

Session 2



When Your Circumstances Fall Short

THE POINT

God's grace will sustain you through anything.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

The people of Waverly, Tennessee, knew it would be a rainy Saturday, but who could have imagined seventeen inches of rain in just twenty-four hours? The flooding came quickly. Scott Brown, pastor of First Baptist Church Waverly was preparing for his daughter's birthday party, but before he knew it, he found himself thrust into the center of a historic flood that would take the lives of twenty people. What could have been a relaxing day celebrating a birthday became a chaotic day of difficult phone calls, food lines, counseling, and make-shift shelters.

Life can turn on a dime. Although we may not have experienced severe flash floods like Waverly, we've all experienced life's sudden shifts. The apostle Paul experienced too many to count, but he understood that God's grace can sustain us through our hardest days and darkest nights.

QUESTION 1:

Whats the scariest weather event you've seen or experienced?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

2 CORINTHIANS 1:8–10

⁸ We don't want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of our affliction that took place in Asia. We were completely overwhelmed—beyond our strength—so that we even despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death, so that we would not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He has delivered us from such a terrible death, and he will deliver us. We have put our hope in him that he will deliver us again

Imagine getting an email from your son who moved his family to a developing nation. He hadn't written anything in a while, so you anxiously open it and read these words:

Hi Mom and Dad,

We do not want you to be uninformed about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under intense pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself.

That would get your attention, wouldn't it? These words of Paul would probably be less surprising for the church of Corinth. Paul always lived on the edge of disaster. He was constantly on the run, on mission, and on the brink.

Although we don't know exactly what troubles Paul was referencing in these verses, there was enough to go around during this period in his life. He was dealing with his first letter to the Corinthians which wasn't of the "Hallmark™" variety, dealing with divisions, factions, rivals, immorality, incest, lawsuits, marriages, and idols. He also had a run-in with the devious

silversmith, Demetrius, who incited a riot against him. And if you've ever had someone whip up a city riot against you, then you can relate. No? Me either. Along with all this, the Jews were constantly nipping at his heels with death threats, arrest warrants, and diatribes. Additionally, many biblical scholars surmise that Paul's health was beginning to break down.

The language of being "completely overwhelmed—beyond our strength" (v. 8) reflects the same kind of language you'd use in those days to describe an animal being hunted down by a predator. The words hearken to images from the prison break scene in the movie *Cool Hand Luke*, stumbling recklessly through the terrain and farmhouses trying to lose the bloodhounds and bounty hunters.

Perhaps few can relate to that kind of desperation, but at one time or another, most of us despair of life. A tragic setback can cause the most ardent believer to wonder whether he or she can take one more hit or survive one more shock. Despair begets loneliness.

We can be among a crowd of people and still feel desperately alone and unseen.

There is a consequential word in the middle of this passage: *We*. If you want to escape the harsh terrain of adversity, you want that word. You need that word. This is why deep connections with God and other believers rise above all other felt needs. God created us for connection. This is also important for us to recognize over the next few days. Connection is vital. Holidays can trigger harsh memories, lost loved ones, and failed expectations—even more reason to practice diligence in our relationships. *We* and *us* are two small words that must reign supreme if we are to survive despair.

The only pronoun more powerful is a divine one: *Him*. Annie Johnson Flint knew the power of Him. She was orphaned as a baby. She lived in a home bordering on poverty and spent her days as a caregiver to her adoptive mother who suffered from strokes. In midlife, she also fell ill

and spent most of her remaining years crippled, bed-ridden, dealing with depression, and chronic pain. How could God glorify Himself in all her unanswered prayers, suffering, and depression? Because of her faith, God gave grace to her and through her life, believers have sung her testimony for well over 100 years. In her hymn, “He Giveth More Grace,” her life became a wellspring of encouragement to those who face adversity, pain, and the anomaly of illness.

God is enough for today’s struggles and tomorrow’s crucibles. He was enough for Annie Johnson Flint. He is enough for us.

QUESTION 2:

When have you found hope when you felt overwhelmed?

2 CORINTHIANS 12:6–8

⁶ For if I want to boast, I wouldn’t be a fool, because I would be telling the truth. But I will spare you, so that no one can credit me with something beyond what he sees in me or hears from me, ⁷ especially because of the extraordinary revelations. Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself. ⁸ Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me.

Let’s pivot to another passage in this letter that has fueled many speculations and questions. What is this thorn? A symbol? A metaphor? An emotional defect? It could have been a chronic physical condition. Paul referred to his poor vision in Galatians. Maybe that was his thorn in the flesh. It could have been an emotional

turmoil. If you’ve ever been through a season of depression, you can relate to the feeling of wanting to do anything for the clouds to break and the depression to leave, but with no success. Paul could have been referring to all the opposition he faced from individuals who wanted nothing better than to see his head on a

post. Maybe it's none of these. Maybe it's all of these. We don't know, and perhaps it benefits us to be spared the details because it makes the thorn more universal and personal to each believer who reads it.

