

Finding Strength
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2 Corinthians 12:7-10; 13:2-8

Exposing weaknesses – Show of hands, how many enjoy having your weaknesses exposed? As painful as it is, **why is it a GOOD thing to expose weaknesses?** Think about a structure like a house, a deck, or a bridge? **What would happen if we refused to acknowledge weaknesses? How does that apply to my own life?**

- In 2 Corinthians 12 the Apostle Paul writes about how God exposes the weaknesses of believers so we can access His supernatural strength.
- In chapter 13 he writes about examining our spiritual life for any weaknesses that need our attention and God's strength.
- In this week's lesson text Lifeway has assigned enough scripture for two lessons. We could do a very thorough lesson on Paul's "thorn in the flesh" and how it applies for you and me.
- We could also do a lesson on how Paul was addressing the spiritual weaknesses of the Corinthian believers in chapter thirteen.
- I will do my best to focus in on the key "nuggets" we can dig out of both these chapters.
- First, a little context: Paul is writing to the members of the church in Corinth to advise and correct them. In chapters one through nine he's been writing like a gentle father. In chapters ten through thirteen his tone becomes stern as he calls them out for bad behavior.
- What was the bad behavior? The church members in Corinth had begun to follow false teachers who were discrediting their founding pastor Paul as their spiritual father. In chapter eleven Paul wrote bluntly:

¹³ These people are false apostles. They are deceitful workers who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ But I am not surprised! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no wonder that his servants also disguise themselves as servants of

righteousness. In the end they will get the punishment their wicked deeds deserve.ⁱ

- Paul defends his authority as an apostle in chapters ten and eleven.
- He wrote briefly about how God allowed him to have a supernatural vision of Heaven and how Paul had “heard things that cannot be told.” (12:2-4)
- But he wrote more about how he had suffered as an apostle (11:23-33.)
- We will see in chapter thirteen, though Paul aggressively defended himself, his greater concern was the spiritual health of these believers.

⁷ even though I have received such wonderful revelations from God. So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.

- We’ve never been told what Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was. **What theories have you heard about what this weakness was?**
- *“Endless suggestions have been made, but three proposals are feasible: (1) Paul had a physical ailment, perhaps an eye disease (cf. Gal. 4:15) or a speech impediment; (2) Paul spoke of continuing opponents in the churches; (3) Paul pointed to some troubling demonic activity, perhaps some severe temptation.”ⁱⁱ*
- John MacArthur believes it had to do with Paul’s opponents: *“Paul’s use of the word messenger from Satan suggests the “thorn in the flesh” (lit. “a stake for the flesh”) was a demonized person, not a physical illness... Possibly, the best explanation for this demon was that he was indwelling the ringleader of the Corinthian conspiracy, the leader of the false apostles. Through them, he was tearing up Paul’s beloved church and thus driving a painful stake through Paul.”ⁱⁱⁱ*
- Sickness? Demonic possession? Temptation? **Why is it actually a benefit that Paul’s specific “thorn” was never revealed?**

- **Question: When we encounter a weakness or trial what's the first question we naturally ask God? What's the next question we ask? What's the best question a follower of Christ SHOULD ask God?**
- Now that we can relate to Paul because he had some kind of trial or weakness just like us, let's see how God uses our weaknesses.

⁸ Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. ⁹ Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. ¹⁰ 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.

- Boast in your weaknesses and take pleasure in them, Paul are you crazy?
- God didn't choose to heal or deliver Paul from his "thorn." **How did God use Paul's weakness for his own good; for the good of others; for God's glory?**
- The lesson for us is in the last few words of verses 9 and 10:
 - "...so that the power of Christ can work through me."
 - "For when I am weak, then I am strong."
- Take note, Paul didn't "roll up in a ball" and hide in the corner due to his weakness. He pressed into the Spirit of God living in him for the power to accomplish his calling IN SPITE of his weakness.
- Accepting our weakness isn't throwing in the towel, it's acknowledging that our life is unplugged from the "power outlet" of God's strength, plugging in, and getting on with what God has called us to do – in HIS strength!
- Let me quote a couple of great theologians on how we apply this:

Andrew Murray wrote:

"The Christian often tries to forget his weakness: God wants us to remember it, to feel it deeply. The Christian wants to conquer his weakness and to be freed from it: God wants us to rest and even

rejoice in it. The Christian mourns over his weakness: Christ teaches His servant to say, "I take pleasure in infirmities; most gladly will I glory in my infirmities." The Christian thinks his weakness his greatest hindrance in the life and service of God: God tells us that it is the secret of strength and success. It is our weakness, heartily accepted and continually realized, that gives us our claim and access to the strength of Him who has said, 'My strength is made perfect in weakness.'"^{iv}

Charles Spurgeon wrote:

"God does not need your strength; He has more than enough of power of His own. He asks for your weakness; He has none of that, Himself, and He is longing, therefore, to take your weakness, and use it as the instrument in His own mighty hand. Will you not yield your weakness to Him, and receive His strength?"^v

