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Weakness & Strength

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Series: Grace & Grit

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

**BIG IDEA - HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO OUR WEAKNESS AND SUFFERING, AND HOW DOES GOD WANT TO MEET US IN THEM?**

Can I just share with you personally for a minute from my heart about something? It's going to be about our student ministry. Now, why is student ministry special and personal to me? You might say, "Because, Kyle, you came to Christ through a student ministry way back in 2001." That would be true. That's a huge reason I love student ministry, but right now, why do I love our student ministry so much?

It's not just because I am a pastor *over* the student ministry. Believe it or not, I'm a parent *in* the student ministry. I have a rising seventh grader. I can't tell you how much Addy loves our student ministry, whether it's, "Dad, please drop me off early. Dad, please pick me up late"; whether it's the young ladies who are investing in her and the other rising seventh graders; whether it's all of the friends she's making or the great families we're meeting.

I just want to talk for a minute to moms and dads. I want you to have this great benefit and blessing that I have, that dozens and dozens of people in our church have. It's the benefit and blessing of our student ministry. Here's what we say here: "We partner with parents to raise a generation in Christ." We always say this, and we mean this. We can't replace you, but we do want to resource you.

We can't replace you. We don't want to replace you. We don't have the time to replace you. Here's the amazing thing. If you're a parent, you get to have a better relationship with your kid than you could have with anyone else on earth, because that's what they want. More than that, you get to be the main spiritual influence in your kid's life. So, we're not here to replace you; we want to resource you.

So, I want you to know about our student ministry. If, for some reason, you moved here this summer or have been coming around and you don't know about it, I'm going to show you a couple of pictures. We went on mission trips to Mississippi and to Virginia Beach. We had a massive conference/camp, CrossRoads Camp. Incredible. People invited their friends who were far from God and close to them. People came to Christ at this camp.

I want to talk to you about what we're doing this fall. Starting August 21, we're relaunching our student ministry for the fall. If I could just talk to middle schoolers and high schoolers for a minute. I challenge you, middle schooler and high schooler. I double dog dare you to go to our student ministry four weeks in a row and just check it out and try it out.

You're never too young. If you're in sixth grade, get over here. You're never too old. If you're a junior or senior, we want you to end well your last two years with us. Here's why. There are two things you need if you're... You always need these, but maybe especially in middle school and high school.

You need friends who share your faith. Maybe you have them, but if you don't have them, one of the easiest and most obvious places to get them would be in our student ministry. The other thing you need is an adult in your life who isn't your parents (as much as we love our parents) who has the same vision and values of your parents but is another person to talk to.

By the way, can we give a round of applause for our student leaders? We have 60 or 70 student leaders. Here's what that means if you don't know. That means they go to Community Group on a different night of the week than Wednesday night so they can also be available every Wednesday night to invest in your kids. So, let's thank God for them, and then we have a lot to cover in our second-to-last week in 2 Corinthians. Let's pray.

Lord, I pray for moms and dads. Give them wisdom. Give them conviction in whatever area they need to lead their kids in. I pray for middle schoolers and high schoolers that they would see there are a lot of great things you can do in high school, but the greatest thing you can do is walk with God in community. We know student ministry isn't the only way, but it's one of the main ways. It's certainly one of the main ways at *our* church. We partner with parents to raise a generation in Christ.

Lord, we pray for the student ministry, a great blessing on it, as they have so many dreams and plans for the fall. We particularly pray for this fall retreat on September 13-15, a key and catalytic event that catapults them into the fall. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

Americans are (well, probably everybody is) fascinated with near-death experiences. You know what a near-death experience is. It's where you, basically, clinically or medically die. Maybe you were in a coma, or something like that, and you say you go somewhere else and see something else. This can happen if you drown and are resuscitated. This can happen if you're in a massive car accident.

People tell similar stories but different stories about the afterlife and going away from their body and coming back. Usually, it involves leaving your body, seeing your body. Usually, it involves a tunnel and a light. Sometimes it involves seeing loved ones. These stories are so popular that when people have these near-death experiences, they write books about them.

The last two weeks I've told you about books I *want* you to read. I'm going to show you some books I *don't* want you to read. Here they are. Have you ever heard of this book, *90 Minutes in Heaven* by Don Piper? (Not John Piper. A different Piper.) I don't know this guy's whole story, but he gets into a car accident, and he says he goes to heaven for 90 minutes. He writes a book. It ends up being on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for five years.

