

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 - Papendorf

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Preacher: Dave Papendorf

[0:00] Good morning, welcome, as always. The past four weeks, this week and next week, as a church, we've been studying a collection!

that cause us to look at, examine, think about testing. These passages span the biblical canon.

We're adding a new voice here, but a familiar one with the Apostle Paul this morning.

We're doing this in conjunction with Christians around the world who are celebrating Lent, a time of preparation, ahead of Easter, which is coming. And so we're dropping into this letter in 2

Corinthians all the way at the end, and so there's a lot of work to be done, thinking about what has Paul said, and who are these people to whom Paul is speaking?

Because 2 Corinthians is this intensely personal letter. Paul, as a human, just sort of gushes out of the text. And as one scholar who I spoke with a few weeks ago said, 1 and 2 Corinthians is basically just, I don't know, a big set of complicated relationships, and that's true to a certain extent. So we have some hard work ahead of us, and we'll take some time setting the context here, both in 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, and approaching our passage. That being said, this is a super familiar passage to us.

[1:29] It pops off the page. It's powerful. It's quotable. And as is the case with these familiar passages, we need to stay disciplined, focused as we read, because texts that are powerful and familiar need to be grounded well, to be understood well.

There's a famous scholar whose name is Jonathan Pennington, who talks about the task of interpretation through the analogy of a dartboard. Maybe you've heard some of us say this before, that when we read and we study the Bible, sorry to bring up darts in church.

I hope you're not scandalized. But anyways, when we read the Bible and we're hoping to interpret the scriptures, there's a reading that's a bullseye reading right in the middle.

Okay, that bullseye reading is the reading that is centralizing the author's argument, their context, their situatedness. But there are also rings around the bullseye, aren't there?

There are other good readings of scripture that relate to the author's argument and context, but are not perfectly squarely bullseye interpretations. And a good reading of scripture incorporates and thinks about all of those together.

[2:41] And sometimes familiar passages can kind of smush those things together, like the bullseye interpretation and the outer rings. Let me give you an example.

1 Corinthians 13 at weddings. Love is patient, love is kind, yada, yada, yada. Okay, Paul is not talking about marriage in 1 Corinthians 13.

But it's not wildly inappropriate or out of bounds to talk about Paul's poem on love in that kind of setting.

It's not irresponsible, as long as we're grounded, thoughtful, mindful. That's a familiar one, maybe even an easy one. Maybe we know about that already. That's the one preachers kind of pick on, right?

But it's especially hard when we approach familiar passages, because sometimes we don't know that we're doing that smushing together. And so we're going to try to work together to get a bullseye interpretation today.

[3:45] Here's the plan. I'm going to give a biography of Paul. We need to remember who Paul is. He's familiar, but there's lots of details that need to be sorted. So a biography of Paul, that's first.

Second, we'll build some context. We're going to do like a sword drill flip through of 1 and 2 Corinthians. Get your fingies ready and dexterous. We're going to look through all of those texts to build the context here.

Third, we'll address our text in particular. And then fourth, explore some theological reflections, application points. So that's what we're up to, biography, context, text, applications.

That's a lot. I need help. We need help. Let's ask the Lord to guide our time. Lord, as I preach this morning, a sinner and a clay jar, I ask that your glory and power would be made known, that it comes from you.

I ask that you would grow all of us this morning as we hear your word, that when we read these ancient texts for Christian instruction, that we would grow. And we ask this through your spirit that you so richly pour out on us.

[5:01] In Jesus the Son. Amen. Amen. Okay. Let's talk about Paul. Let's do Paul biography. And we'll try to stay at 30,000 feet or so.

Paul is a zealous Jewish man who is a member of the Jewish diaspora. That sounds really complicated, and it's not.

We'll unpack each of those. Okay. Paul was born somewhere between 10 and 15 years after Jesus. But we don't want to think about Paul as someone who would have known Jesus. It's very unlikely that he did know Jesus personally.

And Jewish diaspora, that means Jews who live outside of Israel. Paul lived about 600 miles outside of Jerusalem in a place called Tarsus. That's like a two-week journey if you fly first class or camel first class.

