

**Date:** January 20-21, 2024  
**Title:** Virtue or Vice: Weakness  
**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 12:1-10  
**Speaker:** Kurt Bjorklund

Good morning. It's great to be together. Just before we jump into the teaching, I want to give you an update. If you've been around Orchard Hill, you know that at the end of every year, we do something that we call year-end giving. And this is part of how the church is funded. It's funded through regular weekly giving, which goes to regular expenses. Then at the end of every year, we generally will say here's what we're hoping to see happen in the days ahead. We invite those who are part of this church to say if you can make an extra gift toward this, then this is what we'll try to do. It's part of how we've been able as a church to grow.

Going back to when we first built Kidzburgh, to launching the Strip District Campus, to building the Chapel, building the offices, renovating the space here in the Worship Center, launching Butler, and doing the NextGen Wing, which is now what you're seeing happen. It's also part of how we helped launch a church in Haiti and have done numerous things over the years, and it's been because of your generosity.

This year we set a goal of \$1.5 million, which I know when you just throw that number out, it sounds like a huge number, but it represents about 15, 20, and 25% of the overall operating needs of the church. And you all gave and pledged over \$1.4 million this year to that, which is just amazing. As a congregation, that was the biggest number that we've done without having a very specific new construction project. So, way to go. We're just so thankful for how many of you believe in the ministry here and partner with the ministry saying this matters. We hope that what this will mean is we will be able to use a lot of that funding to help complete the NextGen wing at our Wexford campus.

There will be projects that we'll be able to do in the Strip District and Butler. There will be an opportunity in terms of our campus pathway this next year and even in Haiti to help with a project there. And so, our prayer, our hope, is that more and more people will be able to find and follow Jesus because of the generosity of so many of you, both during the year in regular giving and then at year-end. So, thank you again for participating.

Let's pray together. God, I thank you for the provision here at Orchard Hill and ask that you would help us to be faithful with what you've given and that there would be students and kids through the NextGen wing and adults and people at our different campuses and internationally who will be impacted because of the generosity and faithfulness of so many. And God, as we're gathered today, I pray that you would speak to each of us, that your word would take root in our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, we've been working our way through Second Corinthians. I said a couple of weeks ago that my guess is very few of us when we were thinking about our spiritual journey for the New Year, said you know what I really want to do - I want to study Second Corinthians 10 through 13. Partly because a lot of Second Corinthians is full of autobiographical stuff, and it's not super well known. But today we come to the passage that's probably best known in Second Corinthians, and it's the passage about the thorn in the flesh where the Apostle Paul is writing, and he talks about having a thorn in the flesh.

This is one of those passages that is well known for a good reason because probably most of us in one season or another of our lives can relate to feeling like we have a thorn in our flesh. In fact, I had somebody say to me a couple of weeks ago when we were talking about boasting and they said I don't feel like I have anything in my life that I would be tempted to boast about. My life's just hard. I said to the person when they said that well, just wait a couple of weeks. We're going to talk about weakness, and that's today.

So, a thorn in the flesh, as the Apostle Paul talks about it, is talking about something that is certainly unpleasant but a thorn in the biblical use of this word, at least in the original language, was something that was meant to impale or incapacitate. He says I had something that was impaling me, incapacitating me, making my life difficult. And certainly, this could have been something physical for Paul. We know that he had eyesight issues. We know that he had maybe a speech impediment. So maybe he's thinking and saying, I wish that this was taken away from me. It certainly could have been something situational.

We read last week in Second Corinthians 11 about all of the different places and difficulties that he had, and it could have been relational when the passage says he was given a thorn in the flesh and then it says a messenger of Satan. The grammar here is not neuter but it's in a personal form, meaning that the messenger he could be referring to here was an actual person who was just making his life difficult. And so, you hear that, and he says I was given this to torment me. The word torment means to strike with a fist.

