

FINDING STRENGTH

Believers can trust in God's strength when confronted with their weaknesses.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7b-10; 13:2-8

MEMORY VERSE: 2 CORINTHIANS 12:9

- **READ** 2 Corinthians 10:1–13:13, First Thoughts (p. 134), and Understand the Context (pp. 134–135). Review **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*) and **PACK ITEM 7** (*Handout: Corinthians Time Line*) to further set the context for this session as the last in our study of 1 and 2 Corinthians.
- **STUDY** 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10; 13:2-8, using Explore the Text (pp. 135–139). As you study, notice the different ways Paul used variations of the word “weak” in these passages. Highlight instances of weakness being a good thing.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study on pages 140–141. Tailor the plans for your group with More Ideas (p. 142) and ideas included online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides Paper and pens for each person. Make copies of: **PACK ITEM 7** (*Handout: Corinthians Time Line*). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 2** (*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Salvation

Sanctification is the experience, beginning in regeneration, by which the believer is set apart to God's purposes, and is enabled to progress toward moral and spiritual maturity through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him.

BIBLE SKILL

Memorize a verse and apply it to a real life situation.

Memorize 2 Corinthians 12:9 in your preferred Bible translation. Then write the verse in your own words. Finally, write a couple of sentences here or in a journal, stating how the verse can help you today make a tough decision or face a difficult situation.

FIRST THOUGHTS

Many people have a weakness or on-going difficulty they consider an impediment or liability. They may pray for the removal of this perceived liability or seek other ways to overcome it. This week's study reminds us that God can use our weaknesses to anchor our faith, strengthen our witness, and magnify His grace and power.

(In PSG, p. 118) **What are some personal weaknesses or on-going afflictions you find it difficult to live with? What are some possible ways God might use those weaknesses for His purposes and His glory?**

We have the apostle Paul to thank for the phrase, "thorn in the flesh," which has been widely used—and widely misused. Some people have used the term to refer to a chronic physical ailment. Sometimes the term is applied to a difficult person. Others think of the thorn in terms of sins of the heart, such as lust or greed.

Paul did not specify what his thorn in the flesh was. The important matter is to recognize that God's strength is available to us when we confront any weaknesses. In this week's Scripture passages, Paul shared insights learned through his own struggles, and gave his final challenge to the Corinthians to examine their lives, weaknesses and all, for evidence of a living faith.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

2 CORINTHIANS 10:1–13:13

This week's lesson has brought us to the third and final section of 2 Corinthians. In broad terms, the first section focused on Paul's ministry as an apostle (chaps. 1–7). Then, as we learned in last week's study, the second section was about the collection for the Christians in Jerusalem (chaps. 8–9). In chapters 10–13, Paul's primary concern was to defend himself against the unfair charges of those who had infiltrated the Corinthian church and were trying to turn the believers against him. He denounced them as false apostles (11:13-15).

We can outline Paul's presentation in this last section of the epistle around the following points:

- *Paul's authority as a genuine apostle of Jesus (10:1-18)*
- *Paul's condemnation of the false apostles (11:1-15)*
- *Paul's sufferings for the sake of Christ (11:16-33)*
- *Paul's experience of God's sufficient grace (12:1-10)*

- *Paul's miraculous signs as evidence of his apostleship (12:11-13)*
- *Paul's concern for the Corinthians (12:14-21)*
- *Paul's final warnings and exhortations (13:1-13)*

This week's study is taken partly from the apostle's description of how he had drawn strength from God's grace working in his life, particularly in light of his thorn in the flesh. The balance of the study is taken from Paul's final exhortations to the Corinthians. He reminded them that the power of the gospel was at work among them, even in such unexpected ways as God's discipline. He also urged them to examine their lives concerning the genuineness of their faith. As we investigate the first passage for this study (12:7b-10), do your best to identify with Paul as he described the way he confronted his weaknesses. Then as we focus on the second passage (13:2-8), seek to identify with the Corinthians as they received this final challenge from the apostle.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PAUL'S WEAKNESS (2 COR. 12:7b-10)

VERSE 7b

In the opening verses of 2 Corinthians 12, Paul wrote about extraordinary experiences, including visions from God, which he had received. Such things might have made him arrogant or conceited, which God detests. To keep him humble, God sent him an ongoing difficulty. He described this difficulty in puzzling terms.

