

Limited Resources, Limitless God

December 14, 2025

When Your Circumstances Falls Short

The Point: God's grace will sustain you through life's circumstances.

Session Passages: 2 Corinthians 1:8-10; 12:6-10

2 Corinthians 1:8-10

Connection to the Point: Paul's difficulties led him to put his hope in God.

The Setting. Paul wrote the letter we know as 2 Corinthians to reestablish a relationship of trust and close friendship. He opened with the customary introduction and offering of thanks to God. Then he followed with a declaration that God would comfort His people in their present suffering.

Paul had recently endured some unspecified troubles in Asia. This suffering deepened his appreciation of God's limitless compassion and drove him to identify with Christ's sufferings. Therefore, in the opening verses of this epistle, the apostle sought to comfort his readers who also suffered similarly due to their circumstances.

We don't want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters (v. 8). Paul made this warmhearted appeal for their support by bringing his readers up to speed on what he had endured. Apparently they had some knowledge about his hardship, but they could not have known its severity.

Of our affliction that took place in Asia(v. 8). Now the apostle wanted to give them a sense of the devastating nature of his experience in Asia, the Roman province that was in present-day Turkey. Ephesus, the most prominent city of the province, served as Paul's missionary headquarters during this time in his ministry (1 Cor. 16:8). He never specified the exact nature of his affliction nor did he identify Ephesus as the location where it occurred. It could have had something to do with the citywide commotion led by Demetrius, the silversmith (Acts 19:23-40), after which Paul departed for Macedonia (Acts 20:1). In the absence of any details, Paul may have suffered his affliction due to the onset of some life-threatening illness or because of some kind of accident. His enemies may have inflicted on him some particularly dangerous persecution. He may even have suffered some psychological malady or distress. Rather than focusing on the details of his affliction, Paul turned his attention to God's purpose in it.

We were completely overwhelmed—beyond our strength (v. 8). The main verb, translated "completely overwhelmed," carries the idea of being weighed down as by ballast in a ship. Coupling this with the idea of something far beyond one's power exposed the extraordinary nature of Paul's burden. By stringing together these superlatives, the apostle emphasized some inward distress resulting from the pressures and assaults due to his preaching and teaching ministry rather than some trouble imposed on him by enemies.

So that we even despaired of life itself (v. 8). "So that" revealed the result of utter helplessness. The intensity of his suffering left Paul feeling like he was hanging onto his life by a thread.

Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death (v. 9). Not only did Paul sense being crushed by his affliction, he lived with a sense of dread. While no court official had sentenced him to death, metaphorically speaking, he felt like a condemned man awaiting execution.

so that we would not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead (v. 9). Apparently, Paul—like many believers—had sometimes relied on himself. However, the profound psychological pressure experienced posed such a dangerous and imminent threat that he could no longer rely on himself. Left with only one choice, Paul threw himself on the protection of God who had the power to raise the dead. His experience had changed him. No longer would he rely on his own wits or abilities to overcome his afflictions. He would consciously and intentionally rely on the living God who would never leave him nor forsake him (Heb. 13:5).

He has delivered us from such a terrible death, and he will deliver us (v. 10). Note the repetition of word “deliver.” God’s past actions declared His nature in the present and the future. The devastating affliction had the effect of undermining Paul’s self-reliance and strengthened his resolve. He believed that because God had delivered him from trouble in the past that He would deliver him from the tribulations he might encounter in the future.

We have put our hope in him that he will deliver us again (v. 10). Having confirmed that God had delivered him from past and present afflictions, Paul affirmed that He would do so again in the future. This pointed to Paul’s confidence in God’s ultimate rescue from life’s day-to-day problems for every Christ follower. With no way to avoid life’s ultimate enemy, death, these interim deliverances had led Paul to declare his confidence that God will ultimately raise believers from the dead (v. 9).

2 Corinthians 12:6-8

Connection to the Point: A thorn in the flesh kept Paul both humble and looking to God.