This is something that many of us know something about. Maybe you have somebody in your life that you can't extricate yourself from and it feels like a thorn, like a messenger of Satan that over and over is difficult for you. Maybe there are circumstances that you have right now that you say why is this happening? If this could be resolved, my life would be so much better. Or maybe there's a health issue, something that's been chronic and it feels like it's just consistently keeping you from having the life that you want to have. The thorn in the flesh could have been any of these for Paul.

I remember some time ago, my family, when our boys were younger, went to another family's house that had a large deck and was situated on the water. One of my boys was running on the deck and he stepped on a splinter, presumably, and the splinter went up in his foot. And he came running and yelling as little boys do, kind of like this hurts. And I think he was probably four years old at the time. We looked at his foot and tried to get the splinter out and we couldn't get it out because we didn't see it.

And so, I assumed he didn't actually have a splinter and was being overly dramatic. He goes from there, starts limping, and everything he does for the next week is my foot hurts. And I'm just thinking, come on buddy, this is just like this little thing. Then we gave him a bath one night and suddenly, out came this splinter that was about two inches long that had gone up so far that we couldn't find it when we were looking for it.

What I realized in that moment is none of us really know the extent of somebody else's pain, the extent of somebody else's thorn in the flesh. You can look from a distance and say oh, that shouldn't be that bad compared to me. But you don't know. I don't know. And if you're somebody who's living with a thorn in your flesh, it is potentially excruciating and difficult.

Paul uses another word here. He uses the word weakness. Our series has been called *Virtue or Vice*. And we've been looking at these words that the Apostle Paul uses. He uses the word boasting, which you can think of negatively, but he uses it positively to say I boast only in Jesus Christ. We talked about the idea of jealousy, which again can be a negative word, but he used it to say he was jealous for the spiritual condition of the people at the church in Corinth.

Here he takes the word weakness because he has this thorn in the flesh, and he says that he has weakness. And often when you hear weakness, when I hear weakness, we incline to say well, what I need to do is I need to be strong, and I don't want to be weak. In fact, even if you have a significant thorn in the flesh, what's considered virtuous is to be strong in the midst of your difficulty and your hardship.

And yet what Paul does here is he makes a statement first in verse nine and then in verse ten about what it should look like to have this weakness. Here's what he says in verse nine of Second Corinthians chapter 12. He says, "But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses..." So, he brings back the word boast and he says, I'm going to boast gladly in my weakness. Now I don't know about you, but that doesn't seem like how I want to function. I don't want to say oh, do you know where I'm weak? Do you know where I'm struggling? Do you know where it's hard for me? I realize some people like to talk about all their hardships, but most of us might share some of our hardships, but we keep some of them to ourselves.

Then he says this in verse ten. "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." And so, what the Apostle Paul does is he says I'm weak, but I boast in it gladly, and I delight in it. How does that work? How can you say yes, this is hard, I have a thorn and yet I don't want to be devastated by it? Instead, I want to have a sense of being able to say, I rejoice in this.

Let me give you four statements from this passage about thorns that might help us. And just as an aside, understand that a thorn in the flesh is not your sinful choices that bring negative consequences into your life. A thorn in the flesh is something else that's from outside. So, here's the first statement, and that is thorns are given to those whom God blesses and are given to those whom God loves. Verses 1 through 7 tell us this, especially verses 1 and 2 and verse 7. Here's what it says. "I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows." And then he says in verse seven that he was given surpassingly great revelation.

Here's what Paul is probably alluding to. I don't think he's saying that every believer or follower of Jesus will have a moment where they're caught up into this third heaven and they have this experience because he references specifically 14 years ago. He's probably referring to his Damascus Road experience. What he's saying is God has given me a unique calling and a broad ministry, and I've had these amazing revelations, verse seven, and yet God saw fit for Him to have a thorn in the flesh.

