

SESSION 3

READY WHEN SICKNESS COMES TO STAY

The Point

God's grace is enough—even in times of sickness.

The Bible Meets Life

Thanks to advances in medicine, many illnesses that once lead to death no longer do. Instead the person lives, often with non-stop medications or treatments. When a person is first diagnosed with an illness or disease, people are great at offering support. However, that help and support can often diminish as time goes on, but God doesn't forget about us in our sickness. Paul shows us that the Lord uses illness for His glory, and we can trust that His grace is sufficient.

The Passage

2 Corinthians 4:16-18; 12:7b-10

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

2 Corinthians 4:16-18; 12:7b-10

¹⁶ Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day.

¹⁷ For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory.

¹⁸ So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

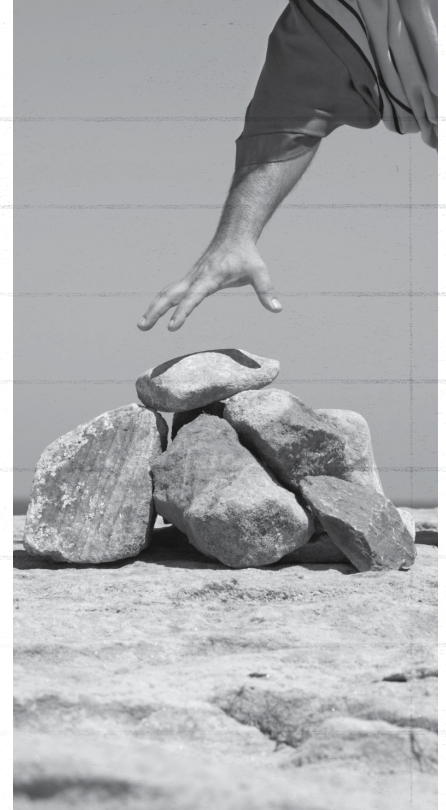
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⁷ Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so I would not exalt myself.

⁸ Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away from me.

⁹ But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me.

¹⁰ So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, catastrophes, persecutions, and in pressures, because of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.



The Setting

Believers in the first century experienced the same physical challenges and trials that the general population did, but their distinct minority status subjected them to additional trials through discrimination and/or persecution. Yet in his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul stressed that whatever difficulty a believer endured would only be momentary when measured against the promise of eternity with Christ. He used a personal example of his own "thorn" to emphasize God's grace and ability to demonstrate His strength despite our difficulties.

ENGAGE

(15 MINUTES)



ITEM
11

Leader Pack: Use the 2 Corinthians 4:18 poster to help in discussion of the session's Scripture passage.

GET INTO THE STUDY

ENGAGE: Begin the session with one or more of the **Engage Options** on the next page. (This is optional. If you'd rather skip the **Engage Options**, just begin with the first discussion question.)

SAY: Sometimes, sickness comes into our lives temporarily. Sometimes, it comes into our lives for a long time. It can even be devastating, but God doesn't forget us in sickness. He uses it for His glory.

DISCUSS: Invite students to discuss the question, "What takes your mind off of how you feel when you're sick??"

GUIDE: Call attention to **The Point**. Explain that this is the key idea to keep in mind throughout the session.

THE POINT

God's grace is enough—even in times of sickness.

READ: Read and summarize **The Bible Meets Life** for your group.

Sometimes all we need is some chicken soup and a good, long nap to feel better when we're sick. A nice warm bed may be enough to help you get over a head cold, but sometimes, sickness is not so easily soothed. For example, take my parents: 1. My mom endured years of treatments for a rare blood disorder that ultimately destroyed her body and required amputation to prolong her life. 2. My father went from a 75-year-old man riding in 100-mile bike treks with people half his age to a man unable to walk. Ultimately he was confined to a wheel chair in an assisted living center. Both my parents died after long and painful journeys through sickness. Both were Christians who loved God. Both had seen God answer miraculous prayers in different seasons of their lives. Both had asked God for earthly healing in their own lives, yet both received "no" as God's answer in the final years of their lives. When we walk with people who face long-term health issues like my parents did, all kinds of questions may arise: Where is God? Why does He heal some people and not others? If He can heal me, why doesn't He? Some of the most profound teaching and insight on this issue come from the pen of the apostle Paul. He was a man well acquainted with pain and suffering. Let's look at an account from His life recorded in 2 Corinthians.

