

**Sunday, September 11, 2022 | Feels: Thriving in the Valleys**

**2 Corinthians 12:1-10 | "The Valley of Deficiency"**

Sometimes our spiritual lives feel like a series of peaks and valleys. One moment, we're soaring high; the next, we experience a crushing low. This Sunday, we'll be starting a five-week series called *Feels: Thriving in the Valleys*, and this study is all about what we should do when we hit the low points in life. Along the way, we'll examine the journey of faith through the eyes of five famous bible characters: Elijah, Paul, Moses, Joseph, and Peter. By the end of this series, the hope is that the Christian will be equipped to combat the negative "feels" that seem to plague us and steal away our inner peace.

Last week, we navigated the valley of depression through the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19. We saw how the Lord comforted this depressed prophet by providing for his needs and listening to his pleas. And while Elijah was still in a sorry state even after his encounter with God, the Lord still chose to use him. Elijah's depression did not disqualify him from serving. This is not to say that the prophet wasn't changed in some way. He still went back to the very thing that made him flee. Thus, the lesson we took away from Elijah's valley was that **communing with God and fellowshiping with others helps to soothe the depressed heart.**

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Today, we'll be exploring the valley of deficiency. That is to say, we'll be packing feelings of inadequacy, fragility, and imperfection. Who among us has not looked at a task before them and thought, "I don't think I can do this." Often, in moments of uncertainty like this, we tend to wallow in despair, not unlike Elijah last week, or, if you're anything like me, you procrastinate, putting off what you know you should do. This is not out of laziness, or, at least not usually, but because you think you'll fail. What are we supposed to do when we face our own legitimate weaknesses, knowing full well that we don't have enough to succeed at whatever task we've set our minds to? The Apostle Paul has the answer for us.

But before we get there, we need to set the context. In 2 Cor. 12, we're entering the middle of a conversation where Paul is defending himself against some false teachers. In blatant comedic fashion, he sarcastically refers to them as "super-apostles" (vs. 5) since they've risen to prominence by comparing themselves with other apostles, namely Paul. But what critiques would they have to lob at Paul? Well, they've attacked his methodology (he never asked them for money), his mannerisms (his speech was plain and simplistic, lacking any sophistication), and his apostolic authority (he rarely, if ever, used the gift of tongues and/or shared with them some prophetic vision). In comparison, these "super-apostles" demand payment for their

services, their speech is marked with eloquence, and they regularly share some super special spiritual experience.

And so, to prove that he was the “real deal” and to poke fun at his objectors, Paul engages in a bit of boasting himself. On the surface, it appears to be the same kind of preening that these “false apostles” (cf. vs. 13) were known for. But rather than crow about his many accomplishments or brag about his spiritual prowess (as they have done), Paul takes all of chapters 11 and 12 to gloat about his shortcomings. For instance, he boasts about not taking their money and refusing to slap them in the face because he is too weak (cf. 2 Cor. 11:19-21). He then gloats about how he had been whipped, beaten, imprisoned, and in danger constantly from rivers, robbers, and even threatened by both Hebrews and Gentiles (cf. 2 Cor. 11:25-26)! Ultimately, this boasting culminates in a story about how Paul had to be let down in a basket to escape being capture in a city called Damascus (cf. 2 Cor. 11:32). Far from being some impervious super Christian, like those super-apostles at Corinth, Paul was constantly beleaguered by trouble. Not only that, he would run away in the most undignified way! Some might’ve even called him a coward.

This entire section oozes with sarcasm that even those who possess a wit as sharp as a butter knife would be able to pick up on it. But Paul's witty retort has the desired effect. It not only silences his objectors by revealing to the Corinthian church how prideful those “super-apostles” really were, but his satirical boasting also establishes his credibility. In a sense, what Paul's critics had said about him was true. He hadn't taken their money. He wasn't an eloquent orator. And he was, indeed, tight-lipped about his spiritual experiences. But the difference between him and the false apostles was that Paul had always been transparent with them. He never once beguiled them like the serpent did with Eve (cf. 2 Cor. 11:3) or took advantage of them as his opponents have done. This ought to be a point in his favor because what the Corinthians saw and heard of Paul was who Paul really was. Say what you will about him, but Paul was not self-aggrandizing. He was genuinely himself with them.

**READ: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. <sup>2</sup> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body **I do not know, God knows**. <sup>3</sup> And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body **I do not know, God knows**— <sup>4</sup> and he heard things that **cannot** be told, which man **may not** utter. <sup>5</sup> On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—<sup>6</sup> though if I should wish to boast, I would not

be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. <sup>7</sup> So to keep me from becoming **conceited** because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a **thorn** was given me in the flesh, a messenger of **Satan** to harass me, to keep me from becoming **conceited**. <sup>8</sup> **Three** times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> 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 of my **weaknesses**, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup> For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am **weak**, then I am **strong**.

Notice how Paul points out three of his own flaws:

**i. Paul’s comprehension was limited (cf. 2 Cor. 12:1-4).**

Twice we read about how Paul didn’t completely understand what was happening to him. And even what little he did understand, he wasn’t allowed to tell anyone what he heard. Now, it isn’t entirely clear Paul picked this particular vision. It wasn’t like he lacked experience in this department. For example, we know from the book of Acts that Paul was prone to many visions, of which no less than six are recorded (cf. Ac. 9:12; 16:9-10; 18:9-10; 22:17-21; 23:11; 27:23-24).<sup>1</sup> And it appears that those revelations were entirely understandable for him. Yet, instead of picking one of the revelations where he could’ve easily gone on about them in great detail, here, in our passage, the apostle chose a vision that he didn’t fully understand and one that he could only talk about cryptically. Why? Because although he got a glimpse into heavenly places and heard things that no man could repeat, he was still just Paul.

