance is granted.

## 6. **Appointed trials are meant to cultivate true contentment in our lives. (v.10)**

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.

How do you know when contentment is found in your life? It's when you know the reality of Philippians 4:13—*"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

It's one thing to *accept* or *be resigned* to the fact of your sufferings. It's another thing to *rejoice* in your appointed suffering. In other words, *to see them as that which will reflect the glory of Christ and be a source of joy to you.* When we are *weak in ourselves* and *conscious of that weakness*, we are in the best condition to manifest *the power of God*. When we are emptied of ourselves, we can be filled with God. Spurgeon said, "our weakness should be prized as making room for divine strength." However, for...

- Those who think they can change their own hearts...or,
- Atone for their own sins...or,
- Subdue the power of evil in their own souls or the souls of other men...or,
- Who feel able to sustain themselves under affliction...

God leaves to their own resources. But when they *feel* and acknowledge their *weakness*, He communicates to them divine strength. Robert Browning Hamilton:

*I walked a mile with pleasure,  
She chatted all the way,  
But left me none the wiser  
For all she had to say.*

*I walked a mile with sorrow,  
And ne'er a word said she;  
But oh, the things I learned from her  
When sorrow walked with me.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Browning Hamilton, *Along the Road*, poem