The reason this is important is that there's a way of thinking that comes into Christian thinking sometimes that says, if I'm a good follower of Jesus, if I'm a good person, if God loves me, or if God blesses me, I'll never have a thorn in my flesh. I'll never have difficulty. And what happens then is when you have difficulty, when something comes along, whether it's physical, relational, or situational that isn't to your liking, what happens is you end up in a place where you say how could God let this happen to me? Or you say my faith or my goodness hasn't been good enough. Therefore, I have this difficulty because God has not come through for me.

But what we need to do is see in this passage and other places in the Bible, that even when God blesses somebody greatly and loves them, the experience of thorns is not necessarily something that they avoid. In fact, when you think about thorns in the Bible, where else are thorns mentioned off the top of your head? The place that comes to my mind is a crown of thorns.

So, Paul is given a thorn in the flesh, and yet Jesus had a crown of thorns. Think about that. Jesus blessed, loved by God, a whole crown of thorns, and in a way, this is teaching us this simple thing. The reason we have hardship or difficulty isn't that God doesn't love us, because he loved Jesus and Jesus had the greatest hardship, the crown of thorns is His way of saying I will take hardship from you so that you can have the eternity that God has promised.

The trouble is, a lot of times our idea of a trade is I'm good, therefore God owes me. And yet what we need to see is that thorns are given to those whom God blesses and God loves, and the trade that's offered is God's suffering and our suffering for future good. So, thorns are given to those whom God blesses.

Here's the second thing. Thorns are from God and Satan. Now, I recognize in saying this that there will be some who will say wait a second, I don't believe that because you will either be dualistic in your thinking and say things are either all from God, all from Satan, or you will be somebody who's so caught up with the idea of the sovereignty of God that you'll say God is behind everything.

But notice how this reads, and this is the end of verse seven, and the beginning of verse eight. It says this. "Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me." So, what do you have here? You have the idea that he says, I was given a thorn in the flesh. And what does he call it? A messenger of Satan. Meaning Satan is at least in part, responsible. And then he turns around, he says, and I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. So, what's he doing? He's saying on one level, this is from Satan, and on another level, I still recognize that God is in control.

And so, what we're dealing with here is the issue of causation. What causes hardship in my life, what causes hardship in your life? And if you answer it only Satan, what happens is you then have a God who isn't in control, and you have a very kind of dualistic view of the world. But if you answer it only God, then God is ultimately the one who has brought evil into your life. What Paul does is he says, I have this messenger of Satan, yet I plead with God. God is

still in control, and yet I can recognize that this is something that is not God as the primary initiator of what I'm experiencing.

I believe that this is one of the things that are important for how we think about evil in our lives, difficulty in our lives because the spiritual problems that will come if you say God caused 100% of what happens is that then God is somehow complicit in suffering. And if you say it's all Satan and God isn't in control, then it's a hopeless scenario.

If you struggle with what I'm saying, I challenge you to look at this text and come up with a better explanation. And if you read through the text of the Scriptures, one of the great stories about this is the story of Job. In chapter one of Job, what you see is the text goes out of its way to say that he was a righteous man, and the idea is that Job is going to suffer. Yet at the same time, what the text is pointing out is that sometimes people suffer whom God has blessed and who have been completely right in how they've lived their lives.

Then what happens in the text of Job is Satan comes to God, and God says hey, have you seen my servant, Job? Satan says let me afflict him with some stuff. So, what do you have? You have the interplay here again of God and Satan at work. Again, this is important if you and I are going to be able to understand weakness in our lives.

C.S. Lewis wrote about this in one of the best philosophical works on suffering, the problem of pain. He said, "Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free will involve, and you will find that you have excluded life itself." So, we can say that thorns are something that are given to those whom God blesses and loves. Thorns are from God and Satan.

Third, I think we can say from this text that some thorns are taken away and some are not. Verse eight, verse nine, again says, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." Paul prays, pleads with God, and says God, would you take away this thorn in my flesh? And God doesn't.

