

Let's take our Bibles; let's stand as we read 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 1 through 10. We're in a series called Total Grace. We're learning that grace isn't a leg up in the Christian experience, but grace underwrites the whole Christian experience from the moment we come to Christ, coming after Christ to being with Christ, it's all a matter of grace. And we have been looking at several aspects of God's grace, and this morning we're coming to look at one more.

Suffering grace. God will give us grace to suffer and in the midst of our suffering, we can actually see an increase of grace. So listen to Paul as he makes an argument for suffering grace in 2 Corinthians 12, verses 1 through 10. "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 14 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 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. 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. Concerning this thing that is the thorn, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me, 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 might 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."

You may be seated. I want to speak this morning on the subject the strength of weakness. Yes, that seems as a paradox, but it's a spiritual truth. The strength of weakness. Just this week I was reading about a pastor who regularly received critical letters from an anonymous member of his church. And the letters were ominously signed, The Thorn. In fact, in one of the early notes, this person had let the pastor know that they had read the story of Paul and his thorn in the side and how God had used that thorn in the side to humble Paul, which made Paul lean on God, which made him open to a new experience of grace. And so this person had dutifully appointed themselves the thorn.

After a few of these notes, the pastor wanted to find out who the thorn was, and through the post office was able to send an anonymous letter himself to the thorn, and it was interesting, at the bottom of the pastor's letter, he signed it, The Hedge trimmer. Now, as our story illustrates, whether it's problems or problem people, we like to take the hedge trimmer to those proverbial thorns in our side. None of us like to live long with things we dislike. As soon as pain shows up or problems develop, we immediately get to work reducing the pain and removing the problem. Come on, let's be honest. The prevailing philosophy of our life is this. That thorns in the side must be set aside as quickly as possible.

But I want to suggest something to you, and I want to raise a question. What if there was a value to our thorn? What if there was a blessing in the buffeting? What if we might even get to a place where we thank God for our hardships and our heartaches? Now, that's counterintuitive. That cuts against the grain of the way we think and react. But while it's counterintuitive, Paul will argue here, in the passage we're about to look at, it is Christian, because here, Paul acknowledges after having visited heaven, with the prospective danger of pride resulting, God gives to Paul a thorn in his side to keep him humble. To keep him dependent upon God.

Initially Paul didn't like the thorn. He wanted to take the hedge trimmer to the thorn in his side. But after awhile he realized that the thorn was going to remain within the providence and will of God, and he came to a place where he actually rejoices, takes pleasure, in his infirmities and his needs and his distresses.

High counterintuitive, but high Christian. That's amazing. Paul sets the hedge trimmer down. He embraces his thorn in the flesh because it humbles him. Shipwrecks him in God and opens his life to a new infusion of God's grace, which makes him spiritually strong. You see, the thorn makes him weak. The weakness makes him needy. The need points him to God. And God through his sufficient grace makes him strong, even in a state of weakness. And that's why he values the thorn. That's why he embraces the trial.

So you and I need to learn, in life, that we mustn't only stop to smell the roses, we must appreciate the thorns. In fact, George Matheson, the Scottish poet and preacher, who wrote the hymn O Love That Will Not Let Me Go, came to appreciate that insight. At one point in his life, struggling with blindness himself, he says this. "My God I have never thanked thee for my thorns. I have thanked thee a thousand times for my roses, but not once for my thorns. I have been looking forward to a world where I shall get compensation for my cross, but I have never thought of my cross as itself a present glory. Teach me the glory of my cross. Teach me the value of my thorn. Show me that I have climbed to thee by the path of pain. Show me that my tears have made my rainbow."

Quite an insight. It echoes what we're about to learn this morning. In fact, Billy Graham, the evangelist, has something similar to say. He once stated this, "Sometimes life touches one person with a bouquet of flowers, and another with a thorn bush. But the first might find a wasp in the flowers, and the second might discover roses among the thorns." It's a good word. And so I want us to come and look with you at 2 Corinthians 12 verses 1 to 10. I want us to learn the value of our thorns, and I want us to learn that God's grace is more than enough for you and I to bear whatever burden God sends and sanctions our way. It's what I call suffering grace. Remember, we're in a series called Total Grace. Grace is not a leg up in the Christian life; grace is not a push in the right direction, the beginning of our Christian experience, no grace is the all-inclusive, all-encompassing sufficient activity of God whereby he gives us what we need to do what he asks.

Grace puts heaven in us. Grace will someday put us in heaven. And grace will underwrite everything in between. And that's why we've looked at saving grace, strengthening grace, speaking grace, serving grace, singing grace, and this morning we're going to look at suffering grace. From 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. God can give us grace to suffer. In fact, suffering handled correctly will see an increase of grace in our lives. Now let me put the text in its context. I don't want to spend a lot of time here, but when we get to chapter 12, Paul's been about the business of defending himself. It's something he doesn't like to do. In fact, from chapter 10, 11, and 12, you're going to see he's embarrassed and he feels awkward about defending himself. Of speaking about himself. Of even boasting.

