

## CLINGING TO HOPE

## STUDY EIGHT

## When Thorns Rip Our Pride

*2 Corinthians 12:2–10*

*God is a master teacher. He teaches us patience by making us wait for what we want. He teaches us wisdom by allowing us to fail. He teaches us grace through hardship. He teaches us humility by sending thorns that rip away our pride.*

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

**M**EASURED by any standard, Paul was an impressive individual. Intellectually, he was top of his class, trained in the finest Jerusalem academy under the eminent Jewish scholar, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He was a brilliant theologian and gifted writer—thirteen of the epistles in the New Testament bear his autograph. In his pre-conversion days, none could match Paul's drive to observe every detail of the Jewish law. Paul wrote about his religious intensity,

*I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault. (Philippians 3:6)*

Headstrong, self-assured, and uncompromising, Paul powered through any task set before him. And yet, while his intellect, giftedness, and zeal set him on a high pedestal, those same attributes made him easy prey for pride.

In the blinding light of Christ's appearance on the road to Damascus, Paul came face-to-face with his sinful condition. He repented on his knees and committed himself to Jesus for the rest of his life. His conversion, however, marked just the first step in his transformation. To deal with Paul's pride, God signed him up for what we might call "thorn" therapy—the Holy Spirit's painful but merciful method of shaping us into the image of Christ.



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## When Thorns Rip Our Pride

2 Corinthians 12:2–10



### PREPARE YOUR HEART

We need the Spirit's light to reveal our pride and guide us in Christ's way of humility. Let the following prayer prepare you to receive God's illuminating truth.

*Father, through Your Word, shine the light of truth into my soul, revealing the pride that may be holding me back from fully depending on You. Search me. Test me. Transform me into the likeness of Your Son. In His name, amen.*



### TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

In *2 Corinthians 12:1–10*, Paul revealed some of the most personal details about his life. Read this passage once to get the flow of his thoughts, and then read it again with the following four-point outline in mind:

- 1) Paul's unsurpassed privilege (12:1–4)
- 2) Paul's uncommon humility (12:5–6)
- 3) Paul's inescapable pain (12:7)
- 4) Paul's paradoxical power (12:8–10)



### Observation: Privileges, Humility, Pain, and Power

Observation is the necessary beginning point in *Searching the Scriptures* as we look for contrasts and comparisons, figures of speech, and repetition of key words. Write down what you see in the passage as you answer the following questions.



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What did Paul say in *2 Corinthians 12:1–4* regarding the *unsurpassed privilege* God gave him? What tone do you sense in the way he shares something so personal? (We'll examine the meaning of Paul's experience later; for now, simply record what you see.)

How did Paul express *uncommon humility* in *12:5–6*? Why did he avoid boasting about his spiritual experience?

Why did Paul even bring up the issue of boasting? Behind the scenes, Paul's opponents in Corinth were slinging mud at him, forcing him to defend his apostleship. Backed in the corner, he had to talk about himself—but he did so reluctantly. “Pre-conversion” Paul would have ballyhooed his accomplishments. But the Spirit-transformed Paul always put Christ and the gospel center stage and never sought the spotlight.

What caused the change? How was God using the tool of *inescapable pain* to mold Paul's character, according to *12:7*? Don't miss the repeated phrase. Why do you think Paul repeated this phrase?



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Finally, in 2 Corinthians 12:8–10, what *paradoxical power* emerged as the thorn therapy did its work in Paul?



### Interpretation: Paradise and Pain

In the interpretation phase, feel free to use your Bible study resources. One resource is Pastor Chuck Swindoll's commentary, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Insights on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, which is available at [insight.org](http://insight.org). For an online resource, consult *Constable's Notes* at [netbible.org](http://netbible.org).

### “The Revelations from God”—2 Corinthians 12:7

What was the nature of Paul's “wonderful revelations from God” (2 Corinthians 12:7)? What is “the third heaven” (12:2)? What did Paul say he experienced there? What questions remain unanswered about his experience?