First, he called the difficulty *a thorn ... in the flesh*. The challenge Bible students face is knowing whether he meant "flesh" in the sense of his physical body or in the sense of his lower, sinful nature. If he meant a physical problem, he could have been referring to poor eyesight or some disease (see Gal. 4:13-15). If he meant a problem because of his sinful nature, he might have been thinking of his ongoing grief because he had persecuted early believers or some other issue that we might call psychological, including a "besetting sin" or ongoing temptation.

Second, he referred to the difficulty as *a messenger of Satan*. Some Bible students take this to refer to Paul's persecutors, whom the devil constantly sent Paul's way, such as the false apostles he combated in this letter. Or perhaps the apostle was aware of some kind of demonic harassment, as in the case of Job in the Old Testament.

Third, Paul described the difficulty as ongoing and excruciating. He wrote that it came to *harass* him. He used a present-tense form (implying that it was permanent) of a verb that typically meant beating with the fists, including shame and humiliation. Whatever the thorn was, it had become a lifelong problem. God's purpose was clear. Twice in this verse Paul noted that the thorn was given *to keep me from becoming conceited*. As we will see, God's purpose was achieved.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Titus and the Church at Corinth" and "'Righteousness' in Paul's Writings" in the Spring 2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7b

^{7b} So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:8-9

⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:10

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

VERSES 8-9

Perhaps Paul knew that Jesus had prayed in Gethsemane for the cup of suffering to be removed from Him (Mark 14:32-41). In Jesus’ case, God’s answer was “no.” Jesus submitted to God’s plan for Him to die on the cross. In Paul’s case, the answer from the Lord was not what he prayed for but actually turned out to be much better. When he received the Lord’s answer, he stopped praying for the thorn to be taken away from him.

What Paul received from the Lord was a promise, “**My •grace is sufficient for you.**” Whatever our circumstances, we are to remember that God has extended His favor, undeserved, toward us. Indeed, it is only because of His grace that we were saved from eternal destruction. If His grace was extended to us when we were the least deserving, then it will be more than enough to meet any difficulties of this life (Rom. 8:31-39).

It was more important for Paul to look to the “Blesser” than to the blessing.

God wanted Paul to learn that relying on Him was more valuable than removal of the thorn. Another way of putting it: it was more important for Paul to look to the “Blesser” than to the blessing. His **weakness** was the occasion for God’s **power** to work. Further, God’s power was **made perfect**—completed, displayed at its best—when contrasted clearly with Paul’s inability. Paul was no masochist, enjoying pain for pain’s sake. Yet he turned God’s unexpected answer into an occasion for glorifying God. He no longer petitioned; he praised. His weaknesses had become the means by which Christ’s power was seen to **rest upon** him. The verb rendered *rest upon* may be translated “pitch a tent on.” Just as God’s glory rested on the Israelites’ tabernacle (Ex. 40:34-38), so now Christ’s power had come upon Paul.

VERSE 10

Paul was **content** with what he endured not because he liked being tormented and feeling powerless. He could enjoy his weaknesses only because of Christ. Thus, he was neither a fanatic, inflicting himself with suffering, nor was he a fool, happily suffering the results of his own foolhardiness. Rather, he was a devoted follower of Jesus, for whose sake he endured.

The five kinds of trouble that Paul mentioned reinforce each other. Taken together, they summarize the apostle’s demanding work as a traveling missionary. He had listed specific troubles in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28. We have not endured the same problems as Paul, yet we can identify with his conclusion on the matter: **For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

(In PSG, p. 122) **How does God use weaknesses and thorns to bring about His purposes and to shape believers’ lives? How do weaknesses cause believers to grow in their trust of God?**

CHRIST'S STRENGTH (2 COR. 13:2-4)

VERSE 2

Paul had devoted much time and energy to the Corinthian congregation. He invested a year and a half when he planted the church (Acts 18:11). When he learned about their troubles, he wrote 1 Corinthians. Sometime after that, he returned to them on what he called a “painful visit” (2 Cor. 2:1). On that occasion, he gave a warning to the church that they needed to repent; later he sent Titus as his ambassador (7:5-7). Now he was writing another letter, and again he found himself in the situation in which he must give a warning, this time from a distance.

