

**ENGAGE**

- This week deals with visions, heaven, struggles, unanswered prayer and strength in our weakness.
- There are many ways your study could take you. Let the Spirit guide you in personal reflection as to what truths are needed in your life at this time.
- If, leading a zoom group, let the conversation guide you. Some may want to address visions, third heaven conversations. Others may want to speak about struggles they are going through (personal thorns). Still, others may have questions about unanswered prayers.
- Whichever path you take, be sure to land on verse 9. 9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” What you need is provided. The prayer is that we might find the faith and grace to rest in Him in the midst of any storm that may arise.

**EXAMINE****A. Paul’s vision and its legacy in his life.****1. (1-6) Paul reluctantly describes his vision.**

**It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me *to be* or hears from me.**

a. **I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord:** The “super apostles” among the Corinthian Christians no doubt claimed many spectacular spiritual experiences, such as **visions and revelations of the Lord**. Paul has “reluctantly boasted” since the last chapter, so now he will boast of his own **visions and revelations of the Lord**.

i. Paul’s reluctance is expressed in the opening words of this chapter: **It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast**. Paul is tired of writing about himself! He would rather write about Jesus, but the worldly thinking that made the Corinthian Christians think little of Paul also made them think little of Jesus, even if they couldn’t perceive it.

b. **Visions and revelation:** Whether they concern angels, Jesus, heaven, or other things, these things are more common in the New Testament than we might think.

· Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, had a vision of an angel ([Luke 1:8-23](#)).

- Jesus' transfiguration is described as a vision for the disciples ([Matthew 17:9](#)).
- The women who came to visit Jesus' tomb had a vision of angels ([Luke 24:22-24](#)).
- Stephen saw a vision of Jesus at his death ([Acts 7:55-56](#)).
- Ananias experienced a vision telling him to go to Saul ([Acts 9:10](#)).
- Peter had a vision of the clean and unclean animals ([Acts 10:17-19](#) and [11:5](#)).
- Peter had a vision of an angel at his release from prison ([Acts 12:9](#)).
- John had many visions on Patmos ([Revelation 1:1](#)).
- Paul had a revelation of Jesus on the road to Damascus ([Acts 22:6-11](#) and [26:12-20](#)).
- Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia, asking him to come to that region to help ([Acts 16:9-10](#)).
- Paul had an encouraging vision while in Corinth ([Acts 18:9-11](#)).
- Paul had a vision of an angel on the ship that was about to be wrecked ([Acts 27:23-25](#)).

i. So we should not be surprised if God should speak to us through some type of **visions and revelations of the Lord**. But we do understand that such experiences are *subjective* and prone to misunderstanding and misapplication. In addition, whatever real benefits there are to **visions and revelations of the Lord**, they are almost always limited to the person who receives the **visions and revelations**. We should be rather cautious when someone reports a vision or revelation they have regarding us.

ii. "How often people have wanted to tell me about their visions! I am always suspicious. I want to know what they had for supper the night before! If people have visions of this sort they are silent about them." (Morgan)

c. **I know a man in Christ**: Paul describes this experience in the third person instead of the first person (he didn't say, "I myself had this experience"). This makes some wonder if he is really speaking about himself here, or if he speaks of someone else. But because he transitions into the first person in verse seven, we may be assured that he really writes about himself.

i. Then why does he use the third person at all? Because Paul, in describing this remarkable spiritual experience, is describing just the kind of thing that the "super apostles" among the Corinthian Christians would glory in. When he described his humble experiences in [2 Corinthians 11:23-30](#), he did not hesitate to write in the first person. No one would think he was glorifying himself as the

“super apostles” did. But here, he walks more carefully. Paul does everything he can to relate this experience without bringing glory to himself.

d. **Fourteen years ago:** This dating by Paul does little to help us know when this happened, because scholars are not in agreement regarding when 2 Corinthians was written.

i. Suggestions have been made that the experience he describes happened during Paul’s ten years in Syria and Cilicia (Galatians 1:21-2:1), at his stoning in Lystris (Acts 14:19), or during his time in Antioch (Acts 13:1-3).

