

“Glitch or Feature?” // 2 Corinthians 11:16–12:10 // God’s Power in Broken Vessels #10¹

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Announcement [VIDEO](#)

Last weekend the Capital Hills Campus was filled to capacity for WINCON, our annual college student conference. WINCON’s basically a missions conference disguised as a college student conference—it’s part of what we call our A18 initiative, an attempt to mobilize this generation to complete the Great Commission. It’s not just for our students but the students of the Summit Collaborative churches we’ve planted, and this year we had nearly 2000 students representing 25 of our churches and 61 different college campuses. It was incredible. At the end, 300 stood up feeling called to church planting and 400 stood up feeling called to summer or long term international missions. And, best of all, 15 stood up to make a first time profession of faith in Jesus Christ. BTW, Kyle Wilkinson, our worship pastor, told me that we always monitor the decibel levels in here to make sure it doesn’t get too loud—weekend worship runs at about 88 decibels. Worship at WinCon was 103 decibels, and we didn’t turn the music up, that’s just how loudly they sang. But here’s what was awesome—the loudest it got all weekend was 104 decibels when they had the people who were surrendering their lives to Christ for the first time stand up. There was no music, but the place erupted

¹ Sources consulted: Eric Mason, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in 2 Corinthians*, (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2024); Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians*. Gary Millar, *2 Corinthians for You* (London, UK: The Good Book Company, 2020); Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians* (London, UK: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004); Timothy Keller, “The Temptation of Ministry,” sermon was preached at Beeson Divinity School, Samford University on November 8, 2016; Andy Stanley,

to the loudest it’s been in here. Kyle said, “How awesome that the point where it got the loudest in here was also the point where it got the loudest in heaven, because the Bible says there is much joy in heaven, in the presence of the angels, when one sinner repents.

Students left here fired up. In fact, on Sunday, after the conference was over, the church planter we’re sending to the campus of Southern Illinois was on a train to Charlotte, and he overheard the person in front of him, whom he didn’t know, sharing Jesus with the lady next to her. Just trying to tell her who Jesus was and how he’d changed her life. It got his attention, of course, and then he said he saw she was wearing her A18 hoodie from WinCon and he thought, ‘Well, of course.’ So, these 2000 students are going back to their campuses ready to go. I tell you all that so that you can rejoice in it, and also so you can pray. God is doing something very unusual, and very important, in this generation, and Summit what a privilege we have to be a part of it. Amen?

Which brings me to this... [\(PIC\)](#) This coming Thursday, we’re going to gather across several of our campuses for a Night of Prayer and Worship to celebrate all the ways God has moved during these 21 days and ask him to continue to pour out his Spirit on this church and our families. That NOPW will take the place of our normal Thursday services and will be a whole night devoted to worship and prayer. Listen, God always meets with us in a powerful way when we do this and I want you to be there. This is one of those epic moments in the life of the church that you don’t miss--on that night we don’t come to listen to preaching as important but to worship and seek God in

“Just Give Me Faith” sermon on 2 Cor. 12:9; Tony Evans, “The Power of a Thorn, part 2,” sermon posted by Tony Evans - Radio on May 26, 2017; Steven Furtick, “The Glitch That Keeps on Giving,” preached at Lakewood Church, May 16, 2019; H.B. Charles Jr., “Thorn in the Flesh.,” sermon posted by Cutting It Straight with H.B. Charles Jr. on Jan. 26, 2015; Tony Merida, personal notes shared via correspondence. And others as noted throughout.

prayer together. So, go ahead and mark your calendars: this coming Thursday, **Jan. 29, 6:30–8 p.m.** Check out our website to find the campus gathering closest to you.

OK...2 Cor 11 if you have your Bibles. Would you stand with me for the reading of God's word? Vs 30, the Apostle Paul says;

11:30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. 32 At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, 33 but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

12 I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. 3 And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 4 and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. 5 On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— 6 though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. 7 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, (and let's all read this verse together—it's just a powerful statement) **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** (2x) Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of

Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Leader: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

People: Thanks be to God.

Thanks be to God; you may be seated.

Anybody else feel in here like it's super embarrassing when a Pixar movie really gets you in the feels?

