CRAWFORD BIBLE COMMENTARY

BIBLE STUDY

2 Corinthians Chapter 12 — Visions, Weakness, and Apostolic Proof

A Verse-by-Verse Bible Study from the Crawford Standard Bible

Introduction

2 Corinthians Chapter 12 continues Paul's “foolish” boasting.

In Chapter 11, he boasted about his sufferings.

Now he tells about something far more amazing.

Fourteen years earlier, he was caught up into Paradise.

He heard things too sacred to be spoken.

The false teachers in Corinth loved to talk about visions and spiritual experiences.

Paul could have boasted about this for years.

But he did not.

He even tells it as if it happened to someone else.

Then he tells the rest of the story.

God gave him a **“thorn in the flesh”** to keep him humble.

Paul begged God three times to take it away.

God said no.

But He gave Paul something better.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

This changed everything for Paul.

He learned to be glad in his weaknesses.

“For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Then Paul gives the marks of a true apostle.

He reminds them that he never took their money.

He loves them like a parent loves a child.

“I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls.”

Finally, Paul expresses his fear.

He is coming for a third visit.

He fears he may find quarreling, pride, and unrepented sin.

He longs for them to repent before he arrives.

The chapter moves through five movements:

- Paul's Vision of Paradise (verses 1–5).
- Paul's Thorn in the Flesh (verses 6–10).
- Paul's Apostolic Credentials (verses 11–13).
- Paul's Concern for the Corinthians (verses 14–18).
- Warning of Paul's Coming Visit (verses 19–21).

The central truth of 2 Corinthians 12 is:

God keeps His servants humble through weakness, gives them grace that is always enough, shows His power most clearly when they are weak, and fills them with sacrificial love that seeks the good and repentance of His people.

I. VISIONS AND REVELATIONS

2 Corinthians 12:1 — Not Beneficial to Boast

"It is not beneficial for me to boast, yet I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord."

"It is not beneficial for me to boast."

Paul knew boasting did no real good.

It did not help him spiritually.

It did not build up the church.

"Yet I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord."

But the false teachers were boasting about their spiritual experiences.

So Paul reluctantly speaks about his own.

Notice the words **"from the Lord."**

These visions did not come from Paul's imagination.

They were given by God.

Cross References

Ezekiel 1:1

> When I was living among the captives by the Kebar River, the skies opened, and I saw visions of God.

Acts 26:19

> So, King Agrippa, I did not disobey the vision that came to me from heaven.

Galatians 1:12

> No person gave me this message, and no one taught it to me. Jesus Christ Himself showed it to me.

Spiritual Principle

Even real spiritual experiences are not something to boast about.

Key Truth

The gifts God gives are reasons to praise Him, not to praise ourselves.

II. CAUGHT UP TO THE THIRD HEAVEN

2 Corinthians 12:2 — A Man in Christ

"I know a man in Christ who, fourteen years ago—whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know, God knows—was caught up to the third heaven."

"I know a man in Christ."

Paul speaks as if this happened to someone else.

But verse 7 makes it clear he is speaking about himself.

He uses this humble way of speaking so as not to draw attention to himself.

"Fourteen years ago."

Paul had kept this experience to himself for fourteen years.

He did not use it to build his reputation.

"Whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know, God knows."

Paul did not even know exactly how it happened.

He was honest about what he did not understand.

“Was caught up to the third heaven.”

The **first heaven** was often understood as the sky.

The **second** as the place of the stars.

The **third heaven** meant the very presence of God.

Cross References

Acts 22:17

> When I went back to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance.

Ezekiel 8:3

> He reached out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and sky and, in visions from God, carried me to Jerusalem.

Revelation 4:1

> After this I looked, and there in heaven was an open door. The voice I had heard before, which sounded like a trumpet, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must happen after this.”

Spiritual Principle

True spiritual experiences produce humility, not self-promotion.

Key Truth

Paul kept silent for fourteen years about the greatest experience of his life.

