



SESSION 7

CHRIST'S POWER IN OUR WEAKNESS

Topsail Island, North Carolina, is a little-known treasure. The beaches are pristine and the sound between the island and mainland boasts a rippling sliver of water that flows both north and south depending on the moon's pull. During the day, pleasure crafts zip past the docks, fishermen meander through reeds, and children splash their way out to the sand bars. In the evenings the sun slides down the backsides of coastal forestry and casts its soft hues over the glinting water. Vacationers scramble to get themselves settled on their decks and docks. No one wants to miss the sunset show.

I was vacationing there with a few friends when one of them suggested we hop in the kayak and paddle our way across the sound to the mouth of an inlet that's lined with marshes. Small waterways serpentine through those marshes—wide enough for a kayak to pass through, long enough for a line to be cast. The fish were calling. Actually they weren't saying anything—they're kind of quiet that way. But we knew they were out there. The swaying reeds, the dive-bombing birds, a telling splash here and there. And I forgot to mention the clouds had blotted out what I'm almost certain were the words "Red Drum."

We grabbed our rods and oars, a bucket of live shrimp, a crunchy bag of frozen mullet, and off we rowed, perpendicular to the choppy current. We lurched in fits and splashes, mostly forward, because graceful kayakers we are not. After exactly 300 strokes, we'd made it to the other side and the keel slid up the bank of a sand bar. We lumbered out one at a time because we're no longer kids. (When you're a kid, you alight out of a kayak; when you're older, you lumber.) We gathered our rods, and April clamored for a shrimp out of the bucket. She pinched him between her fingers and pierced him through with my hook because you should know at this point in the story that

I don't like to bait my own hook. For one thing, shrimp are nasty little creatures with beaks. (You don't know this if your only exposure to them is at parties dipped in cocktail sauce. And don't get me started on that black vein.)

For an hour and a half, I stood knee-deep in the ripples, slinging my bait across the inlet's mouth like an outdoor magazine was there to do a story on my fishing prowess. Time and time again, I tipped the rod back while the shrimp dangled on the hook against the cobalt sky like a Popsicle™ on a stick. *What fish wouldn't want this?*, I mused. The perfectly weighted sinker carried the bait across the fluttering waters after I winged the rod forward. The line zinged. The bait dropped beneath the surface of the water. And nothing. Absolutely not anything of substance for 90 minutes other than one truly annoyed sunfish I reeled in. You should also know that I don't like to take my own fish off the hook. But never mind those details. The imaginary outdoor magazine thinks I'm a real talent.

After chalking up one sunfish, we determined to call it a day. We swapped our rods out of the kayak for a net roughly the size of a hammock. We wanted to capture a few mud minnows before returning home to replenish our supply of live bait. We are efficient this

way. We each grabbed one end of the net and strategically worked our way toward the sand bar. We cornered the mud minnows and any other unsuspecting creatures like pitifully tiny shrimp and crabs and with a brisk sweep we scooped them into our clutches. They flapped and scurried around in captivity. This was the most excitement we'd had all day.

April cupped our winnings in the palms of

If you've cracked your heart open to someone or something that is leading you astray, I implore you to run back to the Scriptures.

her hands with the intent of dropping them in the bucket. But when we turned around to get the bucket, the strangest thing had happened. Our boat had vanished. My first thought

was, *how in the world had someone stolen our kayak right out from underneath us?* We were the only ones ridiculous enough to be out here in the first place! Then I remembered this little known phenomenon people refer to as the tide. Apparently it had come in, and our kayak had gone out, just like that. Our heads darted in all directions scanning every possible waterway it could have floated down. I was panicking. I shot my gaze toward our house, which looked the size of a Monopoly piece across the waterway. It was way too far to swim. "I see it!" April shouted. "I'm going after it!" she exclaimed while charging waist deep into the current eventually succumbing to a full swim.

"This is a bad idea!" I yelled after her. "We need to call someone to get us!"

That's when April reminded me her phone was in the kayak. Right. In the time it took for us to exchange two sentences we could no longer see the boat, and I'd just spotted a stingray mosey past me, swinging its tail like it had never witnessed a more pathetic situation. I got the feeling that stinging me was beneath him.

April disappeared into the marsh while I waited for rescue. (Because if you're keeping track, I don't bait my hooks, unhook my fish,

nor do I swim after lost kayaks. I am nothing but baggage, really.) After several unnerving minutes the tip of the kayak emerged from the reeds. April was safely inside rowing toward me. I realized at this point it would have been well within her rights to leave me out there with my 6-ounce sunfish. But she nosed toward me, and I climbed in the boat, and we paddled across the sound.

After the kayak debacle, my thoughts drifted to 2 Corinthians. Why? Well, because right now all my thoughts lead there, as if it were Rome. I considered how Paul pleads with the Corinthians to stay in the boat of the gospel, to resist wading out into the tantalizing tide of false teaching that so easily sweeps away one's "sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3). I thought about cunning and deceptive leaders presenting a Jesus to the church at Corinth who was no Jesus at all. As if in a clashing sea of currents, I could hear Paul bellowing from Macedonia for his beloved church to stay afloat in the only gospel that can save them. Abandoning that gospel for something that feels better in the moment or seems more culturally relevant would only prove to leave them stranded in the end.