- Like when **Buzz rejects Woody's counsel** and gets himself in serious trouble but then Woody risks everything anyway to come and rescue him because... **“you've got a friend in me”**?
- Or when **Andy discards the toys and goes off to college?**
- Or **how about the opening sequence of UP?** I feel like that one should have come with a trigger warning, 'cause you're like 8 minutes into a cartoon movie and you've got tears streaming down your cheeks and your kids are like, "What's wrong with you? This is supposed to be my movie and you're supposed to be over in the corner quietly checking your phone."
- **A lesser known 'get-you-in-the-feels' moment occurs in Disney's "Wreck-It Ralph,"** when Vanellope discovers the truth about her "glitch." If you haven't seen the movie, Vanellope is a character in a video game who has a glitch that makes her flicker and disappear. She hates it; it makes her weird and the mean girls in the video game make fun of her for it. She spends most of the movie just wishing she could be normal.

In the end, however, she discovers that her glitch, far from being her greatest liability, is actually the source of her greatest strength—it enables her to evade attacks and teleport forward and recover instantly from crashes. In the end, the very thing she tried to get rid of is what makes her unbeatable and allows her to save

the day. Turns out the glitch wasn't so much **a glitch** as it was a **feature**.

That's exactly what Paul gets at in 2 Corinthians 12 when he talks about his "glitch"--except he didn't call it a glitch, he called it his "thorn in the flesh." Paul hated this thorn and he'd asked God **MULTIPLE** times to remove it, but every time God said 'no'. And by the time Paul writes 2 Corinthians, he's learned why--his glitch gave him access to great spiritual power. **For when I am weak** (in this glitch), he said in vs 10, **then I am strong**. Through this glitch, my weakness, I am able to experience the sufficiency of God's grace and his power made perfect in me.

Let me remind you of the context for 2 Corinthians: In this letter, Paul defends himself against the attacks of false teachers. These false teachers have tried to claim superiority by appealing to their talents, their credentials, and their accomplishments. And they've tried to diminish Paul's authority by saying he doesn't have nearly as many of these things as they do. Paul has refused to respond in kind, because he says when it comes to spiritual power, those things are utterly useless.

Spiritual power, he says, doesn't flow from the strength of your flesh; it flows from weak places where you've learned to depend on God.

And then, at the beginning of chapter 12, Paul reveals something about himself that should have established his authority for all time. It's like he suddenly plays the Ace in his hand: Vs 1 **I must go on boasting, though there is nothing to be gained by it...** 2 **I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven** ('3rd heaven' means God's throne. This was an old Jewish way of

talking about cosmology.² The 1st heaven is the *sky--birds and clouds*; the 2nd is *space--the sun, moon and stars*), and the 3rd is God's throneroom. Paul says, "This man was literally there, in very the throne room of God. Then he says)—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. 3 And I know that this man was caught up into paradise..."

And there, Paul goes on to say, this "man" saw incredible visions and heard unutterable words (literally, in Greek, '**un-word-able**' words.)

Now, this passage is a little confusing, because it's like Paul starts telling you about some rando he knows who had these incredible visions. But he's actually talking about himself. We saw in vs 1 that Paul sets it all up by saying that **he is going to do some boasting**. It's not boasting if he's telling you about somebody else. He's talking about himself. **Verse 7** makes that clear. Paul says: **So, to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations** (see, he's admitting these revelations were given to him; to keep me humble) **a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.**

So, here's the question: **if Paul is the guy who received these revelations, why does he (at first) present it in the 3rd person like it's not really him?**

It's a 'humility' move. He's creating distance from it--Paul wants to make clear that these miraculous visions and the honor that came with them were not some kind of affirmation of his flesh, some kind of validation that he is just amazingly awesome. No, he says, these revelations were a special gift God gave to me for the purpose of building up the churches. BTW, $\frac{2}{3}$ of our New Testament is written by Paul. A lot of that material would have come out of those revelations.

² Cf. Deut 10:14; 1 King 8:27; Neh 9:6

Now, be honest: For most of us, if we'd had those kinds of revelations, we'd do the opposite, right? We'd be like, "God chose me for these amazing revelations and that proves that I'm awesome and that I should be in charge." And yet, Paul holds the revelations at arm's length and doesn't want them directly associated with him, at least in the sense of some kind of validation of his flesh.

