

Week 13, 2 Corinthians 12:1–10

Hook



Main Point: When we are weak in ourselves, we are strong in Christ's power.

Group Activity: Do you want to hear the most annoying sound in the world? According to research published in the *Journal of Neuroscience*, it is possible to pinpoint that exact sound. A group of neuroscientists examined 16 participants as they were exposed to 74 different sounds and challenged to identify the most annoying. The participants sampled the sounds in an MRI, leading to the discovery that the amygdala (the region of the brain responsible for producing emotion) increased in direct proportion to the perceived unpleasantness of the sound. Further, the most annoying noises all occurred within the same frequency range, between 2,000 and 5,000 Hz.¹

According to this research, below are the top five most annoying sounds:

5. Fingernails on a blackboard
4. A ruler on a bottle
3. Chalk on a blackboard
2. A fork on a glass
1. A knife on a bottle

What sounds do you find the most annoying?

Transition: Today's lesson will explore Paul's embracing a challenge in his life, something much more difficult than an annoyance, a thorn in his flesh.

¹ <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-is-the-most-annoying-sound-in-the-world-75317235/>

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Book

Main Point: When we are weak in ourselves, we are strong in Christ's power.

Text Summary: 2 Corinthians 12:1–10 In these verses, Paul first puts a reluctant finishing touch on his “apostolic résumé” for the Corinthians by recounting his experience with a topic they are quite infatuated with: ecstatic spiritual raptures. Second, Paul famously reveals the unexpected way to experience God's power during adversity, namely, weakness. Once Paul discovers the surprising source of Christian strength, his entire perspective changes regarding the painful afflictions he has undergone in his ministry.

2 Corinthians 12: 1–6 [Read]

Sub-Point: Believers should boast in their weaknesses instead of their strengths.

Verses 1–2 In chapter 12, Paul reluctantly continues his “fool's speech,” which started chapter 11. In the previous chapter, Paul followed the Corinthian model of boasting about ones' *religious pedigree* and *overcoming of trials*, yet transformed them into an extended boast in his weakness. In chapter 12, Paul continues the same pattern, but this time he boasts about another credential that the foolish Corinthians consider a mark of a true apostle: *ecstatic spiritual visions*.² We see in verse 1 that Paul is experiencing the same hesitation to brag about his spirituality, as he admits that this boasting does no real good.

Yet Paul presses on in order to gain the ear of these Corinthians in the only way they will hear him. Paul again chooses to play the part of the fool, and begins to boast of his intense spiritual visions and experiences, something about which the Corinthians are taken with, as seen in 1 Corinthians.

Paul is not ridiculing the idea of spiritual revelations, but rather calling for believers not to *boast* in them, not make them *ultimate*, nor practice them without *order*.

Paul starts his account in the third person, referring to himself as “a man in Christ” (v. 2). This title simply means that this ecstatic experience took place during the time he was “Paul the Christian,” not “Saul the Pharisee.” Indeed, Paul is simply referring to himself as a Christian here.³ He also tells us that this experience happened “14 years ago,” which scholars say would place the vision a few years after his conversion on the Damascus Road. It is absolutely remarkable that he had never spoken of this experience until now. This reveals the truly

² R Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006), 209.

³ *Ibid.*, 261.

humble heart of Paul the apostle, who hoped no one would over-glorify him or steal focus from Christ (v. 6).⁴

Why might Paul feel compelled to tell the Corinthians about his visions and revelations?

Why might Paul have chosen to speak in the third person (“a man in Christ”)?

Verses 3–6 Paul gives two major details about his transcendental experience—first, that it was in the “third heaven,” otherwise known to him as “paradise,” the dwelling place of Jesus and all the saints (v. 3).⁵

The second detail Paul offers about his ecstatic experience is that what he hears, he cannot share (v. 4). This is not because what he heard was unintelligible, but because God forbade Paul to share it. Whatever was uttered in that experience was meant for Paul’s ears alone as an epic encouragement for the epic suffering he had undergone.⁶

Since Paul himself cannot say with certainty whether or not his experience happened bodily or as an out-of-body experience, surely we cannot either. However it is important to note that he leaves open the idea of a bodily experience, something common Greeks of the day would have considered unthinkable, as they were dualists who considered the material body inherently evil and the immaterial spirit inherently good. Paul clearly does not agree that the body is a bad or unworthy thing in which to experience paradise, else he would not have left this option open.⁷ Regardless of the mode of his rapture, Paul makes clear that 1) it actually happened, and 2) he was present during it!⁸

Being caught up in such an experience as described in these verses places Paul on the level of great heroes of the faith who experienced similar revelations. This would have totally outflanked his opponents when it comes to comparing religious résumés!⁹ Paul knows this will greatly elevate him in the eyes of the Corinthians, and so he quickly returns to his mantra of weakness in order to humbly draw attention away from himself (vv. 5–6). What was of significance to Paul wasn’t his achievements but the work God was doing through him and the

⁴ Ibid., 260.

⁵ David K. Lowery, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 582.

⁶ Hughes, 211.

⁷ Kruse, 263.

⁸ Hughes, 210.

⁹ Ibid., 262.

Gospel that he preached.¹⁰

How might Paul's visions and revelations have impacted his ministry?

Why does Paul boast only in his weakness?

2 Corinthians 12:7–10 [Read]

Sub-Point: God's sustaining power is best experienced in our weakness.