Why do I tell you that? It's popular. People want to know, "What is the afterlife? What's heaven like? What's death like?" and all that. Well, there's another guy. He didn't write *90 Minutes in Heaven*. He wrote *23 Minutes in Hell*. He didn't get the same journey. He basically says after this happens God gives him a vision. He wakes up sweating, screaming in horror on his floor. He writes the book *23 Minutes in Hell*.

You've probably heard of *this* book, the most popular, *Heaven Is for Real*. A young kid goes to heaven and comes back. He says he met his sister. It's an interesting story. It actually was the #1 book on the *New York Times* Best Seller list, believe it or not, and it became a major motion picture. Maybe you've seen it.

Then there's *this* book, *The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven*. This is a sad story, because this boy is 6 years old and gets in a massive car accident and ends up being paralyzed. He and his dad are in this accident, and together they write a book about how he went to heaven when he temporarily died and came back. The only problem is, years later, when the boy grew up, he said he lied about the whole thing. Yikes.

Why am I talking about this? Because if you'll turn to 2 Corinthians 12, Paul talks about (you maybe have never thought about it this way) a near-death experience. Paul goes, "Guys, hold on. I'm going to tell you about this crazy near-death experience where I was out of the body or in the body. I don't really know." This will make more sense in a second.

## 01 THE PLACE OF VISIONS & REVELATIONS

Paul, in chapter 12, verse 1, says, ***"I must go on boasting."*** Paul basically goes, "I hate to brag and boast, but I'm doing it for three chapters. You put me up to it." He says, ***"Though there is nothing to be gained by it..."*** "It's God's plan B or C. This is not God's plan A for me to boast." ***"...I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 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."***

He's like, "Guys, I have to tell you about this near-death experience." Basically, he says, "I don't really like to talk about dreams and revelations." By the way, we need to ask this question for a second. What is the role of dreams, revelations, and visions in Christianity or in Christians' lives today? Like anything else, Christians debate and dialogue and discuss these issues.

On one side there are the people who go, "No dreams. No visions. No special revelations. We have the Bible. The Canon is closed. That was then. This is now. If you have a dream, go back to sleep when you wake up." That's what they would say. "Don't think anything else of it." On the other side are the people who say, "Okay. I read the book of Joel, and it says, 'In the final days, the young men will dream dreams.' We've got to dream. God is still speaking, and the Spirit is still moving."

How do we think of it here? We think of it as Scripture is the highest authority. All other types of dreams someone might have are secondary, supplemental, and submitted to Scripture. We're not saying it can't happen, but you're never going to have a dream that's going to say the opposite of what the Bible says. You're never going to wake up and go, "I just had a dream. God told me to leave my wife and kids." It's like, "You dialed the wrong number. Go back to sleep."

Paul had many unique dreams. I can't go through them all. In Acts 9, Paul gets a vision of Christ on the road to Damascus. It may be the most famous vision. In Acts 16, Paul goes to sleep one night, and while he's sleeping, he gets a vision of a Macedonian man saying, "Come." The Macedonian call. In Acts 18, Paul is discouraged because he has been suffering a lot, and God appears to him by an angel in the night and says, "Keep preaching the gospel. I have many people in this city."

In Acts 27, the very end of the book of Acts, the ship is about to get shipwrecked for Paul's fourth time, and God says, "Don't worry. No one is going to get hurt. I have to protect you, because you're going to go to Rome and preach the gospel to Caesar." So, he

gets all of these different visions, but this is the most intense and most immersive. Let's look at how he describes it.

**"I know a man in Christ..."** Paul, why are you talking in the third person? This was a rabbinical way to have a humble posture when you were talking about good things you had done. **"...who fourteen years ago was caught up..."** Literally, the word is *raptured* in the Greek. **"...to the third heaven..."** How many heavens are there? We'll talk about that. Look at this. This is a classic near-death experience. **"...whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows."**

Okay. Let's talk about when this happened...14 years ago. I won't bore you with all of the details. If you find out when Paul writes 2 Corinthians and back up 14 years, you get to Paul's time in Troas. What happened in Troas? It was the only time Paul was stoned. Most people think this is what happened. Paul was stoned, and then he had a vision. Some of you go, "The same thing happened to me in college." That was different. That was a different stoning. That was a different vision.

What I mean by this is he had rocks pelted at him. If you read the account, they said he was left for dead. They thought he was dead, and then he got back up later. Many people think (it makes sense for other reasons I'll show you later) that during this time Paul has this near-death experience where he is caught up into the third heaven.

