

God's Grace Sustains Us!

**2 Corinthians 12:1-10, 4:8-12; Philippians 1:27;
Romans 8:37; 2 Kings 18-20**

How hard is it to say YES to the Lord when He asks you to serve in His kingdom? While we would like to say that with the bravery of Moses at the Red Sea, David in front of Goliath, Daniel in the Lion's den, and Apostle Paul in prison; we would put on the armor of God and fiercely stand firm in our faith to do what God asks; the truth is that doubt and a litany of excuses would likely be our response. While certainly the perseverance of Moses to free the children of Israel, Joseph to do what was right in God's sight despite his dire circumstances, Josiah desire to purify the land and the temple of Israel, or Paul's perseverance to run the race to win the crowns of righteousness can spur us on towards becoming more like Jesus; their witness is often used as an excuse for whom amongst us could ever attain their "superior" attitudes or service? Though it is through the crucible of fiery affliction that our faith is best tested and refined, is it not easier in the valleys of tribulations to see ourselves as mere jars of clay (2 Corinthians 4:7) who are weak due to the physical, mental, and spiritual difficulties; rather than redeemed and strengthened masterpieces of God's grace? And even if we believed Jesus granted us the ability to turn water into wine, drive out evil spirits, heal the blind, deaf, paralyzed, and feed the

¹ R. Kent Hughes, [Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 130.

masses; if God told us the only way to successfully serve in His kingdom was with a debilitating thorn of daily misery and pain would we truly be willing to accept such an offer and if so how could us "weaklings" ever survive?

The following sermon is going to show how God uses the "fire" in our lives to refine and enable the weak to shame the strong.

To accomplish great things in God's kingdom does not require human ability but faith in divine strength! Let's turn to 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 to see how Apostle Paul was able to overcome his weaknesses.

Thorn in the Flesh

When we think of a person of faith who has done great things in Jesus' name we often think of Apostle Paul! He was circumcised as the Mosaic Law demanded (Genesis 17:12; Leviticus 12:3), a descendent of the Benjamin, who was the only son of Rachel and Jacob born in the Promised Land (Genesis 35:16-18), he was a Hebrew of Hebrews for unlike the Diaspora Jews who only knew Greek,¹ Paul also knew the "native language of first-century Judaism,"² Aramaic, and Hebrews as well, while he initially belonged to a Jewish sect, the Pharisees and was advancing in Judaism beyond many of his

² Clinton E. Arnold, [Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Romans to Philemon](#), vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 360.

own age (Galatians 1:13-14),³ he repented of his sins of persecuting Christ and the church and ended up inspired by the Holy Spirit to write about half of the New Testament! Instead



of making money out of his revelatory experience like the super-apostles had⁴ Paul boasts of how God kept him from becoming conceited by giving him a thorn or a messenger from Satan to

torment him.⁵ Suggestions for what Paul's thorn might have been fall into three categories: psychological anxiety over Israel's suborn disbelief,⁶ Jewish persecution,⁷ or some form of reoccurring physical malady such as weak eyesight, a stammering tongue, reoccurring earache,⁸ malaria, migraine headaches or epilepsy.⁹ While no one can know for certain what

³ Paul Barnett, [Philippians & Philemon: Joy in the Lord](#), ed. Paul Barnett, Reading the Bible Today Series (Sydney, South NSW: Aquila Press, 2016), 88.

⁴ Colin G. Kruse, [2 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 8, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 198.

⁵ Murray J. Harris, [The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 851.

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, [The Letters and Revelation](#), in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 2377.

was Paul's thorn, what can be known is that despite having prayed three times to have it removed God's response was no because "when he was weak, then Christ, by His strength, would make Paul spiritually strong."¹⁰

While the super-apostles saw his thorn as an impediment to ministry success, Paul boasts that it was a gift from God¹¹ for it was precisely in his trial and infirmities that God's power was best seen and glorified!¹²

Let's look just at three lessons we can learn from Paul's response to affliction.

⁷ Murray J. Harris, ["2 Corinthians,"](#) in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 396.

⁸ C. H. Spurgeon, ["The Thorn in the Flesh,"](#) in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 18 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1872), 680.

⁹ David K. Lowery, ["2 Corinthians,"](#) in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 583.