Usually it takes a little bit longer than that. Kids, we remember how God's people lived in Israel, and the temple was there, and they had the law. But God punished disobedient Israelites and sent them into exile.

[6:08] Some of them went to Babylon. We met one of them last week, Daniel. But others went to other places. And these communities of Jews, the Jewish diaspora, spread all over the world.

Well, Tarsus, which is in modern-day Turkey, that's where Paul is from. These Jews in the Jewish diaspora, they clung to this one thing, God's law. Because they didn't have the temple.

The temple is where God made himself known and present with his people. But if they lived apart from the temple, how is it that God's presence is with them? Well, it's in his word, in the law.

Paul is zealous for that. He cares about the word, about reading it, studying, meditating, understanding, protecting good interpretation.

And, I don't know, that's not so crazy to us. Here we are in Wheaton, evangelical land, right? The way that we think about God's relationship with us is heavily mediated through his word.

[7:09] How do we grow in our relationship with God? We read the Bible, and we go to church, and we fellowship with Christians. Growing close to God means, among many things, studying the scriptures.

Being a good evangelical means reading the Bible. Being a good Jewish diaspora zealous guy like Paul means reading the Bible and caring about what it says. That's Paul.

Paul also worked. He had a job. He had vocational training. He made tents. You maybe know about Paul as a tent maker. He also made other stuff with Canvas. Clearly, he had theological training and an opportunity for that.

And that may have spiked up his zeal for protecting God's law. And this is why that's so important.

Paul, as he reads the scriptures, like contemporaries and as we see in his letters, the scriptures, he held tightly to all of the promises of God's redemption for the Jewish people.

Paul sensed and knew that God's people were in spiritual exile. And he longed for God to redeem his people by clinging to his word, being zealous for it, protecting it.

[8:29] And so when these strange people who say the Messiah has come and have said that his name is Jesus and that he's been crucified like a criminal, when Paul hears that and hears all of what's going on there, he thinks like the prophets of the Old Testament.

We need to drive out this foolishness and disobedience among us. That's why Paul persecutes Christians, at least initially. He sees himself like the prophets, a protector who's faithful to the law, expelling false teachers, idolaters.

But when Paul is on his way to persecute, he hears a voice. He goes blind. We talk about this as the experience on the Damascus road, maybe even a conversion.

That's somewhat helpful, but Paul doesn't convert from Judaism to Christianity or something strange like that. Paul realizes something anew and then continues to realize in his life as he studies and prays that Jesus embodies, like in his body, Jesus embodies the hope for Israel. Jesus is Messiah. Jesus is King. Jesus has been resurrected. So that changes everything. And Paul then begins to follow Jesus.

[9:50] And this is where things get not so neat and tidy. We're in the 21st century. We like historical exactitude. We want to know how everything works and how everything happened. Because history, after all, is just one thing that happens after another, right?

Okay, please say no. That's not how we should always think about history. But Paul, after having this conversion, just sort of does his own thing for about 10 years.

It's hard to piece together, but in the book of Acts, we know that he goes to the city of Damascus. Then he goes to Arabia, probably to see Mount Sinai and retrace the steps of God's people and study the law.

Then he goes back to Damascus. Then to Jerusalem. Then to his hometown. Paul moves back in with his parents. Maybe not exactly. But he moves back to Tarsus and he lives there for 10 years. This period of time between Paul's conversion and when Paul becomes like this missionary Paul guy that we read about in Acts. 10 years. 10 years is a long period of time.

[10:49] Paul tells us nothing about what he was doing. For sure he was working. He had a job. Maybe he was telling his family about Jesus. Probably he was. At the very least, he was in this period of formative, study-filled, meditation-drenched spiritual growth.

He was thinking about what it means for Jesus to be Messiah and to study God's word, the Old Testament. So Paul is doing that, but Paul also gets called.

He's got a friend whose name is Barnabas. And in a city not that far away from Tarsus where Paul is from, there's something going on in Antioch. Because God's redemption is not just for Jewish people.