III. GOD KNOWS

2 Corinthians 12:3 — In the Body or Out

“And I know that this man—whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know, God knows—”

Paul repeats himself.

He wants to be clear and honest.

He knew the experience was real.

But he did not know the details of how it happened.

Some things only God knows.

Paul was content to leave it there.

Cross References

1 Corinthians 15:44

> The body is planted as a natural body, but it is raised as a spiritual body. Just as there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

Ezekiel 3:12

> Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard a great rumbling sound behind me saying, “Praise the glory of the Lord in His place!”

Revelation 1:10

> On the Lord's Day the Spirit took control of me, and I heard a loud voice behind me that sounded like a trumpet.

Spiritual Principle

It is wise to be honest about what we do not know.

Key Truth

Faith does not need every answer; it rests in the God who knows.

IV. CAUGHT UP INTO PARADISE

2 Corinthians 12:4 — Inexpressible Things

“was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no human is permitted to speak.”

“Was caught up into Paradise.”

Paradise is another name for the place where God dwells with His people.

Jesus promised the thief on the cross that he would be with Him in Paradise.

“And heard inexpressible things.”

What Paul heard was beyond human words.

“Things that no human is permitted to speak.”

God did not allow Paul to share them.

This is very different from the false teachers.

They loved to talk about their experiences.

Paul's greatest experience was one he was not even allowed to describe.

Cross References

Luke 23:43

> Jesus answered him, “I promise you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”

Revelation 2:7

> Anyone who has ears should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who wins the victory, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life in God's Paradise.

1 Corinthians 2:9

> The Scriptures tell us that nobody has ever seen, heard, or even dreamed up the things God has made ready for those who love Him.

Spiritual Principle

Heaven is more wonderful than words can express.

Application

Does the hope of heaven fill your heart with joy?

V. ONLY IN MY WEAKNESSES

2 Corinthians 12:5 — Boasting About Such a Man

“About such a man I will boast, but about myself I will not boast, except in my weaknesses.”

“About such a man I will boast.”

Paul could speak about what God did for “that man.”

The experience was God's gift, not Paul's achievement.

“But about myself I will not boast, except in my weaknesses.”

When it comes to himself, Paul will only boast in weakness.

Weakness points to God's power.

Cross References

2 Corinthians 11:30

> If I have to brag, I will brag about the things that show how weak I am.

Galatians 6:14

> The only thing I will ever brag about is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:31

> As the Scriptures say, “Whoever brags should brag only about the Lord.”

Spiritual Principle

God's gifts are His glory; our weaknesses show His power.

Key Truth

Paul would rather point to his weakness than to his visions.

VI. SPEAKING THE TRUTH

2 Corinthians 12:6 — Holding Back

“Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so that no one will think more of me than what is seen in me or heard from me.”

“Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool.”

Paul could say much more.

“Because I would be speaking the truth.”

Everything he said would be true.

“But I refrain.”

Still, he holds back.

“So that no one will think more of me than what is seen in me or heard from me.”

Paul wanted people to judge him by his life and his message.

Not by stories of private experiences that no one could check.

Cross References

Proverbs 27:2

> Let other people praise you, not your own mouth. Let strangers do it, not your own lips.

John 8:14

> Jesus answered, “Even if I speak about Myself, what I say is true, because I know where I came from and where I am going.”

Ephesians 4:25

> So stop lying. Each of you must tell the truth to your neighbor, because we all belong to the same body.

Spiritual Principle

Let people judge you by your life, not your claims.

Application

Does your everyday life match what you say about your faith?

VII. A THORN IN THE FLESH

2 Corinthians 12:7 — To Keep Me Humble

“To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.”

“To keep me from becoming conceited.”

Here is the purpose.

God knew the danger of pride.

Great experiences can lead to a big ego.

“Because of the surpassingly great revelations.”

Paul had been shown amazing things.

“There was given me a thorn in the flesh.”

A **thorn** is something sharp that causes constant pain.