It's a kind of foolishness that he's being forced into by certain leaders, certain false apostles who have doubted Paul's credentials as a Christian leader. And one of the points of attack is this. That Paul is too normal to be an apostle. He's too tiny, too timid, too tame. See they argue, is that God's men are marked by dynamism, assertiveness, eloquence, power, ecstatic visions. And Paul's trying to defend himself against that kind of attack. And so he is kind of forced into the foolishness of boasting. Of talking about himself. Of conveying his own character and credentials.

Although the interesting thing is, that he likes to boast in his infirmities. That's the tact he's taking because he believes these false apostles who are preaching a false gospel have inverted the cross. God's power was put on display in the weakness of the cross, and true apostles of Jesus Christ embrace weakness, humble service, cross-bearing. And so Paul, when he boasts, boasts in infirmity.

Look at verse 30 of chapter 11. "I will boast in these things which concern my infirmity." And he's just cataloged for us the fact that he's been stoned, shipwrecked, he has lived in the peril of his own life. He has faced robbers. He has been hungry. He's been thirsty. He's been naked. But Paul boasts in that. That's what he sets out as the true credential of the servant of Jesus Christ, because in God's kingdom the first shall be last and the last shall be first. In God's kingdom, it's not how many servants a man has, but by how many men a man serves.

And this carries through into the chapter that we're looking at where Paul in verse 5 again boasts in his infirmity. Verse 9, again, he boasts in his infirmity. And it's important to remember that because we're going to see that Paul has been forced to share something that he has hidden for 14 years. I mean, his authority is on the line, so he plays a trump card. You guys like to talk about power and authority and ecstatic visions? I got one for you. I've kept this secret for 14 years. But I was once personally raptured, in the body out of the body, I don't know. I was personally raptured into the presence of the risen Christ. Touche.

But it's interesting, again, what he talks about that he actually uses that story against them, but he uses that experience in his life to speak again of his infirmity. Because he goes onto say that God humbled him after that experience with a thorn in the flesh. And that thorn in the flesh brought him to a place of weakness. But he has learned to embrace that weakness because when he's weak he's strong. He experiences God's grace in ways that he wouldn't otherwise. If dependence is the goal, then weakness is an advantage. And that's his argument here. So that's the text in its context.

We're going to look at four things. The providence, the prayer, the promise, the perspective. Let's look at the providence. As we've said, Paul's credentials and character are being questioned. He reluctantly plays the trump card. He tells them about an experience where he was personally raptured to heaven. In fact, he's so reluctant to tell this, that actually in verses 1 through 6, he speaks as if he's speaking about someone else. He speaks in the third person, but it is Paul that is being spoken about here. I'll give you three reasons why. Because, remember, he's defending his own authority. What good would it be if his detractors are focused on him, to talk about someone else? No, it's Paul that's being spoken about here by Paul in the third person.

Number two, he actually identifies himself in verse 6, and number three, he ties the reception of the thorn to the vision he experienced in the presence of Christ. So it is Paul. And you know, he says you guys like the boast of ecstatic visions and revelations, well, I can come to visions and revelations. Verse 1 of chapter 12. But remember, we shouldn't be surprised in the second half of the telling of this story, Paul speaks about a thorn in the flesh, given to him to humble him. To keep him from pride. Therefore, the telling of the vision of Paradise is simply a segue in his desire once again to glory in his weakness and humble service for Christ.

In fact, this is where I get my first thought. The providence, he's admitting that this thorn in his flesh as a result of his visit to heaven is a providence. It was given to me. Although a messenger of Satan, it was given to me, implication by God. And you know what, it has humbled me. And I have learned that God's strength is made perfect in my weakness. This is what I call the providence, verse 7. "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."

Three things about this thorn, which he admits is a providence. A gift from God, although, initially he doesn't like it. He prays for its removal. He struggles through this, it remains and he comes to see God's got a providence and a purpose in this. So let's look at the thorn. Let's look at what I call the picture of the thorn. The whole image of the thorn is rather dramatic, isn't it? In fact, our English translations probably do the Greek a little bit of a disservice, a thorn in the flesh. The Greek word is actually stake. It was used of decapitated heads that were, you know, stuck on a spike or a stake and put on display to put fear into the enemy. That's our word. It's a stake. It's a large pole with a point. And Paul takes that and he says, "You know, I've been given a stake for the flesh. A thorn in my side." MacArthur says, "No small thorn, but a large stake. It's painful. It's hurtful."

