

Grace and the Thorny Path

Paul testified of his experiences.

This boasting will do no good, but I must go on. I will reluctantly tell about visions and revelations from the Lord. ²I* was caught up to the third heaven fourteen years ago. Whether I was in my body or out of my body, I don't know—only God knows. ³Yes, only God knows whether I was in my body or outside my body. But I do know ⁴that I was caught up* to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words, things no human is allowed to tell.

⁵That experience is worth boasting about, but I'm not going to do it. I will boast only about my weaknesses. ⁶If I wanted to boast, I would be no fool in doing so, because I would be telling the truth. But I won't do it, because I don't want anyone to give me credit beyond what they can see in my life or hear in my message, ⁷even though I have received such wonderful revelations from God. So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.

⁸Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. ⁹Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. ¹⁰That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong. ¹

What makes experiences difficult is that they make no sense to us at the time.

Paul and Barnabas prayed for a lame man at Lystra and saw him healed.

Then everyone turned against them,

"But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But when the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe." (Acts 14:8-19-21)

Their experience was at first miraculous, and afterwards, disastrous.

¹ Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (2 Co 12:1–10). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

John Newton wrote,

“If the Lord be with us, we have no cause of fear.
His eye is upon us, His arm over us, His ear open to our prayer
- His grace sufficient, His promise unchangeable.”

Some believe this was when Paul had a vision of heaven, which he later described in his letter to the Corinthians.

1. Paul’s Vision: caught up to the third heaven...

The Place where God dwells in heaven

While Paul doesn’t mention many details; he says that he heard words that he couldn’t repeat to anyone.

2. Paul’s Thorn

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!” (2 Cor. 12:7).

What was Paul’s thorn? - Physical, Demonic, Purposeful

Physical

The exact nature of this “thorn in the flesh” has prompted much speculation... The word translated “thorn” (*skolops*) occurs only here in the New Testament. It refers to something pointed such as a stake for impaling, a medical instrument, or a thorn. “Stake” would be a better translation, though “thorn” has dominated English renderings of the word. The metaphor carries “the notion of something sharp and painful which sticks deeply in the flesh and in the will of God defies extracting.”²

As Barnett puts it,

“God ... brought the elated Paul down to earth and pinned him there with a ‘thorn.’ ”
It also kept Paul pinned closer to the Lord.

Demonic

² Garland, D. E. (1999). *2 Corinthians* (Vol. 29, p. 518). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

The phrase “angel of Satan” is in apposition to the stake. Satan comes to bedevil him as an agent of testing. The verb “to torment” (*kolaphizein*, “abuse,” “batter”) implies humiliating violence—being slapped around; and the present tense suggests that it was persistent—something that happens over and over again.³

Purposeful

A thorn in the flesh was given to Paul to keep him from pride.

3. Paul’s Prayer

Paul’s response was to *‘pray it away.’*

“Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, My grace is sufficient for you for power is perfected in weakness.” (verse 8-9)

Jesus answer was “The thorn will remain, but you will also have My grace.”

God always answers our prayers: “No,” “Yes,” “Wait,”

“I have something better for you.”

Sometimes this is hard for us to accept.

As Bruce puts it, “His prayer was indeed answered, not by his deliverance from the affliction, but by his receiving the necessary grace to bear it.”

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.” (Heb. 4:16)

Heb. 11:32-40

4. Paul’s lesson on grace:

“... Most gladly, therefore I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so 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. 9-10)

Grace is the strength of Christ that comes to us when we are humbled.

³ Garland, D. E. (1999). *2 Corinthians* (Vol. 29, pp. 521–522). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

well content – “to think well, approve, acquiesce, take delight or pleasure.”

Areas of trials Paul includes:

Weakness – astheneais – infirmities, physical weakness, lit. strengthless.

Insults - hubresin – reproaches, verbal abuses (outrage), revile.

Distresses – anagkais – proper, needs, responsibilities.

Persecutions – diogmois – to put to flight, to drive away, to pursue.

Difficulties – stenochoria – anguish, Lit. –narrowness of place.

(Strong’s Concordance)

Verse 4 of Amazing Grace:

The Lord has promised good to me,
His Word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

Trials are God’s instruments that produce positive character qualities and prevent negative ones.

Therefore, it is right to respond with attitudes of joy and gratefulness.

The focus must be on what the trial will produce in character growth instead of the present pain or inconvenience.

Verse 9 speaks of power being **perfected**.

– (tellios) is translated “mature,” or “complete”.

James echoes, that we rejoice because of ‘The perfect result of trials’.⁴

Grace is Christ’s strength in our weakness

– “dunamas” dynamite - power

The philosophy of the world,

“What can’t be cured must be endured.”

Paul’s philosophy,

“What can’t be cured can be enjoyed.”

⁴ James 1:4.

William Wilberforce, led the fight to abolish slavery in the British Empire, was physically weak and frail, but he had deep faith in God. A contemporary, Boswell observed of him, *"I saw what seemed to me a shrimp become a whale."*⁵

Grace is His strength in our weakness.

"God gives grace to the humble;"

-Trials humble us

He Giveth More

He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
 He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;
 To added affliction 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.

His love has no limit, 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 again⁶

Only God...

Can turn a mess into a message
 A test into a testimony
 A trial into a triumph
 A victim into a victory.

⁵ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), p. 1866.

⁶ Annie Johnson Flint