Bible students have long discussed what it was.

Some think it was a physical illness, perhaps a problem with his eyes.

Some think it was a speech difficulty.

Some think it was the persecution or opponents that followed him everywhere.

Paul does not tell us.

Perhaps that is so that all believers can apply it to their own struggles.

“A messenger of Satan to torment me.”

Satan meant it for harm.

But God allowed it and used it for good.

It kept Paul humble and dependent on God.

Cross References

Job 2:6

> The Lord said to Satan, “All right, he is in your power, but you must not take his life.”

Numbers 33:55

> If you do not drive out the people living in the land, those you allow to stay will be like thorns in your eyes and sharp points in your sides.

Galatians 4:13

> You know it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you.

Spiritual Principle

God can use what Satan means for harm to keep us humble and close to Him.

Key Truth

Sometimes God allows a thorn to protect us from the greater danger of pride.

VIII. THREE TIMES I PLEADED

2 Corinthians 12:8 — Take It Away

“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.”

Paul prayed earnestly.

He did not pray once and give up.

He pleaded three times.

This reminds us of Jesus in Gethsemane.

Jesus also prayed three times for the cup to pass.

Both received the answer that God's will was best.

It is right to ask God to remove our pain.

But we must also trust Him when He says no.

Cross References

Matthew 26:39

> Jesus walked on a short distance, bowed down to the ground, and prayed, “Father, if there is any other way, take this suffering from Me. Still, I want what You want, not what I want.”

Matthew 26:44

> So He left them again and went away to pray a third time, saying the same words.

Psalm 34:4

> I went to the Lord for help, and He answered me. He rescued me from everything I was afraid of.

Spiritual Principle

It is right to ask God for relief, and right to trust Him when He answers differently.

Application

Can you trust God even when He does not take your pain away?

IX. MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT

2 Corinthians 12:9 — Power in Weakness

“But He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will most gladly boast in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

This is one of the most precious verses in the Bible.

“But He said to me.”

God answered Paul's prayer.

Not with a yes, but with a promise.

“My grace is sufficient for you.”

Sufficient means enough.

God's grace would be enough for Paul.

Enough for every day.

Enough for every pain.

Enough for every weakness.

“For my power is made perfect in weakness.”

God's power is shown most fully when we are weak.

When we cannot, He can.

“Therefore, I will most gladly boast in my weaknesses.”

Paul's attitude changed.

He no longer resented his weakness.

“So that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

The word **rest** suggests a tent spread over him.

Christ's power would cover him like a shelter.

Cross References

Isaiah 40:29

> When people are worn out, the Lord makes them strong again. When they have no strength left, He fills them with power.

1 Corinthians 1:27

> God chose the things the world sees as foolish to embarrass the wise, and the things it sees as weak to embarrass the strong.

Philippians 4:13

> Christ gives me the strength I need to face anything.

Spiritual Principle

God's grace is always enough, and His power shines brightest in our weakness.

Key Truth

God did not remove the thorn; He gave grace greater than the thorn.

X. WHEN I AM WEAK, THEN I AM STRONG

2 Corinthians 12:10 — Delighting in Weakness

“For the sake of Christ, then, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, and in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

“For the sake of Christ.”

This is the key.

Paul did not love pain for its own sake.

He accepted it for Christ.

“I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, and in difficulties.”

Paul lists five kinds of trouble.

He does not just put up with them.

He finds joy in them, because they bring Christ's power.

“For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

This is the great Christian paradox.

When we admit our weakness, we lean on God.

When we lean on God, His strength becomes ours.

Cross References

James 1:2

> Brothers and sisters, when trouble of any kind comes your way, see it as a chance for real joy.

1 Peter 4:13

> Be glad that you share in Christ's sufferings, so that you will be full of joy when His glory is shown.

Romans 5:3

> We can even be glad when hard times come, because hard times build in us the strength to keep going.

Spiritual Principle

True strength is found in depending on Christ.