ii. The important thing to notice is that Paul kept quiet about this for **fourteen years**, and now he mentions it reluctantly.

e. **Whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows:** Paul doesn’t really know if he was **in the body** or **out of the body** during this vision. It seems that in his mind, either one was possible.

i. Many might ask, what really happened to Paul? Was he carried up **in the body** to heaven, or did his spirit separate itself from his body and go there? The whole point of the passage is that if Paul didn’t know, we can’t know. In fact, Paul emphasizes the point by repeating the idea twice (in verse two and in verse three). Therefore, speculation at this point is useless. “As he could not decide himself, it would be ridiculous in us to attempt it.” (Clarke)

f. **Such a one was caught up to the third heaven:** The **third heaven** doesn’t suggest different “levels” of heaven (although this is what some ancient Jewish Rabbis believed). Instead, Paul is using terminology common in that day, which referred to the “blue sky” as the *first* heaven, the “starry sky” as the *second* heaven, and the place where God lived and reigned as the *third* heaven.

i. “In the sacred writings *three* heavens only are mentioned. The *first* is the *atmosphere*... The *second*, the starry heaven... And, *thirdly*, the *place of the blessed*, or the *throne of the Divine glory*.” (Clarke)

ii. So, this **one** – whom we understand to be Paul himself – was **caught up to the heaven** where God lives. Paul had a vision or an experience of the throne of God, just as Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1) and John (Revelation 4:1-2) did.

g. **He was caught up into Paradise:** Paul identifies this **third heaven** as **Paradise**. The word **Paradise** is taken from the Persian word for an enclosed, luxurious garden often only found among royalty in the ancient world.

i. Some early Christians wrongly thought **Paradise** was the place where souls of believers went after death to await resurrection. Some of them (like the ancient theologian Origen) even believed **Paradise** was located somewhere on the earth’s surface.

h. **And heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter:** In describing this heavenly vision, Paul doesn't relate anything he *saw*, only a shadowy description of what he **heard**.

i. When we think of this, we realize how different Paul is from most of those who describe their so-called "visions" of heaven today. There is *nothing* self-glorifying, self-aggrandizing, or foolish in the description of his experience.

- Paul waited 14 years to say anything about the incident, and when he finally did he said it reluctantly.

- He did everything he could in relating the story to take the focus off himself (such as writing in the third person).

- He doesn't bother at all with breathless descriptions of what he actually experienced. Instead, he says nothing of what he saw, and says only that he heard things **not lawful for a man to utter**.

ii. So what did Paul hear? We don't know! They were **inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter**. God didn't want us to know, so He didn't give Paul permission to speak.

iii. Nevertheless, some commentators can't resist speculating: "It is probable that the apostle refers to some communication concerning the Divine nature and the Divine economy, of which he was only to make a *general* use in his *preaching* and *writing*. No doubt that what he learned at this time formed the *basis* of all his doctrines." (Clarke)

i. **Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities:** Paul essentially says that this "nameless" man who had the vision really had something to **boast** about. But "Paul himself" really could only **boast** in his **infirmities**, which was exactly what he did in 2 Corinthians 11:23-30.

i. **Though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool:** Again, Paul is sharply – and humorously – contrasting himself with the "super apostles" among the Corinthian Christians. They would not hesitate to **boast** about the kind of vision Paul had. In fact, they would write books, make tapes and videos, and go on speaking tours about such a vision! And if they did, each of them would **be a fool**. Paul will not **be a fool**, so he will not boast in this vision.

ii. At the same time, we almost sense that it was important for Paul to communicate to the Corinthian Christians that *he really did have such experiences*. Often, it is easy to think that the only ones who have profound experiences with God are those who **boast** about them constantly. Paul never did boast as the "super apostles" did, but he certainly had profound experiences with God. The proof of those profound experiences was found in his transformed life and powerful, truthful ministry.