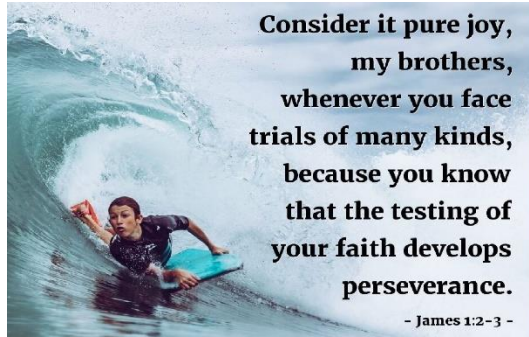
¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ C. K. Barrett, [The Second Epistle to the Corinthians](#), 313.

¹² C. H. Spurgeon, ["The Thorn in the Flesh,"](#) 679.

Thorns Remind us of our Need for Grace!

If only we could see ourselves through God's eyes, then conceit and a sense of entitlement would no longer plague the church! While Paul's thorn was far from pleasant, he admits that it was beneficial because it kept him humble! God opposes the proud (James 4:6), especially amongst those inside of His Son's church that think too highly of their accomplishments



(Ephesians 1:22-23), because in their pride they do not value the interdependency of all members of the body (1 Corinthians 12:12-31) nor does their ministry goals

point to God the Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16)! The inescapable truth is that the abilities that we have received to do miracles in Jesus' name have only been granted to us by the Holy Spirit upon our conversion. While natural ability can be used to accomplish much to impress those around us, without the armor of God (Ephesians 6) and serving with the mind of Christ for His pleasure and will; the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly realms can easily keep the fallen, the often complacent and especially

the arrogant from living lives worthy of the Gospel message (Philippians 1:27)!

If God thought Paul needed a thorn to keep him from becoming conceited and chaos reigning in his life¹³ how much more do we need one as well?

Perseverance of trials and tribulations is not only the key to spiritual maturity (James 1:2-3) but also the key to seeing the power of God demonstrated in one's life!

Thorns Remind us by His Grace we can Do all Things!

If only we could see ourselves through God's eyes, then our weaknesses would not be perceived as incompetence but as fertile ground for His divine might and power! "In order to allow God's grace to truly sustain us, we must learn to identify and accept our weaknesses. Or as Paul says, to boast about them. It isn't a shameful thing to recognize the areas in which we are weak, in fact many of us would agree that it's a strength to know where your deficiencies lie"¹⁴ For Christ's sake Paul delighted in his weaknesses for without them he would not have known what it was like to have Christ's power rest on him.¹⁵ What keeps many Christians from accomplishing what God has empowered them to do

¹³ C. H. Spurgeon, ["The Thorn in the Flesh,"](#) in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 18 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1872), 681.

¹⁴ Taken from ministry series Grace Under Fire from sermoncentral.com

¹⁵ James M. Scott, [2 Corinthians](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 230.

is not a lack of opportunity but the overwhelming feeling or unworthiness! Though we are His ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20), royal priests (1 Peter 2:9), have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16) and partake in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4); many believers feel



that Christ would never choose to let His power rest on them to do great things in His name (John 14:12). While a person's security in their own abilities is Satan's opportunity of corruption; humility,

submission, and faith are what God requires for His own to accomplish more than one could ever ask or imagine! With God's aid, YES you can close the mouths of hungry lions, part the Red Seas of life, cast out demons, cure human sickness, and speak words of wisdom that shines brightly into the lives of the vilest, sinners that have ever walked this earth!

Since success in ministry is attainable only by God then the only thing holding one back in realizing spiritual greatness is not presumed, unattainable holiness we find in others but our lack of desire to pay the price!

God's Grace Sustains Us!

One need not fear persecution, trials, and tribulations will crush one's soul when serving in God's kingdom, for God is and always will be sovereign over all things seen and unseen (Colossians 1:16)! To see the fiery eyes of Satan staring back at you with the intensity of a ferocious lion (1 Peter 5:8-9) can easily instill fear in not only the most accomplished, wealthy, famous amongst us; but even God's very own children! Being in ministry often feels like being in an Indiana Jones movie in which danger and failure of one's mission

lurks around every corner! And though we "jars of clay" are easily broken by our fears and bleak circumstances this in no way means that we do not have the potential to be "more than conquerors through Him who loves us" (Romans 8:37). Though we were not much when the Lord called us, and though we are hard pressed on every side,