And this was confusing to zealous people like Paul and some others. Gentiles, the nations, were being brought in. And this caused all sorts of friction. Those of us who've been studying 1 Corinthians, we know a little bit about this.

And this community is having all sorts of tensions. So Paul and Barnabas go to Antioch. They teach. And later we hear Paul in his letter to the Romans talk about how he understands himself as the apostle to the Gentiles.

[12:08] A zealous Jewish guy who wanted to persecute any polluting influence is now saying, God's people is, and by the way, always has been inclusive of all of those who God has created in his image.

Every human, woman, and man. So then Paul leaves Antioch. He goes out. And, well, you know the story is heals, preaches, ministers. And importantly for 2 Corinthians here, he becomes very well acquainted with two things.

God's power and his, that's Paul's, weakness. Paul writes a bunch of letters. We know a lot about Paul from his letters.

He wrote letters that were meant to be read by lots of people but had particular audiences in mind, sometimes written to specific people, sometimes to churches he visited or churches that he planted. 2 Corinthians is one of those. To weave all of this together here, who is Paul? Well, Paul's, God's sent one, an apostle, chosen and equipped to minister to this Jewish plus Gentile church.

[13:21] Paul has seen God work through miraculous ways. He's also experienced great trials, oppression, opposition, doubts of depression.

I think it's right to understand Paul as this zealous guy who is so transformed by his trials and weaknesses.

These two things are blended so well together in his ministry. They pour out of 2 Corinthians. One scholar says this, that when Paul is writing, he cannot but mention how God is going to set the world right at last.

And God does this, as Paul shows us in many places, like 2 Corinthians, along with his broken people, to underscore, to underline the truthfulness and the power of the gospel. It's for broken people. God uses broken people to accentuate the redemptive truth of the gospel, to show us, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians, that the surpassing power belongs to God, not to us. [14:40] The gospel is not about a good gospel preacher. It's about God who brings the good news along with us broken people. 2 Corinthians gives us a chance to look at that.

I love 2 Corinthians, don't you? The answer is yes. You have to say yes. It's my favorite Pauline letter. If we can have a favorite, I don't know if we're allowed to have favorites, but I'm just going to say that it is.

Okay, so we've got some Paul biography. Let's get our fingers ready. We can flip a little bit, if you want to, through 1 and 2 Corinthians. Okay, so Paul, in his missionary journeys, he goes to Greece, and he spends some time in Athens.

Ooh la la, right? But then he pops over to this city, Corinth. And it's been just about a month since Paul was beaten and left for dead in Philippi.

While he's in Corinth, he's hearing rumors of these people who he loves in Thessalonica. There's riots taking place there. And Paul stays in Corinth for a year.

[15:45] He meets friends. He plants a church. And over the course of his ministry, he returns to Corinth at least three times. And he writes a bunch of letters to them because, well, their relationship is kind of complicated.

There's at least four letters that he writes. We only have two of them. Don't be too stressed about it. It's okay. The first letter he mentions in 1 Corinthians. The second letter is 1 Corinthians.

The third letter is mentioned in 2 Corinthians. And the fourth letter is 2 Corinthians. So just make sure you have that clear in your notes and everything is just fine.

The point is Paul has had some at-a-distance correspondence with the Corinthians. He spent a lot of time with them. And so he knows them. They know him.

Which is why a lot of what we read in 1 and 2 Corinthians is so challenging. In 1 Corinthians, Paul's first letter to them after he spent a year in the city, he leaves.

[16:47] Then he writes a letter to them. And he starts right away in 1 Corinthians 1 addressing divisions that have crept into the church. And in the early chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul continues to contrast this thing that he sees seeping into the church.

The church loves the wisdom and behaviors of the world, but that's not how the gospel works. He calls, Paul does, the Corinthians to live a life of wisdom and behaviors associated with the cross, which is foolishness to the Greeks, a stumbling block, the Jews.

So he writes all about this in these early chapters, summarizes a lot of these issues in chapters 1 through 6, like thinking about sexual holiness the right way or what it means to go to court, lawsuit with Christians.

Thinking about then in chapters 7 through 11 questions that the Corinthians are asking among themselves or maybe have asked Paul, like, what do we do? Should we be married? Should we not be married? How does that work?