Verses 7–8 After speaking indirectly about his paradise-rapture in the third person, Paul switches to the first person in verses 7–10. This is purposeful change, as he desires to make a stronger, more direct case for boasting in weaknesses rather than strength. Unlike his opponents who purposely parade their ecstatic experiences in front of others and build their egos based on the level of their transcendental visions, Paul does not make a showy spectacle of his rapture. Instead, he immediately describes how he was kept from becoming too conceited.¹¹ Paul is clear: *building* an ego was not the goal of his experience; in fact, *thwarting* his ego was necessary in order to keep his Christian character in check. The means by which God kept him from conceit about his ecstatic rapture was a *thorn in his flesh*.

While there is much speculation on what exactly this affliction was, it is clear that it was a source of trouble and frustration for him, as he asks the Lord to remove it three times (v. 8).¹² This helps the reader see Paul for the balanced apostle that he is; on one hand, he does not fall in line with the super-apostles who worshipped health and wealth, and also viewed affliction as the absence of God's blessing. He is perfectly clear that spiritual blessing and suffering are not mutually exclusive. On the other hand, Paul is also no masochist who seeks out pain and suffering as a means to be godly, as was the custom of the ascetics and martyr-seekers of his day. Instead of begging for affliction to come his way, Paul clearly pleads with God three times for the thorn to be *removed*, just as Jesus asked three times for his cup to pass in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–41).

Why does Paul receive a thorn in the flesh?

How did Paul process the challenge of the thorn? Does this change your perception of Paul?

Verses 8–10 Interestingly enough, as Paul and Jesus both prayed three times for something to be removed, in both cases, the petition for relief was not granted (v. 8). However, just as our

¹⁰ David K. Lowery, "2 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 583.

¹¹ Kruse, 264.

¹² *Ibid.*, 265.

Lord was strengthened to face his horrific crucifixion, Paul was also offered encouragement and strength to deal with this perpetual thorn via God's grace (v. 9) ¹³

Once it is made clear to him that 1) God's answer is "no" regarding the removal of his thorn at this current time, and 2) that God's power is set most ablaze in the atmosphere of weakness, Paul's aim markedly transitions from experiencing relief to boasting in his weaknesses. Upon hearing the Lord's clarifying and strengthening words to him, Paul is empowered with a fresh perspective about his thorn inflicted by the Enemy. Instead of seeing it as something to be escaped, he now views all of his afflictions as a landing strip for Christ's strength to rest. For Paul, even the cruelest of wounds inflicted by Satan himself can be used to showcase the staggering magnitude of God's power!

For the sake of Christ and his fortifying power, Paul is now content when recalling all the hardship he's been through (v. 10). For Paul, if there's any reason to boast, it's in his weaknesses and hardships, for that is where the power of the risen Christ can be experienced at its highest measure. Paul has been granted the unexpected secret of Christian confidence: divine strength fills up only those who admit their weakness (v. 10).

What obstacles keep you from viewing your weaknesses and afflictions this way?

How has God's grace been sufficient for you during troublesome moments in your past? How does this encourage you in the present, and for the future?

¹³ Kruse, 266.

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Took



Main Point: When we are weak in ourselves, we are strong in Christ's power.

Group Activity: Break your class into small groups and challenge them to create three categories: "Biblical Characters," "Missionaries/Ministers" and "Friends/Family." Task the groups with thinking through individuals who had "thorns" in the flesh in these categories and carried them well, bringing honor to the Lord and pointing to the Gospel.

Lesson Conclusion: Like the Corinthians, we are tempted to point back to our "spiritual highs" as the moments where God was really active and present, while labeling our "weak lows" as the moments where He was absent or against us. In this lesson, Paul turns all of that on its head, saying that when we consider ourselves most *weak*, we are inviting in the power of God to rest in our lives like never before. Indeed, God has the power to be seriously active in our lowest moments, if we would only admit our weakness and invite Him in. In this biblical view of weakness, our afflictions are not merely "darts thrown by the Enemy," they are the very places God's power burns brightest.

Challenge

Acknowledge your thorn. The first step in practicing biblical "weakness" (in order to experience God's strength) is to actually admit your thorn instead of hiding it, ignoring it, or lying about it. We must not be like the Corinthians, filling our speech with only our accomplishments and none of our struggles. This says to the Lord that we do not need Him, and we have no areas where we'd like to see Him act. Instead, we must be honest about our thorns and present them as areas of weakness where we need Him to intervene. Acknowledging our thorns is non-negotiable if we truly want to experience the power of God.

Pray for relief. The New Testament is filled with examples of how God answered prayers for relief in miraculous ways. Let us not be like the ascetics of Paul's day, assuming that the more suffering we can bring on ourselves, the more interested God is in us. Instead, let us call out to Him as Paul did, asking for relief and trusting that as a good Father, He will give the right answer

for His children's particular situation. We must trust that God knows what to do with our thorns that we acknowledge before Him.

Believe in God's sustaining power. God's sustaining power is most seen in our hardest seasons. Because God always draws near to the weak, like Paul, we can look back over our "low points," and exult with him that God was really working back then, and He is surely working now. God is a mighty sustainer of the weak, especially those who are coping with a difficult "no" from the Lord. The very ache of our weaknesses draws the Father near with sustaining power. Let us believe that this sustaining power is waiting for us, should we simply admit we need it. Let today be the day we grab hold of His strength in faith.