Look. He calls it one other thing. Verse 3: **"And I know that this man was caught up into paradise..."** That's interesting. That literally means a walled garden. It's like a picture of being back in Eden but with no snakes. **"...whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows..."** Paul is repeating himself. Basically, "I don't know what happened. It was kind of crazy."

Okay. What is the third heaven? It's also paradise. Let's talk about heaven. There are three heavens in the Bible. The first heaven you hear about with statements in the Bible that go, "The birds of the heavens." That's the sky in the day. The first heavens are called the *atmospheric heavens*. You can get in an airplane (incredible) and get above the clouds, and you can be in the atmospheric heavens. You can be in the first heavens.

Then there's the second heavens. The psalmists talk about the second heavens. They talk about the stars in the heavens. The second heavens are the *celestial heavens*. Unbelievably (the apostle Paul wouldn't have believed it if you had told him), you can get in a spaceship, if you have enough money, and you can go into the second heavens.

By the way, why are all of the billionaires building spaceships? Do they know things we don't know? Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson... They're all heading into the second heavens.

The third heavens is the *eternal heavens* where the angels are and where God's presence dwells. You can get to the first heaven in an airplane, you can get to the second heaven in a spaceship, but the only way to get into the third heaven is to be in Christ. Now, here's what's interesting. This is a famous story.

There was an astronaut. He was an atheist. He goes into the second heavens on a spaceship, and he comes back and does a press conference afterward. He goes, "Guys, I've gone into the heavens, and I looked around, and I've come back to tell you God is not there." Someone in the crowd said, "If you stepped out of your space suit, you would have seen him."

Paul says, "I was taken into the third heavens. I was taken into paradise." But this is why I started with the near-death experience stories, because it's interesting what Paul says. **"...and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter."** The reason people are suspicious of near-death experiences and long stories and book deals and publishing contracts and movie rights afterward is Paul basically says, "Guys, I'm an apostle. I went to heaven. I can't tell you what I saw."

It actually says that two different ways: "...may not utter," and at the beginning, "...that can't be described." I think this is what he means: "I couldn't explain it to you if I tried." You don't have the categories for it. It would be like trying to explain a sunset to a blind person. Good luck. You can't do it. It would be like trying to explain to a 6-year-old how much they're going to enjoy their honeymoon. They're not mature enough. They don't even have the categories that would make sense.

## 02 BOAST IN SUFFERING AND NOW WEAKNESSES

Here's where we're going with the rest of the time. Paul goes, "Guys, I don't really like to talk about my supernatural, spiritual experiences because they're special. I don't even get a lot of them, and most of you will get none of them. So, for the rest of the time, I don't want to talk about my successes; I want to talk about my struggles."

He says for the rest of the time, he wants to talk about something we can all relate to, because we can't all relate to near-death experiences. Here's something we can all relate to: weakness. I'll show you. Look at what he says in verse 5. This is where we're going to spend the rest of our time.

**"On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses..."** Paul is a strange guy. He's going to boast in his weaknesses. **"...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."***

Here's what Paul says. This is what you should want for people. "I want you to have an accurate picture of me. I want you to know my strengths and my weaknesses. I want you to know my blessings and the burdens that are on my life. I want you to have a holistic picture." Paul goes, "I want you to know how God has honored me with great visions, revelations, and dreams, and I want you to know how God has humbled me."

So, we have to talk about weaknesses. Get ready. This is what we're talking about for the rest of this morning. We're just going to talk about weaknesses. We have to define what a weakness is. What is a weakness? Well, we could use the most basic... Like, a 3-year-old could understand it. It's anywhere you lack strength, obviously.

What is it about us that we don't like to talk about our weaknesses or share our weaknesses? Well, think about it. If you're at war, what is your goal with the enemy? To find out where they're weak. Why do teams watch film of each other before the game day? "I want to know where you're weak." The reason it's scary to say where we're weak is it could be exploited. This is why even spouses sometimes don't like to let their spouse know where they're weak. It's hard. Right? Nobody wants to be weak.

I had to think about this for a while. What is the point of social media? (The reason I talk about social media so much is because we're all on it so much. That's where we live.) Social media exists to share strengths. That's why it has a filter. That's why you went on vacation and found the best picture of you to put online, no matter how anyone else in that picture may have looked.

This is why we don't... Maybe some of you do, but the average person does not put an Instagram picture up, like, "Husband and I just fought for three hours. I have a headache." But we put up date night even if we only do it once every six months. It's okay. Just understand that. Social media is about sharing our strengths. We don't like to talk about our weaknesses.