- Each of us has some "weakness" we've asked God to take away.
- We've no doubt pleaded our case that we would be a more effective follower of Christ if only He would remove this limitation.
- Just like Paul, if we didn't have this weakness we might become "conceited" thinking we can live the Christian life in our own strength.
- The fact is, God uses our weakness to cause us to press into His power. That's why Paul wrote to the Philippians: ¹³ ...I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength. (Phil. 4:13 NLT)
- Other thoughts? Let's move on to chapter thirteen.
- In defending himself, Paul writes that the proof of his authority as an apostle was really in how the Christians in Corinth were addressing their own spiritual weaknesses. Look at verses five and six:

⁵ Examine yourselves to see if your faith is genuine. Test yourselves. Surely you know that Jesus Christ is among you; if not, you have failed the test of genuine faith. ⁶ As you test yourselves, I hope you will recognize that we have not failed the test of apostolic authority.

- Now Paul is challenging them (and us) to expose any weaknesses in our faith. Is our faith genuine? He says, “Test yourselves.”
- **Any ideas on how a follower of Christ can “test” ourselves for any spiritual weaknesses to see if our faith is genuine?**
- The best proof that Paul had accomplished his calling as the founding pastor of the church in Corinth was genuine faith among the members.
- That would apply to any pastor or Bible study teacher.
- I’m no Apostle Paul, but after nine years of teaching this class I ask myself if I am I helping this group or just filling up an hour on Sunday morning?
- **If you were the teacher, what metrics of “success” would you look at to see if you are doing a decent job leading this Bible study class?**
- Leaders look for growth. The tendency is to look for growth in numbers or at least consistency in attendance; to look for growth in relationships; to look for signs that the class is making an impact outside of the class time.
- Those are all important but ultimately the test of success in a Bible study class is whether the group is growing spiritually. Paul wrote in verse nine:

⁹We are glad to seem weak if it helps show that you are actually strong. We pray that you will become mature.

- **How can we “test” ourselves to see if our faith is both genuine (truly a saved follower of Christ – salvation and regeneration) and growing (a deeper obedience and relationship with Christ – sanctification?)**
- At the end of these notes are a couple of resources as a “take home” test of the genuineness of our faith based on several passages of scripture.
- One simple test goes back to what we learned in 2 Corinthians 5:17: ¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (ESV)
- Am I different today than before I followed Jesus?
- Another test comes from 1 John 2:3–6 (ESV) ³And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. ⁴Whoever says “I know him” but does not

keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him,
⁵ but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: ⁶ whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

- Am I living my life the way Christ taught in scripture?
- Finally, does my disposition and outward personality reflect Jesus? Galatians 5:22–23 (ESV) ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.
- Other thoughts on spiritual self-examination?

So, What's the Takeaway?

- None of us likes to have our weaknesses exposed, but the only way to receive God's strength is to allow Him to expose our weakness so we will be forced to rely on Him and not ourselves.
- Paul had a weakness so sharp and painful he called it a "thorn." If Paul had to lean on God for strength we should consider ourselves in good company when we deal with our own weakness or trials.
- We also need to allow God to expose any weakness in our faith.
- The first step to growing more like Christ is acknowledging any weakness in my spiritual life and asking Him to help me grow in grace through the power of His Spirit living in me.
- This week, let's don't let our weaknesses drag us down. Instead, like Paul, let's accept our weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through us. Let's remember that His grace is sufficient and when we are weak, then we can be strong because we have the power of His strength.

TAKE HOME TESTS for SPIRITUAL SELF-EXAMINATION

From the MacArthur Bible Commentary: These are the areas of life for examination to determine if one is actually in the faith.

1. The holiness of Psalm 15
2. The justice, kindness, and humility of Micah 6:8
3. The Beatitudes of Matthew 5:3– 12
4. The love of 1 Corinthians 13:4– 7
5. The fruit of Galatians 5:22, 23
6. The thinking of Philippians 4:8
7. The basics of 1 Thessalonians 5:14– 22
8. The qualities of 2 Peter 1:5– 9
9. The features of truth, obedience, and love in 1 John
10. The pattern of Revelation 1:3 ^{vi}

Warren Wiersbe offers this “test:”

“Do you have the witness of the Holy Spirit in your heart? (Rom. 8:9, 16) Do you love the brethren? (1 John 3:14) Do you practice righteousness? (1 John 2:29; 3:9) Have you overcome the world so that you are living a life of godly separation? (1 John 5:4) These are just a few of the tests we can apply to our own lives to be certain that we are the children of God.”^{vii}

ⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2013). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (2 Co 11:13–15). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

ⁱⁱ Pratt, Richard L., Jr.. *Holman New Testament Commentary - 1 & 2 Corinthians: 7* (p. 427). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Kindle Locations 54283-54288). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Murray, Andrew. *The Essential Works of Andrew Murray (Annotated)* (Kindle Locations 1835-1839). GLH Publishing. Kindle Edition.

^v <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols37-39/chs2209.pdf>

^{vi} MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Kindle Locations 54366-54377). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

^{vii} Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 679). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.