As I now contemplate this section of Paul's letter, I'm reminded that the times haven't changed all that much. The tides that clamor for our beliefs and affections have never ceased being on the move. They continue to creep up on us almost imperceptibly until one day we turn our heads while out of the boat and everything we thought we knew is gone. But it doesn't have to be this way. As we begin this week, my prayer is that the Holy Spirit will help us tighten up our theology where it's gotten sloppy. If you've cracked your heart open to someone or something that is leading you astray, I implore you to run back to the Scripture. We'll be reassured by the steadfast truths of the Word, reminded that whatever the world promises us may flow in today, but it will flow out tomorrow. Only the Jesus Paul preached will prove buoyant enough to hold us.

DAY 1

PURE JEALOUSY

2 CORINTHIANS 11:1-6

Whenever I see a doctor, especially for anything that could be linked to stress or tension, I try to present myself as a relaxed and cheery human. I think most doctors peg me wrong—they claim I’m intense. Recently I had an elongated visit with my doctor, and he emphatically told me some of the troubles I was having had to do with stress. *Me? You really think so, doctor?* Because you wouldn’t believe how relaxed I was in his office—I was almost dead.

After my appointment, I trotted out into the lobby and spoke to the receptionist. She’s a friend of mine who works for my doctor. “Tammi,” I whispered, all collected. “He said he thinks I’m intense!” She feigned wonderment. “But you wouldn’t believe how breezy I was! I was so breezy, like breezier than a swan skimming across the glassy waters of the sea.”

“He’s really good at studying people,” Tammi said, while ringing me up. She handed me a bag of natural supplements that are derived from super foods. I told her I couldn’t wait for everyone to see how easygoing I was about to be.

I don’t know if Paul would have described himself as passionate, intense, or given to stress. He may have fought his intensity as I occasionally do. No one ever called Paul laid-back. In this week’s study, Paul’s passion and zeal crest to new heights out of love for the Corinthians and for the true gospel he preached to them. I’m thinking Paul could have benefited from the calming enzymes of certain super foods to deal with certain super apostles, but I don’t know if he could get those kinds of supplements in Corinth. Plus, I’m thinking that if ever there was something to be ratcheted up about, it’s people’s souls. It’s the gospel. It’s Jesus Christ! So let’s get ready to engage in some important material this week. I have no doubt we will see our own cultures and communities represented in chapter 11, becoming more clearly aware of the things that truly deserve our passion.

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 11:1-6.

What word does Paul use to describe his feelings for the Corinthians in verse 2?

Look back at Exodus 20:1-5. What similarity do you notice between God’s passion for the Israelites and Paul’s passion for the Corinthians?

Here's a definition for *jealousy*: *a strong feeling of possessiveness, often caused by the possibility that something which belongs, or ought to belong, to one is about to be taken away*. The word can be used in a positive sense (e.g. the jealousy of God), meaning a passionate commitment to something that rightly belongs to one. It can also be used in a negative sense (e.g. human jealousy) to mean a self-destructive human emotion similar to envy.¹

We often think first of jealousy with negative connotations. I hate the feeling of being captive to jealousy's consuming nature that often leads to reckless and harmful actions. But there's a difference between being jealous of someone and being jealous for someone. And there's a difference between jealousy that finds its source in our flesh versus the Spirit.

Review today's passage and explain in detail why Paul was jealous for the Corinthians.

Paul also describes his jealousy as what?

☐ *consuming*

☐ *godly*

☐ *overpowering*

☐ *selfish*

I wouldn't want to serve a passive God any more than I would want to be married to a passive husband who didn't care where I was or who I was with. In the purest sense of the word, we cannot be jealous for another person if we don't first care for that person. Paul deeply cherished the Corinthians, which is why he was jealous for them. It's a strange sentiment to write, but I want to be more jealous. Jealous for the lost. Jealous for my friends, family, and the people I minister to to know Jesus more deeply. We simply won't have the energy for godly jealousy if we don't care about another person's spiritual condition.

If you're trying to decipher if the jealousy you're experiencing is godly or from your flesh, consider these questions:

Is your ultimate goal for the person to love Jesus with an undivided heart or to be attached to you?

Are you trying to control this person for your own purposes or liberate him/her?

Are you consumed by what you want this person to do for you, or how desperately you want him/her in relationship with Christ?

Do you see the differences here? Thinking through these questions will help you know what needs to be purified in your heart.

Read Ephesians 5:25-27, along with 2 Corinthians 11:2. Explain the significance of Paul describing the church's relationship to Christ as being like a sacred marriage between a husband and wife. How does this relate to the idea of godly jealousy?

Just as the marriage union is an exclusive and set-apart relationship, so our loyalty to Jesus should be pure and undivided. Since Paul had personally brought the gospel to the Corinthians, he considered himself their spiritual father. His deepest desire was to present them to Christ as a beautiful, pure bridegroom like a father would present his daughter to her husband. The problem is that the Corinthians were claiming a false Jesus along with other conflicting beliefs and false teachings. The church at Corinth was like a bride betrothed to her future husband while being involved with a bunch of other men. Let's look further into what was compromising the Corinthians' pure relationship to Jesus.

Verse 4 is the key to understanding the heart of the problem in the church of Corinth. What three distortions does Paul point out?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

According to verse 3 what did Paul fear? (Fill in the blank) The Corinthians' _____ would be led astray.

To what biblical account did Paul compare the Corinthians' situation in verse 3, and with what adjective is the serpent described?

