

## SESSION 3

# THE GIFT OF GRACE



*If you could have a lifetime supply of any product, what would you choose?*

**QUESTION #1**

#BSFLbrokenvessels

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

## THE PASSAGE

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

## THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

We can get too much of a good thing if we're talking about ice cream, coffee, or roller coasters. One thing, though, stands out as something we all could use in an endless supply.

*Grace.*

An unlimited supply of grace is available—and fully accessible. We're just not always aware of it. When our lives are going great, we often rest in those things that appear to make life great. But when the circumstances of life knock those props out from under us, what's left? Grace. Grace is there. God's grace was always there, but we become more acutely aware of it.

No one accidentally stumbles onto the grace of God when he is wallowing in success and wealth. Rather, it is precisely when he is down and out, or at the end of his rope, that he is in a position to understand and experience the grace of God.

The life of the apostle Paul exemplifies this awareness of grace. He faced numerous challenges and hard times, but he found great strength in the grace God poured out on him.

## 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.

“Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever” (Ps. 73:25-26). Recently as I was reading and meditating on that passage, I found myself at peace. I experienced a genuine sense of joy in my heart. I wasn’t faking it, nor was I trying to stir up emotions in my heart. I was deeply grateful I could pray that passage as my own prayer.

When was the last time you experienced a genuine sense of lasting joy in Christ, rather than a fleeting moment of happiness?

When was the last time you found yourself full of gratitude—not asking for anything in prayer, but rather spending the whole time in thanksgiving and praise? When was the last time you sang out with the psalmist, “Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name” (103:1) rather than “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me” (51:10)?

Without God’s grace, we would not know such joy, gratitude, or praise. Without God’s grace, we would not be able to experience true and lasting joy in Christ. We would instead be endlessly seeking the next thrill—to our own demise. Without God’s grace, greed—not gratitude—would fill our hearts, causing our attitude to be a desire to take from others, rather than giving out of our fullness in Christ. Lastly, without God’s grace, we would be perpetually looking for ways to appease our guilt and remedy our stained conscience, rather than rejoicing and expressing gratitude because Jesus said, “It is finished” (John 19:30).

Without God’s grace, Paul would not have experienced the visions and revelations of the Lord he described in 2 Corinthians 12. 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 spoke of it. And even now in telling of it, he spoke in the third person voice as though he were talking about someone else.

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.

Certainly, we should rejoice in any “mountaintop” moments where we feel especially drawn into the presence of God. But God’s grace also comes to us in other ways. In fact, as we will see in the next section, it may be more typical to experience God’s grace through difficulty and hardship.

How would you summarize Paul’s experiences in these verses?

### QUESTION #2

## 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.

Pride is a tricky matter. When we say, “I’m proud of you,” we typically use it to express love and admiration for our children or one who shares a close relationship with us. However, when we say to someone, “that’s prideful,” it is often a remark intended to correct haughty behavior or, at least, to make the person aware of a pompous attitude. Furthermore, when we accomplish a milestone at work, or receive praise for a job well done, we may find only a fine line separates a sense of satisfaction and a heart of pride.

*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.

Pride is a double-edged sword and the Bible has a lot to say about it. For instance, James 4:6 says, “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.” So, how can we keep ourselves from landing on the wrong side of pride? How can we prevent pride from overtaking our hearts and infiltrating our souls?

**Why is pride such a powerful and dangerous temptation for followers of Christ?**

### QUESTION #3

## DIGGING DEEPER



### THORN IN THE FLESH

The exact nature of this “thorn in the flesh” has prompted much speculation. Paul does not go into any detail in describing it because the Corinthians apparently were well familiar with what he meant. Some of their number or his competitors may have made it the object of their derision. The word translated “thorn” (*skolops*) occurs only here in the New Testament. It refers to something pointed such as a stake for

impaling, a medical instrument, or a thorn. In rabbinic literature the image is used to refer to something that causes pain or annoyance and does not especially refer to sickness or affliction. In the Septuagint the noun is used to refer to some kind of opposition. The phrase “in the flesh” seems to imply, however, that this thorn afflicts his physical body. It may be the problem behind the criticism of his physical presence.