We tend to think that the Apostles were as infallible as Jesus himself. And while it is true that they were commissioned by God and uniquely gifted by the Holy Spirit to do wondrous works and given the ability to interpret the Scriptures, they were still men. They were often just as slow at understanding God's intention as the people they were serving (cf. Ac. 10:9-16). Funny enough, they got into conflict with other apostles, just as brothers are prone to fight once in a while (cf. Gal. 2:11-14).

The way that Paul even relayed this vision as if it had happened to someone else (i.e., in the third person) seems to me to be an effort to distance himself from the experience as if he had merely overheard what transpired rather than being the one to whom it actually happened.

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<sup>1</sup> Barnett, Paul, *The Message of 2 Corinthians*, Revised Edition, The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, Ill; InterVarsity Press Academic, 2020), p. 161.

This is actually quite common today in testimonials. People will often describe events as if they were spectators rather than participants (i.e., “it was as if time slowed down,” “unbeknownst to me at the time...”). Paul shows the believers at Corinth that he wasn’t always so clear on what God was doing. His comprehension was limited.

**ii. Paul’s flesh was vulnerable (cf. 2 Cor. 12:5-7).**

Much speculation has arisen around what, exactly, was Paul's so-called "thorn in the flesh." And while we'll never know what his thorn was on this side of eternity, we can at least make a few general assumptions by examining the terms Paul used.

First, Paul’s heavenly visit coincides with the moment he received his “thorn in the flesh.” And that event occurred sum 14 years prior. This means Paul has been dealing with this thorn for some time. When Paul wrote the book 2 Corinthians, he was working on his 15<sup>th</sup> year under the torment of that thorn.

Secondly, considering that he said the thorn was "in the flesh," implies that his difficulty was, in some way, a physical malady. What exactly it was, we cannot know. But it is possible the Corinthian church might've known what he spoke of.

Thirdly, notice that Paul clarifies what he meant when he says, "a thorn was given me in the flesh" by saying it was also a "messenger of Satan [sent] to harass [him]." This means that whatever alignment vexed the apostle, it was brought on by Satan through one of his demons. This means that Satan inadvertently became the tool that humbled Paul, drawing him closer to God. And before you say that God wouldn't allow Christians to be the victim of some demonic oppression, I'll remind you that Jesus went toe-to-toe with the Devil himself, and while he never once succumbed to temptation, Satan always returned to tempt him again (cf. Lu. 4:13). Also, God allowed Job to be tested in which he lost his whole family, save his wife. So Demonic passion may not be possible, but satanic oppression is undoubtedly possible (cf. Eph. 6:12-13).

Fourthly, the Greek word translated as “harass” in verse 7 is **κολαφίζω** (*kolaphizō*), and it means to humiliate someone, often violently in fact, so much so that if a person were to "*kolaphizō*" another person it meant that they were slapping them around repeatedly; hence the KJV’s rendering of the word as “buffeted” (cf. Mar. 15:65; Matt. 26:67; 1 Pet. 2:20).<sup>2</sup> This is not unlike what a boxer does to his opponent. Thus,

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<sup>2</sup> Garland, David E., *2 Corinthians*, The Christian Standard Commentary, (Holman Reference, 2021), p. 600.

whatever “thorn” Paul had, it was persistent, painful, and possibly opened him up to being ridiculed by his opponents.

**iii. Paul’s prayers were denied (cf. 2 Cor. 12:8-10).**

Paul learns that the solution to his problem wasn't in God giving him what he asked for in prayer but in a renewed reliance upon God's grace even more than before. Paul requested that the thorn be removed from him so that, presumably, he would be stronger. The Lord's reply is, essentially, "Paul, no. I will not remove that thorn because I am already strong enough for you." Whatever strength we might think we need to accomplish the work that God has called us to has already been given to us in Jesus Christ. The issue is that we often rely far too much on our own strength and power, so we miss the opportunity to rely upon God's strength and power. In a manner of speaking, Paul was strongest when he was weakest. The less reliant he became on his own abilities, the more reliant he became upon God's abilities. Thus, paradoxically, a Paul *with* the thorn was better off than a Paul *without* the thorn. “The cracked clay vessel, buffeted and battered, is held together by God’s extraordinary power.”<sup>3</sup>

**So, what’s the takeaway?**

**Our weaknesses are not curses but gifts from God which help us rely upon him.**

Embrace, own, or, as Paul put it, “boast” in your deficiencies, for you will come to life wide awake and fully aware that you are not enough; Christ is. Thereby you still start relying upon him all the more. All of us are born deficient for the tasks we’ve been given. This is not false humility but adjunct reality. Anyone who doesn’t believe this is woefully self-absorbed and destined for a rude awakening. Take heart, dear Christian; our insufficiencies are not cause for despair but an invitation for dependence. So much so that the more well-acquainted you are with your own shortcomings, the more reliant you will become upon God and the more you will grow in your walk the Jesus.

**READ: Proverbs 3:5-6 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup>Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. <sup>6</sup>In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. <sup>7</sup>Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. <sup>8</sup>It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 603.

You cannot do it all on your own or in your own power. Yes, you will need the help of others. But, far more importantly, you will need to rely upon God. Strength is not measured by how much you can stand on your own two feet but by how much you lean upon Christ.

## Video Description

Feels: Thriving in the Valleys | Week 2 | “The Valley of Deficiency”

TEXT: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: