

## GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

**SAY:** “In our last session, we looked at how God works through us despite our shortcomings. Today we look specifically at how God’s grace helps us overcome difficulties.”

Invite members to turn to **page 3** in the **Personal Study Guide (PSG)** and review session titles.

**DISCUSS:** Draw attention to the picture (**PSG, p. 114**) as you introduce **Question #1: If you could have a lifetime supply of any product, what would you choose?**

**OPTION: IN ADVANCE,** attach two large sheets of paper to a focal wall. On the top of one write *GOOD TIMES* and on the second write *BAD TIMES*. Provide markers. Instruct participants to record on the appropriate sheets examples of good things and bad things that can happen in life. Review the lists to prepare for reading **The Bible Meets Life** and **The Point**.

# SESSION 3

## THE GIFT OF GRACE



### **The Point**

God’s grace allows me to face anything life throws at me.

### **The Bible Meets Life**

Our lives are filled with both joys and sorrows, opportunities we embrace and difficulties we’d rather avoid. We don’t question God’s presence in the good times,

although we might when life gets hard. God is with us through it all: good and bad. We are no less in God’s hands or useful as His instruments when we face challenges. God’s grace is always with us.

### **The Passage**

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

### **The Setting**

The apostle Paul wrote Second Corinthians while in Macedonia around A.D. 56, about four years after his first visit to Corinth (Acts 18). While First Corinthians had been written to correct a variety of erroneous beliefs and practices within the Corinthian church, Paul wrote Second Corinthians primarily to defend himself against charges raised by false teachers in Corinth who claimed he was not a true apostle and could not be trusted.

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## 2 Corinthians 12:2-7a

**2** I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.

**3** And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;)

**4** How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

**5** Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

**6** For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me.

**7a** And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations,

### KEY WORDS

**the third heaven** (v. 2)—Scripture does not mention elsewhere anything about different levels of heaven. Thus we must understand this simply as a place in heaven beyond our known universe.

**revelations** (v. 7)—The Greek term means a “disclosure.” In New Testament usage it typically refers to the revelation or disclosure of some truth (or truths) of God.

**Verses 2-3.** Despite the fact that the apostle Paul had founded the church at Corinth and spent 18 months there “teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18:11), the church was consistently troubled by issues of false beliefs and practices. Paul dealt with these issues through a series of visits and letters in which he sought to correct the members of this church. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians after receiving news that false teachers (“false apostles,” 2 Cor. 11:13) had infiltrated the church and were leading the believers astray. These charlatans challenged Paul’s authority

**GUIDE:** Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life** (PSG, p. 115). Highlight the explanation the author gives of how God’s grace impacts us when we are down and out.

Reinforce the importance of turning to the Lord for strength by reading **The Point** (PSG, p. 115): **God’s grace allows me to face anything life throws at me.**

**PRAY:** Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to help us look to him for strength when times are tough. Thank Him for the grace He has always provided in such times.

## STUDY THE BIBLE 2 Corinthians 12:2-7a



10 minutes

**GUIDE:** Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 118.

**READ:** Ask a volunteer to read 2 Corinthians 12:2-7a.

**GUIDE:** Use **Bible**

**Commentary** **1** and

**KEY WORDS** on page 119  
(**PSG, p. 116**) to give more background on Paul's experience in "the third heaven."

**SUMMARIZE:** Without God's grace, Paul would not have experienced the visions and revelations of the Lord he described in 2 Corinthians 12 (**PSG, p. 117**).

*False teachers were trying to convince the Corinthian church to follow them based on their own claimed visions and revelations of the Lord (2 Cor. 11:4-14).*

*Paul responded by sharing his own experience with visions and revelations. He refused to boast about his incredible experience—the great honor and blessing he received from God. It would seem this was not an experience Paul talked openly about, since it happened 14 years earlier, and this appears to be the first time he had spoken of it.*

(Continued on next page.)

as an apostle and raised questions about his integrity. Thus Paul was compelled to write the letter, especially to defend himself against the charges leveled against him.

Paul spent much of the letter correcting the believers and defending his ministry. Then because the Corinthians seemed so enamored by the egotistical boasting of the false teachers, Paul reluctantly borrowed a page from the false teachers' playbook. Rather than boast about his successes and accomplishments, however, he focused on his hardships and sufferings (11: 16-33). As he continued to boast about his weakness, he shared what he had learned from an overwhelming experience with the Lord many years earlier.