Application

What weakness do you need to hand over to Christ today?

XI. COMPELLED TO BE A FOOL

2 Corinthians 12:11 — Not Inferior

“I have been a fool, but you compelled me. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am in no way inferior to the “super-apostles,” even though I am nothing.”

“I have been a fool, but you compelled me.”

Paul finishes his boasting.

He did not want to do it.

The Corinthians forced him by listening to the false teachers.

“I ought to have been commended by you.”

They should have defended him.

They knew him best.

“I am in no way inferior to the super-apostles.”

Paul was equal to anyone in his calling.

“Even though I am nothing.”

Yet he humbly admits that in himself, he is nothing.

Everything he is comes from God's grace.

Cross References

2 Corinthians 11:5

> I do not think I am any less than those so-called super-apostles.

1 Corinthians 15:9

> I am the least of the apostles. I do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I attacked God's church.

1 Corinthians 15:10

> Whatever I am now, God's grace made me. His grace in me was not wasted.

Spiritual Principle

God's servants can be confident in their calling and humble about themselves.

Key Truth

Confidence in God's call and humility about ourselves belong together.

XII. THE MARKS OF A TRUE APOSTLE

2 Corinthians 12:12 — Signs, Wonders, and Mighty Works

“The marks of a true apostle—signs, wonders, and mighty works—were performed among you with great perseverance.”

“The marks of a true apostle.”

Paul reminds them of the evidence they had already seen.

“Signs, wonders, and mighty works.”

God had done miracles through Paul in Corinth.

These confirmed his message.

“Were performed among you.”

They had seen it with their own eyes.

“With great perseverance.”

Paul's patient endurance through hardship was also a mark of his calling.

Notice that Paul does not say “I performed.”

He says they **“were performed.”**

God was the One doing the work.

Cross References

Romans 15:19

> Christ worked through me by the power of signs and miracles and by the power of the Spirit. So I have fully preached the good news of Christ from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum.

Acts 5:12

> The apostles did many miracles and wonders among the people.

Hebrews 2:4

> God also confirmed the message by signs, wonders, many kinds of miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit given out as He chose.

Spiritual Principle

God confirms the ministry of His true servants.

Key Truth

The mark of a true servant is God's power working through faithful endurance.

XIII. FORGIVE ME THIS WRONG

2 Corinthians 12:13 — Never a Burden

“How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!”

“How were you inferior to the other churches?”

The Corinthians had received everything other churches received.

“Except that I was never a burden to you.”

The only difference was that Paul never took their money.

“Forgive me this wrong!”

This is gentle sarcasm.

Was it really a sin to serve them for free?

Paul uses humor to show how unfair their complaint was.

Cross References

2 Corinthians 11:9

> When I was with you and needed something, I did not ask any of you for help.

2 Corinthians 12:16

> However it may be, I was never a burden to you.

1 Corinthians 9:12

> We have not used this right. We would rather put up with anything than put something in the way of the gospel of Christ.

Spiritual Principle

Generous service should never be held against a servant of God.

Key Truth

Sometimes love is misunderstood, even when it gives the most.

XIV. NOT YOURS, BUT YOU

2 Corinthians 12:14 — A Parent's Love

“Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because I seek not your possessions but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.”

“Now I am ready to visit you for the third time.”

Paul was planning another visit.

“I will not be a burden to you.”

He would still not take their money.

“Because I seek not your possessions but you.”

This is the heart of true ministry.

Paul did not want what they had.

He wanted them.

Their hearts, their faith, their good.

“For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.”

Paul was their spiritual father.

Parents provide for their children, not the other way around.

Cross References

2 Corinthians 13:1

> This will be my third visit to you. As the Scriptures say, “Every matter must be proven by two or three witnesses.”

Acts 20:33

> I never wanted anyone's silver, gold, or clothing.

Proverbs 19:14

> Houses and riches can be passed down from parents, but a wise wife is a gift from the Lord.

Spiritual Principle

True ministry seeks people, not possessions.