I want to consider the progression here. First of all, the battle starts with the mind. Just as the serpent in the garden challenged Eve's thinking, so the false teachers in Corinth were going after the believers' minds. They were challenging their Christ-centered thinking, beliefs, and world views. And they were doing so with a slick and convincing tongue that was wooing the Corinthians away from the true Jesus, His Spirit, and the pure gospel.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: *In what ways do you find your biblical world view being opposed? It may be through personal opposition or it could be more general, such as through the media, books, or Hollywood. How is the opposition cunning or compelling? Be honest in your reflection.*

Paul warned that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent, we too can be deceived. But if being deceived means to be tricked or misled, how can we know when it's happening to us? Last night I talked to a family member who was describing how oppressed he'd felt a few days before. A lot of difficult trials and tragedies were surrounding him, and he found himself mentally sinking in a sea of swirling shadows. When I asked him how he pulled out of the despair, he simply said, "I knew what I needed to do. Go to the Scriptures." This will always be one of the chief protections for our minds from the deceptions of the enemy. If we're toying with or buying into a way of thinking that is contrary to God's Word, we're on the road to deception. If what we're beginning to believe doesn't match up with God's Word, we can know we're being deceived. So in a sense, we don't know when we're being deceived unless we let the Word of God tell us.

If we're toying with or buying into a way of thinking that is contrary to God's Word, we're on the road to deception.

Look back at verse 4. We know the false teachers were preaching a different Jesus than the true Christ Paul had preached to them. This led to some of the Corinthians having _____ a different spirit and gospel.

Things become really dangerous when we receive contrary thoughts and beliefs into our thinking and eventually into our hearts. Paul says at the end of verse 4 that the Corinthians had no problem with the detractors teaching a different Jesus. They received it without being troubled in any way. You, too, may be struggling with a once-tightly held biblical belief you are no longer sure is true because of what you've recently read, watched, or experienced. Go back to the Word and find the truth.

PERSONAL RESPONSE: *Ask the Lord to show you if you have received as truth a compromised version of Christ or His gospel. If so, repent and turn back to the real truth.*

When the enemy comes to deceive us he does so cunningly. Remember, the serpent in the garden of Eden was cursed to crawl on his belly after Eve ate of the tree. There's no telling how charming he may have looked, or with what swagger he strutted into the garden before twisting the logic of God's Word. He must have seemed believable, his arguments buyable, and his promises desirable for Eve to have been deceived. This is why we must continually immerse ourselves in the Word. When the tantalizing winds of culture's "liberating arguments" blow through our thoughts, we can then protect ourselves from being lulled into deception by countering false wisdom with biblical truth.

Paul couldn't bear to see the false teachers in Corinth lead his new converts astray. But notice he didn't fear the Corinthians being led astray from religion, a denomination, or even from his own self. He was afraid they'd be led away from their pure devotion to Christ! This is what allowed Paul's jealousy to fall underneath the godly category. His sole passion was to present the Corinthians purely to Jesus as a father would give his daughter as a bride to her bridegroom. As we start this week, I'm jealous for you to know the difference between the world's cunning teaching and the wisdom of Jesus. I'm jealous for you to see the thinness of materialism against the adventure of a Christ-following life. I'm jealous for you to experience the satisfying love of Jesus, sold out for no other. This is pure jealousy.

DAY 2

WHAT MATTERS MOST

2 Corinthians 11:5-15

Our culture places a premium on beauty, talent, skill level, wealth, social status, charisma, people skills, and fame. Paul's Corinth was no different. **Even in the church today we gravitate to the successful over those we deem common.** How many times have you thought, *how awesome a Christian would a specific movie star or famous athlete or wealthy business owner be?* But we may not have that same thought about the widow at the end of our street or the troubled middle class family in our neighborhood. This is not to say that any of the aforementioned accolades are inherently sinful or shouldn't be pursued with the right heart. The problem comes when outward appearance and social standing are what we use to evaluate spiritual worth or success—our own or someone else's.

The church at Corinth had stumbled into that very trap, buying into the teachings and claims of the false apostles simply because these men were persuasive, charismatic, and influential. Paul had quite an impressive list of accomplishments to his name as well, but either the Corinthians didn't value those achievements, or Paul chose to withhold some of them so as not to take away from the pure power of the gospel. This will become clearer as we begin today's study.

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 11:5-15.

According to verse 6, what skill(s) does it seem Paul was lacking, according to the Corinthians?

What can we surmise they were accusing him of in verses 7-9?

- ☐ *Charging an expensive honorarium*
- ☐ *Preaching for free*
- ☐ *Stealing to support himself*

List all the ways Paul humbled himself so as not to be a burden to the Corinthians.

Paul couldn't win with the Corinthians. If he'd charged them a fortune to minister in their church they would have called him a charlatan; when he didn't charge them at all, they were offended. Most speakers in ancient Corinth were paid professionals and those who came to listen expected

to pay, hoping part of their money could purchase them closeness to the speaker. If Paul had allowed the Corinthians to support him financially they may have tried to use it as leverage to control him or his message. Also, Paul's manual labor as a tentmaker was an embarrassment to them. "An impoverished leader was a contradiction in terms."² Even though Paul was bringing the life-changing message of Jesus, he wasn't sharing it the way they wanted. We're getting an idea of how political ministry had become in Corinth. Still, Paul refused to change from a humble approach to a conceited one. Oddly enough, his humble service is something he'll actually boast about.

Review verse 11. What reason does Paul give for why he chose to humbly serve the Corinthians?

The Corinthians would have been happier with Paul if he had served and loved them according to their specific ideas and conditions. They wanted Paul to rely on their pay so he could be subject to them. They desired that he fit into their social norms by dropping the lowly tent-making gig and jumping on the speaking circuit. The problem is that all of this would have undermined Paul's pure love for them. To minister under the constructs of the Corinthian culture was really no ministry at all.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: *Have you ever felt pressure to change your ministry approach or the way you showed love to someone based solely on what that person wanted? Explain. If you compromised a genuine approach, what was the result?*

To get a better picture of the flashy Corinthian approach versus Paul's humble service, turn back to 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

Fill in the columns below:

| The Way Paul Ministered | The Way Paul Didn't Minister |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| | |

Paul may not have preached with the ornamental and haughty speaking skills the Corinthians were accustomed to, but what accompanied his speaking according to verse 4?