Paul was converted to Christianity around AD 35 and then spent about three years in solitude in Arabia (*Galatians 1:15–18*). He eventually returned to his hometown in Tarsus and stayed there until Barnabas found him and brought him to Antioch (*Acts 9:23–30; 11:25–26*). One year later, Paul and Barnabas went on their first missionary journey.

At the time of writing 2 Corinthians, the apostle was on his *third* missionary journey, having planted churches in Asia, Macedonia, and Greece—including Corinth. He corresponded with the Corinthian church between AD 53–55. Only now, after years of keeping quiet, Paul finally shared his experience.



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Why do you think Paul may have kept these revelations a secret for so long?

*Paul despised the thought of being on a pedestal where people would look up to him to the point of worshiping him. He was a mere man with his own problems.*

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

### “A Thorn in My Flesh”—2 Corinthians 12:7

How does Pastor Chuck Swindoll explain what Paul refers to as “a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan” in his commentary, *Insights on 1 & 2 Corinthians* (page 469)? Consult other sources that you may have. What does your research reveal?

What would it have been like for Paul to live in constant, stabbing pain?



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*2 Corinthians 12:2–10*

*The thorn assaulted Paul like an implacable demon repeatedly attacking the man. Paul was never free of pain, and the reason was to keep him from proudly exalting himself, to keep him from being conceited, strutting around like a celebrity. Thorns humble us.*

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

**Timeless Principles**

As you interpret a passage, you will discover timeless truths that apply in any culture. For example, here’s a principle from Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 12:6, “I don’t want anyone to give me credit beyond what they can see in my life or hear in my message.” *The most effective witness isn’t accomplished by spiritual bragging but by a changed life and a clear message about Christ.*

Now you try. In the chart below are some statements from the passage. Write down the principles that you glean from 2 Corinthians 12.

Bible Verses	Principles
<i>So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh. (2 Corinthians 12:7)</i>	
<i>Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” (12:8–9)</i>	
<i>I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. (12:9)</i>	
<i>That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (12:10)</i>	



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In one sense, Paul's painful affliction disabled him because it kept him from operating in full strength; but, in another sense, it enabled him. It pulled the plug on his pride! It freed Paul to go beyond his human frailty and live fully in Christ's kingdom.

What a paradox! The pain limiting Paul gave him access to Christ's limitless power. Once Paul settled into this truth, he could say, "I was glad to let it happen."

*Christ's power works best in weakness. You'll never read about this paradoxical power in a newspaper or on the evening news. It's rare. It's made possible only by grace.*  
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



### Correlation: Treasure in Earthen Vessels

Correlate this passage with an earlier passage in Paul's letter, [2 Corinthians 4:5–10](#). Write down your insights as you compare this passage with what you learned about Christ's power through weakness in 12:1–10.

How should we rightly understand our identity and our role as followers of Christ?

To what *hope* can you cling when "pressed," "perplexed," "hunted," and "knocked down" (4:8–9)?



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*When you suffer, do you focus on the pain or the lessons it teaches? Is God's grace all you need? —Pastor Chuck Swindoll*



### Application: Bringing It Home

Application is the final step. Pick one of the principles from the chart above and write it in such a way that is most effective to you. Use “I” statements as you state your desire to put the truth into practice.

What difference can living by this principle make regarding your inner peace? Your relationships? Your work? Your closeness with Christ?

As you wrap up this study, carry these three thoughts with you. First, remember that *God has a plan* for you that might go beyond your limitations. This will give you perspective on God's bigger purpose.

Second, *depend on God's power* in your pain. This will give you confidence as you more keenly sense God at work.





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Third, *focus on the flower not the thorns*. Stop obsessively thinking about your pain. Three times, Paul prayed for God to take away his thorn. When God said no, Paul shifted his mind-set from what he couldn't do to what God could do through him. Let your weakness remind you of God's strength and let your suffering point to the glory that "outweighs them and will last forever" (2 Corinthians 4:17). This will give you hope—which is what we need most when we're going through our own "thorn" therapy.



### A FINAL PRAYER

As you would write in a journal, conclude this study by writing your own prayer to the Lord, reflecting on Christ's power and His presence through the pain in your life.

Father,