The warning was addressed to those who sinned before and were still unrepentant. These were the people in the congregation who had not responded to his instructions in the first epistle and on his painful visit. **All the others** referred to those who might still be unrepentant after receiving this second epistle. Thus, Paul was aware that a third visit might also be unpleasant. His words **if I come again** were actually fulfilled when he returned to Corinth in connection with completing the love offering for the Jerusalem Christians (Acts 20:2-3; 2 Cor. 9:4).

The phrase **I will not spare** points to Paul's willingness to engage in disciplinary action against those who stubbornly remained in their sins. He did not say what the discipline would consist of, but he meant it to be redemptive rather than punitive, as in 1 Corinthians 5:4-5.

VERSES 3-4

One of the sins of the Corinthians was that they challenged whether Paul was an authentic apostle of Jesus. They were still seeking **proof** of Christ speaking in and through Paul. He was not trying to lord it over them, but he was insistent that he was a genuine messenger of the Lord. In the actions that he would undertake in disciplining them, they would see the proof they were looking for. After that, they could not doubt Paul's genuineness.

Whatever the Corinthians may have thought about Paul as a weak man or weak preacher (1 Cor. 1:27-28), they could never think that Christ Himself had been **weak** toward them. Rather, He had been **powerful** among them (1:4-8).

Christ has all authority; He had shown the power of His gospel among the Corinthians. Yet there was a time when **weakness** seemed to be His dominant characteristic. That was when He was **crucified**. In humbling Himself by taking on the sins of humanity, He submitted to the most horrible of deaths. However, that was momentary. He was raised and now forever **lives by the power of God**.

Paul knew that his weakness was parallel to Christ's own experience: **we also are weak in him**. It was only because of Paul's spiritual union with Christ (*in him*) that he was able to make the comparison. Further, his experience of power was like Christ's: **in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God**. Paul had the authority of the resurrected Christ as an apostle, and the fact that he had appeared weak up till this point should not be misunderstood. He had the authority granted to him by the

2 CORINTHIANS 13:2

² I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them—

2 CORINTHIANS 13:3-4

³ since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.

⁴ For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

Lord Himself. He was certain that Christ's power would be evident to all as he disciplined the Corinthians when he arrived for his third visit.

(In PSG, p.124) **How is discipline an act of love? If God failed to discipline His followers, would He be viewed as weak or strong? Explain.**

OUR CHOICE (2 COR. 13:5-8)

VERSES 5-6

Paul's critics in Corinth had in effect subjected him to a test of apostleship: Was he truly an apostle of Jesus Christ? They had demanded that he give them proof of his spiritual authority. Now Paul turned the tables. It was they, not he, who needed to be given an examination. Thus, he challenged them: **examine yourselves ... test yourselves**. The verb *examine* carried the idea of putting someone (or something) through a trial so that its true character may be determined. (In other contexts, this same verb meant "tempt," that is, to entice someone to sin.) The verb *test* carried the idea of examining something or someone to determine whether it was genuine or approved. Note that Paul used the pronoun *yourselves* three times in this verse, as if he were saying, "It's you, you, you, not me, who need to go through a test." They were the ones who should engage in serious soul searching.

So what was the test? Based on verse 5, Paul wanted the Corinthians to ask themselves two questions: First, are you **in the faith**? By *the faith*, Paul meant the Christian faith, that is, faith looked at objectively as a system of beliefs and behaviors (as in 1 Cor. 16:13, "stand firm in the faith"; see also 1 Tim. 4:1; 6:21). Of course, included implicitly is the question of whether the Corinthians were people who had truly trusted Christ. Did they have faith, looked at subjectively and personally? So the question was whether they were personally committed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

If they could not see His "tracks" in their lives, then they should be very concerned.

The second test question was this: **Do you not realize ... that Jesus Christ is in you?** If Christ indwelt them through the Holy Spirit—as is the case with all genuine believers (Rom. 8:9)—then marks of His presence should be evident. But if they could not see His "tracks" in their lives, then they should be very concerned. Did they fail the test? Were they unapproved, merely seeming to be followers of Jesus?