Application

Do you love people for who they are or for what they can give you?

XV. SPEND AND BE SPENT

2 Corinthians 12:15 — For Your Souls

“I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?”

“I will most gladly spend.”

Paul would spend his time, money, and energy.

“And be spent.”

He would even let himself be completely used up.

“For your souls.”

Their spiritual good was his goal.

“If I love you more, am I to be loved less?”

This is a painful question.

The more Paul loved them, the less they seemed to love him.

Yet he kept loving.

Cross References

Philippians 2:17

> Even if my life is poured out like a drink offering on top of the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad, and I share my joy with all of you.

1 Thessalonians 2:8

> We cared for you so much that we were happy to share with you not only God's good news but also our own lives, because you had become so dear to us.

John 15:13

> The highest kind of love is shown when a person dies to save his friends.

Spiritual Principle

Christlike love keeps giving even when it is not returned.

Key Truth

Real love does not keep score.

XVI. CRAFTY?

2 Corinthians 12:16 — The Accusation

“Be that as it may, I did not burden you. But some say, “Being crafty, I caught you by trickery.””

“Be that as it may, I did not burden you.”

Paul states the facts.

“But some say, ‘Being crafty, I caught you by trickery.’”

His critics had a new accusation.

They admitted Paul did not take money directly.

But they suggested he was secretly taking money through the collection for Jerusalem.

Paul repeats the accusation so he can answer it.

Cross References

1 Thessalonians 2:5

> You know we never used flattery, and we never pretended so we could get money. God is our witness.

2 Corinthians 4:2

> We have refused to use shameful, secret ways. We do not use tricks, and we do not twist God's word.

Genesis 27:35

> Isaac said, “Your brother came and tricked me, and he took your blessing.”

Spiritual Principle

Faithful servants may be falsely accused, but truth will stand.

Key Truth

A clear conscience is the best answer to false accusations.

XVII. DID I EXPLOIT YOU?

2 Corinthians 12:17 — Through the Men I Sent

“Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent to you?”

Paul asks a simple question.

Had any of his messengers taken advantage of them?

The answer was obviously no.

Paul invites them to examine the facts.

Cross References

2 Corinthians 7:2

> Make room for us in your hearts. We have not hurt anyone, ruined anyone, or cheated anyone.

1 Samuel 12:3

> Here I am. Tell me in front of the Lord: Whose ox or donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated or mistreated? Whose bribe have I accepted?

Acts 20:33

> I have not wanted anyone's money or nice clothes.

Spiritual Principle

An honest servant can invite others to examine his conduct.

Application

Could your life stand up to an honest examination?

XVIII. THE SAME SPIRIT, THE SAME STEPS

2 Corinthians 12:18 — Titus and the Brother

“I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Did Titus exploit you? Did we not walk in the same spirit, and follow the same steps?”

“I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him.”

Paul reminds them of the men who came to help with the offering.

“Did Titus exploit you?”

They knew Titus had not.

“Did we not walk in the same spirit, and follow the same steps?”

Paul and Titus lived the same way.

They had the same attitude and the same conduct.

Titus followed in Paul's footsteps of integrity.

Cross References

2 Corinthians 8:6

> So we asked Titus to help you finish this special act of kindness, since he was the one who started it.

2 Corinthians 8:18

> With him we are sending the brother who is praised by all the churches for his work in the gospel.

Galatians 2:1

> Fourteen years later I went up to Jerusalem again with Barnabas, and I also took Titus with me.

Spiritual Principle

Faithful leaders raise up others who walk in the same integrity.

Key Truth

Integrity is shown by those who follow in our steps.

XIX. FOR YOUR STRENGTHENING

2 Corinthians 12:19 — In the Sight of God

“Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.”

“Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you?”

Paul knew it might look like he was just defending himself.

“We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ.”

But Paul was not answering to the Corinthians.

He was answering to God.

“Everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.”

The goal of all his words was to build them up.

