

Bible Study: Letters of Paul
Central Presbyterian Church
November 9, 2025
Session 10/16: 2 Corinthians “Grace in Weakness”
Readings: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10
English text taken from the Lexham English Bible
Greek text taken from SBLGNT (Society for Biblical Literature – Greek New Testament)

Historical Context

Paul’s Relationship with Corinth

- Founding: Paul planted the church ~AD 50–51 (Acts 18).
- Previous Letters:
 - Previous letter (1 Cor 5:9, lost).
 - 1 Corinthians (~AD 54).
 - Severe letter (2 Cor 2:3–4; 7:8–9, lost or part of 2 Cor 10–13).
 - 2 Corinthians (~AD 55–56), written after Titus’s report (7:6–16).
- Crisis: “Super-apostles” (11:5; 12:11) — itinerant Jewish-Christian rhetors claiming superiority via miracles, eloquence, letters of recommendation (3:1). They accused Paul of weakness (10:10: “his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible”).

Paul’s Physical Condition

- Gal 4:13–15: Preached “through weakness of the flesh”; Galatians did not “scorn” his condition.
- 2 Cor 10:10: Critics mocked his appearance and speech.
 - Acts 14:19: Stoned at Lystra (~AD 48) — possible lasting trauma.
 - Thorn in the flesh: Unknown, but not merely metaphorical spiritual temptation (contra some patristic allegories); likely physical (σάρξ) and visible (cf. Gal 6:17: “marks of Jesus”).

Greco-Roman Cultural Values

- Honor-shame culture: Strength, eloquence, patronage = honour; weakness, suffering = shame.
- Rhetorical ideals: Sophists valued λόγος (speech) and σῶμα (impressive presence). Paul subverts both.

- Hardship catalogs (peristaseis): Stoics/Cynics boasted endurance; Paul reorients to Christ's power.

Jewish Background

- Divine passive (ἐδόθη): God allows Satan to afflict (Job 1–2; 1 Sam 16:14).
- Messenger of Satan: Echoes mastema (Jubilees) or Belial's agents (Qumran).

Literary Context

Structure of 2 Corinthians

- Chs. 1–7: Reconciliation after painful visit/letter.
- Chs. 8–9: Collection for Jerusalem.
- Chs. 10–13: “Fool’s Speech” — ironic self-defense against super-apostles.
 - 11:1–12:13 = boasting (καύχησις) in weakness.
 - 12:1–10 = climax: visions → thorn → divine oracle.

Rhetorical Strategy

- Irony & parody: Paul “boasts” like a fool (11:16–21) to expose rivals.
- Peristasis catalog (11:23–33; 12:10): Subverts Greco-Roman **virtus**.
- Chiasmus:

A Visions (12:1–6)
 B Thorn (12:7)
 C Prayer (12:8)
 D Divine Word (12:9a)
 C' Response (12:9b)
 B' Acceptance (12:10)
 A' Weakness as true boast

Intertextual Echoes

- Exodus theophany: Shekinah (ἐπισκηνόω) → Christ's power tabernacles in Paul.
- Jesus' passion: Threefold prayer (Gethsemane); “my power” echoes “Abba” submission.
- Isaiah's Servant: Strength in weakness (Isa 40–53).

Verse-by-verse Exegesis

Verse 7

LEB

And so that I would not become arrogant because of the extraordinary degree of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan, so that he might torment me, so that I would not become arrogant.

SBLGNT

καὶ τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων. διὸ ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι, ἐδόθη μοι σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί, ἄγγελος σατανᾶ, ἵνα με κολαφίζῃ, ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι.

Word-for-word gloss

and | to-the | excess | of-the | revelations. | wherefore | in-order-that | not | I-be-exalted, | was-given | to-me | thorn | in-the | flesh, | angel | of-Satan, | in-order-that | me | he-might-buffet, | in-order-that | not | I-be-exalted.

Historical Notes

- Revelations (ἀποκαλύψεων): Likely Paul's Damascus vision (Acts 9; 22; 26) or third heaven (v. 2). In 1st-century Judaism, such visions conferred authority (e.g., Enoch, 4 Ezra).
- Thorn (σκόλοψ):
 - Medical: Hippocrates uses σκόλοψ for bone splinters or chronic pain.
 - Social: A visible affliction would undermine Paul's rhetorical credibility in Corinth's sophistic culture.
- Messenger of Satan:
 - Jewish: Satan as accuser/prosecutor (Zech 3:1; Jubilees).
 - Greco-Roman: Daemons could afflict. Paul reframes this as divine pedagogy.

Literary Notes

- Inclusio: ὑπεραίρωμαι frames the verse — literary bracket emphasizing humility.
- Aposiopesis: Sentence breaks after ἀποκαλύψεων — dramatic pause before the thorn.
- Divine passive (ἐδόθη): Avoids naming God — theological reticence.

Verse 8

LEB

Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it might depart from me.

SBLGNT*

ὕπὲρ τούτου τρεῖς τὸν κύριον παρεκάλεσα ἵνα ἀποστῇ ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ.

Word-for-word gloss

concerning | this | three-times | the | Lord | I-besought | in-order-that | it-might-depart | from | me.