According to verse 5, why would Paul rather preach in weakness than out of his intellectual prowess?

CONTINUE READING 1 CORINTHIANS 2:5-7,10

What word is used several times to characterize Paul's message?

☐ intellect

☐ charisma

☐ charm

☐ wisdom

How do we get wisdom (v. 10)?

Paul isn't saying we shouldn't work hard at our crafts or refine our skills and talents. He's also not promoting laziness that leans on the convenient excuse that the Spirit will somehow take care of our unpreparedness. (I've tried to fall back on this one a time or two.) In context, the Corinthian false teachers were attempting to dissuade people from the true gospel by their sharp oratory skills and intellectualism. Paul pointed out that human pride and smarts are no match for God's wisdom and power. Whether we are skilled or unskilled, educated or uneducated, the power of the gospel shines through humble vessels.

As I write this, I'm in the midst of preparing to lead worship at an event for ministry leaders. I could list countless people who have broader singing ranges and silkier voices with guitar skills that pick circles around my strumming. I'm working hard, but I'm limited in my abilities. When I look at a passage like this, I'm encouraged that even in my shortcomings I can pray and trust that the power of God's anointing will rest upon me as I lead worship.

Turn back to 2 Corinthians 11:6. Instead of being a trained speaker, what did Paul say he had?

Let's put this together because it has profound meaning. Dear reader, we live in a world where people don't know where they're going. They don't know what to hope in or if hope even exists. Many don't know why they're here.

They're chasing every imaginable dream to no avail. For a season, they may have woken up for a certain pleasure until one day that pleasure stopped satisfying or it walked out the door. But you and I don't live with that emptiness. We have the knowledge and wisdom Paul wrote about because God has revealed it to us by His Spirit (1 Cor. 2:10). And the knowledge He revealed is "the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6, HCSB). And we carry this treasure in jars of clay, not refined, showy vessels (2 Cor. 4:7).

The wisdom and knowledge of Jesus is what the world is desperate for. We don't have to be an expert in the latest trends, or have razor-sharp skills designed to buy people's respect, impress them with our beauty, or make them covet our positions. The world has all this in spades! It doesn't need more of its own stuff. What people are longing for is to meet someone with abiding spiritual wisdom and knowledge about what truly matters. Someone to tell them the secret wisdom of God that rescues us from loneliness, satiates our longings, obliterates the strongholds that keeps us addicted, and washes our consciences clean!

Plain and simple, this secret wisdom is cultivated by time in God's Word. It's quickened in prayer. It's deepened by fellowship with other believers. It's revealed in greater degrees when we're obedient. You can't buy the secret things of God, but He's pleased to give them to the ones who seek Him.

DAY 3

A FOOLISH BOAST

2 CORINTHIANS 11:16-30

Today's passage is an interesting one to say the least. It's not often we read the apostle Paul admit he's not speaking as the Lord would, or according to God's ways. This doesn't mean Paul was out from underneath God's authority; it means he's taken his Christianity off-roading into the woods after the Corinthians because he's tried everything else to convince them of his apostleship. If he can't beat his opponents, he's going to momentarily join them in their tactics, but not to achieve their goals—that's the key difference. Paul will stoop to the bragging shenanigans of the false teachers only to ultimately prove his undying love and commitment to the church at Corinth, and to turn everyone's sights back to Jesus. If you've ever thought Christianity is simply a matter of following a list of rules, today will prove it's far more relational and creative than that. Not to mention adventurous.

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 11:16-30.

Paul's situation is reminiscent of challenges we face today. Charming, charismatic personalities who claim to love God and may even claim to follow Jesus are leading countless believers down paths that are at odds with God's Word. The Corinthian church was filled with new believers who were especially vulnerable to the pull of the super apostles. These false teachers claimed to be God's leaders, but were actually about their own position and power. Paul had no choice but to go head-to-head with them for the sake of the church he loved.

Paul's opponents were bragging according to human standards, swaying the church away from Paul and ultimately Christ. In verse 18 and 21b Paul says he too is going to start boasting. What types of things did he boast about according to the rest of the passage?

According to verse 30, how did Paul describe what he boasted about? Why do you think he boasted about these things?

The Lord has used today's passage to convict me. Honestly, I like to stay out of the fray. I'm not one to jump into controversy. I fear people twisting my words, I hate being misunderstood, and I generally dislike being disliked. (Did you notice my fears are all about me?) Pretty much all the controversy that swirls around taking a stand is everything I try to avoid. In other words, no one has to worry about me ever running for president. We are in a battle, though, and the Lord has not called us to live our lives shirking from

uncomfortable situations. If the world is going to use its megaphone to cast its sway over the people we're called to be ministers of reconciliation to, how much more should you and I boast about who Jesus is and what He's done in our lives?

PERSONAL REFLECTION: *Consider the way people who are not believers (or confused believers) flaunt and promote their false beliefs. How can you graciously but boldly boast about Jesus and what He's done in your life? If this is difficult for you, list what stands in your way.*

Review verse 20. Keep in mind Paul is not referring to a hypothetical situation but a real one that is affecting the church in Corinth. List the five harmful actions the church was putting up with from the false teachers. "You even put up with anyone who ..."