Now, as we look at the picture of the thorn, what was it? Well, Paul doesn't tell us. It's led to a lot of speculation, a lot of ink has been spilled, I've read pages and pages of reflections by commentators and Bible teachers. There are several top contenders. Number one, it was a physical ailment. It was some bodily dysfunction. Some illness, some sickness. In fact, all kinds of things have been argued from headaches to malaria to an eye problem. In fact, there may be some merit to the thesis that it was an eye problem, because in Galatians 4:13-15 and Galatians 6 verse 11, we see that Paul had an eye problem. He had to read and write in large letters. William Ramsey, a great biblical scholar, argues for malaria because where Paul traveled in his missionary journeys, malaria often was something someone struggled with. Physical ailment.

Number two, a reoccurring temptation. Because some commentators take the word flesh here, not in a physical sense, not in Paul addressing his body, but in an ethical sense. His unredeemed humanity, that part of him that's still susceptible to temptation. And so to drive a stake through his flesh, to humble him, to kill the old man so to speak. Paul was faced with a reoccurring temptation he had to fight with, and in fighting with it he was made strong in the Lord.

A third contender is oppositional leadership. A good argument, again. It's clear that there were those false apostles who were doubting Paul, casting dispersion upon his credentials and they were a thorn in his side. And the fourth top contender is demonic oppression. John MacArthur argues this. Several others argue this. Messenger can also be translated angel, angel of Satan. Demon. Messenger from hell. That's how that word is normally used in the Gospels. And so, might we have here, an insight that Satan has targeted the apostle Paul, and while he cannot be possessed by a demon, he can be oppressed by a demon, and that's what's going on. Demons have attacked him physically. Perhaps hindered his advancement in gospel work. In fact, you could combine version three and four in that chapter 11, Paul talks about false apostles, deceitful workers transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ and no wonder, for Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. So you could have a combination in that you have false teachers who have demonic roots and they're opposing Paul and the Gospel.

So, after a week of study I've come to this conclusion. I don't know what the thorn is. I'm agnostic. And I think that's a good place to be, actually. It's a good position to take, for it allows you and me to take our stresses and our distresses, and say, "That might have been Paul's thorn." If you've got a physical ailment, you'd like to think that was Paul's thorn. If you've got a reoccurring temptation, you'd like to think that's Paul's thorn. If you've got someone opposing you, being a thorn in your side and a pain in your neck, well then you'd like to think that's Paul's oppositional leadership. And his thorn.

Perhaps you're in the fight of your life spiritually. There's warfare going on for your commitment to Jesus Christ, and you'd like to think maybe my thorn is Paul's thorn, demonic oppression. That's the picture. What about the purpose?

Now the picture is ambiguous. We don't know. I think good arguments could be made for those four views. We don't need to be dogmatic. That's not a hill to die on. So the picture's ambiguous. We don't know what the thorn is. And therefore you can make it what you want it to be in some sense so you can learn the lessons you need to learn. But the purpose is not ambiguous. "Lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations." Let's stop. Paul's saying in the light of the fact I went to the third heaven, he tells them what the third heaven was. It was Paradise. It was the presence of God. It was the immediate presence of the risen Christ. Paul went there and came back. He doesn't know if he went in his body or out of his body, but he had an experience second to none. This is an abundance of revelation. By the way, he didn't write a book about it, My Trip to Heaven and Back, like some others have. He says, you know what? In the light of that you know what happened? A thorn in the flesh was given to me. A messenger of Satan to buffet me.

There's the purpose. It's as clear as day. We don't know what the thorn is, but we know its purpose. It was to buffet him. Lest he be exalted. It was given to him to keep him humble. In fact this word buffet's a very strong verb. It's used in Matthew 26:67, of the Roman soldier laying his fist on the face of the Savior. It's our word. It's to beat someone. Black and blue. That's quite an image. Paul's saying, "Hey, I was given a thorn." It could have been a person. It could have been an illness. It could have been a demonic attack. It could have been someone opposing him. And that thorn beat me down. It was like a fist in my face. It beat me down. It had this effect of bringing me low. It was given to keep me from rising up in pride. This thorn was given to burst my bubble. Interesting, buffet me, that's not buffet by the way, it's buffet. It was given to buffet me. To beat me down. It's in the present tense. Which means it was a reoccurring event.

The fact that Paul in the next verse prays that three times it would be removed, we could conclude, say it was a physical ailment, that it flared up three times in his life. And each time he prayed for its removal. But either way, the present tense would seem to infer that this was a humiliating, debilitating, frustrating, and periodic experience. But the purpose is clear. God was using it to remedy Paul of the potential danger of spiritual pride. Of his visit to heaven going to his head. And he's embarrassed of, kind of let it out now, he's kept it a secret for 14 years. But these guys have forced him into the foolishness of boasting. But even here he turns it to say the end of the story is humility, infirmity and in that I glory. Because it's there you know God in a wonderful way and his grace in a special manner.