And what makes this passage amazing is that **Paul sandwiches his recounting of these revelations between 2 acknowledgments of extreme weakness on his part.** And he makes the point that it is from these places of weakness, these places of brokenness, and not those lofty visions, that his true spiritual power flows from.

Think of this passage like a "spiritual power" sandwich. In the middle of the sandwich is the meat, where Paul reveals these incredible experiences he's had in the 3rd heaven. But on either side of that awesome experience is a thick slice of whole grain humility bread because, Paul says, those two always go together. Great spiritual power always comes through brokenness and weakness.

I want us to look at both of those confessions of weakness this weekend.

- The first one, in chapter 11, is fascinating and gives you a little glimpse into Paul's ironic sense of humor, and I'm betting many of you are unfamiliar with it.
- The second one, at the end of chapter 12, is more familiar--it's Paul's discussion of his "thorn in the flesh"--his "**glitch.**"

You ready?

Whole Grain Humility Bread Slice #1: The Anti-Corona Muralis (11:16–33)

(And I know this sounds like a COVID thing, but relax. This is a Latin phrase that literally means "crown of the wall." Corona: crown. Muralis: wall)

The **Corona Muralis** was Rome's highest military award--think of it like our military's "Medal of Honor." To qualify for the Medal of Honor, the U.S. military says you have to perform **an act of "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty."** You have to show an act of bravery that sets you far above your comrades, and the recommendation for the award has to be approved by every person in the chain of command above you, all the way to the President himself.

The **Corona Muralis** was similar. To get it, you had to be the first soldier over the siege wall in a battle, because the most dangerous part of any Roman battle--the part where you were most likely to die--was when you'd put the ladders up and were trying to get up over the wall. It was especially brutal for the first troops trying to climb up. The enemy would push the ladders off the wall and send all the soldiers on them toppling to their deaths; they would fire arrows directly down at you; a lot of times they'd pour vats of boiling oil on the guys climbing up the ladder. And maybe the worst part of the whole order was if you were the one of the first ones who made it over the wall, it's literally you up there, by yourself, against the entire enemy garrison. I've often wondered what that was like: You finally get over the wall and you're like, "I made it!... And now it's me vs **ALL THESE GUYS!**"

Very few soldiers who made it as the 1st one over the wall lived to tell about it. But, if somehow you survived, you were eligible for the **Corona Muralis**. [\(PIC\)](#) [\(PIC\)](#) It was a literal crown, fashioned to look like the walls of a city, complete with gates and battlements. BTW, this is a picture of an actual statue found in Corinth dating back to the time of Paul where somebody had received this reward. The point is, this is an award the Corinthians were familiar with.³

One more thing: to get the **Corona Muralis**, you had to go to Rome and appear before a tribunal and take a solemn oath, invoking the names of your gods as witness, saying, ‘I solemnly swear before the holy gods, who know I’m telling the truth, that, when we were attacking the city, I was the first one over the wall.’

In **vs 31** Paul says, “The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.” **He’s using the formulation of the *corona muralis* oath.** Then, in **vs 32–33**, he refers to a harrowing escapade whereby he was lowered DOWN in a basket outside a wall.

Paul was teasing the false teachers. This is like the Anti-Corona Muralis. Paul hadn’t climbed a wall to some kind of high honor that everyone praised him for; he was lowered DOWN a wall in shame and dishonor because the powers that be wanted to kill him.

That’s why he said, **vs 30:** If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. IOW, “If you force me to boast, I won’t boast about my accomplishments, or my talents, or my honors, I will boast about my weakness, because it’s through my weaknesses is where I received the crown that matters--not the **Corona Muralis**--the crown of my bravery, but the **Corona Christi**--the crown of Christ, the crown of suffering, the crown of the Spirit’s power.

³ N.T. Wright, *2 Corinthians for Everyone*

And that brings us to the 2nd bread slice of humility bread in our Spiritual Power sandwich. Jump down to **vs 7** of chapter 12:

Whole Grain Humility Bread Slice #2: Paul’s thorn in the flesh (12:7–10)

On the other side of Paul’s disclosure about the amazing revelations he received he tells us about a “thorn in the flesh.”