iii. Therefore, Paul felt it was important to *mention* this experience but not to *dwell* on it in any way. He wasn't trying to "sell" himself to the Corinthian Christians. In fact, he holds back from his description (**But I forbear**), because he didn't want to persuade the Corinthian Christians that he was

just another “super apostle” (**lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me**). If the Corinthian Christians thought Paul was weak and different from the “super apostles,” that was fine with him. He wanted the Corinthian Christians to see the glory of God expressed in weakness, not to see him as “great” as the “super apostles” claimed to be.

j. Why was Paul given this vision? First, he was given it for you and me so that we would benefit from what the Lord showed Paul. Secondly, he was given it because what God told him through this vision sustained him through all the trials of ministry and enabled Paul to give everything God wanted him to give to all generations. This vision helped Paul finish his course.

## 2. (7) The presence of Paul’s thorn in the flesh.

**And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.**

a. **And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations:** Paul’s vision was so impressive that it would have been easy for him to be **exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations**. He could have gloried in himself or caused others to glory in him because of this experience.

i. Paul was not immune to the danger of pride. No one is. “The best of God’s people have in them a root of pride, or a disposition to be *exalted above measure*, upon their receipt of favours from God not common to others.” (Poole)

b. **A thorn in the flesh was given to me:** To prevent being **exalted above measure**, Paul was given this. In this, Paul reveals the real reason for telling of his heavenly vision: not to glorify himself but to explain his **thorn in the flesh**.

i. It seems that everyone could see the **thorn in the flesh** Paul suffered from – it was no secret. His heavenly vision was a secret until now, but everyone saw the **thorn**. Some among the Corinthian Christians probably thought less of Paul because of his **thorn in the flesh**, but they knew nothing of the amazing spiritual experience that lay behind it.

ii. “He says, ‘There was *given* to me.’ He reckoned his great trial to be a gift. It is well put. He does not say, ‘There was inflicted upon me a thorn in the flesh,’ but ‘There was given to me.’” (Spurgeon)

c. **A thorn in the flesh:** What is a **thorn in the flesh**? When we think of a **thorn**, we think of a somewhat minor irritation. But the root word Paul used for **thorn** here describes *a tent stake*, not a thumbtack.

i. In the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint, the word *skolops* (**thorn**) shows “something which frustrates and causes trouble in the lives of those afflicted.” (Kruse)

d. **A thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me:** In a strange way, the **thorn** was **given** – ultimately given by God – but it was also a **messenger of Satan**.

i. Satan probably jumped at God's permission to afflict Paul and did so with malice towards the apostle. But God had a purpose in it all and allowed Satan's messenger to successfully keep Paul from being **exalted above measure**.

ii. **To buffet me** means that this **thorn in the flesh** – the **messenger of Satan** – “punched” Paul. He felt that he was beaten black and blue by this **messenger of Satan**.

iii. Paul, punched about by the devil? Who would have thought it? “Perhaps you have looked into the face of a Christian who is always smiling, who never seems to have any worry, is always happy and radiant and, as you have thought about your own circumstances, you have said in your heart, ‘I wish I were he! He seems to have no problems. He doesn't have to take what I do.’ But perhaps you have lived long enough, as I have, to know that sometimes the most radiant face hides great pressures, and often the man who is being most blessed of God is being most buffeted by the devil.” (Redpath)

e. It is interesting to consider what a counselor without a Biblical perspective might have said to Paul. Imagine that Paul tells the counselor about his great infirmity, his troublesome “thorn in the flesh,” and how Paul feels weak and powerless to continue on against it. We might imagine that the counselor would say, “Well Paul, what you need is a positive mental outlook to meet this problem.” Or he might say, “Paul, the power is within you to conquer this infirmity; you should look deep within the inner man to find the resources for success.” Perhaps the counselor would then tell Paul, “What you really need is a support group of caring individuals.” The counselor might suggest Paul take medication for depression. Or he might even seek to challenge Paul by saying, “Paul, if you really had faith, you would be delivered from this thorn in the flesh.” Some of this advice might be good in different circumstances, but Paul will take his problem to the Wonderful Counselor, and He has something different to say.