The Setting. Paul continued refuting the attacks of the false apostles, whom he labeled “super-apostles” (11:5,13-15) which he began in chapter 10. Because he hesitated to speak about his personal spiritual experiences, the false teachers and critics maligned him for his lack of supernatural visions and revelations. In their estimation, such experiences would have validated his salvation and ministry. These deceivers may have captivated many in Corinth with their tales of wild supernatural experiences.

Paul had to defend himself against these critics who had infiltrated the church in Corinth. He had no choice; otherwise, the false teachers would have buried the church with false doctrines. Through the careful use of satirical boasting and without claiming superiority over critics, Paul described the story of an extraordinary experience about himself which he told in the third person. This experience occurred fourteen years before his letter (12:2), but Paul did not offer any other specifics about the time or place. Possible suggestions for the date include during Paul’s years in Syria and Cilicia (Gal. 1:21–2:1), at his stoning in Lystra (14:19), or during his time in Antioch (13:1-3). His readers would have understood the terms, “third heaven” (12:3) and “paradise” (v. 4), as the dwelling place of God.

For if I want to boast, I wouldn’t be a fool, because I would be telling the truth (v. 6). Should the Corinthians have thought that Paul had nothing to brag about, he debunked their claims because he had good reason to boast if he wanted to do so. He could have boasted about himself and his ecstatic experiences because they really happened, unlike his opponents, who probably rehearsed claims that had no real substance.

While Paul could not offer proof of his vision (12:2-4), neither could his opponents. They used their so-called experiences to bolster their position in the church in Corinth while putting Paul down for his lack of the same. However, Paul knew what he had experienced and refused to brag about it. Rather he would show that his visionary experience led to God using him in his weakness and dependency. While Paul’s opponents may have characterized him as weak and ineffective, they could not overlook that God had chosen him as an apostle and tasked him to found the church in Corinth.

But I will spare you, so that no one can credit me with something beyond what he sees in me or hears from me (v. 6). Paul restrained himself for dwelling on the vision because he did not want to take them down the wrong path. Paul feared that if he received too much attention for his visionary experience, then the gospel message would have been clouded. He used “credit” in the sense of commercial accounting. He wanted no part of receiving any credit for anything in his ministry except what the Corinthians could see (the sufferings he endured) or hear (the message he preached).

Rather than launching headlong into a sustained attack on his opponents on the grounds that they misrepresented him and themselves, Paul left his readers to come to this conclusion for themselves. He demonstrated to them that the true man of God will focus on declaring God’s truth without drawing attention to himself and his ecstatic experiences.

Especially because of the extraordinary revelations. Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself (v. 7). Paul desired that people would only evaluate him on the basis of what they could personally witness in him. However, he wondered if after telling the Corinthians about his visions they might decide to favor Paul because of his exceptional ecstatic revelations. Clearly, Paul would never have become too proud or conceited over these experiences. However, he knew that some in Corinth rallied to following him because of them. Paul signaled his summary statement about his extraordinary experiences.

He offered this rationale for what God had done: God was concerned that Paul would become arrogant because of the profound visions.

A thorn in the flesh was given to me (v. 7). To prevent Paul from swelling up with even a hint of spiritual arrogance, God gave him a thorn in the flesh. The Bible never defined what this malady was or whether it was physical or spiritual; however, “in the flesh” implied some physical discomfort or defect. Paul never revealed the exact nature of this impairment. Speculations range from an eye disease to malaria to epilepsy. Calling it a thorn would have metaphorically pointed to something sharp and painful that stabbed his flesh. The idea of a deeply embedded splinter would have served as a constant irritating reminder. Since God gave it to him, Paul believed that this thorn in the flesh served as the Lord’s way of keeping him humble and dependent.

A messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself. Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me (v. 7). Paul described this struggle in his life as a messenger from Satan who tormented him continually. In doing so, Paul confronted a paradox of the thorn as being simultaneously given by Satan and used by God. Paul recognized the sovereignty of God using the agency of Satan to give what Paul needed to minister most effectively as God’s servant. Paul recognized the sovereignty of God using the agency of Satan to give Paul what he needed to minister most effectively as God’s servant with a humble spirit. Just as in the case of Job where God allowed Satan to test Job (Job 1–2), God set limits on Satan’s activity in Paul’s life.

“To torment” marked the first of two reasons for the thorn and literally means “to strike with the fist.” The present tense points to a continual or recurring pounding. Paul faced a constant reminder that he must depend on God. The second reason for the thorn in the flesh emphatically repeated what Paul wrote earlier in this verse. God intended this thorn to curb the spiritual elation that might constantly surface from his memories. As Paul experienced his thorn in the flesh, he discovered that it served as gift from God and a tool of Satan. As a gift from God, it deflated his pride, and as a tool of Satan, it inflicted suffering. In either case, the result of the thorn forced Paul to deepen his relationship with God.

Paul may have thought this thorn would hamper his effectiveness in ministry, so he pleaded desperately for its removal. As a result of three intense times of prayer, which paralleled Jesus’s time of praying in Gethsemane (Mark 14:41), Paul learned the spiritual benefit that this thorn brought to him.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Connection to the Point: God strengthened Paul by His grace to endure his difficult circumstances.

But he said to me (v. 9). The Lord answered Paul’s prayer. While he did not receive the answer for which he hoped, God gave him what he needed. Paul used the perfect tense for “said” rather than the aorist tense, meaning that he understood God’s decision as final. He had pleaded with God in the past to remove the thorn and has now stopped (aorist), but he lived in the enduring comfort of God’s promise to him.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.” (v. 9). God did not give Paul an explanation but gave him a twofold promise. First, the Lord assured him that the supply of His grace for carrying out his ministry would never run dry. “Sufficient” carried the idea of being enough. Paul learned that this thorn in the flesh would not hamstring his calling and that God’s grace would also sustain him. God also promised the power of Christ would find its completion in Paul’s weakness, not in heavenly visions and ecstatic demonstrations that the false teachers thought proved their superiority. Through his weakness, Paul had come to understand the very heart of the gospel’s power. He had experienced God’s grace and power interlocking with his human weakness to bring about only what God can accomplish.

Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses (v. 9). Paul replied by declaring that he would take pleasure in his weaknesses and not hinder God’s work in his life. He would rather boast about his affliction rather than praying for its removal. Why would he ever again want to ask God to remove his thorn in the flesh if it meant more glory for God?

So that Christ’s power may reside in me (v. 9). Paul used a rare word in Greek only found here in the New Testament translated as reside. It has the meaning to set up a tent or to take up habitation. The Old Testament referred to the presence of God living among His people as in the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34). As Paul realized God’s purpose for the thorn in the flesh, he accepted His purpose in not removing it.

So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties (v. 10). Paul expressed his acceptance and concluded with a brief summary of the hardships he had experienced through which he found *pleasure* (2 Cor. 11:23-28). This did not mean that he no longer groaned under the burden that the thorn caused (5:2-4), and no one would have blamed him if he did. He not only boasted in his *weaknesses* (v. 9a) but he took *pleasure* in them because he used them to know and prove the resurrection power of Christ (Phil. 3:10). By taking *pleasure* in the troubles he faced did not mean that Paul courted martyrdom. Doing so would have only resulted in the rewards of foolish fanaticism.

For the sake of Christ (v. 10). Paul did not fear anything thrown at him because he willingly lived for Christ. His reward came through his relationship with his Savior.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. (v. 10). Paul stated in the most succinct terms the concise statement of ministry, an intensely personal application of Christ's power perfected in weakness (v. 9). When Paul acknowledged his weakness and expressed his complete dependence upon Christ, he immediately became empowered with Christ's resurrection power. Instead of relying on his own energy, effort, understanding, or talent, the apostle turned to Christ and drew upon His wisdom and strength. Admitting weakness affirmed Christ's inexhaustible power.

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