PRAY: Transition into the session by praying that the Lord comfort students who are dealing with sickness in their families and friends—or even themselves.

Engage Options

► Lead with Action

Before the session, contact 4-7 students and ask them to bring the one thing they want when they are sick to the session. Make sure that no one else knows what they are bringing. For example, students can bring: a stuffed animal, their mom, a favorite blanket, and so forth. Place all items on the stage in a group. Invite the students who brought items to the front. Challenge the remaining students to match the item to the person who brought it. Say, **"We all have comforts we want when we are sick. But what happens when the illness is too severe or even terminal and these comforts are not enough?"**

OPTION: Ask someone who has experienced healing from a terminal illness to speak to your students about his or her journey. This option would be especially powerful if you can find a someone close to your students' ages.

► Lead with Atmosphere

Place pictures of hospital beds and people suffering from cancer, disease, etc. around the room. Say, **"It is more than likely that we will all spend our time in one of these before our lives are over. Many of us will spend our last days in a bed just like these. The truth is that sickness can strike us at any moment, but God's grace is more than enough to carry us through those moments."**

OPTION: You can also search the Internet for "Healer: The Kelsie Story," in which Kelsie Constable's parents talk about the Lord working through Kelsie's journey to healing.

► Lead with Media

Play Kari Jobe's song "Healer." Say, **"No matter the circumstances we find ourselves in, we can always turn to God for healing."**

STUDY THE BIBLE

The Point: God's grace is enough—even in times of sickness.

¹⁶ *Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory.*

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—2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18

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GUIDE: Lead students to understand how Paul's perspective changed his attitude about his pain.

In 2 Corinthians 4 Paul described his current situation with words like "pressured," "perplexed," "persecuted," "struck down," and "given over to death." Even though Paul's outward circumstances were extremely hard, he used very different words and phrases to describe his inward attitude: "not crushed," "not in despair," "not abandoned," and "not destroyed" (vv. 8-9).

What enabled Paul to have that kind of attitude? He maintained an eternal perspective.

Such a viewpoint is rare in our culture. Today, a person's hope, happiness, and even identity are typically tied to his or her physical health or circumstances. Because Paul had an eternal perspective, however, he was able to be strong and joyful when most people would feel weak and depressed.

SAY: Pain has a way of rocking our world; it can help us shift our focus. We realize we're mortal and won't be here forever, and we come to see that this physical life is temporary (Jas. 4:14). When life gets hard—even unbearable—the Lord encourages us to remember that we are not home yet.

DISCUSS: Lead students to discuss the question, "What are some questions people ask as they deal with health-related issues?"

Commentary

2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18

Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul showed how God's comfort had upheld him in the midst of multiple challenges to his apostleship and his endurance of great physical hardships. Like modern day prosperity preachers, Paul's enemies believed that his extensive suffering proved God did not support him. Conversely, Paul explained how suffering pointed to the resurrection power of God at work in him, while the easy living of false apostles only glorified themselves.

Having affirmed these powerful truths, Paul declared that we do not give up. We stand firm in Christ because the decay of the outer person goes hand-in-hand with the renewal of the inner person of the believer. While some scholars interpret the outer/inner person distinction as the comparison of the whole outer person seen by the world versus the unseen personality, the context seems more likely to emphasize our temporal fleshly body as opposed to His eternal Spirit. This interpretation is reinforced by Paul's continued discussion of the striking of the earthly dwelling (body) and its coming heavenly replacement (5:1). Consequently, we do not fret over the destruction of the outer person because, as the present tense verb reveals, we are continually being renewed spiritually.

Paul described his sufferings as a momentary light affliction because he viewed his situation in light of eternity. Paul knew God was working through, not in spite of, his sufferings to bring glory to Himself. Paul was so convinced the glory of God would be incomparable that he used a double expression (for emphasis) of the Greek term from which we have the English word *hyperbole*. In other words, he was informing the Corinthians that the future glory of God in which His people would share could not be exaggerated. Simply stated, Paul's eyes of faith allowed him to clearly differentiate between Christian experiences that are momentary and light and the ones that will be eternal and have weight.