What about food offered to idols? Paul answers or at least talks about all of these things in chapters 7, 8, 9, 10, 11. Finally, he addresses some worship order issues in chapter 11, 12, 13, 14.

[18:07] But we all know chapter 15. Go ahead, flip, flip, flip. In chapter 15, Paul gives us the frame here, the resurrection of Jesus.

This is the climax of 1 Corinthians. Paul says that the resurrection of Jesus frames the nature of the gospel and the way that we should live as Christians.

At the end of 1 Corinthians, there's some final instructions. But this book or this letter, 1 Corinthians, is kind of like peppy, chirpy, very brilliant, very organized, organized, sometimes confusing, but definitely expansive.

Paul talks about a ton of stuff in 1 Corinthians. So much so that a lot of Christian colleges now, their final Bible course, they're using 1 Corinthians as the capstone Bible course to address what it means to live in a pagan culture or something like that, Paul.

It's very expansive in 1 Corinthians. 2 Corinthians is different. There's a big change, a tonal change between these letters.

[19:14] Something has happened. We don't know exactly what has happened, but we can piece together a lot of it. 2 Corinthians is repetitive.

It's kind of like a buoy. You guys have seen a buoy before, right? Okay, a buoy is less dense than water, which means it floats above the water. But when seas are turbulent or the lake is really turbulent or whatever, pick the body of water, buoys go under and they go up.

They go under and they go up. Can you imagine this image taking place? Maybe in the ocean, especially. 2 Corinthians is a lot like that. There's this like underwater despair and discouragement that Paul articulates.

And then it pops back up in 2 Corinthians to talk about the hope and the comfort that the gospel provides. And Paul modulates between these two things.

He's probably reflecting on all of the bad experiences that he's had, maybe even in prison, and all of the stuff that he's hearing about going on in Corinth. And so for the first seven chapters, Paul goes back and forth between hope and comfort of the gospel and defending his ministry.

[20:24] Because there are people who say, Paul, you are not that smart. You have been persecuted. You are not articulate. You don't even take money. That's not God's apostle.

That's a different kind of person than we would expect. Paul does talk about money in chapters 8 and 9. And then starting in chapter 10 in 2 Corinthians, he begins to address his opponents.

There's these people in Corinth who are undercutting Paul's authority. And they're saying, like I mentioned before, that he's not very articulate. He doesn't take money. Look at all of the trials that he's experienced.

Would someone who's sent by God really be shipwrecked and face all of these issues? Would someone who is God's sent apostle be in prison? Do you think about that today in our 21st century context?

Who is the ideal preacher or pastor of your church? Someone in prison? Probably not. Well, I don't know. It depends, I guess, on your context.

[21:31] Paul is countering these false charges. And then we plop down in chapter 12. So, a lot of runway. Let's take off and talk about the text here.

Here's what Paul says in verse 7. So, to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

Look at that verse and notice how it's structured. At the start, to keep me from becoming conceited. At the end, to keep me from becoming conceited. Paul is at least being focused here.

Of course, that raises a question. Why would Paul be conceited? Okay, we've got to peek up just a little bit here to see the preceding verses.

Paul has been boasting for a little while here. And Paul's boasting is boasting, not boasting. You guys are familiar with the phrase, sorry, not sorry.

[22:41] Okay, sorry, not sorry works like this. Josh Olson and I play pickup basketball and he makes a game-winning three right in my face. He is sorry, but not sorry. You know what I'm saying? He feels a little bit bad for me, but not really that bad for me.

May or may not have happened one or more or many times. Paul's doing something similar but better. However, Paul has indulged with his opponents who boast about all these great things that they have.

But here's the thing that Paul does. He indulges with them just a little bit. He boasts like them and then he boasts better than them with weakness.

Which doesn't make a lot of sense, but that's exactly the point that Paul is getting after. Okay, he could be boasting about these visions and revelations that he's been having.

Notice in verses 2 and 3, just a bit above. He calls them visions, revelations. Apparently in verse 4, he hears things that he's not supposed to tell us. Someone caught up in the third heaven, whoa.