Historical Notes

- Threefold prayer: Jewish piety: Triple repetition = intensity (Dan 6:10).
- Jesus in Gethsemane: Paul models Christ’s submission (Mark 14:36).
- τὸν κύριον: In Corinth, Kyrios = Caesar or pagan gods. Paul reclaims for Christ.

Literary Notes

- Triadic structure: Mirrors Jesus’ prayer — intertextual alignment.
- Silence after prayer: Narrative gap heightens anticipation for divine speech (v. 9).

Verse 9a

LEB

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

SBLGNT

καὶ εἶρηκέν μοι· Ἀρκεῖ σοι ἡ χάρις μου· ἡ γὰρ δύναμις ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ τελεῖται.

Word-for-word gloss

and | he-has-said | to-me: | Suffices | for-you | the | grace | of-me; | the | for | power | in | weakness | is-perfected.

Historical Notes

- χάρις: In Corinth, **charis** = patronage/gift. Paul redefines as unmerited divine enablement.
- ἀσθένεια:
 - Medical: Chronic illness.
 - Social: Paul’s critics used it as proof of divine disfavor (cf. Deut 28 curses).

Literary Notes

- Perfect tense (εἶρηκέν): like OT “Thus says the Lord.”
- Chiasmus:

A χάρις
B δύναμις
B' ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ
A' τελεῖται

- Shekinah echo: τελεῖται recalls tabernacle completion (Exod 40:33–35 LXX).

Verse 9b

LEB

Therefore I delight most gladly in weaknesses, in insults, in calamities, in persecutions, and difficulties for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

SBLGNT

ἥδιστα οὖν μᾶλλον καυχῆσομαι ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις, ἵνα ἐπισκηνώσῃ ἐπ' ἐμὲ ἡ δύναμις τοῦ Χριστοῦ. διὸ εὐδοκῶ ἐν ἀσθενείαις, ἐν ὕβρεσιν, ἐν ἀνάγκαις, ἐν διωγμοῖς καὶ στενοχωρίαις ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ· ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατός εἰμι.

Word-for-word gloss

most-gladly | therefore | rather | I-will-boast | in | the | weaknesses, | in-order-that | may-pitch-tent | upon | me | the | power | of-the | Christ. | wherefore | I-am-content | in | weaknesses, | in | insults, | in | necessities, | in | persecutions | and | distresses | for | Christ; | whenever | for | I-am-weak, | then | powerful | I-am.

Historical Notes

- Hardship catalog:
 - Stoic: Epictetus boasts endurance.
 - Paul: Boasts Christ's power, not self-mastery.
- ὕβρεσιν: Public shaming (e.g., being **beaten with rods**, Acts 16:22).
- στενοχωρίαις: Literal confinement (prison, shipwreck).

Literary Notes

- ἐπισκηνῶω: Johannine echo (John 1:14: ἐσκήνωσεν). Paul = living tabernacle.
- Rhetorical climax: Five-item list + paradox = memorable sententia
- εὐδοκῶ: Echoes God's pleasure at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:11) — Paul conforms to Christ.

Verse 10

LEB

Therefore I am content in weaknesses, in insults, in calamities, in persecutions and difficulties for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

SBLGNT (Identical to v. 9b latter half)

διὸ εὐδοκῶ ἐν ἀσθενείαις, ἐν ὕβρεσιν, ἐν ἀνάγκαις, ἐν διωγμοῖς καὶ στενοχωρίαις ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ· ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατός εἰμι.

Word-for-word gloss (Identical to v. 9b latter half)

wherefore | I-am-content | in | weaknesses, | in | insults, | in | necessities, | in | persecutions | and | distresses | for | Christ; | whenever | for | I-am-weak, | then | powerful | I-am.

Historical & Literary Notes

- Repetition: Epistolary reinforcement — like OT covenant renewal.
- ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ: Missional motive — suffering for the gospel, not masochism.
- Paradox: Subverts Corinthian spirituality (triumphalism, glossolalia as power).

Theological Synthesis

Paul reframes apostolic legitimacy:

1. Visions → risk of pride.
2. Thorn → divine check.
3. Prayer denied → grace revealed.
4. Weakness embraced → Christ's power displayed.

The “cruciform pattern” of ministry

How 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 shows this

Verse	Cruciform Element	Signature of Ministry
V7	Thorn in the flesh → humiliation	Weakness prevents pride after visions
V8	Prayer denied → submission	Like Jesus in Gethsemane (“not my will”)
V9a	Power in weakness → cross logic	Strength through limitation, not around it
V9b - 10	Boasting in insults, persecutions → catalog of suffering	Delight in what the world calls shame

Result: Paul's ministry credential is not miracles or eloquence — but cross-shaped weakness.

Summary Theological Takeaways

Theme	Key Phrase	Implication
Divine Sovereignty	ἐδόθη μοι	God ordains suffering for sanctification
Sufficiency of Grace	Ἀρκεῖ σοι ἡ χάρις μου	Grace is not escape but empowerment
Power in Weakness	ἡ δύναμις ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ τελεῖται	God's telos is reached in human limitation
Cruciform Boasting	ἧδιστα...καυχῆσομαι ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις	True glory is cross-shaped

Key Quote for Memorization

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor 12:9)

Discussion Questions

- How does Paul's view of weakness challenge our instincts?
- What does “my grace is sufficient” mean in practice?
- How can we rely on God in our weakness?