Paul began by referring to an unnamed person: **I knew a man in Christ**. While this could have referred to another believer Paul knew, in verse 7 it is obvious Paul was writing about himself in the third person. Perhaps this was Paul's humble way of moving away from the self-centered boasting that the Corinthian believers had heard from false teachers. Perhaps he did not want to compare himself with great servants of God (such as Elijah in 2 Kings 2:11 or Jesus in Acts 1:9) who were taken up to heaven while they were alive.

**1** ▶ Paul emphasized he was **caught up**. This refers to an involuntary action—and could be understood as being snatched away, grabbed, or forcefully taken away. This was not an experience Paul pursued—God planned and accomplished it without any prompting or assistance from Paul. Paul's experience was descriptive rather than prescriptive. In other words, this was unique to Paul and not something all believers should seek as they hope for some type of greater experience with God.

God took Paul to **the third heaven**. Ancient rabbis taught there were multiple levels of heaven. Scripture, however, does not mention elsewhere anything about different levels of heaven. Thus, we must understand this simply as a place in heaven beyond our known universe. Wherever this is, it is a place beyond this earth and the heavens of our atmosphere. It refers to the dwelling place of God and His saints. ◀

Paul noted that his experience occurred **above fourteen years ago**. For some reason, perhaps because he did not want to boast about it or make it some type of standard for believers, Paul had never mentioned this previously; the New Testament gives us no other record of the event. Even so, this is a reminder that the apostles and other followers of Christ experienced many things that weren't always recorded in Scripture.

Paul was unaware if he was taken up to heaven **in the body**—physically—or perhaps had an **out of the body** experience like a vision or was in some disembodied state. He acknowledged that only **God knoweth** the full extent of what really happened. Paul’s experience must have been overwhelming since he emphasized twice in these verses that he could not fully explain how it occurred.

**Verse 4.** However it happened, Paul **was caught up into paradise**. The Greek word for *paradise* is likely derived from a Persian word that means “park.” It refers to a lavish, walled garden that might be part of a king’s palace. The same Greek word is used for the garden of Eden in the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. *Paradise* is probably equivalent to the third heaven, and may have been used as a more descriptive term. It refers to the place where the dead in Christ dwell with God (Rev. 2:7); Jesus told the thief on the cross, “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Paul declared that he **heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter**. Similar to what John experienced when he was forbidden to write what he heard (Rev. 10:4), Paul also was prohibited from sharing what he heard. Note he mentioned nothing about what he saw.

**Verse 5.** While the incredible details of Paul’s vision would have surpassed anything the false teachers had experienced, he wrote nothing else about it. In fact, Paul still didn’t even acknowledge directly he was the one who experienced this astounding revelation. Paul didn’t hesitate to **glory** about the experience **of such an one**, but refused to boast about himself except for his **infirmities** (see 2 Cor. 11:30). Again, this evidently was quite different from what Paul’s opponents (the false teachers) had been doing as they pridefully told about their strengths, experiences, and accomplishments.

**Verses 6-7a.** Paul noted that if he **would desire to glory**, he would **not be a fool** because he would speak **the truth**. This stood in stark contrast to the foolish boasting of his opponents, who told things that were not true, hoping to captivate and control the Corinthian believers.

Rather than trying to sway them by relating his fantastic experiences, Paul determined to **forbear** for the time being. He did not want the Corinthian believers’ opinion of him and his apostolic authority to be based on **the abundance of the revelations** he had received from God. Had Paul done this he would have been acting in the same manner as the false teachers, who were leading the Corinthians astray. Instead, Paul wanted them to respect and follow his teaching and

*While describing this amazing experience, Paul—not wanting to boast—shared only the briefest of details. He did not elaborate on what he heard because this was a private moment between him and the Lord.*

*By doing so, Paul demonstrated to the Corinthian church that experiences like these are not prescriptive for all believers. This was a unique event that others should not expect to experience before God can use them for ministry.*

**DISCUSS: Question #2**  
**(PSG, p. 118): How would you summarize Paul’s experiences in these verses?**

*(Alternate: What are the benefits and cautions of sharing our spiritual experiences?)*

**TRANSITION:** “In the next verses, Paul wrote about what he called a ‘thorn in the flesh,’ a persistent and painful issue in his life.”