[23:48] But boasting is not a sort of thing to be prideful in. Paul, just in case he's tempted to boast, verse 7 here.

So to keep me from becoming conceited, because of these revelations that he's had, a thorn is given to him in the flesh. Okay, I know you want to know.

What are these things? These visions, these revelations, the voice, paradise, third heaven. Would it surprise you to know that scholars have not reached a consensus on what is going on here?

Probably Paul is making use of some familiar literary references that people would know from Enoch. Maybe we don't know Enoch, but Paul and his audience probably do.

Paul is also very likely describing an experience that he has, which is transformative, contains visual components.

[24:48] So probably Paul is meditating and praying, and he has this experience. I don't think Paul is saying this is a likely experience we're meant to have or to expect, but some Christians have.

Paul has. Hildegard of Bingen, everyone's favorite 11th century nun, has. Thomas Aquinas, you know Thomas Aquinas. Thomas Aquinas spent years of his life writing the Summa Theologica, and then in prayer, one day, he receives a vision, maybe something like this, and he just stops writing and says, that's it.

Julian of Norwich, we could go on and on, many examples here. Not a lot of consensus, but Paul has this experience. It could be a thing to boast about, hey, you know the third heaven?

I can tell you something about it. And actually, Jesus told me something when I was in the third heaven, and I could tell you, but Paul doesn't, because that's not the thing. Verse 7, to keep me from becoming conceited, I've got this thorn.

Thorn. Thorn in the flesh. Paul does not tell us exactly what this is either. And I know you want to know, what is the thorn in the flesh?

[26:05] Would it surprise you to know that scholars have not reached a consensus on this idea? Three big, because we must, theories here. One of them is some sort of anxiety, mental illness, depression.

Okay, that's possible. Another theory is that his thorn in the flesh are these opponents that he talks a lot about in 2 Corinthians. A third theory is that maybe Paul has a physical limitation or an injury. If you remember reading from Galatians, Paul talks about his bad eyesight. Maybe he's got eye problems, a thorn in the flesh. I have an opinion. You can ask me later about it. The point is not which one it is.

The point is there's a theological dynamic here. God, interestingly enough, gives this thorn. Do you see that? Thorn was given to me in the flesh.

A messenger of Satan to harass me. There is a goal here that God has with inflicting Paul.

[27:11] It's a theological telos, an end in aim. Now, we can be tempted here to over-personalize or, let's say, do ooey-gooey Christian application stuff with this passage.

Okay, yesterday, when I was preparing my sermon, I was holding my phone. I dropped my phone on accident. The corner of my phone hit right on the top of my foot, and it hurt a lot, and it still hurts a lot.

This is not my thorn in the flesh to give me a limp to plague my preaching ministry with weakness, so I'm not conceited. No. Okay, that's not what's going on. That's trivializing this idea here.

It doesn't mean that we can't understand or see our experience as a way that God is growing us or testing us, but I think a better implication and application for us here is to note that the thorn was given, that's by God, even though it's a messenger of Satan to harass me.

There's an abiding and important truth there which has resonance throughout Scripture. We studied Job two weeks ago, didn't we? And four weeks ago, Jesus in the wilderness.

[28:30] Satan is there in both of those instances, and he does what he always does because Satan is always doing what he's always doing.

He takes God's world, sometimes God's word, his design, and he tries to confuse us about it, misappropriate it, cast doubts.

Here, Satan is this messenger to Paul in a way to disorient him, to get him distracted, to give him doubt that God's power is not enough, that you need some sort of revelation or something else.

Maybe the messenger from Satan is using this thorn to say that your ministry is fraudulent because it's limited and because there's opposition.

Satan does what he will always do to get us to doubt God's control, God's purpose in times of challenge.

[29:32] Here and elsewhere, we get a reorientation that God has redemptive purposes for what we experience, which sounds really trivial and trite, but is true.

That doesn't mitigate pain or struggle or doubt or concern or suffering, but it does provide hope and we can respond in prayer. That's what Paul does.

Verse eight. Three times, Paul says. I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness.