And every job asks for it. Every job interview worth its salt, every job application asks something like, "What are your weaknesses?" What do you say? "I work too hard. I care too much. I put people in front of myself to the detriment of myself." That's what we say. What we're really saying is, "I don't know my weaknesses" or "I don't want to share them."

So, you have to know your weaknesses. Some of you don't know your weaknesses, and it's a terrible thing to not know your weaknesses. The reason for that is very simple:

everybody else around you knows your weaknesses. Your classmates know them. Your coworkers know them. Your kids know them. Your spouse knows them.

So, what do you do once you realize you have weaknesses? We don't look up to people with weaknesses naturally. Do you want a weak leader? No. No one wants that. Do you want a weak spouse? It's like, "Uh..." Why do people date? If you're normal, what attracted you to your now spouse or your current girlfriend or boyfriend was his or her strengths, obviously...how good-looking he or she was, how funny, how great their personality, their earning potential, their capacity, their competency.

Now we have to talk about weaknesses. I want to give you the purpose of weaknesses, and then we're going to look at what Paul says. There are many manifold purposes of weaknesses, but I want to give you four of them today. If we're going to be "open Bible, open life" here we have to talk about our weaknesses. Four purposes for weaknesses. I think these are really helpful.

First, it makes you more relatable to other people. This is a super-big principle, especially if you become successful. I don't know what that looks like for you. You have the corner office, and you have more money and more time and more platform. You have to realize this. This is such an important principle. Success separates; weaknesses welcome.

Success does impress, and that's always fun. It's fun to be impressed, and it's fun to impress other people and all that. Success impresses, but success by definition separates. Weakness, no matter what it is, will always welcome other people even if it's a different weakness. I'll show you how this works. It's a little awkward for me to do, but I'm going to talk about myself for a second to prove a point.

If I talked about some of my strengths and successes (not that I have that many), a lot of which had nothing to do with me... If I talked to you for a while about growing up in an upper-middle-class home, playing the country club every weekend, a lot of you would be like, "You jerk. I've never played... Can you even relate to me?" If I talked about some of the exciting joys of leading a large, fast-growing church, it might be interesting, but it would create distance.

But if I talk about our marriage the first year Margy and I were married and how it was horrible... We had the worst first year of marriage of almost anybody I know as we tried to put our lives together. It was a really dark, hard time. Then Margy repented and it was great. She knows that joke. No, we both needed to repent and grow.

If I told you that until I was probably in my early 30s, I just felt behind in life... I felt behind in my job. I felt behind financially. I felt behind in my family. I just felt like I was

playing catch-up. I'd compare myself to where my dad was at that age. I could go into it. It's a long story.

If I talked about losing my nearest and dearest friend suddenly almost a year ago to this day... I just wanted to show you what it feels like in a room. Here's what I've noticed. Whenever I share something personal from my life, more people give me hugs after service. Every time. They just feel closer to me. Success separates; weaknesses welcome others in.

Second principle. Why did God give us weaknesses? Because it makes you more empathetic toward other people. Here's another principle: where you are competent, it's hard for you to have compassion. Let's say it another way. Where you are strong, it is hard for you to have sympathy.

If you've never struggled with anxiety and depression, it is very easy to have this mentality. Maybe you would never say it out loud, but it's easy to have this mentality. "Cheer up. Can you please smile? Everybody has problems; get over it." Then one day *you* have anxiety and depression, and you're like, "I can't turn on happy on the inside. That's interesting."

Who knows your stories. I don't know all of your stories, obviously. But if you've never struggled financially... That's okay. You've always had enough money to do whatever you want to do. You're just not going to have a ton of compassion on the person who goes, "Dude, I'm trying really, really hard, and I feel like this is a reasonable budget, and I am struggling all the time."

If you hit the genetic lottery...there are no health issues, no surgery, very little sickness...you're going to struggle to relate to someone's struggle with trying to lose weight or someone's chronic illness. So, often, what God does is he gives us weaknesses to make us more compassionate.

Thirdly, weaknesses help build relationships. I mean, there are a million ways you build relationships, but one way to build relationships is to be strong and find someone else who's strong. You're like, "You're good at this, and I'm good at this. Let's go build a company or a business together." Or "You love to do this, and I love to do that. Let's go do this hobby together. We'll both be great at it together." A lot of friendships start that way.

I'm just telling you what I've seen in my own Community Group. If you want to deepen the relationships in your Community Group or in your DNA Group, it normally happens... You can't plan this. This is just how it happens. Somebody steps up and admits an area where they're weak and need help.