Paul assured his readers that if they examined him, they would find **we have not failed the test**. (Again, as noted several times in these studies, he typically used "we" forms to refer to himself in this letter.) He was in the faith; he had Christ's presence in his life; and he was glad for those claims

2 CORINTHIANS 13:5-6

⁵ Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you fail to meet the test! ⁶ I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test.

to be tested and demonstrated. Just as Abraham's faith was proven genuine by testing (Gen. 22:1), so it was with Paul, and indeed, with every believer.

VERSE 7

Paul expected the Corinthians to respond to his urgent warning. If and when he arrived there, he would deal strenuously with any who were still unrepentant (2 Cor. 13:2). Thus, he wrote out his prayer for them: **that you may not do wrong**. He wanted them to do what is right. His primary concern was with the congregation, not with his own reputation. It was a matter of secondary importance to him that he **appear to have met the test** of authenticity by the members of the congregation. He had already written about the marks of an apostle present in his ministry (12:11-13). If, in the eyes of his critics in Corinth—the false apostles, to be specific—he did appear to fail, that was not his main concern.

VERSE 8

Why was Paul so concerned for the Corinthians to test themselves regarding the genuineness of their relationship to Christ? Because his ministry was defined by the proclamation of **the truth** about Jesus and the urgency for those who heard the truth to respond in repentance and faith. If that had not happened in Corinth, his efforts there were wasted.

In every place he went, Paul was careful not to act or speak against the truth. His passion was to speak for the truth. He was not speaking about truth in some abstract form or truth in some generic sense, although Paul would never have spoken falsehood regarding any matter. Rather by *the truth* in this verse, he meant the gospel truth about salvation in Jesus Christ. In other words, Paul was single minded. His commission and passion was to proclaim the good news in all circumstances and in every possible way. He would never do anything to hinder the advance of the message of Jesus Christ.

(In PSG, p. 125) **What is the difference between approaching others to convince them that you are right and approaching others so they can be right? How is the way in which a person approaches another person a test of faith and maturity for the approaching person?**

2 CORINTHIANS 13:7

⁷ But we pray to God that you may not do wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed.

2 CORINTHIANS 13:8

⁸ For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

ILLUSTRATE: Prior to the group's arrival, create a display of snack foods over which people might say they can't control themselves (examples: chips, candy). As the group arrives, invite them to sample the snacks and name their favorite irresistible snack or favorite food.

CLARIFY: Note that self-control over snacks is a small representation over the recurring temptations or besetting sins with which some people struggle.

DISCUSS: *What are some personal weaknesses or ongoing afflictions you find it difficult to live with? What are some possible ways God might use those weaknesses for His purposes and His glory?* (PSG, p. 118)

SAY: *In this week's study, we'll see that Paul struggled with an ongoing issue. He referred to this as a thorn in his flesh. Paul shared insights learned through his own struggles, showing how God's strength is available when we confront our weaknesses.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Guide the group to listen for Paul's attitude toward his thorn in the flesh, or weakness, as a volunteer reads aloud 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10.

CLARIFY: Use information in the second paragraph under Verses 7b-8 (PSG, p. 120) to overview three categories of possible explanations offered by Bible scholars. Note that many believe it was a physical issue that annoyed Paul and, at times, caused difficulties to his ministry.

GUIDE: Call for volunteers to name two important spiritual truths that Paul learned through his thorn in the flesh. Then, say: *God allowed Paul's thorn in the flesh to remain as a reminder of Paul's need for dependence upon God and His grace. Paul viewed his weakness as a source of strength.*

DISCUSS: *How does God use weaknesses and thorns to bring about His purposes and to shape believers' lives? How do weaknesses cause believers to grow in their trust of God?* (PSG, p. 122)

READ: Read aloud 2 Corinthians 13:2-4, calling for the group to listen for the content of Paul's warning.

CLARIFY: Use information in the first paragraph under Verse 2 (PSG, p. 122) for brief background about why Paul gave a warning to the Corinthians. Explain that Paul was not bullying the Christians or seeking to terrify them with his authority; rather, he was trying to build them up.