Verse 18 teaches us that this eternal perspective does not happen by default. Paul exhorted the Corinthians not to focus on that which is seen and so easily steals our attention, thoughts, passion, and resources. Instead, we must focus on what is unseen—that which can only be seen with eyes of faith. Once again Paul used weighty adjectives that readers will miss if they do not stop to consider the difference between the temporary and the eternal. While we cannot avoid the “seen” issues of life and must give attention to many of them, they must not become our focus. By contrast, Christians who choose to walk by sight will miss the joy and comfort that come from focusing on the unseen promises that lie ahead for God's children (2 Cor. 5:6-8).

TIP: Remind students that *Paul's suffering was personal. He knew what it meant to suffer, like we do. He was a very real person with very real problems.*

STUDY THE BIBLE

The Point: God's grace is enough—even in times of sickness.

⁷ Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so I would not exalt myself. ⁸ Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away from me. ^{9a} But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."

—2 CORINTHIANS 12:7b-9a

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SUMMARIZE: Explain how Paul's own affliction challenged him to trust God.

In 2 Corinthians 12, we see one very specific example from Paul's life about his own journey with suffering. We read of Paul's request for relief and deliverance from his "thorn in the flesh." Bible scholars have conjectured as to what exactly was Paul's thorn in the flesh. No one can say with certainty what it was, but it was likely some kind of physical affliction.

Paul repeatedly petitioned God to remove his affliction. God's answer, however, was "no." And as far as we know, God gave no explanation for refusing Paul. Implicit in God's "no" is the gentle challenge to "trust Me."

And while God didn't remove the thorn, He did make two promises to Paul.

1. God's ever-present grace would be sufficient. God didn't remove the thorn, but He did promise Paul He would provide everything the apostle would need to live with it.

2. God would demonstrate His power in Paul's weakness. Sometimes the light of Christ's power shines most brightly against the dark backdrop of our suffering.

DISCUSS: Guide students to discuss the question, "When have you experienced God's grace during a time of weakness?"

DO: Have students complete the **Action Point**, "Power in the Pain."

Power in the Pain

Think about Paul's suffering. How could Christ's power shine through His pain? Discuss your answers with a partner and have an answer ready if called on to share with your group.

Commentary

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7b-9a

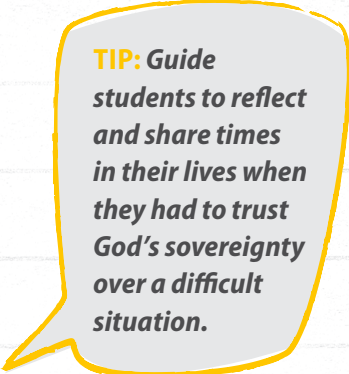
The passive nature of the verb “was given” told the Corinthians that Paul received a messenger of Satan from God, an arrangement not unlike the story of Job. Satan provided the torment, coinciding with his character, but God superintended the attack to bring about His own glory. This explanation pointed both to God as the giver of Paul’s thorn and to Paul as the recipient of God’s will, not merely of Satan’s torment. The present tense verb translated “torment,” “harass,” or “buffet” revealed an action that happened repeatedly and not merely a past event because Paul’s struggle with his thorn in the flesh had continued for some time. At the end of the verse, Paul repeated the purpose of the thorn in the flesh as keeping him from exalting himself.

The most prominent interpretations of Paul’s thorn in the flesh include personal sickness, inner temptations, human opponents, and torment from a demon, with many interpreters embracing the first option. The word translated “thorn” can also be translated *stake*, showing that Paul’s torment was nothing minor. We may not know the specific nature of Paul’s thorn in the flesh, but its ambiguity allows all believers to identify with Paul and to draw encouragement as they endure their own struggles.

Paul made his critical struggle a matter of serious prayer, as he pleaded three times for relief. Some scholars compare his three-fold prayer to Jesus’ prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46), concluding that the use of the number three is either symbolic of repeated prayer or indicative of prayer that ended after God showed the desired answer to be outside of His will. The second option seems more favorable since Paul stopped praying for the removal of the thorn once God answered his prayer and humbled himself to accept God’s will.