Now, the reason I say sometimes God does, sometimes he doesn't, sometimes thorns are taken, sometimes they are not, is when you read through the pages of the Bible, you find these stories are where people believed, and they were healed. These are incredible stories that give incredible hope about how God will work. Sometimes what we can do is we can project into those stories and say therefore, God always works this way. So, if I do the things that this person did in this instance, I'm going to get the results that they got. But in order to interpret the Bible correctly over all of its pages, we need to take into account all of the different places that the Bible speaks to something. So here, what you're getting is that there is suffering sometimes that is not taken away, even though there was righteousness, even though there was prayer that said God, would you take this away?

We're in the midst of a seasonal study on prayer on Tuesday nights at our Wexford Campus. One of the issues that we're going to address this coming week at the study is this idea of how we reconcile, pray boldly and expectantly, hoping that God works with faith, and yet have a sense of saying God is still sovereign over what happens. How do you know when you

don't have enough faith? Simply, here in this text, part of it is to say some thorns, difficulties, and prayers are answered the way we want, and some are answered maybe the way we don't want. It doesn't mean that they're not answered, but it just means that the result isn't always what we expect.

I remember as a college student, I heard a missionary speak. Her name was Helen Roseveare, and she'd written some books and was well-known years ago. You can find her story online. You can find books about it. But she went on to be a missionary, where she served in medical missions hoping to tell more and more people about Jesus Christ, to help people find and follow Jesus Christ because of her medical missions.

While she was there, one of the worst things that you can imagine happened to her. Again, I won't tell the story, but you can read about it. I remember hearing her speak as a young follower of Jesus, and inside I was just saying how could God let this happen? You gave your life to serving him and this is what happened. She said something, and she's written about this. Here's what she says. This is her take on God's word to her, she said, "Can you thank me for trusting you with this experience even if you never know the reason why?" And her take was to say I don't know why God let something happen or didn't take suffering away or didn't not cause it, but he's trusting me with an experience.

I have to tell you, as a college student hearing that kind of spirituality was above and beyond my understanding. Even today, there's a piece of me that says, I would rather not suffer than have whatever God intends on the other side. And yet, what I recognize now is that if God doesn't take something away that we pray for Him to take away, or if God doesn't do what we think He's doing, it's precisely because in his loving goodness, he says I've got something else.

This leads to the fourth statement, and that is thorns are a means of grace. Do you see this in this text? Again, all of verses seven, eight, nine, and ten point to this. Here's what he says. "Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me." Now, in this English translation, and most English translations for the sake of stylistic reasons, this isn't a good translation of the original language because twice it says in order to keep me from becoming conceited. It's actually repeated twice. So, the way it really reads is therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me in order to keep me from being conceited. So, it's emphasized in the original language. Stylistically, in our English, it would have been an awkward sentence. It's only once. But the inspired text is saying this is what the thorn in the flesh was doing. It's a means of grace, and it's keeping you, Paul, from becoming full of yourself.

Then verse eight says this. "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me." Verse nine, "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" So it's through weakness that we experience God's power and His grace. Then he says this. "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Henri Nouwen has written this. He said, "Joy and resentment cannot coexist." You see the delighting in insult, weakness, and difficulty, all of this, joy and resentment cannot coexist. So,

if I resent my difficulty, my weakness, my thorn, I can't be joyful. But if I'm able to say this is actually a means of grace, God is using this to bring about strength, his strength to give power. Because when I am weak, he says that I'm strong.

Maybe to keep or develop a character quality, then I'm able to say I can delight in this weakness. And if you've ever been in a place where something difficult led to something good, you can get a small sense of this. But it isn't even just that it's so much greater because it's saying that it is in weakness, that God does some of his greatest work.

One of the things that I do often when I'm studying the scriptures for myself, sometimes studying for a message because I had the chance to learn the original languages, is I'll try to translate the original language into what I would call a more wooden, stiff, literal translation. So, if you say the New American Standard, ESV is kind of here, it's kind of to this side of it, and then what I try to do is I try to make an expanded kind of nuanced rendition of the text. So, if you would say the message is like over here, it's like trying to go beyond that. And I find that it just helps me grapple with the words. Let me share with you my expanded rendition of this passage verses seven through ten, because for me, this was helpful in just understanding this text and its words and not just what we say about it.