They're like, "You know what? I'm not really good at this whole marriage thing. I don't think I'm living in overt sin about it, but our marriage isn't great, and I need help." Or you reach out to someone in your group and go, "Hey, I'm embarrassed to tell you this, but when I read the Bible, I feel nothing. I really need help."

Or what the Puritans used to call... Maybe you struggle with spiritual depression. That was a phrase the Puritans loved to use. "I'm just dry, and God feels distant. Could we get together, and could you help me pray about these things in my life?" I'm just telling you God will often use our weaknesses, if we're humble enough to open up about them, to build deeper relationships.

Finally, weaknesses help you know where you need to grow, obviously. That's the most simple, straightforward one. The fourth purpose is your own development. There are different types of weaknesses. If you can discover your weaknesses early in your life, you can decide, "Is this a weakness...?"

We'll see there are two types of weaknesses. There's the weakness that can be fixed, and there's a weakness that can't. There's the weakness you can grow in, and there's a weakness that's never changing. The earlier you can find that out, the better. Also, Satan will uniquely tempt you in your strengths and uniquely tempt you in your weaknesses, so you'd better know what they both are.

### 03 THE THORN IN PAUL'S FLESH

Now let's look at what Paul says. Paul gives a name to his weakness. I want you to see this. Verse 7: **"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations..."** Basically, he says, "Because I get to write the Bible and God speaks to me, he also has humbled me." Here it is. **"...a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited."**

I want to talk to you about a thorn. What is a thorn? A *thorn* is a weakness that won't go away. It's never going away. It didn't go away for Paul. It's not going away for you either. We'll talk about this. See, the word *thorn* in the Greek is a word that can either mean stake, like a tent stake you put in the ground... Paul is using another illustration he's familiar with. He's like, "It's like a tent peg is stuck in my side." That's pretty graphic. That's what he's basically saying.

That's one way you can translate the word *thorn*. The other way (and I think this is helpful) is a splinter. What is a splinter? Well, it's something small. Do you ever get a splinter in your finger? You feel it all the time. Little by little throughout the day you feel

it. Here's what I'm trying to say. For some of you, your thorn is a big thing. It's a stake in your side, and you knew it as soon as I started talking about it.

For others of you, if you couldn't think about a glaring weakness in your life, you may have many different splinters. Here's the point. What does the splinter and the stake have in common? What is he trying to get at? This is something that sticks in you, lingers, and does not leave. This could be something like same-sex attraction where some 12-year-old... These stories are always the same way if they're in the church.

A 12-year-old or 13-year-old boy who's in a church like this, listening to sermons like mine, starts to feel like, "Well, this is weird. Everybody else is talking about the pretty girls, and I'm thinking about the guys." Then he starts to pray about that, and all of the prayers are pretty similar. They're all the same prayer *you'd* pray if you struggled with that. It would be something like, "Lord, I don't want these feelings. Take it away. Tomorrow, when I wake up, I'd like to not feel this way again."

I know people in our church who started to feel that at 13, and now they're married to a woman and have kids and still feel some of that at 33. Sometimes it could be something as small in your life as a couple of allergies you have that have hindered you. It could be a chronic illness. It could be something like type 1 diabetes. It could be dyslexia. We'll see this. God is going to have a purpose for all of this.

What is Paul's thorn? Well, we don't know for sure. Let me give you what some people say. I'll just give you the main ones. Paul's reputation was a thorn in his side for the rest of his life. He was such a persecutor of the church and had Christians killed, and even though God had done a great work in his life, he could never get over his past. Some of you may have an experience like that. It's a thorn in your side, something you did in the past that others bring up.

Other people say, "No, it was these Judaizers and false teachers." They were a thorn in his side. It was a relational thing. They always show up. Basically, everywhere Paul goes, he builds something, and people come behind him and break it down. He's like, "Argh!" That's how he feels.

A lot of people think it was (and it most likely was) a physical illness or issue. Some say epilepsy. I don't know where they get that from, but that has been commonly said. Others say migraines. What we think it is (and I'll tell you why) is we think Paul had an eye problem.

Think back to what I told you. When does he get the vision that he also says God decides to humble him after the vision? Well, if our timeline is right, he gets the vision when he is

pelted with rocks. Imagine you're pelted with rocks and a couple of them hit you in the face.