In the midst of harassment, the messenger of Satan, Paul prays three times.

Probably not only three times. After all, Paul says pray without ceasing. What Paul's getting after is a biblical pattern of faithful, fervent prayer. In Psalm 55, the psalmist talks about praying morning, night, and noon all day.

[30:44] The three markers of time during the day. That's probably what Paul is alluding to here. By the way, Jesus also prays three times in the garden, doesn't he?

So, Paul is depicting to us that he has repeatedly engaged in this biblical pattern of prayer.

Focused, devoted, emotional even.

We see a biblical practice of prayer that Paul puts before us. I think that's an opportunity to imitate, to take the instruction and do what Paul does in this or in other circumstances.

If we feel afflicted by doubts or just generally. Notice too, he asks specifically that it should leave me. And quite a contrast to a few verses before.

Verse 9. But he said to me, that's the Lord, Jesus. He, that's Jesus, said to Paul, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

[31:55] Okay, Jesus talks to Paul. Paul now shares what Jesus says he didn't before. And the answer that he shares is basically no.

Lord, please take this thorn in the flesh away from me. Jesus says, no. My grace is what's sufficient for you. And notice our causal clause here.

For, because, my power is made perfect in weakness. You have what you need, Paul, my grace. But more so than that, the circumstances demonstrate something that is really true about the gospel. We're going to get to this in just a second. That weakness is what adorns the gospel with God's power.

Okay, I know you want to know. What is going on with this conversation? Does Jesus talk back and forth with Paul? What's that like? Would it surprise you to know that scholars have not reached a consensus on this particular thing?

[33:01] Maybe it's a voice like he hears on the Damascus Road. Maybe Paul is having another revelation that he doesn't classify as that. Maybe, maybe, Paul, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is paraphrasing a conclusion that he reaches.

Have any of you prayed about something for a really long time? And even though you don't have exact words or some sort of, like, revelatory moment, you come to understand that thing in a new way?

Maybe that's what Paul is articulating here. Maybe that's what Paul is saying.

Paul continues, That is weird.

Paul is not going to pray for the thorn to be removed anymore. He's going to boast, and his boasting has a purpose, so that God's, the power of Christ may rest upon him.

[34:34] You see how counterintuitive that is? Such a backwards kind of thing. Okay, what does that mean, kids? What does counterintuitive mean? Let me give you an example.

There's a word. The word is inflammable. What does that word mean? Sounds like it would mean not able to catch on fire, right? But, Latin heads, you know.

It's from inflammo, which means the ability to catch on fire. And so, inflammable actually means flammable. Inedible. Even though inedible does not mean edible.

Okay. Inflammable is counterintuitive. It's a thing that seems not to make sense, but does. It's contrary to what we expect, but true even still. It's like, you know, me being a better offensive

rebounder than Josh Olson.

It's a thing you wouldn't expect, but it's true. You can ask him about that later. I boast in my weakness, I guess. Okay, so he boasts in weakness so that the power of Christ may rest upon him.

[35:40] As an apostle, rather than shut down charges that your opponents bring against you, that you are weak or incapable, you boast in those things so that Christ empowers your ministry.

Or at least Paul does. That's important for us to catch. This is how the gospel works. And Paul summarizes in verse 10.

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses. Insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul resolves here to be content. And Paul sees the point of the thorn here, that it teaches something about the gospel.

That the gospel's power, the good news about Jesus as Messiah, is not about the power or the ability of the minister or the Christian, you or me. That's how this last statement can be true.

[36:43] When I am weak, I am strong. God chooses to cultivate weak disciples. That's us. To talk about his redemptive gospel.

To show his power alone. Let's zoom out for just a second here from the text. And then summarize with some applications in a second. Okay, Paul was probably in prison in Ephesus for a period of time.

And it's in Ephesus that he writes Philippians and also Colossians. And while he's writing Philippians and Colossians, he hears news in prison about all of this bad stuff that's happening in Corinth.

He's already written 1 Corinthians. And so all of these books really work together cohesively to teach theology. Of course, all the Bible does. But these intimately so.