And so, this tries to take into account the tenses and the nuances of the individual Greek words. Here's what it says. Because of the extraordinary, unusually astute insights and opportunities, to keep me from being self-exalting and full of myself, I was given a deeply painful and consistent thorn in my flesh, which was a messenger of Satan (one doing Satan's bidding,) to beat and torment me relentlessly, in order to keep me from being self-exalting and full of myself.

Three times I begged God to remove it from me but instead He said definitively, because this is in the perfect tense, my grace is sufficient for anything you are facing, and my power becomes perfected or comes to fruition when you are weak. Therefore, I will boast in my weakness with the most happy realization that through my weakness Christ's power abides with me.

Therefore, I'm content and take pleasure in weakness. Listen to just these translations of these words. In intentionally insulting or humiliating barbs, in hardships that bring constraints, in deliberate attempts to sabotage me, in the suffocating feeling of walls closing in on me when done unto Christ, or for Christ's sake. Because whenever I'm weak, it is then that I'm really powerful.

You see, the weakness, when we embrace it, invites God's grace. But when we resist it or say, I'm strong and don't need God's grace, that is when we experience weakness. I know that as we're gathered here today, some of us are probably saying well, I'm not sure about God and how God works in my life and if I even believe. But here's what I want you to hear, and that is you either will go through life in your own strength or in the strength of God, and the invitation first and foremost, is to acknowledge our weakness and say I need a savior. That's what salvation is saying, I'm not good enough, strong enough on my own, and I trust what Jesus Christ has done. That is how I enter into a relationship with God. But it isn't just a door of entry. It's a consistent place of saying it is God's grace and always God's work that transforms me and helps me in the places in my life that are full of thorns and hardships.

There's an English clergyman who lived several hundred years ago named John Bailey, and he wrote a prayer that I'd like to just utilize here as we come to an end. And here's what he wrote. And I want to read it once just quickly, and then I want to ask you to pray it with me. So let me just read this. This is what he wrote. He said, "Let me use disappointment as material for patience. Let me use success as material for thankfulness. Let me use trouble as material for perseverance. Let me use danger as material for courage. Let me use reproach as material for long-suffering. Let me use praise as material for humility. Let me use pleasure as material for temperance, and let me use pain as material for endurance."

And so, what I'd like to ask you to do is just bow your heads, close your eyes for a moment, and enter into a moment of praying about your thoughts. Your thought isn't visible or obvious to anybody else, but your thorn might be a person or people. It might be situations, or it might be health. I want you just to bring it to God and say God, I'm embracing weakness. Feel free to pray and plead with God to take it from you. I would love to hear about God's miraculous deliverance, but at the same time, with the recognition that God may be saying my grace is sufficient, my power is made perfect in weakness.

So today, can you just say to God wherever you are, God use my disappointment. What are you disappointed in as material for patience in my life? Can you say God use my success? Where have you felt the hand of God at work in your life as material for thankfulness? Where can you say God use my trouble? The things that are hard for me today, the insults, the hardships, and the pressure as material for perseverance. Where can you use danger as material for courage? Where can you use reproach where people have spoken against you, and said things that are unkind, and untrue as material for long-suffering? Where can you use praise as material for humility and pleasure as material for temperance? And where can you use pain as material for endurance?

God, I don't know the situations that are represented today, but I know that there are thorns. And I ask today that you would remove thorns in miraculous ways and there would be stories of your glory. But I also pray that there would be an embracing of weakness that says this is not a vice to be weak, but it's a virtue. Because when we are weak, you are strong. And your grace is sufficient. And I pray your grace into our lives. And we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Thanks for being here. Have a great week.