*Nay,
in all these things
we are more
than conquerors
through him
that loved us.
Romans 8:37 KJV*

perplexed, persecuted, and often struck down we are far from crushed or left in despair (2 Corinthians 4:8-12) for the Lord is always with us! Those who have faith as tiny as a mustard seed will not be destroyed but lifted to do His perfect and pleasing will! This is why when Paul was in prison, received forty lashes minus one, three times beaten with rods, flogged severely, pelted with stones, shipwrecked three times, and constantly had his life threatened at the hands of both the Jews and Gentiles (2 Corinthians 11:21-29); he rejoiced in the Lord for He knew "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians

1:21). “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Conclusion: A Story of Sustaining Grace

At the tender age of 25 Hezekiah became king of Judah and reigned 29 years (2 Kings 18:2). He did what was “right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done.” He “removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles”



(18:4). There was “none like him among the kings of Judah” (18:5) and he was “successful in whatever he undertook” (18:6). He rebelled against the king of Assyria (18:7) and in the 14th year of his reign

Sennacherib king of Assyria “attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them” (18:13). “In multiple inscriptions, Sennacherib claims to have captured 46 cities of Judah and taken captive 200,150 people of Judah.”¹⁶ Though Hezekiah sent tribute of “three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold” (18:14) to get Assyrians to withdraw from the attack, the offer was refused and Sennacherib sent his supreme commander, his chief

¹⁶ D. A. Carson, ed., [NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 623.

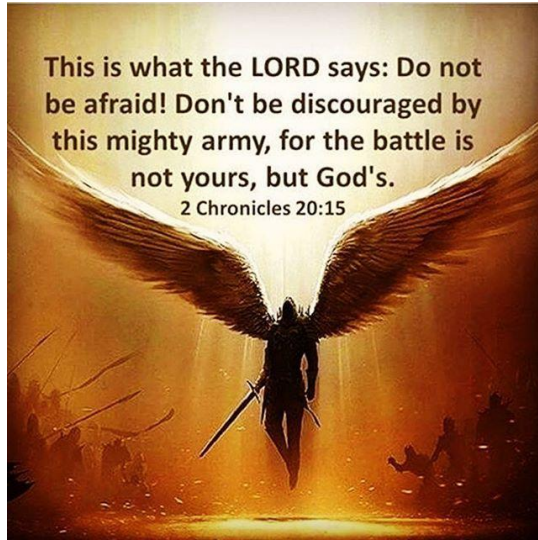
officer, and his field commander with a large army to attack Hezekiah at Jerusalem (18:17).

In response to Hezekiah’s reassurance to his people, if they would only trust in the Lord, He would deliver them (18:29-30); the commander of the Assyrian army proudly claimed that Hezekiah was misleading them for the gods of other nations could not save them from the Assyrian army’s mighty wrath, nor would the God of Israel (32-35)!
“When king Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the temple of the Lord” (19:1)!

When King Hezekiah’s officials asked the advice of the prophet Isaiah, he told them this is what the Lord says, “Do not be afraid of what you have heard – those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me” (19:5-6). Hezekiah faced an army with “well-tamped earth ramps and battering-rams”¹⁷ and an army of foot soldiers that totaled in the hundreds of thousands! The Assyrian army easily took out the fortified cities of Judah and now were trying to instill fear into the heart of a king who refused to serve them. By human wisdom Hezekiah should have been petrified of the Assyrians for defeat was inevitable. And even though the “Assyrian kings had laid waste the nations and lands around him” (19:17) Hezekiah put his trust in the

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, ed., [NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 625.

Lord. He knew that despite their strength, having ridiculed the “the living God” (19:16), the “Holy One of Israel” (3:22) his “insolence had reached God’s ears” (19:28) and God alone would fight for Israel and put a “bit in their mouths” (3:28). Amid Sennacherib’s fierce,



undefeated army, that night a light shone very brightly. It was not an army of angels but one, called the “angel of the Lord who put to death a 185,000 in the Assyrian camp” that night (19:35)! Not one Assyrian soldier entered Jerusalem nor was even one arrow shot into the city (19:34).

Like Hezekiah we need to trust in God when we are serving in His kingdom. Yes, God often asks us to do the impossible by human standards and serve Him in great afflictions but by His grace we can do anything in His name and for His glory! So, I leave you with one final question to ponder: do you trust in God enough to serve Him no matter what He asks or what the costs or are you so afraid of those who oppose you that you cannot be like King Hezekiah and boldly say, I will serve without fear, I trust You God for Your will cannot be defeated?