### 3. (8) Paul's prayer regarding the thorn in the flesh.

#### Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

a. **Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord:** Paul did exactly what he told others to do in a time of trouble. Paul believed for himself what he wrote in Philippians 4:6: *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.*

b. **I pleaded with the Lord three times:** In fact, Paul *repeatedly* prayed about this thorn in the flesh. We might imagine that when the thorn in the flesh first appeared Paul thought, “This is no problem. I'll just give it to the Lord in prayer.” But nothing happened when he prayed. So he thought, “This is a tough one,” and prayed again. When nothing happened after praying the third time, he knew God was trying to tell him something.

i. Some think that Paul is using a Hebrew figure of speech that really means much more than **three times**. “That does not mean three times. It is the Hebrew figure for ceaselessly, continuously, over and over again.” (Morgan)

ii. Some say it is unspiritual and evidence of little faith to pray for something more than once. That would be surprising to Paul, who **pleaded with the Lord three times**, and to Jesus, who prayed with *the same words* three times in His agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:39-41).

iii. But there was nothing wrong with Paul's prayer. "God respecteth not the arithmetic of our prayers, how many they are; not the rhetoric of our prayers, how neat they are; nor the geometry of our prayers, how long they are; nor the music of our prayers, how melodious they are; nor the logic of our prayers, how methodical they are; but the divinity of our prayers, how heart-sprung they are. Not gifts, but graces prevail in prayer." (Trapp)

c. **Pleaded with the Lord:** Paul's prayer on this matter was *passionate*. We wonder if he wasn't surprised when the prayer was not answered the first or second time.

d. **That it might depart from me:** Paul's initial prayer was to *escape* the suffering this thorn in the flesh brought him. Paul was no masochist. When he suffered, his first instinct was to ask God to take the suffering away.

i. When his passionate and repeated plea was not answered, it must have concerned Paul. It added another dimension to this trial.

· It had a *physical* dimension, in that it was a thorn in the flesh.

· It had a *mental* dimension, in that it was a messenger of Satan.

· It had a *spiritual* dimension, in that it was an unanswered prayer.

e. **Concerning this thing:** What exactly was Paul's thorn in the flesh? We simply don't have enough information to say precisely, but that hasn't prevented many commentators and teachers from giving their opinion.

i. Some see it mainly as *spiritual harassment*. Others think it was *persecution*. Many suggest that it was a *physical* or *mental* ailment. Some say this was Paul's struggle with lustful and sinful thoughts.

ii. Among Christians, Tertullian gives the earliest recorded guess at the exact nature of Paul's problem. He thought the thorn in the flesh was an earache or a headache.

iii. In more modern times, historian Sir William Ramsay offered the suggestion that Paul's infirmity was a type of malaria common to the area where he served as a missionary. Sufferers of this type of malaria experience attacks when under stress, and they "feel a contempt and loathing for self, and believe that others feel equal contempt and loathing." This malarial fever also produces severe headaches, described by sufferers as being "like a red-hot bar thrust through the forehead."

iv. Each of these suggestions is possible, but God had a definite purpose in not revealing the exact nature of Paul's thorn. If we knew exactly what Paul's thorn was, then everybody who was afflicted – but not in exactly the same way – might doubt that Paul's experience was relevant for them. God wanted everyone with any kind of thorn in the flesh to be able to put themselves in Paul's shoes. "I generally find that each expositor has selected that particular thorn which had pierced his own bosom." (Spurgeon)

#### 4. (9-10) God's provision to Paul through his thorn in the flesh.

**And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

a. **And He said to me:** God had a response for Paul. The answer was not what Paul initially hoped for or expected, but God still had a response for Paul. We often close our ears to God if He responds in a way we did not hope for or expect.

b. **My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness:** Instead of removing the thorn from Paul's life, God gave and would keep giving His **grace** to Paul. The **grace** God gave Paul was **sufficient** to meet his every need.

i. Paul was desperate in his desire to find relief from this burden, but there are two ways of relief. It can come by *removing* the load or by *strengthening* the shoulder that bears the load. Instead of taking away the thorn, God strengthened Paul under it, and God would show His strength through Paul's apparent **weakness**.