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

When I read this list I think, *why in the world would anyone put up with this?* I realize we can't know for sure, but I have to believe that if the Corinthian believers were taking this much abuse from the false teachers, something tantalizing was also being offered. I can't imagine they would have subjected themselves to this harsh treatment if they weren't being persuasively influenced, promised something desirable, or involved in some sort of codependent relationship with the false leaders. Remember, these enemies were masquerading as apostles of Christ and servants of righteousness—they weren't blatantly evil in appearance, rather they were Jesus-ish in persuasion (2 Cor. 11:13-15). I tend to forget this.

I personally experienced something similar at an impressionable time in my life. I desperately wanted to be on the inside with some dynamic personalities who were "spiritual" but not Christlike. I put up with all kinds of nonsense, never knowing when I was going to be chosen or left out. I allowed myself to be lied to and taken advantage of. After awhile I even let myself become deceived, all because I wanted acceptance. I truly praise God that I had a few people like Paul step into my life. They reminded me of what healthy, godly friendships look like in comparison to the misery I was experiencing.

PERSONAL TAKE: *Can you relate to this experience? If so, how? Add any insights the Holy Spirit is revealing to you about why you've allowed yourself to be hurt or taken advantage of.*

In a tongue-in-cheek sort of way, Paul says in verse 21 he was too weak for the kind of harsh treatment the false leaders displayed. Based on your study of 2 Corinthians so far, how was Paul's approach to ministry with the Corinthians different than the false teachers? What Christlike characteristics did Paul display?

If you're wondering if someone is a true servant of the Lord, ask yourself these questions: Is the person humble or proud? Gentle or harsh? Patient or explosive? A bragger of self-made accomplishments or a boaster of weaknesses that makes much of Jesus' strength?

Verses 22-29 are what many refer to as "The Fool's Speech" since Paul was put in a position to have to act foolishly by boasting about his spiritual experiences. As my friend Julie put it, "Paul didn't mention his humble service earlier because he was busy just doing it. Now they had forced him to come out and say what before he was just trying to show with his choices, his life, his work, his words."

What descriptions of identity and heritage does Paul begin with in verse 22? Why start here with his boasting?

Consider the physical hardships listed in verses 23-27 that Paul endured for the sake of the gospel. What convicts and challenges you the most and why?

For better understanding, I've paraphrased verses 28-29 below:

Apart from other things I could mention, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is led into sin and I am not livid about it?³

PERSONAL TAKE: *Verses 28-29 shift from Paul's physical hardships and suffering to a more relational and emotional nature of suffering. Explain how relational pain—such as watching people you love be led astray—can be even more painful than physical suffering?*

When I look at the whole of Paul's speech, I'm challenged. He has leveraged his heritage, experiences, trials, and open heart to defend himself before the church he served. The persuasive personalities who looked like Christ's ministers and who were holding power over the Corinthian believers needed someone to stand up to them. We need people willing to take a stand for truth today. We're desperate for people to rise up with humility for the sake of others so Jesus can receive glory. If we fling ourselves out there with any other motives—even if we speak truth—we will be as foolish as the ancient false teachers.

If you consider yourself too weak or powerless to make any kind of difference, read Revelation 12:10-11 in the margin as an encouraging reminder. What does your testimony, in conjunction with the blood of the Lamb, have the power to do?

PERSONAL RESPONSE: *Don't rush to finish today. Take a moment to prayerfully journal about one specific way you can step up and take a necessary stand. (I'm praying the same.)*

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: The salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Messiah have now come, because the accuser of our brothers has been thrown out: the one who accuses them before our God day and night. They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not love their lives in the face of death.
Revelation 12:10-11, HCSB

DAY 4

CAUGHT UP TO HEAVEN

2 CORINTHIANS 11:30-33; 12:1-6

First, let me begin by saying I'm so proud of you! Not many people get this far into a Bible study. The chores of life creep in, enthusiasm wanes, and friends drop out. Then you're left with that awkward task of going to your group meeting alone, when all you really want is to be home on your couch with a bowl of cheese dip. I understand this. I want you to know that the cheese dip will come and go, but your time in the Word of God will never be taken from you. When Mary of Bethany sat at Jesus' feet as Martha prepared the meal, Jesus said that Mary's investment of time with Him would never be taken from her (Luke 10:42). Be encouraged. **The time you're spending with the Lord is an eternal investment.**

As I applaud your impressive discipline and commitment, according to today's text, I should be cheering you on for your weaknesses as well. Paul is going to show us yet again that we can take great joy in our frailties—not for frailties' sake, but because the power of Christ shines magnificently through our weakness.

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 11:30-33.

PERSONAL TAKE: *Write verse 30 in the margin. Then consider this question: Given the circumstances he faced with the Corinthian church, including the conflict with the "super apostles," why would Paul choose to boast about his weaknesses instead of his strengths?*

Were you perplexed by Paul inserting his account of being lowered in a basket from a window in the wall of Damascus? At first this struck me as an odd story in an odd place. I tucked it away as The Great Basket Mystery. (I have a large folder in my head for similar Bible questions.) Thankfully there is supplemental information in Acts that will shed further light. Before reading that text, keep in mind Paul's prestigious heritage and upbringing as a Jew of Jews. Also note the great basket escape happened soon after his salvation experience on the road to Damascus.

READ ACTS 9:9-15,22-25.

Paul had gone from being renowned in the Jewish community as a Pharisee intent on stomping out this movement called the Way (Acts 9:1-2), to a man on the run as a follower of its founder, Jesus. Explain how going from being a powerful leader to a fugitive fleeing for his life in a basket would be considered a weakness Paul could boast about.