Although some Bible versions print the divine quote in red to represent the words of Jesus, Paul did not clarify whether his answer came from the Father or the Son. He also did not state how the answer came, but the perfect tense of the verb translated “He said” shows the action was completed and the answer stood firm. We should note that although God denied Paul’s request, He gave a better answer than a simple “no.” He reminded Paul that His grace was sufficient. The same undeserved favor of God that saved Paul would sustain him—and even restrain him when necessary.

The Lord continued, telling Paul His power is perfected (meaning *completed, fulfilled, or accomplished*) in weakness. Human weakness serves to magnify the beauty of divine grace as our frailties render us unable to rightly take any credit for God’s marvelous works. In other words, Paul learned through Satan’s ongoing torment that he was most powerful when he was least dependent on himself.



TIP: Guide students to reflect and share times in their lives when they had to trust God’s sovereignty over a difficult situation.

STUDY THE BIBLE

The Point: God's grace is enough—even in times of sickness.

^{9b} Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me. ¹⁰ So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, catastrophes, persecutions, and in pressures, because of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

—2 CORINTHIANS 12:9b-10

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SAY: Paul didn't just endure his trials and survive his suffering. He found the supernatural strength to "boast" and "take pleasure" in his suffering and weakness.

SUMMARIZE: Explain the three ways that God delivers us from sickness.

I don't fully understand why, but God has determined to do some of His most significant work through sickness, pain, and trial. It could be that what the world really needs to see—far more than a miracle or healing—are people who find joy, peace, and trust in God even in the midst of their suffering.

Does God still heal? Yes, but God doesn't always choose to heal in the way we want Him to. God delivers us in one of three ways:

1. Sometimes God delivers us out of our pain and suffering through supernatural intervention. God is still in the healing business, and He sometimes demonstrates His great power through healing.

2. Sometimes God delivers us through the pain and suffering. This is how God worked in Paul's life. God doesn't take away the sickness, but He gives us the grace to endure it. In the process, He shapes us deeply and manifests His glory as others see joy, steadfastness, and Jesus in us as we endure.

3. Sometimes God delivers us unto Himself. We can get so fixated on this life that we forget the beautiful reality of heaven that awaits us.

SAY: Our Heavenly Father is good, wise, and in control. He can be trusted.

DISCUSS: Invite students to answer the question, "How can we minister to friends who have long-term sicknesses?"

Commentary

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9b-10

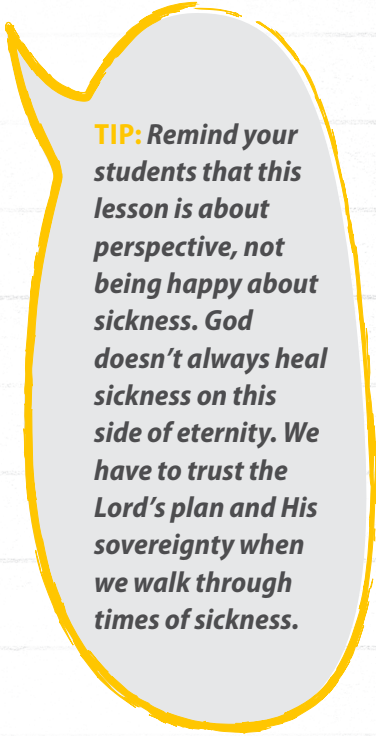
God transformed the words Paul would have used to boast of his heavenly experience into boasting gladly about his weaknesses, so that people might look through his sufferings and see the power of the resurrected Christ. Paul employed language echoing the function of the Old Testament tabernacle when he spoke of his desire for Christ's power to reside in him. Like John's description of the incarnate Christ as the One who became flesh and "took up residence" among us (John 1:14), so Christ causes His power to reside in us in our weaknesses.

In essence, while Paul did not enjoy his weaknesses themselves, he did find great joy in full surrender to God's control over his life.

Because Paul could see the hand of God at work in his life, he could take pleasure in or be "pleased with" (v. 10) his various struggles—including weaknesses, insults (slander from a variety of enemies), catastrophes (or "hardships"), persecutions, and pressures (lit. "tight situations"), many of which he outlined in the previous chapter. Despite the pain of his weaknesses, Paul embraced their sanctifying purpose in his life because of or "for the sake of" Christ.

