

Strength in Weakness and the Call to Spiritual Examination

Key Text:	2 Corinthians 12 & 13
Key Verse(s):	“And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Background to the Study

Chapter 12 opens with Paul answering critics who had questioned his ministry and integrity. He speaks reluctantly about extraordinary visions and revelations he received, calling himself “a man in Christ” to avoid drawing attention to himself. The exact event he mentions from “fourteen years ago” cannot be pinned down with certainty from the book of Acts, but Paul uses the account, whether a bodily or a spiritual ascent to the “third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:1–4), to show that he had been uniquely favoured by God. The experience included “unspeakable words” that were not meant for public display; Paul shares the story only to establish that his ministry was grounded in real encounters with the Lord, not in clever rhetoric or self-promotion.

Yet alongside that high privilege came a painful reality, a “thorn in the flesh” that kept Paul humble and dependent on God (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). Scholars have long debated the thorn’s exact nature; many suggest an eye problem. Whatever it was, it was persistent, visible, and humiliating. Paul pleaded with the Lord three times for relief, and each time the answer came: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Rather than remove the suffering, God gave Paul the assurance that divine strength would be present in his weakness. Paul therefore learned to boast not in his visions but in his infirmities, because they displayed Christ’s power and kept him dependent on God’s grace.

Paul’s refusal to accept support from the Corinthians (see 2 Corinthians 11:7–9 and 12:13–18) is part of the same pattern. He did not want his ministry to be open to the charge of self-interest, so he laboured without burdening them and accepted help from other churches when necessary. His aim was spiritual profit for the Corinthians, not personal gain. This posture of sacrifice and humility contrasts sharply with the behaviour of those who sought status and applause; Paul’s credentials were not honours or eloquence but faithfulness, suffering, and dependence on Christ.

In chapter 13 Paul turns from personal testimony to pastoral correction. He announces a third visit and warns that he will exercise discipline if he finds unrepentant sin (2 Corinthians 13:1–4). Because some in Corinth had tested his authority and asked for proof of his apostleship, Paul calls the church to self-examination: “Examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith” (2 Corinthians 13:5). This is not a call to despair but to honest appraisal and restoration. Paul hopes the Corinthians will prove themselves genuine so that his visit will not require harsh measures.

Testimony from Our Day

At seventeen, Joni Eareckson Tada dove into shallow water and snapped her neck. In an instant she went from an active young woman to a quadriplegic. The months that followed were dark and overwhelming. She could not imagine living life in a wheelchair or depending on others for the most private needs. Depression came quickly and deeply.

In the midst of that despair Joni cried out to God. She prayed, “If I cannot die, then please show me how to live.” She admitted she had no strength to face this life on her own and asked God to carry her. God answered not by removing the disability but by giving the grace she needed to endure. Over time she discovered that when her own strength failed, God’s strength was enough. She still woke each morning needing God, but she also found purpose and ministry through her weakness.

Joni learned to boast not in what she could do but in what Christ could do through her weakness. She became an author, an artist, and the founder of Joni and Friends, a ministry serving people with disabilities around the world. Her life shows that God’s power is most visible when we are weakest and most dependent on him.

A Closer Look

Question 1	Why did Paul speak cautiously about his extraordinary spiritual experience rather than boast about it? (II Corinthians 12:1–6) Why was Paul given a “thorn in the flesh”? (II Corinthians 12:7) Paul prayed three times for the thorn to depart. What can we learn when God does not answer prayer in the way we expect? (II Corinthians 12:8–9)
Question 2	In 2 Corinthians 12:14–15, what does Paul mean by “I seek not yours, but you”? How can Christians distinguish between ministry motivated by love for souls and ministry motivated by personal gain, recognition, or influence? (1 Thessalonians 2:2; Philippians 2:20–21; 2 Corinthians 11:9)
Question 3	Paul was planning another trip to Corinth, and he was concerned he might find that ungodly practices had infiltrated the Corinthian congregation. He wrote sternly to the group, hoping they would deal with such issues before he arrived. What particular problems did he name? How can we guard against such problems creeping into the church today? 2 Corinthians 12:20–21
Question 4	What do we use as our guide for spiritually assessing our lives? How can we use the results of this test of our souls to become stronger Christians? (Read 2 Corinthians 13:5; Hebrews 4:12; James 2:14–26; 1 John 4:1)
Question 5	Why did Paul say, “we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth”? (II Corinthians 13:8) What does Paul's desire for the Corinthians' “perfection” teach us about Christian growth and maturity? (II Corinthians 13:9)
Question 6	How can we put Paul’s closing charge in II Corinthians 13:11 into practice in maintaining a spiritually healthy church today

Take Home

When we come to the end of our own strength and lean wholly on God, His grace proves more than sufficient and His power is made perfect in our weakness. Our limitations are not barriers to His work; they are the very places where Christ chooses to display His strength.

And when we honestly examine ourselves in the light of God's Word, we face the most important question of all: are we truly "in the faith"? This spiritual self-examination is not optional or casual. It is a matter of eternal significance. A sincere, Scripture-shaped assessment leads us to repentance where needed, assurance where grace is evident, and renewed commitment to walk faithfully with Christ.