Notice he calls them **“dear friends.”**

Even in correction, Paul loved them.

Cross References

1 Corinthians 4:3

> It does not matter much to me if I am judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself.

Romans 15:2

> Each of us should please our neighbor, doing what is good for them and helping them grow strong in faith.

Ephesians 4:29

> Do not say anything harmful. Say only what is helpful for building others up, so your words bring grace to those who hear.

Spiritual Principle

Godly words aim to strengthen others, not merely to defend ourselves.

Application

Are your words building others up?

XX. I FEAR WHAT I MAY FIND

2 Corinthians 12:20 — Sins of Division

“For I fear that when I come, I may not find you as I wish, and that you may not find me as you wish. I fear there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder.”

“I may not find you as I wish.”

Paul hoped to find them changed.

“And that you may not find me as you wish.”

If they had not changed, Paul would have to be firm.

Then Paul lists eight sins that destroy a church.

- Quarreling.
- Jealousy.
- Outbursts of anger.
- Selfish ambition.
- Slander.
- Gossip.
- Arrogance.
- Disorder.

All of these are sins of attitude and relationship.

They tear a church apart from the inside.

Cross References

Galatians 5:20

> The sinful nature produces worship of idols, witchcraft, hatred, fighting, jealousy, fits of anger, selfishness, division, and splitting into groups.

1 Corinthians 3:3

> You are still living by worldly ways. Since there is jealousy and fighting among you, are you not acting like people of the world?

James 3:16

> When people are jealous and only out for themselves, things fall apart and all sorts of evil follow.

Spiritual Principle

Sins of attitude can destroy a church just as surely as outward sins.

Spiritual Warning

Quarreling, gossip, and pride are not small sins in God's eyes.

XXI. MOURNING OVER UNREPENTED SIN

2 Corinthians 12:21 — My God May Humble Me

“I fear that when I come again, my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin, and debauchery in which they have indulged.”

“My God may humble me before you.”

Paul's greatest embarrassment would not be his weakness.

It would be finding his spiritual children still in sin.

“I may have to mourn over many.”

Paul would grieve, not gloat.

His heart would break.

“Who have sinned earlier and have not repented.”

The problem was not only the sin.

It was the refusal to repent.

“Of the impurity, sexual sin, and debauchery.”

These were sins of the body.

Corinth was known for its immorality.

Some believers had slipped back into the old life.

Paul longed for them to turn back before he came.

Cross References

1 Corinthians 5:1

> People are saying that there is sexual sin among you, the kind that even pagans do not allow.

Galatians 5:19

> The things the sinful nature does are easy to see: sexual sin, impurity, and wild living.

1 Corinthians 5:2

> And you are proud! You should have been filled with sorrow and removed the man who did this from among you.

Spiritual Principle

True leaders grieve over unrepented sin and long for repentance.

Application

Is there any sin you need to repent of before it hardens your heart?

XXII. FIVE GREAT LESSONS FROM 2 CORINTHIANS 12

1. Spiritual Experiences Must Not Breed Pride

“To keep me from becoming conceited... there was given me a thorn in the flesh.”

Principle:

Paul's vision of heaven was kept in humility through his thorn in the flesh.

2. God's Grace Is Sufficient

“My grace is sufficient for you.”

Principle:

Weakness is not a failure but the very place where Christ's power shines brightest.

3. True Ministry Is Sacrificial

“I seek not your possessions but you.”

Principle:

Paul sought not the Corinthians' possessions but their souls, showing a parent's love.

4. Leaders Must Correct in Love

“Everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.”

Principle:

Paul's warnings show both his fear for their sins and his hope for their repentance.

5. Strength Is Found in Surrender

“For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Principle:

When we are weak, we are truly strong in Christ.

XXIII. THE THORN AND THE GRACE

Verses 7–10 tell one of the most important stories in Paul's life.

The Danger

Pride after great revelations.

The Thorn

A painful weakness that would not go away.

The Source

A messenger of Satan, allowed by God.

The Prayer

Three times Paul begged for it to be removed.

The Answer

“My grace is sufficient for you.”

The Purpose

“My power is made perfect in weakness.”

The Result

“I will most gladly boast in my weaknesses.”

What the Thorn Might Have Been

Paul does not say, and Bible students hold different views.

- A physical illness, perhaps an eye problem.
- A difficulty in speaking.
- Constant persecution and opposition.
- Some other painful trial.

Because Paul did not name it, believers with every kind of thorn can find hope in this passage.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

God may not remove your thorn, but He will never leave you without grace.

XXIV. THE PARADOX OF STRENGTH

Verse 10 states the great Christian paradox.

The World Says

- Hide your weakness.
- Trust in your own strength.
- Avoid hardship.
- Boast in success.

God Says

- Admit your weakness.
- Trust in My strength.
- Find My grace in hardship.
- Boast in what shows My power.

Five Places Paul Found Strength

- Weaknesses.
- Insults.
- Hardships.
- Persecutions.
- Difficulties.

Key Truth

Our weakness is not an obstacle to God's power; it is the stage on which He displays it.

XXV. A SPIRITUAL PARENT'S HEART

Verses 14–19 show the love of a true shepherd.

He Wants People, Not Possessions

“I seek not your possessions but you.”

He Provides Like a Parent

“Parents save up for their children.”

He Gives Everything

“I will most gladly spend and be spent.”

He Loves Even When Not Loved Back

“If I love you more, am I to be loved less?”

He Lives with Integrity

“Did we not walk in the same spirit?”

He Speaks to Build Up

“Everything we do... is for your strengthening.”

Crawford Bible Study Principle

A true shepherd's love is measured by what he gives, not by what he gets.

XXVI. WHAT 2 CORINTHIANS 12 TEACHES ABOUT JESUS

He Gives Revelations

“Visions and revelations from the Lord.”

He Hears Our Prayers

“Three times I pleaded with the Lord.”

He Speaks to His Servants

“But He said to me.”

His Grace Is Enough

“My grace is sufficient for you.”

His Power Rests on the Weak

“So that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

He Is Worth Every Hardship

“For the sake of Christ, then, I delight in weaknesses.”

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Jesus does not always take away our weakness, but He always gives grace that is greater.

XXVII. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR PERSONAL STUDY

Question 1

Why did Paul speak of his vision as if it happened to “a man in Christ”?

To avoid drawing attention to himself and to show humility.

Question 2

What is the “third heaven”?

The very presence of God, also called Paradise.

Question 3

Why did Paul keep his vision secret for fourteen years?

He did not use spiritual experiences to build his reputation.

Question 4

Why was Paul given a thorn in the flesh?

To keep him from becoming proud because of his great revelations.

Question 5

What was the thorn?

Paul does not say.

Suggestions include an illness, a speech difficulty, or ongoing persecution.

Question 6

How did God answer Paul's prayer?

Not by removing the thorn, but by promising, “My grace is sufficient for you.”

Question 7

What does it mean that God's power is made perfect in weakness?

God's power is shown most clearly when we depend on Him because we cannot do it ourselves.

Question 8

How can Paul say, “When I am weak, then I am strong”?

His weakness drove him to depend on Christ, and Christ's strength became his.

Question 9

What were the marks of a true apostle?

Signs, wonders, and mighty works, done with great perseverance.

Question 10

What did Paul mean by “I seek not your possessions but you”?

He wanted their hearts and their spiritual good, not their money.

Question 11

What did Paul fear he would find in Corinth?

Quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance, disorder, and unrepented sexual sin.

Question 12

What should 2 Corinthians 12 change about the way Christians live today?

2 Corinthians 12 should cause believers to live:

- Humble about spiritual experiences.
- Praying honestly about their pain.
- Trusting God when He says no.
- Resting in His sufficient grace.
- Depending on Christ's strength in weakness.
- Loving others sacrificially.
- Speaking to build others up.
- Repenting quickly of sin.