And so Paul, I want to suggest to you, is thinking in prison and thereafter articulating for us in 2 Corinthians this idea about the gospel.

[37:50] And it goes like this. Christ is above all powers and all dominions. Yet, he humbles himself in an obedient death on the cross.

And he is resurrected and highly exalted, triumphing over all powers and authorities. Maybe you recognize all sorts of words that I just sort of collapsed together from Philippians and Colossians and even 2 Corinthians.

In other words, I think what Paul is getting after and what I hope we see, even through this text, but broadly through Paul's letters. That the narrative fiber, the narrative fiber of God's redemption in Christ is cosmic power expressed through humility as exemplified in Jesus.

Who created all things, who created all things, yet became man, emptied himself to death on a cross, yet was resurrected in power and glory.

That's best preached through weak disciples who follow the example of Jesus. If Jesus' strength is displayed in voluntary, obedient weakness, gospel people are probably going to experience something similar.

[39:14] I hope that point resonates with you. That's what Paul is trying to drive at us in this passage. One scholar says this. Paul's a clay jar.

His weakness is the occasion for God's sufficient grace and power. Yeah. Us too. And what's more, weakness is a subversive display of power and strength.

It undercuts power and strength. Could there be any more of a Jesus posture than that? Jesus who eats with sinners, who touches unclean people, who seems to be weak even to death on a cross, but in fact is raised in glory.

Paul says it in chapter 13, just a few verses below. Jesus was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. As we transition into some final conclusions, let's observe some obvious things, or maybe let me remind you of them.

Our passage is not squarely about testing. It's really a gospel text about the nature of the gospel, but circled around the bullseye are some Christian discipleship lessons we want to observe.

[40:38] Let me remind you of them. One, Satan is going to do what he always does to get us to doubt God's power and control in times of challenge.

We saw it with Job. We saw it with Daniel. We saw it with Jesus. With Abraham. For Paul here, it's the thorn in the flesh.

It's not just true for the apostles. It's true for us. Satan is at work. And so, thing two, let's pray.

Sounds like the easiest application point ever.

Well, that's what Paul does in verse eight. When we doubt, as we experience challenges, even as we rejoice, let's pursue this biblical model of prayer.

Be focused. Plead with emotion, even as you pray. Amazingly, Jesus not only teaches us how to pray, but he also says that we should pray to God like he is our father.

[41:39] Abba, father. Because God is a good father who wants to give good things to his children who ask him. So ask. A lot. Let's do that.

Sometimes we receive answers for our prayers when we do that. Sometimes we don't exactly.

Sometimes when we pray, it takes a really long time.

And maybe, just maybe, we get a recontextualized understanding of our challenges. Or a reimagined idea about them. Maybe we can pray for that. Third, let's make sure that we don't use contemporary buzzwords and stick them into the text.

You heard it, even if you didn't know that you heard it. Verse 10. For the sake of Christ, then I am what? Content. Ah. Contentment is a virtue these days, is it not?

And, by the way, it is a biblical virtue. But we want to rightly understand that. Paul is not telling us just to be satisfied with things as they are, if they're less than ideal.

[42:44] Paul is clearly not. He needs a reimagination to know what God has purposed and what God is teaching him about the gospel with this thorn in the flesh business.

The Bible is not teaching us, nor should we use it to teach, that Paul is giving us like a gridded out kind of playbook. You know, be content while clenching your jaw and, you know, smiling under this facade.

This is not either like two-bit stoicism. Stoicism is virtue for the sake of virtue. In this case, is being content just the power of positive thinking?

If I think I'm content, I'll be content. That's not what Paul is teaching here either. Paul prays and receives a new perspective. Lastly, fourth, our passage illuminates a dynamic of the power of the gospel.

When we come to the Lord's table, we're going to do that in a minute, let's consider that. The upside-down, counterintuitive, subversive gospel of Jesus, a message about Jesus, the Son of God who became man, who endured the weakness of death on a cross, was raised in power, sits in glory.

[44:04] Jesus, who through the Spirit, lives in us and works through us, who are weak vessels. And Jesus, who comes to commune with us even today in a warehouse with a shared loaf and a simple cup.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Amen.