We can all take a page out of Paul's evangelism and discipleship playbook here. Sharing what God has done in our marriages, friendships, child-raising, jobs, health, etc.—especially during times of weakness and vulnerability—is one of the most relatable ways to share our faith.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: *Can you think of an especially weak time in your life when Jesus showed Himself strong in your powerlessness? Describe how you can share this experience with believers and unbelievers alike in a way that makes the hope of Jesus accessible and relatable.*

A dear older friend of mine shared this story with me: "I remember a man coming in to service the cable. He said, 'Lady, is your house always this clean?' I told him I used to be a real pig! 'What happened to change you?' he asked. 'The Lord Jesus Christ!' I replied. I never expected to share about Jesus that day in that way. It is always exhilarating! I have grown to absolutely love the simple and unglamorous ways God can use us! It speaks more of His greatness to me that He cares about such little details."

TURN BACK TO 2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-6.

What heaven was Paul caught up to?

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> first | <input type="checkbox"/> third |
| <input type="checkbox"/> second | <input type="checkbox"/> fourth |

How many years prior to Paul's writing this letter had this experience happened?

According to verse 4, what types of things did Paul hear?

Why did Paul speak about himself in the third person? Some scholars suggest he didn't want to come off as arrogant about this extraordinary experience, so he used this grammatical tool to humbly detract attention from himself. Sharing about the amazing works God has done in our lives is vital for us to do, but we should be careful not to slip into a "bragimony." (One of my favorite made-up Christian terms for when a testimony turns into bragging about how awesome we are.)

When sharing about God's goodness in your life, what's one specific thing you can do to make sure God is the one being celebrated instead of exalting yourself? It can be something as simple as Paul using the third person to talk about his experience—except maybe don't imitate him exactly. That could be a little weird.

While several theories abound concerning "the third heaven," many scholars say Paul is referring to the highest heavenly realm, God's throne room. In verse 4 Paul calls it paradise. "It may be, therefore, that Paul was taken into the very presence of God in the heavenly holy of holies."⁴ Paul's experience fits well with the obsession our modern culture—even secular culture—has with the afterlife and spirituality. Granted, much of what we watch on television or in movies about the spiritual realm is fictional or completely false. However, this fascination with it tells me that inherently we know we're more than physical beings existing only for this fading earth.

Why do you think Paul felt the need to share this experience with the Corinthians now after keeping it private for fourteen years?

Paul wasn't sure if his heavenly experience took place in the body or out of the body. It's possible he was confronting the gnostic belief prevalent at the time that the body was inherently evil, and therefore a truly divine experience couldn't have happened while in the body. Regardless, Paul was comfortable with whichever way the Lord had chosen to snatch him up. What I find meaningful is that both times Paul claimed to not know the answer to this mystery, he insisted, but "God knows" (vv. 2,3).

PERSONAL REFLECTION: *Is there something in your life you've been spending precious energy trying to solve or figure out? If there doesn't appear to be a clear answer this side of heaven—or at least in the foreseeable future—take a moment to entrust it to the God who knows. Lay it before the One to whom no mysteries exist. Write your prayer below.*

Look back at the end of verse 6. What two things did Paul want to be noted for?

This is one of those enormously practical verses I'd skimmed over my whole life until now. After Paul relayed one of the most sacred, holy, and extraordinary experiences a person could ever have, he essentially said, *But enough about all that. The real reason I want you to trust my apostleship is because of the way I've lived my life before you. By what I do and say.* We love the sensational. We get excited for a miracle or a good vision or dream. Perhaps even more so today we're infatuated with the platforms of Christian celebrities, focusing on their big ministries—impressed more with size rather than effectiveness. But do we have the same level of passion for daily faithfulness? The humble service no one sees? The patient and kind word spoken in mundane conversations? Supernatural and extra-special experiences are wonderful, but it's the consistent godly patterns of our lives that yield enduring fruit.

Supernatural and extra-special experiences are wonderful, but it's the consistent godly patterns of our lives that yield enduring fruit.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: *When you think about your life as a believer, what do you most seek: electrically-charged highs and supernatural experiences or daily faithfulness that's characterized by love, peace, patience, kindness, service, and joy? Explain.*

The Lord snatching a person up for anything—especially a visit to heaven—is an unspeakable privilege and blessing. I’ve had a few experiences in my life I would categorize as extraordinarily sacred or holy. At times, the Lord has spoken to my heart more clearly than if I’d heard Him audibly. He’s given me experiences I would say were divine. I treasure these, and occasionally I share about them. You may have some, too. But at the end of our lives these mountain-top experiences will not be what we’re remembered for. By God’s grace, we will be a part of changing lives on this earth because of what we’ve said and done. Because of how we’ve humbly, sacrificially, and all-out joyfully lived our lives with day-to-day faithfulness.

Our culture makes much of the spotlight and the sensational. We even fall into this trap in the church sometimes. The bright lights will fade and the stage will one day have someone else dance across its surface. But those who do the will of the Lord will live forever (1 John 2:17). And His will is to love Him and love others. Let’s do this in word and deed.