David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29 of *The New American Commentary*, gen. ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1999), 519.

For Paul, God used “a thorn in the flesh,” a “messenger of Satan.” Paul gave us no more details regarding this sharp, painful, and persistent issue in his life. This thorn could have been his adversaries or the persecution he endured, but most scholars believe it was some type of physical condition ranging from eye or ear problems to malaria. We just don’t know. Whatever it was, this thorn was a hardship to his ministry (see Gal. 4:13-14). It was more than a mere annoyance because Paul prayed three times for God to take it away. The bottom line is that, while we don’t know just what this thorn in the flesh was, we do know it kept Paul humble. Therefore, Paul’s thorn in the flesh brought good into his life.

This is hard to realize when the ground is falling out from underneath you. When you are “downsized” five years away from retirement, or your children rebel, or your furnace and hot water heater break down in the same month, it is difficult to see how God is going to use this for His good. But He does. He always does (Rom. 8:28). You might not see the results immediately, but God, in His providence and sovereignty, will strengthen you through these hardships. He walks with us and comforts us. That’s grace.

God allows us to go through hardships because He has a plan and wants to do something in our lives. He wants to remove the pride from our hearts and replace it with His love, mercy, and goodness.

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## **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.



We have a natural aversion to pain. Ever taken a pain reliever at the first hint of a headache? We want to prevent all pain, not simply reduce it. Pain, however, can actually be a good thing. Yes, pain hurts, but often when we experience pain, it means our bodies are functioning properly. For example, the pain you feel when you touch a hot stove is a good thing because it causes you to jerk your hand away; otherwise you'd leave your hand there and burn through to the bone.

**How can we “take pleasure” in times of distress?**

#### **QUESTION #4**

Pain can also toss us into the arms of God. When we experience the pain of hardship—whether it is our fault or not—we discover God never leaves us (Heb. 13:5). In fact, God often uses the pain of hardship to get our attention and reveal His grace and presence to us. After all, when Paul turned to God and pleaded for Him to remove the “thorn in the flesh,” the Lord responded, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”

God’s grace is always sufficient. When you go through hardship, the same grace that was with Jesus (Luke 2:40) is with you, since grace and truth come through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). You are saved through the grace of Jesus, and His grace is able to build you up in any and every situation. God’s grace and His power are bigger and greater than any evil, hardship, or trial that may come your way.

As a result, instead of boasting in your strengths, it is actually more advantageous to boast in your weaknesses. Paul came to this conclusion “that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 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.” Paul’s is no false humility, as when a person



falsely boasts in his weaknesses, saying, for example, "My greatest weakness is that I care too much." Rather, this passage is actually exhorting you to accept hardships when they come because God wants to shape you through them and use the difficulties to make you strong in Him.

Through God's help that comes by His grace, He will give you the strength to endure anything.

**What role does our Christian community play in times of personal distress?**

**QUESTION #5**

## EXPERIENCING GOD'S GRACE

*Select a few of the following life experiences.*

*Describe how you might experience the grace of God in that situation:*

death of a loved one

promotion at work

marriage

birth of a child

loss of a job

separation

illness or hospitalization

natural disaster

other

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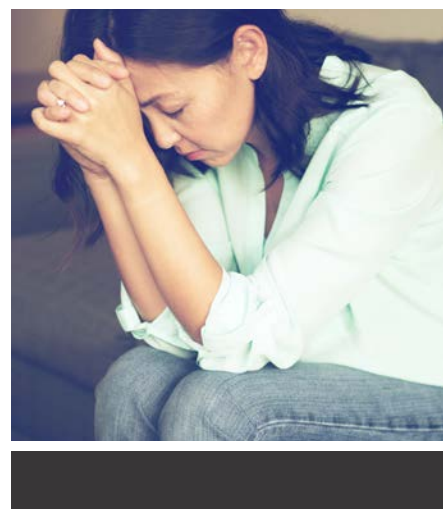
*Pray about and share a testimony of God's grace with someone this week.*

# 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.



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