That's why, by the way, we'll get to it in a moment when he prays, God doesn't take the risk of removing it. He prayed three times that the Lord would take it away and God didn't. God wasn't going to take the risk of removing it. It was going to play a vital role in Paul's life. It was effective in making Paul effective because it made him dependent, and if dependence is the goal, then weakness is an ally. Now, hear that again. If dependence is the goal, if leaning on God, if staying close to God is the goal in each of our lives, then weakness oppresses us towards God as an ally. It's an advantage. It's something you can be thankful for. You can value your thorn in the light of what it produces. Hold that thought. We'll come back to it.

The thorn produced a natural weakness in Paul that produced a supernatural strength in Paul through grace. In fact, as I was studying this, I came across a sermon by Warren Wiersbe whose writings I thoroughly enjoy. In his book, Truth on its Head, he makes this point. It's very helpful. That when God

disciplines us, when God allows suffering in our life, when God allows persistent pain or illness, when God allows people to make life uncomfortable, when God sends setback, he often has several purposes. And Wiersbe identifies one. I knew one, but I didn't know the other. On the one hand, God sometimes disciplines us to correct our past sins. God will use suffering or trouble in our life to bring us back into line. To humble us. So God uses discipline to correct past sins, but he said this, and this was fresh to me. He uses discipline to prevent future sins.

Now, that's what was happening in Paul's life. It looks like Paul had done a reasonable job of managing the temptation to pride. Of going on the tour as the man who went to heaven and came back, and he'll sign copies of the book in the foyer. But it was still a reality and God had used a thorn to help that from happening. And it prevented Paul from future sins, from sins that he could commit but hasn't yet committed. So sometimes God disciplines us, God allows trouble in our life to deal with sins we have committed. But the beauty of this story is sometimes God allows hardship to keep us from committing sin. Where we're shipwrecked on God. We feel our need of him.

So that brings us to the third thought. The providence of the thorn. The picture, the purpose, the providence. Because, you see, Paul acknowledges that while Satan had a hand in this thorn, it was a messenger of Satan to beat him down. It was a stake in his flesh. While Satan is the immediate source, while Satan has targeted Paul with malice, God has permitted this. Much like God permitted Satan to touch Job back in Job 1 and 2, God has permitted, allowed, sovereignly designed that Satan can harass his servant. That Satan can use this thorn or give Paul a thorn, because God will use that to keep Paul humble which will indeed open a door to a new experience of grace. And so, while Satan is the immediate cause, the direct cause, God is the indirect cause. While it has come from Satan's hand, it has also passed first through God's hand. Because look at what the commentators call the divine passive.

While God is not identified in the text, he's there. A thorn in the flesh was given to me. A messenger of Satan, to buffet me. As we've said, it's Job 1 and 2, God has given Satan permission to harm Paul. And God in His sovereignty will use Satan's harassment to keep His servant humble so that indeed in his weakness he might know strength. God is sovereign, and that means that Satan can only operate as far as God permits, and within limits by God's divine hand. And that's what's going on here.

We see the same, don't we, in the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, where Jesus refers to his suffering in John 18 verse 16, the cup which the Father has given me. But elsewhere we're told that he was taken by wicked hands and crucified. That cup had been prepared by human hate, but God had taken it and it had first passed through his hand. Where even Jesus acknowledges that the cup has come from the Father's hand, although it's been filled by human hate, and Satanic opposition. So there's a providence here you don't want to miss. And there's a thought here, we've talked about before, but I just want to underscore. You need to understand what Martin Luther the reformer understood, that even the devil is God's devil. Satan can even with malicious intent toward God's saints, serve the purposes of God. Paul could have simply concluded that his suffering was a sinister act from below, but he also saw it as a sovereign act from above. This thorn is a messenger of Satan to beat me down but this thorn was given to me by a sovereign hand, and God has used it.

So, look, whatever's going on in your life, whatever God permits in your life, good, bad or ugly, do remember this. There is a such a thing as a good bad. Paul's difficulty had divine design written all over it. That's why you need to embrace the idea there can be purpose in your pain. That just as with Joseph what was meant for evil, God means it for good. That God works concurrently, as the devil attacks you, as people hate you, as life turns upside down before you, God is still at work concurrently in the events

that we've just described. That's why, by the way, you might need to be careful about automatically as a matter of course, rebuking the devil and chasing demons when something bad happens to you, for as John MacArthur notes we might thwart the purposes of God with our faulty assumptions.

Because while this was clearly Satanic in origin, it was also providential as an experience. A gift from God. Given to me. Granted to me. Graced to me. So there is such a thing as a good bad, and even in the midst of harassment, or even oppression from below, you and I need to remind ourselves that the devil is God's devil. Erwin Lutzer former pastor of Moody church said this. "Satan is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. Apparently he roars to frighten us. He stalks and plots against us. But like the lion at the zoo, he is only free within the parameters of his cage. He roams only where God permits. That gives you a sense of confidence in the midst of life's conflicts and challenges.