DAY 5

WHEN I'M WEAK, I'M STRONG

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10

When I'm weak I am strong

Suffering brings Your grace along

My deepest hurt becomes my greatest song

For when I'm weak I am strong

I wrote these words and put them to a simple melody when I was in college. I never got around to writing verses or a bridge or anything that would make this lyric into an actual song. It was my little chorus I strummed on my guitar, sometimes singing through tears. I was always a pretty serious kid—that one of my favorite passages of Scripture growing up was about Paul's thorn in the flesh, and that I wrote a chorus about it, is a testament to this. (My poor parents!) This is still one of the most meaningful passages in the Bible to me. Not so much because I love the idea of having a thorn, but because of the presence of Jesus who presses in deeper than the thorn. I'm praying you'll be encouraged by today's reading.

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10.

The Greek word for *thorn* is *skolops* and can refer to “something sharp or pointed, such as a splinter or a stake.”⁵ Paul used this metaphor to speak of a particular pain that was difficult and unceasing. He also tells us the thorn was inherently evil, calling it “a messenger of Satan” (v. 7). I will speak more about this in this week's video, but let's look at the why, what, and who of the thorn. Answering these questions may be difficult and troubling at times, but once we do the hard work we'll be blessed by ending this week's study with the promise of Christ's power and presence in our lives, no matter what the thorn.

WHY THE THORN WAS GIVEN

Why was the thorn given (v. 7)?

PERSONAL TAKE: *Why would Paul becoming proud or conceited be one of the worst things that could happen to him, his ministry, and his relationship with the Lord?*

Of the why, what, and who of Paul's thorn in the flesh, the why is most clearly answered. As a result of Paul's supernatural experience with the Lord he would need this thorn to keep him walking in humility. We may not have all the information we'd like but let's give it up for at least one clear answer!

WHAT THE THORN WAS

Several ideas and opinions have been offered over the years as to the nature of Paul's thorn, but the reality is we simply don't know. Some believe it was a physical ailment; others believe it was persecution and continuing opposition; still a few think it was psychological travail. You can make arguments for any of these; however, a physical condition and persecution of some sort are the two with the most traction.

PERSONAL TAKE: *What benefit do we receive from not knowing the identity of Paul's thorn?*

We don't need to have Paul's thorn to experience the grace and power of Jesus; we only need to have a thorn.

In one way I'd love to know what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. Reading his letters with that knowledge in mind would give us more personalized insight into some of his writings. At the same time, I'm glad we don't know. That makes this passage more broadly applicable to any of us who have a thorn. We don't need to have Paul's thorn to experience the grace and power of Jesus; we only need to have a thorn. Lacking the thorn's specific identity, we focus on Jesus during our suffering rather than comparing our thorn to the nature of Paul's. If our thorn matched Paul's, consider how that one form of suffering would be exalted above every other form. Can you imagine? Just think of all the people who would be incessantly talking about their PTSD—Paul's Thorn & Suffering Disease. I think the Lord saved us big by not revealing this one.

THE WHO BEHIND THE THORN

According to verse 7, the thorn was _____ Paul.

☐ received by

☐ forced upon

☐ resisted by

☐ given to

The difficulty of this verse is that it's not crystal clear who the giver is—God or Satan. However, we do know that "The word *given* was usually employed to denote that God's favor had been bestowed."⁶ We also know that God chose to not remove it and that He had a good purpose for the thorn. My personal belief—and the view of scholars I've studied—is that God was the giver of the thorn. I know this can be difficult to accept—it's hard for me to accept—especially since we know the thorn was evil. But regardless of whether you view God or Satan as the giver, tension exists. Either God gave the thorn, which has its obvious difficulties, or Satan gave it while God

stood by and allowed it. Either way we're left to contend with God about a difficult matter.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: *What in verse 7 causes you the most difficulty with God? If no difficulty exists for you, explain.*

We're not the first people to struggle with the question, *if God is good how could He give an evil thorn or permit pain He could have stopped?* We also see this play out in John 11. Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus was deathly ill. They sent for Jesus while their brother was still alive, pleading for Jesus to come and heal him. But Jesus didn't come in time (11:6).

READ JOHN 11:33-37.

Mary and Martha's Jewish friends had two very different responses when they saw Jesus weeping alongside Mary. What were they?

What was the chief complaint about Jesus from the second group?

The other day I took one of those walks with the Lord where I prayed and praised, but also contended. I confessed to the Lord that one of the greatest challenges to my faith is seeing the lost dying without the gospel. Also, it's very difficult for me to watch tragedies fall on believers and unbelievers alike that God has the power to stop. If He knew the trajectory of this decaying world and our wicked hearts, why start this whole thing in the first place? I was hashing these questions out with the Lord on my walk—not expecting an answer but more interested in receiving a deeper assurance of His great love for the world.

A few hours later, I was thumbing through the passage you just read, preparing for a message I was giving to a group of women. I've read John 11 bunches of times, but had never noticed the significance of the two distinct responses to the exact same event. Both groups witnessed Jesus weeping with Mary near Lazarus's tomb. One group's eyes were opened to Jesus' profound love for Lazarus—*See how He loved him!* But the other group was filled with a sea of doubt—*If He has the power to heal, why didn't He?* The first group was focused on what Jesus had done; the second on what He could have done but didn't.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: *When it comes to the troubles and difficulties of life, how can you more purposely focus on what Jesus has done for you versus what He hasn't?*

TURN BACK TO 2 CORINTHIANS 12:8.

True or False: Paul received the thorn without objection.

What helps buoy me through the difficulties of verses 7-8 are verses 9-10. After Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to remove the thorn, what was Jesus' personal response to him? Write the quote in verse 9.