The purpose of this thorn, Paul says, vs 7, was “to keep me from becoming conceited.” And of course, we all want to know, “**What exactly was Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’?**”

- This is the kind of thing that commentaries spill great amounts of ink over.
- **Some say it was Paul’s eyesight.** Paul had an eye disease, they say, that caused his eyes to ooze--it was gross, painful, and made it hard for him to see. There are several things written in Paul’s epistles that seem to indicate he had eye problems like that.
- Others say, “No, he’s referring to certain people who were ‘a thorn in his side’.” And, it’s true, Paul had a lot of those. Bloggers and podcasters and documentarians who say all kinds of unkind and untrue things about him. And Paul has asked God, “God, please shut these people up; what they are saying is not true and it hurts our ministry.” But God said, “No, Paul, I’m going to let them keep running their mouths and publishing their books to cause you problems.” So, these commentators say, Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” were his haters. And maybe that’s true, too.

The bottom line is, WE DON’T KNOW exactly what Paul’s thorn was, and that’s intentional. Listen! *Bible-study-pro-tip here***:**

Whenever the Holy Spirit leaves something vague in Scripture, he leaves it vague on purpose.

What, do you think, is the Holy Spirit's purpose in leaving this vague and not telling us what Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' was?

I think the answer is obvious: It was so that you and I could apply what he says about his to ours.

- You see, if Paul had told us what his thorn was, we'd play the comparison game--"Well, what I have is *NOTHING* compared to what Paul had. Mine's not even worth talking about--it's a 1st world problem--and God probably doesn't even care about it."
- Or, if we figured out ours was worse than Paul's, we'd say, "That's it? That's all Paul was dealing with? A little eye pain? Mine is WAY worse. See, no one really understands my pain and there's no way God **COULD** have a good purpose for me in something this bad."
- (And of course, if you happened to have the exact same thorn as Paul had, you'd probably boast about it--"Well, you know, me and Paul... we have the exact same *pussing-eye* problem. So, clearly that makes me like Paul, and makes me special."

So, the Holy Spirit leaves Paul's affliction vague so that you can apply what Paul says about his to yours.

Our Pastor of Counseling here at Summit, Dr. Brad Hambrick, says, Suffering is not a competitive sport. I love that. My suffering does not gain or lose meaning in comparison to yours. Suffering is suffering, and God wants you to learn to see your suffering, whatever it is, through the same lens Paul looked at his through.

So, the most important thing in this passage is to see **how Paul processes his suffering.**

First, notice **that** Paul attributes his pain to 3 sources:

- In vs. 7, he calls it a thorn **"of the flesh"**--which means it's some problem caused by flesh and blood.
- But then, second, still in vs 7, he calls it a **"messenger of Satan."** Which means this physical thing had a spiritual component to it.
 - SATAN is using this physical thing to attack me, Paul says, to discourage me and tempt me. To slow me down and wear me out.
- **Oh, but wait a minute. There's more.** Paul then says (still **vs 7**) says this thorn was **"given"** to him in the flesh.
 - Given... by whom?
 - You say, "Well, by Satan." But that can't be? Because Paul says, vs 7 "The thorn was given to (for the purpose of) **keep (ing) me from becoming conceited.**" Would Satan have **wanted to keep** Paul from being conceited? Hardly! Satan would have loved for Paul to become prideful.
 - Which means the thorn ultimately was given **BY GOD.**

In one verse, Paul gave you 3 sources for his pain: It's a thorn from the flesh; it's from Satan; and it's from God. And maybe having one thing with 3 sources is hard for you to get your mind around, but that's how Paul talks about it.

Write this down. My friend H.B. Charles (PIC) says, "The thorn may come through Satan, but the thorn comes from God—and that's good news."