ii. To do this, Paul had to believe that God's **grace is sufficient**. We really don't believe God's grace is sufficient until we believe we are *insufficient*. For many of us, especially in American culture, this is a huge obstacle. We are the people who idolize the "self-made man" and want to rely on ourselves. But we can't receive God's strength until we know our weakness. We can't receive the sufficiency of God's grace until we know our own insufficiency.

iii. "Great tribulation brings out the great strength of God. If you never feel inward conflicts and sinking of soul, you do not know much of the upholding power of God; but if you go down, down, into the depths of soul-anguish till the deep threatens to shut her mouth upon you, and then the Lord rides upon a cherub and does fly, yea, rides upon the wings of the wind and delivers your soul, and catches you away to the third heaven of delight, then you perceive the majesty of divine grace. Oh, there must be the weakness of man, felt, recognized, and mourned over, or else the strength of the Son of God will never be perfected in us." (Spurgeon)

c. **My grace is sufficient:** How did God's **grace** make the difference? How did it meet Paul's need at this point?

i. **Grace** could meet Paul's need because it expresses God's acceptance and pleasure in us. When we receive His grace, we enjoy our status of favor and approval in God's eyes. Grace means that God likes us, that He is favorably disposed towards us and that we have His approval and promise of care.

ii. **Grace** could meet Paul's need because it was available all the time. When we sin or fail, it does not put us outside the reach of God's grace. Since grace is given freely to us in Jesus, it can't be taken away later because we stumble or fall. When we come to God by faith through the blood of Jesus, His grace is ever ready to meet us and to minister to our insufficiencies.

iii. **Grace** could meet Paul's need because it was the very strength of God. So much of the power of this world is expressed in things that can only bring harm and destruction, but God loves to show His power through His goodness and grace. Sometimes we associate goodness with cowardice or timidity. When we do, we take a worldly perspective about power and strength, and we deny God's truth about the strength of grace and love. Grace is not weak or wimpy. Instead, it is the power of God to fulfill what we lack.

d. **My grace is sufficient for you:** You may emphasize any aspect of this you please.

i. "My **grace** is sufficient for you." Grace is the favor and love of God in action. It means He loves us and is pleased by us. Can you hear it from God? "My love is enough for you." Isn't it true?

ii. "**My** grace is sufficient for you." Whose grace is it? It is the grace of Jesus. Isn't His love, His favor, enough? What will Jesus fail at? Remember too that Jesus suffered thorns, so He cares and He knows.

iii. "My grace **is** sufficient for you." It **is** right now. Not that it will be some day, but right now, at this moment, His grace is sufficient. You thought something had to change before His grace would be enough. You thought, "His grace *was* sufficient once, His grace *may be* sufficient again, but not now, not with what I am going through." Despite that feeling, God's word stands. "My grace **is** sufficient for you." Spurgeon wrote, "It is easy to believe in grace for the past and the future, but to rest in it for the immediate necessity is true faith. Believer, it is *now* that grace is sufficient: even at this moment it *is* enough for thee."

iv. "My grace is **sufficient** for you." Redpath explains this aspect best: "Do you see the humor of the situation? God's grace: me. His grace sufficient for little me! How absurd to think that it could ever be any different! As if a little fish could swim in the ocean and fear lest it might drink it dry! The grace of our crucified, risen, exalted, triumphant Saviour, the Lord of all glory, is surely sufficient for me! Do you not think it is rather modest of the Lord to say *sufficient*?"