Let's move on. The providence, the prayer. Things will speed up here a little bit. Look at verse 8. Concerning this thing, this thorn in the flesh what we have now concluded as this providence from God. Concerning this thing, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me and he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you." The implication is God did not remove the thorn at Paul's request. In response to the thorn, given to Paul to beat him down, Paul naturally prays for relief. There's nothing in this text that would indicate that this prayer was wrong. Illegitimate. Paul prayed it three times. It was only after a period of time, either by direct revelation or by a sense of reading God's providence, that Paul began to conclude that this is a prayer God is not going to answer.

It's not that the prayer wasn't legitimate. It would be a natural reaction to want this messenger of Satan, that at least on the face of it, seeks to do evil in Paul's life. Seeks to harm him spiritually. It would only be natural to pray against that or to pray that God will relieve one from that. But as time goes by, Paul begins to conclude that the thorn's going to remain. And that actually that rebuking Satan and chasing demons are not always God's will. And God allows his saints to be harassed and hurt. Because if dependence is the goal, weakness is the ally. Because hardship presses up hard upon God and as we lean hard upon God, we get a measure of his grace that allows us to be strong in the midst of our weakness.

So, the point we're going to get to and mention throughout this, when you've got trouble, it doesn't mean you shouldn't pray for relief. It doesn't mean if you get illness you shouldn't go to the doctor. But what we're going to see is that over time, the thorn wasn't removed. So you should go to a doctor if you're sick. You can pray to God for relief in the midst of your pain. But over time, the providence of God might make it clear to you as with Paul that the sickness will remain. And the harassment will stay. But there's grace sufficient for it all.

So we're at the prayer. Again, remember when Paul writes this, he's compressing time here. We're talking about something that has unfolded 14 years previous and unfolded over 14 years. He's writing with insight and hindsight and with the passage of time, Paul has come to see that this thorn in the one hand is a weapon in the hand of Satan, but in the other hand, it's a tool in the hand of God. And that's why God didn't take the risk of removing it. And he didn't answer Paul's prayer the way Paul prayed it.

Paul prayed three times, because as we've said it was reoccurring. Buffet me is in the present tense. This thorn in the flesh flared up on several occasions. Or, by the way, just an interesting little footnote, it could be a deliberate illusion to Jesus's experience in Gethsemane. Jesus has his own cup. Jesus has his own crown of thorns to wear. And how many times does he pray for the removal of that cup? Three times. But then He has to surrender to the apparent will of God, which is not my will be done but your

will be done. And he embraces the cup and he dies for our sin to glorify the Father and redeem us. We thank him for it.

So God did not answer Paul's prayer and remove the thorn. Because God's like a wise parent, He doesn't always give his children what they think is best. Because what they think is best may not be best but father knows best, and the heavenly Father knew best.

Now, before we leave the prayer, just a couple of things to kind of drill down into. Number one, I think it's important just to note this, God does not always heal. I mean, that's a clear implication, isn't it? From the text. I'm assuming Paul's at a good place spiritually. I'm assuming he's a man of faith. I'm assuming that he's walking in the spirit. I mean, he's an effective servant of God. In fact, he's a target for Satan and the demons of hell. But God doesn't answer Paul's prayer that I believe was offered out of a heart that loved God and out of a faith in God's ability. He prayed three times for it to depart, but it didn't. You see, there are those who would give you the impression, and those who prey on the immature, and the desperate. That healing is a birthright. That if you're a Christian, God wants you healthy and wealthy. You've heard them. You've seen them. Their books are bestsellers, which is a tragedy in itself.

But I want to tell you this morning, based on this text and other texts, our health and our happiness is not God's chief concern. Paul's sanctification, Paul's holiness, Paul's growth in grace was God's greatest concern here. The holiness of the inner man is always more important to God than the health of the outer man. The outer man is dying. Our bodies are wasting and we can't stop it. Take as many pills as you want. Put as much cream on as you want. You can't stop it. The outer man is dying. But the inner man can be renewed day by day. We can grow in grace and God can use thorns to have us lean on him, and leaning on him in our need, he meets our need with sufficient grace.

I read something awhile ago. You need to write this down. I find it very helpful. I've quoted it to several people. Where a particular lady said something in an article I was reading where she said, "God healed me of my need to be healed." That's a good statement. God healed me of my need to be healed. And it seems the same here with Paul. Paul prayed three times. Out of a heart that loves God, out of a faith in God's ability, he prayed three times that God would heal him. Remove the thorn. But God healed him of his need to be healed. And he gets to a place in his life where he's thankful for that which he was once not thankful for. His weakness. He glories in his infirmity, his need, and his hardships.