- **Why is that good news?** Because it means God is using even the **affliction of Satan** to work good in you. God is not the one inflicting the pain, because God doesn't do things like that--that's Satan's work, but God commandeers Satan's destruction--what the enemy intends for evil--and uses it for good.
- I'm talking about things like:
 - Marriage problems
 - Bodily afflictions
 - Slow career advancement

- An ongoing temptation
- Problems with your friends
- A boss that doesn't understand you
- Financial frustrations
- Loneliness
- Problems with one of your kids
- In **vs. 10** Paul summarizes a whole grab bag of possibilities for what these "thorns" might be. He says, "weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities..."

Some of you experience these things and you say, "This trial is caused by Satan. I know it. I can feel Satan's power at work in it. It is bringing me down and destroying me." Yeah, **maybe.**

- But see, if you are a believer **SATAN NEVER HAS THE LAST WORD IN YOUR LIFE.** Your affliction, your weakness, may be caused by your flesh, your failures, your enemies, or even Satan himself, but ultimately they are **FROM GOD** for your good.
- Hear me: Just because a thorn is from Satan doesn't mean you can anoint it with oil, say an incantation over it and get rid of it. **God has a purpose** in Satan's afflictions and sometimes he leaves them in place.

The **beautiful mystery of God's sovereignty** is that even what others intend for evil, even what Satan intends for evil, God commandeers for good.

- **Which reminds me of another one of my favorite stories, another classic Summit story.** It's the one about the little bird who gets a late start flying South for the winter. Because he got a late start, he got caught in a snowstorm, and the storm was so bad that ice formed on his wings and he couldn't even fly. He went down for a crash landing, and couldn't get back up. He thought, "Great. Now I'm going to freeze to death." And then suddenly a cow came and... unloaded manure on him. At first, the little bird thought things had gone from bad to worse--it's bad

enough that I'm freezing to death and can't fly, but now I've got to die covered in manure--but then he realizes that the manure has thawed his wings! And he gets so excited that he starts to chirp and sing. But this attracts a cat; who comes along and eats him.

And the lessons from this great little parable are three: Lesson 1: Not everyone who drops manure on you is your enemy. Lesson 2: Not everyone who digs you out is your friend. Lesson 3: When you're in manure, sometimes it's helpful to keep your little chirper shut... and see what God is up to. And all God's people said...

Paul says, *'I know Satan is at work in this trial, but I also know he doesn't get the last word. Satan's purpose in this may be to afflict and destroy, but God has a greater purpose.'* **And what is that greater purpose?** **vs. 7: To keep me from becoming conceited.** That's so important, he says that twice. **He's really clear on that.**

- You see, the greatest enemy in your life is not Satan, or your critics, or your spouse, or your boss, or your circumstances ..., it is your pride. Your sense of self-sufficiency. The sense that you have what it takes to overcome all the challenges in your life.
- **Pride is the queen mother** of all sins, and it leads to a whole colony of other sins.
- When you're proud, you're not desperate to know his will. You don't really pray a lot. Truth is, you don't really have a daily recurring prayer time because you just don't feel that desperate for his help.
- You're not afraid of getting separated from God's will. Someone humble is terrified of being separated from God's blessing. They're like Moses who said, "I won't go anywhere that you won't go with me."
- My guess is if you're proud you haven't taken these 21 DOPF that seriously. You may do a little stuff, but you're just not that desperate to know what God wants.

- A lot of your spiritual problems (prayerlessness, laziness, disobedience--go back to your pride).

So God allows certain kinds of suffering to keep you from pride. Sometimes he lets you continue to struggle with sinful temptations.

- **Here's some honest talk you won't hear a lot in church:** Do you ever wonder why God lets you continue to struggle with certain temptations even when you've asked him to take them away? The answer: to keep you from becoming conceited.
- Listen, I don't know about y'all, but if I walked around victorious over all my temptations immediately, my sinful heart would for sure conclude that I was really good at this obeying Jesus thing: *"There ain't never been a Christian like me. I'm the greatest Christian who ever lived, the man after God's own heart."* **Which would fill me with PRIDE**, which, **ironically**, would make me more like Satan than Jesus.
- I love how **C.S. Lewis said it:** God sometimes even lets us struggle with lesser sins to keep us from the greatest one: **PRIDE**.
- I figure God lets me struggle with some recurring temptations so that I will say with Paul,
 - *"Oh wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death?"* And *"I am convinced that in me, that is, in my flesh, nothing good dwells..."*
 - **In my library I have this book of letters by John Newton, the writer of the famous hymn Amazing Grace.** One of my favorites is one he wrote to a pastor friend who had confessed that he was having some sinful struggles and was really discouraged by them. Newton, who was in his 80's by this point, wrote this young pastor back and said he'd always assumed that by this point in his life, in his 80's, after walking with God for 50 to 60 years, that he would have left most temptations behind. He said that some of those temptations, however, felt stronger than ever--at 80! And at first that made

