JARS OF CLAY • GOD’S PURPOSE IN OUR WEAKNESS • 2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-10 • 4/16/2023

# MAIN POINT

We are going through a 3-part series from the book of 2 Corinthians called Jars of Clay: God’s presence in our weakness, strength in our suffering, and hope for our future. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth that the hope of the gospel is like a “treasure we hold in clay jars.” This metaphor reminds us of how fragile life can be. We will take a close look at how God works through our frailty and suffering to accomplish his purpose in our lives. God’s treasure is carried in clay jars, reminds us that God’s beauty and power can show up in our brokenness and god’s hope transcends our physical lives.

Today, Pastor Chuck will be speaking about God’s strength in our weakness. How our brokenness provides an opportunity to trust God more fully (2 Cor 12:7-10).

The LifeGroup lesson will focus on: God’s power is made manifest through the weaknesses and inabilities of man.

# INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

**Who is considered powerful in our society?**

**How are powerful people treated in our society?**

**Why are we typically afraid to disclose our weaknesses to each other?**

We are typically drawn to people who are powerful—and conﬁdent in their power. Weakness, on the other hand, is … well, weak. No one expects a weak athlete or a weak business to succeed. And isn’t success what we all want?

This Bible study, though, is not about sports or business. It’s about life. Whatever weaknesses we have can actually be opportunities for strengths, as they bring us to the One who empowers us. When we let Him, God will use the diﬃculties or inﬁrmities we live with to do something great.

# UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

## HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-7.

**If you are comfortable, share some of your weaknesses.**

**How do our weaknesses remind us that we cannot boast in ourselves? What types of things or experiences are we tempted to boast about?**

**Why do you think Paul was hesitant to mention his vision? What purpose did Paul’s thorn serve in his own life?**

## HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 2 CORINTHIANS 12:8-9A.

**Name some ways that God gives us grace and strength to live with our weaknesses.**

**How do the Lord’s words in verse 9 help us respond to the “health, wealth, and success” gospel that is often marketed today?**

**What do we learn from this passage about the value of persistent prayer in relation to our weaknesses and problems?**

## HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 2 CORINTHIANS 12:9B-10.

**Share how you can use your weaknesses as opportunities to exalt Christ.**

**What can we learn from Paul’s example about dealing with physical discomfort or hardship?**

**How does the Christian perspective on power and weakness differ from the world’s perspective?**

**How should we respond if God chooses not to heal or take away our weakness?**

# APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

**Are you going through a hardship, or enduring a “thorn in your side”? In what ways can you envision God taking this diﬃculty and making it serve a higher purpose?**

**How, speciﬁcally, can you allow the Lord’s power to take over where you are weak?**

**How do we best apply this in environments (ex work, school) where showing weakness has consequences?**

# PRAYER

As you pray, ask God to help you lean on His strength and grace as you acknowledge your weaknesses. Ask Him to show you how you can bring glory to Him even in weakness.

# COMMENTARY

## 2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-10

12:1-6. Paul’s boasting moved from his trials to visions and revelations he received. The phrase translated boasting is necessary (v. 1) indicates that Paul spoke of his own experiences only because the situation in Corinth had compelled him to do so. Although Paul was embarrassed to boast about a personal spiritual experience, the circumstances demanded it. Apparently, his critics had boasted of visions and ecstatic experiences they claimed to have. In contrast, Paul reluctantly told them about a genuine vision or revelation but gave God all the credit. Paul referred to visions and revelations of the Lord. By deﬁnition, a vision always is seen. On the other hand, a revelation may come by some other means than a vision.

Although 2 Corinthians 12:7 seems clearly to identify Paul as the man of verse 2, why did Paul refer to himself in the third person? According to one view, Paul did so because of modesty.

Another possibility is that he did so because no human being can take credit for a divine vision. Other suggestions include that the reference to third person was a way of indicating the sacred nature of this experience for Paul or that he wanted to maintain a distinction between the Paul who had such a great experience and the Paul who boasted of his weaknesses. Whatever the reason, Paul lacked knowledge of whether he was in the body or out of the body.

According to verse 6, Paul admitted that if he boasted he would be telling the truth. Nevertheless, Paul refused to boast of such private spiritual experiences. He deliberately chose not to boast because others might give him the credit instead of giving God the credit. Paul always wanted

others to glorify God rather than himself. Furthermore, Paul wanted others to evaluate him on the basis of his present performance, not on the basis of what happened years ago.

12:7-8. Apparently, Paul’s main reason for referring to his unique revelation was to introduce the subject of his thorn in the ﬂesh. The Greek word translated “thorn” also was used to designate “a stake,” “a splinter,” or “the pointed end of a ﬁshhook.” Although some interpreters hold that the term refers to a cross, thus, ﬁguratively to self-cruciﬁxion (Gal. 2:20), the evidence does not warrant such a view. Whatever the precise nature of his thorn in the ﬂesh, Paul saw it as given to him to prevent his being overly exalted because of the revelations he experienced. What was Paul’s thorn in the ﬂesh? Three main theories about the thorn in the ﬂesh are that it refers to: (1) physical aﬄiction, (2) besetting temptation, and (3) persecutions. Many people believe that Paul purposefully did not identify his problem.

The phrase “messenger of Satan” probably refers to Satan as the source of Paul’s thorn in the ﬂesh. Therefore, we may ask: Did God or Satan give Paul his thorn in the ﬂesh? Because Satan is the author of sin, disease, and death, he alone is the culprit. Since God, however, is sovereign and omnipotent, everything Satan does must be according to God’s permissive will. Paul distinguished between God’s purpose in permitting the thorn as a test, to keep Paul from exalting himself (v. 7), and Satan’s purpose in using it to tempt him by tormenting him, perhaps to get Paul to renounce God. Recall that Satan was allowed to aﬄict Job, but only within the limits set by God (Job 1–2). Paul implored the Lord three times for the thorn to be removed (v. 8). Prayer, of course, was the appropriate approach to Paul’s diﬃculty. Yet even the prayer of this great man of faith was not answered by the removal of the thorn. Paul’s experience reminds us that God sometimes answers prayer differently from what we ask or expect.

12:9-10. Although three times Paul requested God to remove his aﬄiction, God did not take it away. Rather than removing Paul’s thorn, God gave him something better. God gave Paul suﬃcient grace for Paul to rise above his thorn by depending on God’s mighty power (v. 9). The term translated grace often has been deﬁned as “undeserved, or unmerited, favor.” The Greek verb translated is suﬃcient indicates “enough,” or “adequate.” The form of the verb indicates the continual availability of God’s grace. The verb translated is perfected also means “completed,” or “ﬁnished.” Paul realized that God intended to bring him to a speciﬁc goal through the diﬃculty.

Although that goal was not speciﬁed, Paul’s weakness opened the way for God’s power to ﬂow though him. Through God’s response to his prayer, Paul understood God’s reason for his aﬄiction. Thus he wrote verse 9. The ﬁnal portion of verse 10 summarizes the lesson God taught Paul through his painful experience. Paul was able to apply this lesson to far more diﬃculties than his thorn in the ﬂesh (see v. 10a).