Number two, under this idea of the prayer. God often answers our prayers, but not in the fashion we prayed them. See, when it comes to answers to pray, I think God will give you one of three, or, I don't know, I could make an argument, four answers. I think God sometimes says go. Sometimes God says no. Sometimes God says slow. What do I mean by go? God says yes. He gives you what you want, or what you desire within his will. You get the green light. Sometimes God says no. Either because the prayer's illegitimate or even if it's legitimate, his wisdom is overruling your perceived wisdom and he says no. Not good for you. Not good now. Good for someone else, but not you. And that's the red light. And then sometimes God says slow. That's the orange light. Where God says, okay. We're going to get there, but not right now. I'm going to grow your patience. I'm going to see how much you want it. I'm going to have you pray a little bit longer.

But God often answers our prayers not in the fashion we prayed them, so I think there's kind of fourth option, what I call the no-go or the yes-no. In fact, I looked up on the internet. If you take green and red and you mix those colors you get gray. So we've talked about green lights, red lights, and orange lights. There's a gray light. That's the yes-no. The go-no. What I'm going to argue, and I think the text will bare

it out. God said no to the means by which Paul would get to the end of his prayer, which was relief from the thorn. But God said yes to the end, relief from the thorn, but He was going to do it another way. Relief from the thorn wasn't going to come by means of removal of the thorn, but by means of grace to bare it. To have the power of Christ rest on him. God answers our prayers often in a roundabout way.

In fact, listen to D.A. Carson in his book on 2 Corinthians 12. In one sense, of course, God did indeed answer Paul's prayer. But not as the apostle wished. John Calvin rightly distinguishes between the means and the ends in prayer. The end that Paul wanted was relief from the thorn. And he simply assumed that the means would be the thorn's removal. But God granted the ends by another means. He gave relief from the thorn, not by removing it, but by adding more grace. Sufficient grace. It's a great insight.

So, Paul gets to the end of his prayer. In one sense God does answer his prayer, but in another sense he doesn't answer Paul's prayer, because his prayer was removal of the thorn. But God gets him to the end of his prayer by giving him grace to bear that thorn so much so that he will actually gladly rejoice in his infirmity. That's the change that happens. Look at verse 9. "Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmity." I think there's an admittance there. Now, I wouldn't have said this several years ago, because several years ago I'm praying for removal. I don't want the pain. I don't want the sickness. I don't want the opposition. I don't want the problem. But time proved that the thorn was going to remain. I didn't surrender to self-pity. I didn't become bitter with bitter providence. God did a work in my life where I came to see that God had answered my prayers in a roundabout way. And he says, "I most gladly would rather boast in my infirmity."

This is not how I drew it up, but on the other side of it I see God's wisdom. I see that God had given me this thorn in the flesh. And God's using it to sanctify an ends in my life. That raises a question doesn't it? Are you willing to trust God with the answer? Will you welcome the unasked for answer that really is an answer to your prayer in a roundabout way? In an act of genuine faith will you, like Paul, enthusiastically willingly accept the will of God because Father knows best? There's no stoic acquiescence here. There's no grim resignation. Therefore most gladly I would rather boast in my infirmity.

That's why we like the Confederate soldier's prayer, don't we, that was found just outside Gettysburg. "I asked God for strength that I might achieve, I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health that I might do greater things. I was given infirmity that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy. I was given poverty that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of men. I was given weakness that I might feel my need of God. I asked for all things that I might enjoy life. I was given life that I might enjoy all things." And here's the sentence. "I got nothing I asked for but everything I hoped for." Same with Paul. He didn't get what he asked for directly, but he got what he had hoped for indirectly, which was relief. But the relief came through grace that cushioned the weakness.

So let's move on. You still with me? The prayer. The providence. The promise. The promise. God doesn't offer Paul relief in a direct fashion. He offers him a promise. Look at verse 8 again. "Concerning this thing, this thorn. I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart. And he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in weakness.'" Paul, were going to take a different road here. We'll end up in the same destination, but a different road. The thorn will remain. But I will help you deal with the thorn through a compensating strength. Through grace sufficient. Now, grace in this context is God's energy. Or as we see in verse 10, the power of Christ resting on the believer. Those are

interchangeable. Verse 9, my grace is sufficient. Look at verse 9 at the end of it, that the power of Christ might rest upon me.

By the way, it's an interesting little phrase, "rest upon me." It was used of the Shekinah glory resting on the temple. Inhabiting God's house. And Paul is admitting here, that you know what? This thorn has opened the door. Has provided an opportunity to experience God's grace in an abundant sufficient manner. And he says it's glorious. That's why I can glory in it. I take pleasure in my infirmities, because you know what? The glory of God's grace is inhabiting me like the Shekinah glory rested on the temple. Beautiful.