him depressed, wondering if something was fundamentally wrong with him. But he said he now realized that God let him continue to struggle with some of these sinful temptations and probably would until the day he died to keep him from the worst sin: pride. *"True growth in grace*, he said, this side of the resurrection, (listen to this) doesn't mean getting to a place where you no longer feel like you need God's grace, but growing in your awareness of just how desperate for God's grace that you really are." **John Newton**

- **God may let you struggle with certain sins so that you will stay closely tethered to his grace.** That doesn't mean you ever stop praying for victory or that you stop fighting against it. That's a big part of what God wants you to learn to do. It just means that God is up to something good even in delaying the answer for deliverance from your temptations.

What Paul screams at us in this passage is this: The place we experience God's power most is in our failure. Ironically, the place we lose him fastest is in our successes.

- **We always assume that success in life and ministry or family is a blessing from God.** And it can be. But failure in those things can also be a blessing.
 - The worst thing God can do for you is let you succeed in a way that un-tethers you from him.
- I think in my own world of this slate of mega-pastors who have fallen in ministry and I think what happens is their success got them to a place where they LOST THEIR DEPENDENCE on God--the problem with ministry is that you can get good at it--and their success makes them forget how desperate they are on God's sustaining grace. And that makes me THANK GOD for those places God has let me struggle, and fail, because there I learned to lean on God.

- **Where is that for you?** Where have you succeeded... and your success has gotten you to the point where you say, “I built this! I’ve got this.” And you’re no longer desperate for God’s grace.⁴

Vs 7: So to keep me from becoming conceited... a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

Write this down: **If dependence is the objective, weakness is an advantage.** Because your weaknesses are places you are more likely to lean in on God. And that will mean, like Paul says, “When I am **weak** (those places where I am weak), then I am **strong** (because that’s where I’ve learned to depend on God).”

Listen, Church: Scripture tells us to beware our **STRENGTHS**, not our weaknesses, because our strengths are those places where we are most likely to forget God. And that’s why God allows some failures to happen--to teach us more to depend on him. Thank God for your weaknesses, your glitches, because there you learn to depend on God.

A.W. Tozer famously said: **“It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.”⁵**

- And I always **want to be careful with this quote**, because I don’t want to imply that God is the one hurting you. Paul says it is literally Satan who is the one abusing him. And God is grieved when you’re hurt by someone and weeps with you in it and is angry on your behalf that it happened, and one day he will execute full vengeance on the sin that hurt you.

- But even in the worst abuse experienced by a believer, Paul says, God overrules with a good plan. And this is good news for the abused. Nothing is outside the arc of God’s redemptive power.

Friend, this weekend, maybe, like Paul, God has allowed you to experience some brokenness or hurt—he has given you a thorn in the flesh, so to speak—so you can lean more fully into him.

Y'all, I look back on my life now (now that I've gotten a little older--I look back from 38 years old...) and I recognize that some of the most growing seasons of my life happened when I failed

- (“*Ooooh, tell us...!*” I know that's what you want but I'm not going to tell you.)
- **Some of it is too personal and embarrassing.** The point is when I look back I realize those are the times I grew most)—when I felt like I was at the end and I was insufficient for the task: **Wounded. Limping.**
- **Relational betrayals; unfair accusations; frustrated plans; family struggles. Ongoing pain.**
- **But it was there I learned to depend on God.**
- **I've learned to love this quote by Hudson Taylor, the famous missionary to China. He said** “God wants to give you something far better than riches and gold—or personal charisma or talent—and that is helpless dependence upon him.”
- Again: **If dependence is the objective, weaknesses become our advantage.**

Vs 10 is widely acknowledged by scholars to be the high point of this whole letter, and a good one to memorize: **10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

⁴ John Stott says, “Pride is your greatest enemy, humility is your greatest friend.”