Most people think Paul had eye problems. Why? Because after Troas, Paul goes to Galatia, and he writes in the letter to the Galatians... You can go read it. He goes, "Guys, I visited you, and you were willing to give me your very eyes." That was not a colloquial saying. That's weird.

Then Paul signs the end of the book of Galatians, "Look with what large letters I write." Why would you write with large letters? Only if you couldn't see very well. In fact, a lot of Paul's letters, including Romans, Paul didn't write; he dictated to somebody else who signs at the end.

Think about how hard your job would be... This is going to be helpful as we think about thorns in a little bit. Paul traveled for a living and wrote letters and, what we think, struggled to see. Have you ever wondered, "Why was Paul shipwrecked three or four times?" Maybe he was driving the ship. I don't know.

Okay. What's the purpose of the thorn? Let's go back to verse 7. That is most likely the question you and I will ask. **"So to keep me from becoming conceited..."** That's going to be mentioned twice. **"...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."**

He starts and ends with "To not be conceited," but in the middle he calls it a *messenger of Satan*. This is where you have to put your thinking cap on and go, "When the Bible says two different things that seem to contradict themselves, I believe them both at the same time." Here's what Paul says. Do you want to know where the thorn is from? His answer is "God and Satan."

Do you want to know what's going on with the weakness you're dealing with? God has a plan for it, and Satan has a plan for it. There are two different actors. There are two different agents. They have two different goals. They have two different motives. They have two different strategies. That's what it's saying. Let's start with Satan. It says the purpose of the thorn in your flesh from Satan is to harass you. In the Greek it means to punch you with a clenched fist.

Think about this. What Satan wants you to do is focus on your weaknesses, to be discouraged by your weaknesses, to be defeated by your weaknesses, to be depressed by your weaknesses, to think, "God can't use me, because look at my marriage. God can't use me, because look at my past. God can't use me, because look at my education." That's what Satan wants.

God has another purpose. It says his purpose is to humble us and make us dependent on him. Now, I know we don't like to admit this, but we're all prone to pride. I guess God in his wisdom has decided that one of the ways he's going to keep us humble (I don't know how else to interpret this text) is to give us lifelong weaknesses that make us trust and depend on him.

So, what do you do with a thorn? Let me show you what Paul did with a thorn. Turn with me to verse 8. **"Three times I pleaded..."** That means "I desperately prayed about this." **"...with the Lord about this, that it should leave me."** Here's the most practical thing: if you have a thorn, pray for God to take it away. That's the first thing. Paul is like, "There was this pain. There was this pressure. There were these problems in my life."

Let's just say we're right on what it is. "I can't see. Can you please take that away so I can see?" He probably had all of these reasons. "Because, God, then I'll get places more quickly, and then I'll write more letters," or whatever it was. Here's the thing. When you read, "I pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away," I don't think this is what he means. If you know the apostle Paul, you know this isn't what he means.

Paul does not mean he got up on Monday morning and prayed about it one time, and then he got up on Tuesday morning and said, "Well, I prayed about this yesterday. Let's pray about it a second time." Then he prayed about it a second time. Then he got up on Wednesday morning and went, "Let me pray about it one more time, and then I'm done." That's not what Paul means.

Here's what Paul most likely means. You'll know this if you've ever had a weakness in your life. Paul says, "I pleaded with the Lord three times." Here's what this means. "There were three different seasons of my life I asked God to do something about this." Here's how we might say it today. "When I was single, I remember praying about this disability I have. I remember my roommate and I praying about it and asking God, 'Can you change this while I'm young?'

Then there was another season when I got married, and I had that same disability, and my wife (or husband) and I prayed about it. Then when we had kids, I thought, 'I don't want this with kids.' So we got on our knees, especially when our second one was born, and we asked God to take it away."

I want to be sensitive with this, but this is the most important thing to understand. If you look, we're going to see the answer Paul gets to asking God to take away a thorn in his flesh. You know the answer. The answer is "No," which is really hard for me. As a pastor, I hate seeing people be heartbroken over all of the unanswered prayer in their lives.

Now, granted, a lot of times you pray for something and God says, "Go. You've got it. We're good." Sometimes you pray for something and God says so slowly, "Hold on. You're going to get it, but eventually." Sometimes God says, "No." Here's what this means. Sometimes God says, "I'm not fixing that." Yikes! Sometimes God says, "I'm not changing that."

Here's what this means, as practically as I can make it. Sometimes you say, "God, will you heal me?" and God says, "I'm not healing that." Yikes! You say, "God, I want to get pregnant," and God says, "No."

"God, I want to get married."

"No."