ASK: *What role should the church and church leaders play in holding believers accountable for spiritual growth? What is the responsibility of the individual when challenged to grow spiritually?* (PSG, p. 123)

DISCUSS: Note that Paul warned those who doubted his authority that his authority was being demonstrated by the power of the gospel among the Corinthian believers. Lead the group to recall times they have seen the power of the gospel demonstrated, whether through the church or elsewhere.

DISCUSS: *How is discipline an act of love? If God failed to discipline His followers, would He be viewed as weak or strong? Explain.* (PSG, p. 124)

READ: Direct someone to read 2 Corinthians 13:5-8. Guide the rest of the group to listen for how Paul challenged the Corinthian hearers to examine their faith, looking for evidence of their salvation.

CLARIFY: Encourage people to carefully examine their spiritual lives without casting unnecessary doubts. Use information under Verses 5-6 and Verses 7-8 in the PSG (pp. 124–125) to clarify examination-related words. Ask: *How might a person test his or her faith? Why might it be important for them to do so?* (PSG, p. 125)

SAY: *It's not about whether or not Paul appeared to pass the test. What is important is whether or not the Corinthians themselves demonstrated Christ in the midst of their trials.*

DISCUSS: *What is the difference between approaching others to convince them that you are right and approaching others so they can be right? How is the way in which a person approaches another person a test of faith and maturity for the approaching person?* (PSG, p. 125)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Call attention to the summary statement under the session title on page 118 of the PSG: *Believers can trust in God's strength when confronted with their weaknesses.* Invite volunteers to suggest ways this truth is demonstrated in today's Bible passage. Point out the bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 126). Lead the group to propose how each bulleted statement relates to the session summary statement.

CHALLENGE: Lead the group to respond to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 126): *Share with the group ways God is using a "thorn" to shape and mold you for His honor. Record insights gained from others as they share. How can you learn from them?*

SUMMARIZE: Use **Pack Item 2** (*Outline: 1,2 Corinthians*) and **Pack Item 7** (*Handout: Corinthians Time Line*) to position this as the final session in this thirteen-session study. Invite volunteers to share brief insights from the study of 1 and 2 Corinthians.

PRAY: Lead in a time of silent prayer, inviting the group to reflect on areas in which they are weak. Close by thanking God that we can trust His strength when we are weak.



PRACTICE

- Be sure all individuals in the group have a PSG for the new Summer 2018 study, which will begin next week.
- Connect with the group via email or social media to remind them of the memory verse (2 Cor. 12:9) and journal activity for this session.
- Review your group meetings over the past three sessions. What ideas most drew in the group's attention and discussion? Identify teaching styles you have not used yet. Keep the list close by as you prepare for future group sessions, especially as you begin a new topic of study.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the Focus Attention idea, recall the song "Jesus Loves Me" by Anna B. Warner. Focus on these lyrics that emphasize our weakness and Jesus' strength. Point out the song often is associated with children, but the awareness of God's strength is an important concept for believers of any age.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the discussion of 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10, invite a volunteer to read aloud 2 Corinthians 12:9, this session's memory verse. Suggest that the group reflect on their "thorn in the flesh" and substitute it for the word "weakness." Use the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 122) to further apply this verse to daily life.
- To enhance the discussion of 2 Corinthians 13:2-4, lead the group to imagine they are giving the warning in these verses from the standpoint of a parent. Form pairs, and direct the pairs to restate Paul's comments as a loving parent writing to a teenager.
- To supplement the study of 2 Corinthians 13:5-8, lead the group to name types of examinations people take or undergo (examples: academic, skill-based, medical, occupational, athletic). Discuss: *What is the purpose of examinations? Why are they necessary? How do these principles apply to examining our lives spiritually?*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

To supplement the challenge, direct the group to scan the bulleted summary statements in their PSGs. Call for volunteers to share statements that stand out to them. Reflect on how these statements have influenced thoughts and actions during the last few weeks.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Close the session by leading the group to sing the first verse of "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." Guide the group to identify ways in which this song would have been appropriate for Paul as he encouraged the Corinthians.