XXVIII. PERSONAL APPLICATION

2 Corinthians 12 asks several important questions.

Do I Boast About Spiritual Experiences?

Or do I keep them humbly before God?

What Is My Thorn?

What weakness or pain has God not removed?

How Do I Pray About It?

Do I bring it honestly to God?

Can I Accept God's Answer?

Even when He says no?

Do I Believe His Grace Is Enough?

Or do I feel I need something more?

Do I Hide My Weakness?

Or let it point to Christ's power?

Do I Love Sacrificially?

Am I willing to spend and be spent for others?

Is There Sin I Have Not Repented Of?

What do I need to turn from today?

XXIX. A CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“Grace Greater Than the Thorn”

Every believer has a thorn.

Some carry pain in their bodies.

Some carry pain in their minds.

Some carry pain in their families.

Some carry pain from people who oppose them.

Like Paul, we pray.

We ask God to take it away.

Sometimes He does.

But sometimes He says no.

That does not mean He does not care.

It does not mean He has not heard.

It means He has something better than relief.

He gives grace.

Grace to face today.

Grace to keep going tomorrow.

Grace that turns weakness into a place where Christ's power rests.

This creates a powerful principle.

God's “no” to the thorn is never a “no” to you.

It is His “yes” to more of His grace and more of His power in your life.

Principle:

When God does not remove the thorn, He gives grace that is greater than the thorn.

XXX. FINAL APPLICATION

2 Corinthians Chapter 12 takes us from heaven to a thorn.

It shows Paul caught up into Paradise.

It shows him humbled by weakness.

It shows him praying for relief.

It shows God giving grace instead.

It shows the power of Christ resting on a weak man.

It shows a parent's love for wandering children.

And it shows a pastor's heartbreak over unrepented sin.

2 Corinthians 12 therefore reminds us:

Never let spiritual blessings make you proud.

Never think God has abandoned you because He said no.

Never believe His grace is not enough.

Never be ashamed of weakness that shows His strength.

Never stop loving, even when love is not returned.

The church does not need people who look strong.

It needs:

Believers who are humble.

Believers who rest in grace.

Believers who depend on Christ's power.

And believers who love sacrificially.

The same Lord still says:

Tell people that His grace is sufficient.

Tell people that His power is made perfect in weakness.

Tell people that weakness can become strength in Christ.

Tell people that it is not too late to repent.

And as you live:

Stay humble.

Pray honestly.

Rest in grace.

Be strong in your weakness.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for the glory of heaven, more wonderful than words can say.

Thank You that You care enough to keep us humble.

Thank You that You hear our prayers, even when Your answer is different from what we ask.

Thank You that Your grace is sufficient for us.

Thank You that Your power is made perfect in weakness.

Thank You that when we are weak, then we are strong.

Forgive us when we have been proud of our blessings.

Forgive us when we have doubted Your love because of our pain.

Forgive us when we have hidden our weakness instead of bringing it to You.

Forgive us when we have sought what others have instead of seeking their good.

Forgive us for sins we have not yet turned from.

Help us accept the thorns You allow.

Let the power of Christ rest upon us.

Teach us to delight in weakness for His sake.

Make us willing to spend and be spent for others.

Keep our church free from quarreling, gossip, and pride.

And lead us to repent quickly of every sin.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Key Verse

“But He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will most gladly boast in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” — 2 Corinthians 12:9

Central Truth

God keeps His servants humble through weakness, gives them grace that is always enough, shows His power most clearly when they are weak, and fills them with sacrificial love that seeks the good and repentance of His people.

2 Corinthians 12 in One Sentence

Paul humbly tells of being caught up into Paradise, explains that God gave him a thorn in the flesh to keep him from pride and answered his prayers with the promise that His grace is sufficient and His power is made perfect in weakness, reminds the Corinthians of his sacrificial love that sought them and not their possessions, and warns them to repent before his coming visit.