## STUDY THE BIBLE

### 2 Corinthians 12:7b-8



10 minutes

**READ:** Ask a volunteer to read 2 Corinthians 12:7b-8.

**SUMMARIZE:** Use the definitions of *pride* from **PSG pages 118-119** to explain the meaning of pride and how it applies in this context:

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines pride both as "a feeling that you respect yourself and deserve to be respected by other people" and "a feeling that you are more important or better than other people."

The former definition is a positive, healthy sense of pride because it relates to having a healthy sense of self-esteem. The latter meaning is a toxic, negative form of pride because it causes you to judge and find your self-worth in how you compare with others.

guidance because of what they had seen in his life and heard from his mouth (vv. 16-33)—solid, verifiable facts rather than fanciful claims that could not be confirmed.

That Paul used the plural *revelations* for his experience could indicate he had similar experiences on multiple occasions. But because he also commented on the *abundance* of those revelations, it could also allude to the overwhelming significance of this experience, which was of exceptional value to him. God had blessed Paul in a very special way, but this blessing certainly was accompanied by a great burden.

## 2 Corinthians 12:7b-8

**7b** there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

**8** For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

### KEY WORDS

**the messenger of Satan** (v. 7)—A parallel to "thorn in the flesh," the term indicates that Satan, the chief adversary of God, was the immediate cause of Paul's affliction.

### *Hardships can keep us from pride.*

**Verse 7b.** God knows the human heart. He knew what Paul might do out of such an amazing revelation. Any of us would likely become prideful, calling attention to ourselves, using the experience to our advantage, and perhaps even looking down on others who had not experienced the same thing. An experience such as Paul's could lead any believer to develop in him- or herself a feeling of superiority, as if he or she had joined a very exclusive club that was limited to select persons.

**2** ▶ God would not allow this for Paul. To make sure it didn't happen, Paul **was given ... a thorn in the flesh**. This was some type of trouble or disability Paul experienced throughout his life. Most biblical scholars have thought it was some physical condition that caused pain and difficulty. However, it could have been an extreme emotional issue or

even a severe spiritual burden (such as depression, despair, or doubt).

Others have suggested it may have been related to issues of persecution or opposition to Paul's ministry. Whatever the malady, Paul never specifically identified it.

What Paul did mention, however, was the source of this *thorn* and the reason behind it. The Greek verb translated *was given* is used elsewhere in Paul's writings to indicate favor or blessing from God (Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 4:14). Paul's use of the term here emphasized his thorn ultimately came from God. Paul pointed out God's purpose in this—**lest I be exalted above measure**. The thorn was intended to humble Paul—to keep him from thinking himself superior to others because of the heavenly revelations he had received or using the experience for sinful purposes. ◀

**3 ▶** While God was the Source, He allowed **a messenger of Satan to buffet** Paul. This is similar to Job's experience, when God gave Satan permission to bring pain and trouble to Job but not to kill him (Job 1:6–2:7). It may be difficult for us to understand that God used Satan for His purposes. While Satan thought he could bring down the man or cause him to turn away from the Lord, God knew the suffering would strengthen the man and his relationship with God.

The word *buffet* renders the Greek term that means to beat with the fist or batter with punches. A modern picture would be of a boxer or street fighter who repeatedly beats or punches another person. This is the way of Satan, who continually strikes us and exploits our vulnerabilities like the thief who seeks “to steal, and to kill, and to destroy” (John 10:10; see 1 Pet. 5:8-9). “The verb ‘to buffet’... (*kolaphizein*, ‘abuse,’ ‘batter’) implies humiliating violence—being slapped around; and the present tense suggests it was persistent—something that happens over and over again.”<sup>1</sup> It is the same term used to describe the abuse Jesus suffered during His trial before the Sanhedrin prior to His crucifixion (Matt. 26:67; Mark 14:65). ◀

**Verse 8.** Pain and suffering were not a part of God's original creation. They came into the world as a result of human sin. We naturally seek relief for our discomfort and an end to our distress. Paul was no exception. He didn't like the messenger and whatever means it used to torment him. So Paul prayed to God, asking **that it might depart from me**. He **besought the Lord** for permanent relief. **Thrice**—three times—may reflect the pattern of Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-44) or it could simply emphasize the intense and repeated requests for healing Paul made of God.