"God, please take away all of the crazy idiosyncrasies of my spouse."

"No."

Seriously. This is very hard on us. Let me say it this way. It's hard for us to accept that hard things come from God, he allows them in our lives for a greater purpose, and he's not planning on taking them away our entire life. It's like, "Wow!" Let me show you what he says instead. I'm just showing you right in the text.

This is the famous verse. **"But he said to me, 'My grace...'"** I love that. God says, "Grace belongs to me." What is grace? *Grace* is God doing for you what you can't do for yourself. **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power..."** He associates his power and his grace. God's grace is his power in your life. **"...is made perfect in weakness."**

Okay. I'm going to try to explain this. Every once in a while, God says to somebody, "I'm not taking something away; I'm going to add something to it." Let me say it this way. "I'm not going to give you relief; I'm going to give you grace. I'm going to give you a supernatural power to do what the Bible says, which is to finish well, to endure, and to persevere."

Here's another really interesting thing to think about that I'll try to explain. Paul shows us something else that's interesting about God. God does not give us explanations for the thorn but promises for the thorn. We don't get an explanation; we get a promise.

If you've ever had a thorn that's really bad, what you want is an explanation. You're like, "Why did I get type 1 diabetes when I was 20?" You want to know that. "Why was I in that car accident that left me limping?" "Why did I get chronic pain in my 50s?" You're

like, "God, I need an explanation. If you give me an explanation..." God is like, "I'm not giving you an explanation."

There are two things you want to know. "Why did this happen, and how are you going to use it?" So then you want *that*, and that's understandable. It's like, "Okay, God. I get it. I got the thorn. I got the weakness, whatever it's going to be. God, can you just tell me how you're going to use it?"

At least with the apostle Paul, who of anybody we'd say God would take it away or God would explain it to him, God says, "My grace is sufficient. My power is made perfect in weakness. I'm not going to be able to give you the explanation right now, but I'm going to give you promises." That seems to work for Paul. Hopefully it can work for us.

Paul says, "**Therefore...**" Paul is like, "I got it." It might have taken him a while, but he goes, "**Therefore I will boast all the more gladly...**" He said earlier, "I'll boast in my weaknesses." Now he says, "I'll boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses." Could you imagine the apostle Paul? He shows up. "Guys, I can't see. It's awesome." It's something like that.

He says, "**...so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.**" Then this phrase... We say this, and it looks great on a bumper sticker or hanging on your wall, but we're not sure what it means. In fact, a lot of people think it says, "For when I am weak, then *he* is strong." It doesn't say that.

It says, "**For when I am weak, then I am strong.**" That sounds like an oxymoron. We'll try to unpack it toward the end here. I want you to see something. There are three steps to dealing with your weaknesses. The first is admitting you have them. It's okay. We all have them. Everybody has a thorn. The reason we don't know what Paul's thorn is is God is saying, "Fill in the blank. We all have them."

The second thing is you can hopefully communicate about your weaknesses. Paul moves from admitting he has weaknesses to communicating them. Then, in some way, Paul is able to get to the place of celebrating his weaknesses. Again, I know it's a broad category I'm giving you for weaknesses, but here's what I want us to think about. This is not a word for everyone today, but I think it's probably a word for all of us eventually.

Just think about this with me for a second. Wrestle with the Lord. Wrestle with Scripture over this. Paul says, "I prayed about this three times, and then I said, 'Therefore I will boast in my weaknesses.'" In other words, Paul said, "I stopped praying about this."

Let me give you the broader category: submission to the will of God for our lives. Paul says, for some of us... And I can't tell you. I'm not going to play JV Holy Spirit and tell you. But every once in a while, you have to go, "God, I'm done asking, and I'm going to start accepting." Let me tell you a story from our church. I'm not speaking this over every woman in our church.

We had this lady in our church. This was a while ago. She came up to me and told me, "Hey, Pastor Kyle, my husband and I have longed to have kids of our own for years. We've tried everything, and it has been a decade. We just realized God was saying 'No' to our prayer and our desire to have our own kids, but God has really put on our hearts, since we've accepted that, the call to foster care and adoption."

It's like, "Whoa! Okay. So, you saw God say 'No...'" This is how she interpreted it. "...and point you in a different direction because there was a different purpose." What I'm trying to tell you is every once in a while in your life you need to go, "Okay. It's time to move forward. At least for this next season of my life, I am going to accept what God has for me."

Let me give you my best understanding of what Paul means when he says, "When I am weak, then I am strong." There's an element of faith with this. Here's what he means: "I am more effective with my thorn than without it." That is the exact opposite of how we think. Right?