v. "My grace is sufficient **for you.**" I'm so glad God didn't say, "My grace is sufficient for Paul the Apostle." I might have felt left out. But God made it broad enough. **You** can be the "**you**" in **for you.** God's grace is sufficient **for you!** Are you beyond it? Are you so different? Is your thorn worse than Paul's or worse than many others who have known the triumph of Jesus? Of course not. This sufficient grace is **for you.**

vi. "This sufficiency is declared without any limiting words, and therefore I understand the passage to mean that the grace of our Lord Jesus is sufficient to uphold thee, sufficient to strengthen thee, sufficient to comfort thee, sufficient to make thy trouble useful to thee, sufficient to enable thee to triumph over it, sufficient to bring thee out of it, sufficient to bring thee out of ten thousand like it, sufficient to bring thee home to heaven... O child of God, I wish it were possible to put into words this all-sufficiency, but it is not. Let me retract my speech: I am glad that it cannot be put into words, for if so it would be finite, but since we never can express it, glory be to God it is inexhaustible, and our demands upon it can never be too great. Here let me press upon you the pleasing duty of taking home the promise personally at this moment, for no believer here need be under any fear, since for him also, at this very instant, the grace of the Lord Jesus is sufficient." (Spurgeon)

vii. "John Bunyan has the following passage, which exactly expresses what I myself have experienced. He says that he was full of sadness and terror, but suddenly these words broke in upon him with great power, and three times together the words sounded in his ears, "My grace is sufficient for thee; my grace is sufficient for thee; my grace is sufficient for thee." And "Oh! Bethought," says he, "that every word was a mighty word unto me; as 'My,' and 'grace,' and 'sufficient,' and 'for thee'; they were then, and sometimes are still, far bigger than others be." He who knows, like the bee, how to suck honey from flowers, may well linger over each one of these words and drink in unutterable content." (Spurgeon)

e. **Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me:** Through his **infirmities**, God made Paul completely dependent on His **grace** and on His **strength**, but it was all for good. Paul's continued – even forced – dependence upon God made him stronger than he would have ever been if his revelations had made him proud and self-sufficient.

i. Many of us think that real Christian maturity is when we come to a place where we are somewhat "independent" of God. The idea is that we have our act so together that we don't need to rely on God so much day to day, moment to moment. This isn't Christian maturity at all. God deliberately engineered debilitating circumstances into Paul's life so he would be in constant, total dependence on God's grace and God's strength.

ii. Many people see God as a parent that we outgrow. Once we're mature and once we have overcome certain obstacles in life, we can shake off God just the same as we shook off the authority of our parents. In this pattern, some of us treat God the same way we treat our parents. We give Him a measure of respect, we give Him His due – but we no longer feel we really have to *obey* Him anymore. In our hearts, we have moved out of the house. We think we can make our own rules in life as long as we have supper at God's house once a week and give the Him a little recognition.

iii. Many harbor a longing for the day when the Christian life will become "easy." We hope for a time when the major struggles with sin are behind us, and now we go on to bigger and better things without much of a struggle. That day is an illusion. If the Apostle Paul himself constantly experienced weakness, who are we to think that we will surpass him?

iv. In fact, the *illusion* of strength and independence actually leaves someone in a weaker place. "There is nothing more hindering to the work of God than the uplifted and proud Christian." (Morgan)

v. "Ministers of the Gospel especially should banish all thoughts of their own cleverness, intellectual ability, culture, sufficiency for their work, and learn that only when they are emptied can they be filled, and only when they know themselves to be nothing are they ready for God to work through them." (Maclaren)

vi. "God works through the man who has been wiped clean and turned inside out, his life emptied before the Lord until he is hopelessly weak, that no flesh might glory in His presence." (Redpath)

f. **Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities:** In the end, Paul does not resign himself to his fate; he welcomes it. He rejoices that God has forced him to rely on the grace and strength of God all the more so he can say, "**when I am weak, then I am strong.**"

i. Paul was at such a level of spiritual strength and maturity that God had to deliberately introduce a *thorn in the flesh*. Most of us provide our own thorns, and an honest look shows us enough weakness to make us constantly and totally rely on the grace and strength of Jesus. Yet even if we were to grow to the spiritual strength and maturity of a Paul, God would say to us as well: "I need to keep you depending on Me in everything. Here is something to depend on Me for." This is a place of *victory*, not of *discouragement*.

ii. "In the Christian perspective there is no place for the aimless non-resistance of dispirited resignation." (Hughes)

g. **I take pleasure in infirmities:** Paul's **pleasure in infirmities** is not the sick musing of an ascetic, thinking that we are justified before God by our sufferings. Paul didn't *seek* his thorn in the flesh, it came to him.