**GUIDE:** Use **Bible**

**Commentary 2** on page 122 and this page, as well as **DIGGING DEEPER** on **PSG page 119** to explain Paul's “thorn in the flesh.”

**DISCUSS:** **Question #3**

**(PSG, p. 119): Why is pride such a powerful and dangerous temptation for followers of Christ?**

*(Alternate: When have you dealt with a thorn in the flesh?)*

**GUIDE:** Use **Bible**

**Commentary 3** as well as **KEY WORDS** on page 122 **(PSG, p. 118)** to describe “the messenger of Satan” that buffeted Paul.”

**TRANSITION:** “The next verses sum up the good news of this passage: God's grace will sustain His people.”

## STUDY THE BIBLE 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

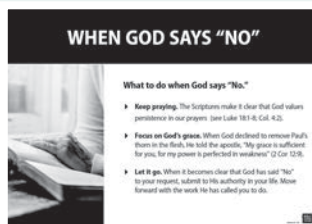


**15 minutes**

**READ:** Read or ask a volunteer to read 2 Corinthians 12:9-10.

**DISCUSS: Question #4**  
(PSG, p. 121): How can we take pleasure in times of distress?

**LEADER PACK:** Point to **Item 10: When God Says “No”** after your group members have shared their responses to **Question #4**. Note that sometimes it may seem to us that God is not answering us in our times of distress; those can be tough times. Even tougher are the times when His answer is “no.” So, what do we do? Ask a volunteer to read the poster.



## 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

***God helps us by His grace to endure anything.***

**Verse 9.** God answers prayer, but sometimes His answer is not what we expect or even what we want to hear. Paul clearly heard God respond to his prayer, and essentially God's answer was “no.” God would not remove Paul's thorn in the flesh. God would, however, use that malady for Paul's good.

**4** ▶ The thorn caused **weakness** for Paul. Paul had a commission from Christ and he wanted to fulfill it. But rather than finding strength through the removal of this thorn, Paul experienced strength through God's **grace**. Ultimately Paul's ministry was not dependent on his health—be it physical, emotional, or spiritual. Instead, the most important thing he needed was God's grace. Paul frequently used the word *grace* in his writings. In this case it pictures the presence of God encouraging, guiding, supporting, and strengthening him. Paul would have enough—all that was necessary—when he had God's grace. “We learn from the message given to Paul that God's grace is not just the unmerited favor that saves us but a force that also sustains us throughout our lives.”<sup>2</sup>

The *grace* that God gives to believers through Christ is inseparably linked to and expressed through His **power**.<sup>3</sup> God's ways are not always easy to understand. Sometimes in the New Testament we read statements that are difficult to comprehend. An example is when Jesus noted that “the last shall be first, and the first last” (Matt. 20:16). Paul heard a similar paradox when God told him, **my strength is made perfect in weakness**. On the surface this doesn't make sense. In times of human weakness, however, it can

be understood most clearly because that's when God's power can best be experienced. Paul had learned what he wanted the Corinthians to learn: the most complete display of power comes from God when we are weak. The ultimate example of this is the crucifixion. Though He was seemingly powerless and helpless, it was through the crucifixion that Jesus achieved salvation for all who will come to Him through faith.

Rather than boasting about his strengths as the false teachers had been doing, Paul said he would **rather glory in his infirmities**. Paul was not boasting in weakness for weakness's sake. Rather, he had discovered the key to his effectiveness as a servant of Christ. Only in his weakness could he experience **the power of Christ**; it would **rest upon** him (literally, "dwell in" or "cover like a tent") to provide all he needed to glorify God and fulfill His mission.

It's not that God can't work when people are strong. Rather, He gets the most glory in those times when believers are most incapable, unable, or unlikely. When the believer acts in obedience to God, acknowledging his or her own weakness and trusting in the presence of the power of God, the purposes of God are accomplished and God is glorified. ◀

**Verse 10.** Paul closed out this section of his letter by listing several things no human would desire: **Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses.** These summarize the extreme struggles and sufferings Paul experienced in his apostolic ministry (2 Cor. 11:23-28). While some might have looked down on him because of those trials, Paul noted that he took *pleasure* in these difficulties. It was not that he enjoyed them because he enjoyed pain; rather, he accepted and even desired them **for Christ's sake** and His kingdom. Paul's greatest desire was for Christ to live out His will in him (Gal. 2:20) so he could effectively "testify the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). This could only happen when he was **weak** and Christ was **strong** in him.