Through his sufferings Paul identified with his Savior and desired to also (though in a different way) display the power of God. He served as a living example of how God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong (1 Cor. 1:27). Paul also knew that God was using his sufferings to strengthen his faith and make him more like Christ. As he reminded the church at Rome, we can rejoice in afflictions because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope (Rom. 5:3-4).

Paul concluded this part of his letter by summarizing the result of his sufferings: "For when I am weak, then I am strong." He did not refer to the physical strength of the outer person that was being destroyed (2 Cor. 4:16), but of the inner spiritual strength by which he stood when the outer person had been stripped of all his resources. As he had stated previously, God gave us lives as fragile as jars of clay so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us (v. 7).



TIP: *Remind your students that this lesson is about perspective, not being happy about sickness. God doesn't always heal sickness on this side of eternity. We have to trust the Lord's plan and His sovereignty when we walk through times of sickness.*

IMPACT

(10 MINUTES)

TIP: *If you have any students directly affected by sickness, encourage your group to pray together for that person. Avoid embarrassing the student, but lead your group to boldly intercede on his or her behalf.*

APPLY IT

SAY: People all around us are suffering through sickness and disease. One of the ways God ministers to those people is through you and me. We get the privilege of being the voice and hands of Christ to those who are hurting.

READ: Ask for a volunteer to read aloud a few ways students can take what they have learned and **Apply It**.

- ▶ **Pray.** Pray every day this week for someone you know who is suffering with sickness or disease. Don't be afraid to boldly ask God to heal that person. But also pray with a submissive heart because God may have purposes in mind that you can't comprehend.
- ▶ **Be there.** Make the time to get together with someone who is going through a time of suffering. Don't feel like you have to fix his or her problem. Offer love and support with your presence.
- ▶ **Serve.** Find a tangible way to serve someone going through a time of sickness or suffering. Take a meal, offer to babysit, or run some errands.

GUIDE: Lead students to consider which of the three suggested responses to the Bible study most closely applies to them and their current circumstances.

ASK: Which of these responses do you personally need to focus on most as you live this session out? Allow time for responses.

WRAP UP

PRAY: Close in prayer, asking God to help students remain faithful and to trust His plan, even when circumstances aren't what they would want.

ASK: Ask students about last week's **Live It Out** options. Discuss any responses and encourage students as they choose to apply the Bible to their lives.

GUIDE: Encourage students to complete one or both of the **Live It Out** activities for the week. Let them know you will discuss them next time you meet.



For **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/BibleStudiesForLife

LEADER LIVE IT OUT

Before the session, challenge yourself to grow with your students through this Live It Out.

Sick Day | Jeremiah 29:11

Reflect on what life would be like if you had a chronic or debilitating illness that affected every part of your day. The condition controls how you sleep, how you eat, and what you can or cannot do. What would you think about? What questions would you have? How you would live day-to-day? What would you want other people to know about you?

Journal your thoughts. Remember these thoughts as you encounter those who are dealing with chronic illness.

Notes:

ONE CONVERSATION™

Use these discussion starters to help foster a spiritual conversation with your family.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; 12:7-10

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE: Thanks to advances in medicine, many illnesses that once lead to death no longer do. Instead the person lives, often with non-stop medications or treatments. When a person is first diagnosed with an illness or disease, people are great at offering support. However, that help and support can often diminish as time goes on, but God doesn't forget about us in our sickness. Paul shows us that the Lord uses illness for His glory, and we can trust that His grace is sufficient.

STUDENTS

THE POINT: God's grace is enough—even in times of sickness.

- How can you and your family support people you know dealing with illness?

Discuss the following quote: "Health is not valued till sickness comes."¹ —Thomas Fuller

1. "Sickness," ThinkExist.com, cited 5 May 2014). Available from the Internet: <http://thinkexist.com>.

LIVE IT OUT: Your student has been encouraged to do one or both Live It Out activities in the Personal Study Guide. Here are some suggested ways to help your student:

*If your student chooses to do **An Encouraging Visit**:*

- Help your student gather flowers or write an encouraging note.
- Go with your student to the hospital to be an encouraging visitor.

*If your student chooses to do **Sick Day**:*

- Ask your student how he/she would respond to having a debilitating illness.
- Encourage your student to pray for those who struggle with sickness.