i. "The concept, so pernicious in the Church at a later date, of courting martyrdom, of practising asceticism, and even of embracing dirt, disease, and destitution as means to the acquisition of favour before God, is diametrically opposed to the Apostle's mind and to the whole tenor of the gospel in the New Testament, for it is a concept governing a way of life *for one's own sake*, with a view to making oneself righteous and acceptable before God – a concept of works, not faith." (Hughes)

h. **For when I am weak, then I am strong:** What triumph! What can the world do to such a man so firm in the grip of Jesus? God did not allow this *thorn in the flesh* to punish Paul or to keep him weak for the sake of weakness. God allowed it to show a divine strength in Paul.

i. Think about this man Paul. Was he a weak or strong man? The man who traveled the ancient world spreading the gospel of Jesus despite the fiercest persecutions, who endured shipwrecks and imprisonment, who preached to kings and slaves, who established strong churches and trained up their leaders was not a weak man. In light of his life and accomplishments, we would say that Paul

was a very strong man. But he was only strong because he knew his weaknesses and looked outside himself for the strength of God's grace. If we want lives of such strength, we also must understand and admit our weakness and look to God alone for the grace that will strengthen us for any task. It was the grace-filled Paul who said, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."* (Philippians 4:13)

ii. "The valleys are watered with rain to make them fruitful while the summits of lofty mountains remain dry. A man must become a valley if he wants to receive the heavenly rain of God's spiritual grace." (Calvin)

iii. "From all this I gather, that the worst trial a man may have may be the best possession he has in this world; that the messenger of Satan may be as good to him as his guardian angel; that it may be as well for him to be buffeted of Satan as ever it was to be caressed of the Lord himself; that it may be essential to our soul's salvation that we should do business not only on deep waters, but on waters that cast up mire and dirt. The worst form of trial may, nevertheless, be our best present portion." (Spurgeon)

i. To summarize, instead of using his experience to glorify himself (as the "super apostles" among the Corinthian Christians did), Paul relates how his whole glorious experience humbled him more than ever.

i. All Paul's enemies could see was the thorn; they could not see how and why it was there. But Paul knew, so he rejoiced even in his thorn in the flesh.

ii. Of course, the greatest example of the principle Paul communicates here was lived by Jesus Himself. "Could anyone on earth be more meek than the Son of God to be hung on the cross, hung in our place that He might redeem us from our sins? As that point of absolute weakness was met by the mighty power of God as He raised Him from the dead, I wonder if the pressure of the thorn in Paul's life was a reminder of the power of the cross." (Redpath)

iii. Yet, we should never think that in our lives, the mere presence of a thorn means the glory and strength of Jesus would shine in us and through us. You can resist God's grace and refuse to set your mind on Jesus, and then find your thorn cursing you instead of blessing you. "Without the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, thorns are productive of evil rather than good. In many people, their thorn in the flesh does not appear to have fulfilled any admirable design at all; it has created another vice, instead of removing a temptation." (Spurgeon)

## QUESTIONS

- **vs 1** If there is nothing to be gained by his continued boasting, why does he continue to boast?
- What is your first impression of this visionary experience that Paul describes?

- Do you know of people who have made claims to a similar sort of experience? If so, how were you able to evaluate their experience?
- What do you think was the purpose of this vision if Paul was not permitted to speak of its content?
- According to 2 Cor. 12:6 what criteria does Paul want others to use when evaluating his ministry?
- How do you feel about God refusing to take away Paul's thorn?
- Can you relate to Paul's experience? If so, how?
- **vs 7,8** How did God help Paul to maintain an appropriate level of humility?
- How has God helped you to maintain an appropriate level of humility?
- What are examples of sources of humiliation?
- **vs 9** What are examples in the Bible of choosing the weak over the strong?
- Where in your life do you need God's grace to be sufficient?
- What would you consider your own weakness to be?
- Have you viewed it as something to hide or do you think it could be something that God could use to show His power to others?