Regardless of the type of thorns we've been given or hardships we're enduring I'm a big believer in pleading with the Lord. I encourage you to beg the Lord for healing, deliverance, and relief. Scripture backs up our persistent appeal to God for help in times of trouble. However, there are times when the Lord tells us to move forward with our thorns. If He chooses to keep the difficulty in place, we must choose to live in the promises of verses 9-10. It's a willful decision we must make. I've spent way too much time sidelined by certain pain, trying to dissect it and figure it out, instead of experiencing Christ's sufficient grace and perfect power in the midst of it.

PERSONAL REFLECTION: *In the midst of your most painful trial, how has Jesus' grace been sufficient for you?*

How has His power been made complete in your weakness?

After Paul hears from Jesus his tone significantly changes. He goes from pleading with the Lord to remove the thorn to what entirely new response?

The thorn had not changed but Paul's perspective had. Instead of solely seeing the evil of the thorn and focusing on the pain of it, he realized it was an avenue through which Christ's power could rest upon him. The great pain was accompanied by an even greater joy.

PERSONAL TAKE: *If we read only verses 7-8, we would emphatically say that Paul would have done anything to get rid of his thorn. But after reading verses 9-10, do you think Paul would remove his thorn or keep his thorn, given the opportunity?*

PERSONAL RESPONSE: *Has God ever given or allowed something painful in your life that you desperately wanted removed, but later wouldn't trade? Perhaps it was even something evil in nature. Record your thoughts below.*

I pray you're encouraged today by this difficult passage. If we weren't given verses 9-10, we might find ourselves despairing over verses 7-8. Imagine if Paul chose to live in the atmosphere of the first two verses, never moving into the hope of Christ's promises and blessings to him. His boasting about his weaknesses would have been lamenting as a martyr. His gladness would have been madness. His delighting in hardships because there he found Christ's strength would have been bitterness over a helpless identity.

Dear sister, if we will choose to seek the Lord's response to our difficulties, whether a persistent thorn or the other hardships mentioned, we will experience the miracle of being glad in sadness, boasting about weakness, and delighting in suffering. Not because we're detaching, compartmentalizing, or blocking out reality. But because we're experiencing the very real presence of Jesus, whose strength is perfected in our weakness.

A dear friend of my family's recently went through one of the most devastating losses a person can endure. He wrote this prayer: "God, you permit what you could have prevented. Thank you. My heart trusts in your unfailing love." This is the miracle I'm talking about. A heart of thanks and trust in the Lord who may give or allow the thorn, but never does so without also giving the grace and power of Jesus in extra measure. For when we're weak, we're strong.

SESSION 7 VIEWER GUIDE

THORN IN THE FLESH

GROUP DISCUSSION:

Why does Paul focus his boasting on his weaknesses? Give an example of what it looks like to boast in your weakness without it being false humility.

Why do we sometimes feel such a need to promote ourselves? How can we defer attention from ourselves to Christ without coming off as a martyr?

Kelly stated, "Our reputation shouldn't be based on a handful of extraordinary experiences but on the long haul of our words and deeds." While we may agree that is true, why do we put more stock in the extraordinary?

Why does God hate pride so much? In what ways do you struggle with pride?

Does the passage on Paul's thorn in the flesh trouble you? If so, why? What truths from the text have comforted you even in the midst of its difficulties?

How has the power of Christ been displayed in your weakness?

What one thing stood out to you from this video?

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Sundried Tomato AND Goat Cheese Frittata (serves 6)

INGREDIENTS:

6 eggs

1 cup milk

Salt and pepper

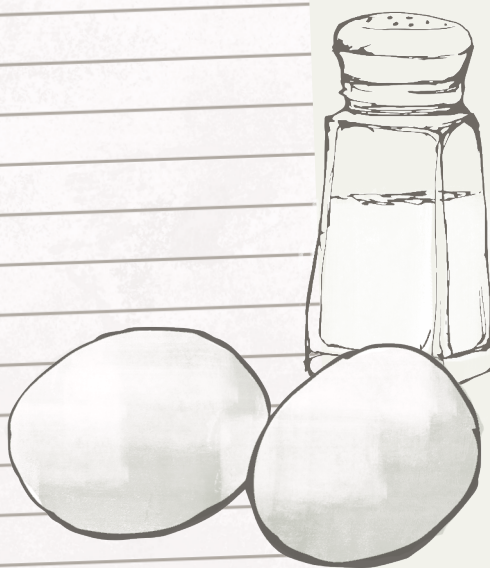
4 ounces goat cheese, broken into large chunks

¼ cup olive oil, plus more for drizzling

2 cloves garlic, minced

1½ cups sun-dried tomatoes

4 cups arugula, roughly chopped and divided



I know some of you meet in the mornings and could use a breakfast recipe, so here's a filling one. A friend made this for me, and I loved it. I kept looking for the crust because it was so filling, but it's all eggs, cheese, and veggies. I also just realized almost every recipe I've chosen shares the common thread of the queen of all ingredients: garlic. You always have my permission to use more than the recipe calls for. Oh, and I haven't given up on finding a dessert that calls for garlic—just give me time.

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

In a large bowl, whisk together eggs and milk until smooth. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Add goat cheese and stir just enough to coat. Set aside.

Heat ¼ cup olive oil in a large ovenproof skillet over medium heat. Add garlic and sauté about 1 minute. Add sundried tomatoes and 3½ cups arugula, stirring for 1 minute. Pour egg mixture over ingredients in pan and cook about 5 minutes, or until the eggs begin to set.

Transfer the skillet to the preheated oven and bake about 10 to 15 minutes, or until the frittata has set and is slightly golden on top. Remove from the oven and let stand for 5 minutes.

Sprinkle the frittata with the remaining ½ cup arugula leaves and drizzle with olive oil. Slice into wedges and serve.