And he wants us to know that this power that rests on him, like a glory, is incessant, abundant, complete, never ending. It's a self-replenishing river of spiritual resource. Because my grace is sufficient is in the present tense. My grace is constantly sufficient. Interestingly, too, that little phrase he said to me, that's in the perfect tense. Now, in the Greek, the perfect tense speaks of an event that has taken place, the results of which continue. So you can kind of read it like this. And he said to me, "And it is still good." From the the moment he said it til now, it's still good. His grace is constantly sufficient. And that's why his strength can be made perfect in my weakness. It's beautiful, isn't it?

It takes us to John 1:16 which we've quoted often. I'm going to quote it one more time and illustrate it as I've always illustrated it. "Of his fullness," speaking Christ, John says, "we have received grace for grace." You might have a translation, grace upon grace or grace in the place of grace. That's what the Greek communicates. And the great bishop Handley Moule of England illustrated by saying, "Imagine you stood by a flowing river. Now to the eye, it looks like one piece of water flowing in a constant direction. But if you would go and maybe, you know, pick one of your feet as a marker, and just keep your eye on the side of the bank and the water that's going by, you'll see that it's running water, and in reality while it's one river, it's water replacing water replacing water replacing water. It's water in the place of water." And that's the analogy.

Whatever your thorn, whether it's a person who won't get out of your way. Whether it's an illness that's stubborn. Whether it's a continuing situation in life of which there seems to be no relief, there is grace. There is energy from God. There is power through Jesus Christ that will rest in you in a manner that it will allow you to live one day after another day after another day because grace will replace grace will replace grace. And it will do it in such a manner that you are sufficient. You are up for whatever life throws your way. That's beautiful and that's helpful. That's the promise.

And by the way, to quote Warren Wiersbe again, he says somewhere in his writings that we live on promises, not explanations. That's true. We live on promises not explanations. And Paul's living on this promise that God's grace is sufficient. In fact in his book *Grace*, Max Lucado, I think helps me illustrate this and apply it and move on. These are good words. Listen to him as he addresses this very text, John 1:16, this very issue grace sufficient. Here's what he says. Think of the imagery. Catch the language. "Plunge your sponge into Lake Erie. Did you absorb every drop? Take a deep breath? Did you suck the oxygen out of the atmosphere? Pluck a pine needle from a tree in Yosemite. Did you deplete the forest of foliage? Watch an ocean wave crash against the beach. Will there never be another one? Of course there will. No sooner will one wave crash into the sand, then another appears. Then another, then another. This is a picture of God's sufficient grace. Grace is simply another word for God's tumbling, rumbling reservoir of strength and protection. It comes at us, not occasionally, not miserly, but constantly and aggressively. Wave upon wave. We have barely regained our balance from one breaker, and then bam. Here comes another."

Grace upon grace. We dare to hang our hat and stake our hope on the gladdest news of all. If God permits the challenge, he will provide the grace needed for it. Amen? That's the message of Paul. Suffering grace. God can give us grace to suffer, and in fact if we handle our suffering right, if we submit to the providence of God, if we don't fall into self-pity, if we don't become bitter in the bitter providence, we'll grow in grace. And in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. Our weakness will become the platform upon which God's strength will be put on display.

Brings us to the final thought, the perspective. The perspective. We've kind of touched on it the whole way along. But we'll just drill down into it for a few moments. What is the perspective? Well, stated plainly it is thorns have a value. Stated plainly, thorns have a value. We're back to this idea of putting the hedge trimmer down. Leave the thorn alone. If by now it seems within the providence of God, you may have done the right thing and gone to a doctor. You may have done the right thing and gone to try and reconcile with that person. You may have done the right thing and prayed to God to remove the impediment. But over time, and in a way it becomes clear to you, this is God's will at least for now. Put the hedge trimmer down. Embrace the thorn and realize it has a value. It's a weapon in the hand of Satan. It's a tool in the hand of God. And let God grow you through it.

God is drawn to people who are weak and admit it. You know, we can be too big for God to use but never too small. Paul doesn't want the thorn. He's already prayed for its removal. God has not permitted that and he has come to realize this. That the thorn has good results. So Paul doesn't want the thorn, but he come to appreciate what the thorn brings. What the thorn gives. What the thorn does. It helps him lean on God with a new sense of neediness. The thorn makes him weak, and in his weakness he's made strong in grace. And in a state of weakness Christ's power rests mightily on him. I mean, this takes us back to the very beginning of his first letter, doesn't it, to the Corinthians, Chapter 1, verse 27. "But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty."