⁵ A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous*, 144.

- BTW, that word for “**content**” there in Greek doesn’t just mean being “stoically” resolved to something. The word is *eudokeo*, and it literally means to “delight in.” (It’s the same word the Father used when Jesus was baptized: “This is my Son, in whom I am **well pleased.**”) Paul is saying, “I don’t merely tolerate these sufferings, I step into them; I embrace them. Because these are the places I experience God’s power.”

Now, one caveat: There’s nothing wrong with asking God to take away your thorn. Paul did, vs 8 “**Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.**”

- And, btw, that’s likely not a reference to **3 quick, one-off, throw-away requests**--Like, “I asked him once **2 Fridays ago** during my quiet time, and then once before dinner last Thursday, and then I mentioned it as a prayer request last week in my small group.”
- No, Paul is referring here to **3 extended seasons**--seasons where he prayed intensely, got others to pray with him, probably fasted.
- In each of these seasons, **Paul was hopeful** that God would remove the thorn, maybe even expecting God to let him see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living so he could be more freed up for ministry.
- Don’t wear your spiritual pants so tight you don’t ask God to take the thorn away.
- **The point is when God said “no,” Paul understood that God wasn’t ignoring him**, or putting him off--he just had a greater purpose in his trouble.

HB Charles again. When you pray...

- Sometimes the request is just wrong, so God says ‘no.’
- Sometimes the request is right but the time is wrong, so God says ‘slow.’
- Sometimes it’s you that ain’t ready, so God says grow.

The point is not to not ask God for relief. The point is to be ‘content’ when he doesn’t; even to eagerly *step into* the suffering. And that’s because you understand that it’s not through the mountaintop experiences in the third heaven where true power comes--it’s through your weakness and humiliation, your *coronae muralis*, your crowns of shame, your thorns in the flesh--that’s what opens up gateways to great spiritual power. It’s your GLITCH that turns out to be the source of your greatest strength.

VAMP

Listen! Every thorn in your life comes with dueling messages. One is from Satan and one is from God. Who you listen to determines whether you’re discouraged and overwhelmed in this trial or strengthened and thriving.

- Many of you are in a season of suffering. Maybe it’s an extended season. Listen, it’s not the suffering that’s killing you; it’s the narrative you’re believing **ABOUT** the suffering. There’s a subtle voice inside you that says, “I’ll never be happy” or “This is the end” or “God doesn’t really care about what’s going on with me.” That’s the narrative of your enemy.
- God has a greater narrative: My strength is made perfect in weakness. When you are weak, there you’ll be strong.
- You feel like a moral failure? He says, If any man or woman is in Christ...
- You feel paralyzed, unable to walk forward? He says, “I chose you and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide. By this is my Father glorified that you bear much fruit. Don’t go forward on your power, go forward on mine.”
- You feel like a bad parent? He says, “Yeah, well where you are weak, there I am strong.”

- You say, “But God, I feel so incapable.” And he says, “Yes, but I’m so infinitely *capable*.”
- You say, “God, I am so dysfunctional.” He says, “Yeah, but I’m so whole.”
- You say, “I am so deficient.” He says, “Yet I am so sufficient.”
- You say, “I am so sinful.” He says, “But I am so graceful.”
- You say, “I feel so dead!” He says, “I raise the dead!”
- You say, “I am at the end of my rope!” He says, “I’ve got another rope, and it’s as long as eternity and woven with the strands of power of the resurrection.”

That glitch of yours is not a flaw. It’s a platform for grace. And God is ready to give you that grace if you’re ready to ask him for it.

So my question this weekend: Where are you afflicted?

- I want to invite you to pray for relief.
- **But I also want you to be aware that God might be doing some of his most important work** in and through that thorn, and so in addition to asking for relief from the thorn, I also want you to pray like Paul, “Lord Jesus, even if my enemy means this for evil, I know you can use it for good. Help me to be content in this weakness, and let your strength be made perfect in my weakness.”
- **Strength and weakness are paired in the Christian life.** Are you content with that? Can you lean into it?