Here's what we tend to think: "God, if my marriage wasn't so dysfunctional..." "God, if I didn't have this learning disability..." "God, if I didn't have this chronic pain..." "If I didn't have this difficult relationship..." "Just take it away, because then I would be more effective."

It makes me think of chess. Does anyone in here like chess? I like chess so much better than checkers because it's so sophisticated, but the first time you teach someone to play chess, it's so confusing. "The pawn can only move one except if it's your first move, but sometimes you have to take it diagonally." Then you show them all of these different pieces. "This is what the bishop does, and this is what the rook does, and this is what the queen..." Everyone is like, "What?"

Here's the whole point. The game cannot be played until you accept the limits of what each piece can do. As soon as you're like, "That's what it can do," then all of a sudden you get unbelievably creative with that piece, and you see how valuable that piece is versus another piece on the board. I'm asking you today to accept your limits. I'm not saying to stop asking. I'm saying the first thing we see Paul do is ask, but we see Paul get to the place of accepting.

Now, we talked about weaknesses the whole time today, for the most part. We talked about all of the different weaknesses we have, but I want to show us one weakness we all have together. In Romans 5:6, Paul says this, speaking to the entire human race: **"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."**

Paul says, "There's a type of weakness I want you to know about. It's a spiritual inability to work your way to God." He says while we were still weak and ungodly, Christ died for us. Think about this. What is the story of Christ? The story of Christ is somebody very powerful becoming very weak. When you look at the cross of Christ, what you see is weakness, but what is manifested in the weakness, if you can see it, is the power of God to save. The way Jesus saved us was by becoming weak for us.

We're not only told one place about Jesus and weakness. Hebrews 4:15 says, **"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."**

He says, "All right. Jesus was fully God and fully man. He was tempted in every way. He understands your weaknesses." I know some of you out here today might be like, "Kyle, I don't know. You didn't mention *my* category." Well, I can't mention them all, but Jesus knows them all. He has experienced them. The Bible says that when you have a weakness, you can take it to Jesus. In fact, if I could translate that passage, it says, "Take your thorn to the throne of grace and ask God to do something."

When we talk about thorns and all of the different things you guys are all dealing with and I'm dealing with, it makes me think of one final verse. It says, **"Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."**

We're going to end praying together right now. Here's the truth. When it comes to weaknesses, there's always that tension I tried to explain today. Here's the tension when it comes to weaknesses: "Do I pray and ask God to take it away or is it time to pray and say, 'God, help me accept this'? Is it time for me to say, 'Please remove this' or is it time for me to say, 'God, help me to move forward in this'?"

So, here's what I want to do. I'm not going to ask anyone to share their weaknesses. Don't worry. In a minute, I'm going to ask you to stand if you would say, "You know what? There's a thorn in my flesh." Or maybe there's a thorn in the flesh of somebody you love. It hurts to see your kids hurt.

I'm going to stand and pray, and this is what I'm going to pray for you. I'm going to pray that God takes away the thorn. We're just going to pray together, "God, take away the thorn." But there's another group of you. We're not going to know the difference. You're all going to stand together. There's another group of you that are going to stand, and it's because you've been asking and asking and asking.

Maybe the prayer you're going to say is, "Lord, help me to accept this. Help me to accept these limits, and help me to move forward and watch you move." So, if you're in either one of those categories, just stand up all over the room right now. There's no shame. Thank you, guys. We're going to pray together. Close your eyes, and let's pray for these people all over our church.

Lord, we're a weak church. We're weak. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 1, "Not many were called who were strong," so it's not a surprise that we'd all be standing in here. Lord, I pray for the power of Christ to rest upon the weak right now.

I ask for anyone in here who has some kind of... Whether it's a splinter or a stake in their side, Lord, we ask in Jesus' name that you would remove the thorn for their good, the good of their families, the good of our city, and for your glory, Lord, so they can do so much more ministry, mission, and mercy and be set free. Lord, I pray that all over here you'd be taking thorns out right now, thorns they've had for decades.

But at the same time... I don't know if it's a lot of these people or a few of these people. They just have felt today (and only the Holy Spirit can speak into a person's heart), "It's time. It's time to submit. It's time to say, 'This is my life. This is my family. This is my health.' It's time to stop looking for a loophole and start looking for grace." Lord, I pray that there would be so much grace, whether you take it away or meet them powerfully in it. We ask all this in Jesus' name, amen.