By concealing the source of his pain, Paul allowed readers to consider their own personal crucibles rather than his. What do we do when the thing we despise refuses to be extracted, dismissed, and healed? What happens when we plead with God to take away that thing that steals our joy, occupies our sleepless nights, and wrecks our tomorrow? What happens when we name it, claim it, and it sticks around like an unpleasant smell? These are the kinds of questions we all ask about—problems that keep showing up with relentless consistency. Sometimes these metaphorical conundrums won't go away because God wants to use them to get our attention. He prayed and it attacked him again. He prayed again, and it attacked again! He prayed a third time, and (you guessed it) it attacked again! It was like a smell you can't escape.

In a small way, it reminds me of a smelly season of my life. It all started with a whiff. You know, the faint smell that just isn't right when you open the door to the car. For me, it happened during those days when anything and everything perishable that can fit into the hand of a two-year-old would end up in that impossible-to-reach spot under the driver's seat. Being a courageous young father, I swept my hand under the floorboard. Nothing. The good thing about these odors is that they're generally small enough that after a few hours, the subtle stench will be overtaken by the pine tree shaped air freshener dangling from the rearview mirror.

By day two, the malodorous presence seemed stronger. Before heading to work I cased the sedan, spending a good bit of time following my nose around the car. I saw nothing. I was late for work, so I let it ride. Literally.

After a week, I opened the door, and I could almost see the smell escaping from the car as I got in. I wanted to sell the car! That's how desperate I was to get away from that odoriferous siege of the senses. After days of pure agony as I tried to find the source of the stink, I finally remembered Sunday dinner. With one kid on my hip and another at my thigh at the local seafood restaurant, I had placed a doggy bag with a full serving of lobster linguine and crab legs in the trunk. I can't begin to describe the science experiment I observed when I popped the trunk a week later! I opened the Styrofoam container and I'm fairly sure I saw it move!

This experience reminds me that when something in my life doesn't pass the smell test, when something doesn't seem quite right, God wants me to search and find the source of the stench. Sometimes in doing so, He may reveal the mess of my soul, showing that I am the problem. God then uses my discomfort to drive me to dependency upon Him. The thorn in Paul's life was a daily reminder that God's grace is sufficient. His grace is all we need.

QUESTION 3:

When has a weakness in your life brought about a greater dependence on God?

Engage

GOD'S SUSTAINING GRACE

Choose one of the following images where you have experienced God's sustaining grace. Then offer a prayer of thanks.



My Prayer:

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9–10

⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.” Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may reside in me. ¹⁰ So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

It’s interesting to read the epilogue of the crisis. Because of Christ’s presence in the middle of His painful anomaly, Paul was provoked to glory in his own weakness—not because of the weaknesses themselves but because they revealed God’s grace and power. This is such an important truth. Whenever we get to the point where we recognize God’s presence right smack in the middle of our pain, we can glory in it. You may have heard people say some illogical things about their greatest pain. I sure have.

His grace is completely sufficient and absolutely awesome amid the storms that seem to come in waves through our lives. Paul began with a testimony of divine “third heaven” ascendancy shrouded in mystery (2 Cor. 12:2), and then he pivoted to share a time when God was inexplicably silent despite Paul’s relentless pleas. He experienced both revelation and silence. We see the balance and a dichotomy simultaneously. Also notice that he is timid in the things that most would write books about and then he gets to the thorn, and we find him boasting and taking pleasure in the suffering. Perhaps this is because he realizes that we learn best about the heart of God when we identify with His sufferings. Comfort leads to complacency. Suffering leads to spiritual intimacy. Over the years I’ve come to understand that I learn best through suffering. Not

that I look for ways to experience pain. That would be insane. But Paul reminds us that God speaks louder in suffering. We learn best about the gospel when we are under oppression, and when we realize our own failures.

I learn best about the gospel when I identify with the despair, joy, anger, and celebration of all this life entails. Then I join Christ in the mission, despite all the spiritual darkness in this land of glitz and grit. I learn best when my back is against the wall. I learn best when I pray and only silence replies. So many believers pray for power, opportunity, and prosperity when those things can destroy us.

QUESTION 4:

When have you seen God’s grace be enough in a difficult situation?

QUESTION 5:

How have you seen our group help one another during trying circumstances?

LIVE IT OUT

Catherine of Aragon, the first wife of Henry VIII, wrote this powerful sentence, “None get to God but through trouble.”¹ Ouch! That’s a painful sentence. God meets us amid our struggles. It’s the narrative of Christmas: Our Holy God coming down to a broken, suffering community. Choose one of the following applications:

- **Reflect.** Make a list of some struggles you’ve endured over the past ten years. Reflect on the ways God has brought you through them.
- **Share.** We all are struggling with something! This week, find an opportunity to share some struggles you are having with a friend and invite him or her to pray for you as you continue to persevere.
- **Serve.** This is the season when we sing those immortal words, “Truly He taught us to love one another.”² Find an opportunity to bless someone in need with your time or with a financial gift.



1. Catherine of Aragon, as quoted in Timothy Jones, *Awake My Soul* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 167.

2. John S. Dwight, “O Holy Night!” *Baptist Hymnal*, 194.