Jesus predicted difficulties and troubles for His followers (John 16:33). In their writings both Paul (2 Tim. 3:12) and Peter (1 Pet. 4:12-13) affirmed this truth. Yet too often Christians today are surprised and frustrated because of their trials. Only when we lean into God in the difficult times, listen for His voice, and allow His grace to work through our weakness can we experience Him on a deeper level and bring glory to Him as He works in and through us.

1. David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 522.

2. *Ibid.*, 524.

3. Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 573-74.

**GUIDE:** Use **Bible**

**Commentary 4** on page 124 and this page to describe God's grace and how it relates to His power in our times of weakness.

**DISCUSS: Question #5**  
(PSG, p. 122): **What role does our Christian community play in times of personal distress?**

(Alternate: *What has helped you discover that God's grace is sufficient for you to endure anything?*)

**DO:** Invite volunteers to share responses to the activity on **PSG page 122: "Experiencing God's Grace."**



## LIVE IT OUT



5 minutes

**GUIDE:** Emphasize **The Point:**  
**God's grace allows me to face anything life throws at me.**

**REVIEW:** Review **Live It Out (PSG, p. 123;** see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

## WRAP IT UP

**GUIDE:** Emphasize that regardless of how hard life comes at us, God's grace is there for us.

**PRAY:** "Father, thank You for Your grace; it is indeed sufficient for us.."

**NOTE:** Remind group members that **PSG pages 6-9** are there to journal one another's prayer requests.

## LIVE IT OUT

God's grace is sufficient and His grace will allow you to face anything and everything that life throws at you. Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **Give thanks for grace.** What hardship are you currently experiencing, or did you most recently experience? Thank God for that difficulty and ask Him to fill you with strength by His grace.
- ▶ **Look for grace.** Consider a recent hardship you encountered. How did God work in your life while going through that difficulty? Identify how God displayed His grace in that situation.
- ▶ **Share grace.** Who in your life needs to experience God's grace? Pray that God would intervene. Ask God to break the false hopes and false securities in that individual's life. Pray that God would shower His grace upon the person and use you as a conduit of His grace.

None of us is going to pray for pain or persecution. But when it comes, we can know that God will be there with us to help us become more like Him.

BIBLICAL  
**ILLUSTRATOR**



Meat market or “Macellum” at Puteoli, which is on the western coast of Italy. Paul admonished believers not to eat meat that had been offered to idols.

In 1–2 Corinthians, Paul’s references to Satan’s activities fall into four categories: deceiving, tempting, being subject to God’s will, and maintaining an evil identity. First, Satan’s basic deceptive nature appears in 2 Corinthians 2:11, where Paul warned the Corinthians that Satan could take advantage or outwit them when they fail in their duty to forgive a divisive fellow Christian. Likewise, Paul wrote that Satan disguises himself as an “angel of light” (11:14).

Second, Satan’s role as a tempter appears in Paul’s discussion of sexual relations in marriage (1 Cor. 7:5). Paul advised spouses not to deprive their spouses sexually lest Satan would tempt them toward infidelity through their lack of self-control (v. 2). Yet, Paul affirmed no temptation is too strong for God’s faithfulness to provide the believer a way of escape (10:13).

Third, Paul referred to Satan as functioning as an instrument within God’s larger knowledge and grace (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 12:7). For Paul, the only positive characteristic of Satan’s work is God’s ability to transform the enemy’s deception, temptation, and evil into good that ultimately glorifies Him.

Fourth, related to Satan’s evil nature, Paul called Satan “god of this world” and “Belial,” which meant “worthless” or “wicked.”

The excerpt above is from the article “The god of this World: Paul’s Portrait of Satan in 2 Corinthians” (Summer 2016), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

## SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

*God’s grace is always sufficient. You are saved through the grace of Jesus. God’s grace is greater than any evil, hardship, or trial that may come your way.*

Each week, make yourself available either before or after the session to speak privately with anyone in your group who wants to know more about becoming a Christian. See the article, “Leading Someone to the Greatest Decision of All,” on page 2 for guidance in leading a person to Christ.

Remind group members that **page 2** in the **PSG** offers guidance in how to become a Christian. Encourage believers to consider using this article as they have opportunities to lead others to Christ.

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