God's attracted to weakness. Disability. Handicap. Inability. Because it's in that context His power is put on display. Remember, this isn't some justification of Christian masochism. Or aestheticism. Or as some did in the centuries following the early church, early martyrdom. They thought it was meritorious to punish yourself. To beat yourself down. To go looking for thorns. To be a thorn in the Roman empire's side so that they will martyr you and you'll have a glorious death and God will love you more because of it. No, that's not what's being talked about here. This is for Christ's sake. This isn't about us. This is about Christ, His Gospel and what His grace produces. And know what it produces? In the midst of hardship, in the midst of need, it produces strength and power in the needy heart.

I like what J.I. Packer says as we kind of move towards a close. "Paul's physical weakness guarded him against spiritual sickness." Paul's physical weakness guarded him against spiritual sickness. Against pride. It was only as he found his insufficiency that he discovered God's sufficiency.

So a couple of little applications and we'll be done. Number one, and I want to be sensitive here. Because I know many of you are going through some rather difficult trials, but being sensitive, I still have to say this. Quit focusing on your thorn. On your handicap. On your weakness. Because if dependence upon God is the objective, weakness can be an advantage. Suffering is not alleviated or made easier by identifying the cause, or blaming someone else, but by making the right response. And the right response is when God makes it clear within his providence that your thorn at least is going to stay for a while, or for much longer, you need to have a right response. You need to glory in it. You need to think this through. When I am weak I am strong. This presses me down, and you know what? God gives grace

to the humble and he resists the proud. So if this empties me of dependence upon myself, if this reminds me of my limited wisdom, if this throws me in God's direction, then I'm going to glory in my infirmity. Because when I am weak I am strong.

See, life is 10% what you make it, it's 90% how you take it. Right responses are so important. That's why you need to stop focusing all your efforts in removing difficulties in your life. Because you will have difficulties in your life. And if you handle them correctly, while they're meant to be a weapon in Satan's hand, they're actually a tool in God's hand.

And the last thought, Hudson Taylor says all of God's servants have been weak men who reckoned on God being with them. That's what Paul's arguing here. I gladly would rather boast in my infirmity that the power of Christ might rest in me. I take pleasure in infirmity, in reproach, in need, in persecution, in distress. Not pleasure in the infirmity itself, but pleasure in what Christ does with it. It's for Christ's sake. Because when I'm weak I'm strong. You see, when you and I are weak, God's grace stands the greatest chance to manifest itself in our lives in a more glorious and intensive manner. God's power is drawn to human weaknesses. A flower is drawn to the sunlight and as iron filings are drawn to a magnet. And this is the opposite of contemporary Christianity, which preaches avoidance of suffering and sickness. Deliverance from any form of weakness.

No, classic Christianity understood that weakness was the path to strength. That God delights to put his power on display in the context of human frailty. Back in chapter 4, verse 7 of this passage. "We are the clay jars that house the treasure of the Gospel." Let's listen to Joni Eareckson Tada. She lives it, doesn't she? And God's grace will have her here next summer. We've all watched her from a distance. Some of us have met her up close and personal. She's a wonderful lady. She's a wonderful servant of God. She's lived this. Embracing the weakness that she might be strong.

So I'll let her tell of how she envisions meeting God in heaven. Here's what she says. "You know, though, I always say that in a way I hope I can take my wheelchair to heaven with me. I know that's not biblically correct, but if I were able, I would have my wheelchair up in heaven right next to me when God gives me a brand new glorified body. And I will then turn to Jesus and say, 'Lord, do you see that wheelchair right there? Well, you were right when you said that in this world we will have trouble because that wheelchair was a lot of trouble. But Jesus, the weaker I was in that thing, the harder I leaned on you, and the harder I leaned on you, the stronger I discovered you to be. So thank you for what you did in my life through that wheelchair.' And now, I always say jokingly, 'You can send that wheelchair to hell if you want.'"

A messenger of Satan to buffet her. But given to her by God to make her lean hard. And the harder she leant the stronger God was. That's the strength of weakness. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this beautiful passage. Help us, along with Paul, to wrestle past the human response, the natural response of praying for relief. We thank you sometimes, Lord, you do relieve us. Sometimes you do heal us. Sometimes in your providence you take away those things that you allowed for a time. But at other times, those things remain and they handicap us. And they're a burr under our saddle. They're a pebble in our shoe. They're a thorn in our side. And initially we don't like it. Help us not to surrender to self-pity. Help us to wrestle past this in prayer. In reading God's providence and waiting upon God and coming to see that our very weakness becomes the portal for a new experience of God's grace. Sufficient grace.

Oh, Lord, we thank you for that image from Max Lucado. We've been at the beach here in Southern Cal, we've been pounded by the waves. We've been rolled over. We get on our feet and one hits us again.

Oh what a picture of the grace of God. We no sooner get our footing and bam. Another wave of your grace comes in. Oh, we thank you for that. Help us to embrace our infirmity. Help us to thank you for our thorns. Help us to see a value in them for Jesus' sake. Help us to put the hedge cutter down. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.