

2 Corinthians: Hard Knocks, Unbreakable Faith

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Christ's Power Is Displayed in Hard Times

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

Christ's Power Is Displayed in Hard Times

We demonstrate the power of Christ by enduring hardship.

Second Corinthians speaks about the harsh realities of life and the unbreakable faith that sustains us through difficult and dangerous times.

We don't know the particulars, but late in chapter 12 Paul catalogues some of the difficulties he has encountered during his ministry: prison, floggings, stoning, shipwreck, and being robbed, starved, and abandoned. Paul is qualified to speak on the subject of hardship.

As if all that were not bad enough, some of Paul's critics in Corinth were kicking him while he was down by suggesting that he lacked the credentials to be an apostle and that all the bad things that had happened to him were confirmation of God's judgment. In response to all that, Paul wrote this letter, both to establish his credibility as an apostle and to teach the Corinthians a proper perspective on hardship and suffering—a perspective we very much need today.

Scripture: **2 Corinthians 4:7–12**

Based On: "Unbreakable?" by Bryan Wilkerson,
PreachingToday.com



Christ's Power Is Displayed in Hard Times

Leader's Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to Leader: Provide each person with the *Participant's Guide*, included at the end of this study.

M. Night Shyamalan's film *Unbreakable* begins with a train wreck. Everyone on board is killed—except for one. David Dunn not only survives the wreck, he walks away without a scratch. Instead of being relieved by his good fortune, however, he's troubled by this remarkable outcome. Why was he unharmed, and what does it mean? Into Dunn's life comes an eccentric comic book collector named Elijah, who seems equally intrigued by Dunn's survival. Elijah has reason to be interested; he was born with a genetic disorder that leaves his bones especially brittle—so brittle, in fact, that he is known as Mr. Glass. Dunn, on the other hand, has never broken a bone, even after years of playing football. He's never had stitches; never pulled a muscle; never been bruised; never even been sick. Elijah tells David that he's not like other people; he's been given an extraordinary gift that he cannot keep to himself, but must employ in the service and protection of others. For the rest of the film, Dunn struggles to understand and accept his remarkable abilities and the destiny that goes with them. He's unbreakable.

The film is fiction, of course—a comic book fantasy. There are no superheroes walking the streets of our cities. We are all quite breakable. We're a lot more like Mr. Glass than like David Dunn. We're fragile and susceptible to disease, accident, injury, violence, germs, and natural disaster. All kinds of things can happen to us in this world, and they lead to all sorts of questions. Why did this happen, and why to me or my loved ones? Who or what is behind all this? How am I supposed to handle it? How can we afford to reach out to the world when it takes all we have just to stay healthy and safe?

The apostle Paul wrote 2 Corinthians after surviving more than a few train wrecks in his life and ministry. It's one of the least familiar of Paul's letters, but it speaks about the harsh realities of life and the unbreakable faith that sustains us through difficult and dangerous times.

This study begins with the pivotal passage of the entire book. Read 2 Corinthians 4:7–12.

Discussion Questions:

[Q] What are some of the hardships and sufferings that people in your church are experiencing right now? Make a list.

[Q] When did you last ask, “Why me, God?”



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[Q] What messages have you received from Christian television, books, and radio about how to view or deal with suffering and hardship?

[Q] Share how you've seen Christ's power displayed in hard times.

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: We are jars of clay.

Paul begins verse 7 by claiming that “we have this treasure in jars of clay.” In this context, “we” includes not only Paul and his associates, but also, by extension, everyone who bears the name of Christ. The treasure he's talking about is the gospel; not just the *message* of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, but also the *power* behind the message—the very life of God available through faith in Christ.

But how are we Christians like jars of clay? First of all, clay pots were quite ordinary. They were everywhere, especially in the homes of peasants and common people. Wealthy people used more exotic materials, such as ivory, marble, glass, or fine wood, but regular people used clay pots. It would be like saying today, “We have this treasure in plastic bags.” Second, jars of clay were fragile. Compared to marble, ivory, or even wood, clay didn't last; since it was so cheap, no one really expected it to. People used a pot for a while, and when it got too chipped or cracked to use, or when it fell and shattered, they simply got another one.

Paul creates this great juxtaposition: God has taken this great treasure, the life of Christ, and placed it in people like you and me, who are as common and fragile as clay pots.

[Q] Do you think of yourself as a “jar of clay”? Why or why not?

[Q] What is encouraging about this imagery? What makes you nervous about it?

[Q] What does this passage do for your self-esteem?

Teaching Point Two: God displays his life-giving power in jars of clay.

God stores his treasure in fragile containers—like us—to display his life-giving power. That way, it is clear that whatever we accomplish is done only by God's power. From the little we know, Paul was not an impressive person. He was not known as an eloquent speaker, he might have been small of stature, and he seems to have had health problems, including



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poor eyesight. He was often on the receiving end of criticism, slander, rejection, and persecution. Yet somehow, the gospel was spread through him so that the church was established throughout the known world. The only explanation is that God must have been working through him!

It doesn't make sense to place something so valuable in a container so ordinary—unless, of course, you want people to notice the treasure and not the container. God pours his life into ordinary containers like you and me so that people will praise him and not us. We are who we are only because of the treasure we carry within us—the life-giving power of Christ.

[Q] How have you observed God's "all-surpassing power" displayed in "jars of clay"? What do these observations tell you about God?

[Q] What ministry calibrations do you have to make as you're reminded that "we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (v. 7)? What causes us to sometimes get off track and think that it's more about us than it is about God's power?

[Q] How do verses 8–9 encourage you at this moment in your life?

Teaching Point Three: God dispenses his life-giving power through jars of clay.

God puts his treasure in jars of clay to dispense his life-giving power. Jars of clay were meant to be used, not admired. God's not looking for sterling silver tea sets. He's looking for rough and tumble clay pots—the kind that can be used every day. He's looking for the kind of pots that don't need to be tucked away in a china closet, but can be sent out into a crash-bang world, carrying within them the life of Christ. The church was never meant to be a china cabinet, where precious pieces could be safely stowed out of harm's way. The church was meant to be a working kitchen, where well-worn pots are filled again and again to dispense their life-giving contents to a thirsty world.

It's interesting that Paul chooses the phrase "given over to death" to describe our mission. It's the same expression the gospels use to describe Jesus' being turned over to the authorities for flogging and crucifixion. In the same way that God allowed his Son to suffer for the sins of the world, he sometimes allows his servants to suffer in order to offer everlasting life to the world.



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[Q] React to this statement: “God’s not looking for sterling silver tea sets. He’s looking for rough and tumble clay pots” Do you think most American Christians believe this? Why or why not?

[Q] How did the suffering of others pave the way for you to experience life in Christ?

[Q] How has your suffering lead to opportunities for ministry? How could it this week?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Do you feel stressed out, mixed up, beaten up, or knocked down? The world can be a rough place for a clay pot. Maybe you’re feeling pretty banged up—like a cracked, chipped jar of clay. Don’t be alarmed; you’re not alone. What’s happening to you is quite normal for followers of Christ. In fact, it’s practically part of the job description!

Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To appropriate God’s grace on behalf of others in tough circumstances.*

Activity: *Ask members of your group to bring missionary newsletters from home (or obtain some from your church’s office), and read through some of the ways those missionaries are enduring hardship. Take some time as a group to pray for those situations. Watch for how God answers those prayers and let the missionaries know you are praying for them.*

Action Point: **Close by praying together and thanking God for your present sufferings! And, as a visual reminder, get a small terra cotta pot and in it place the names of people you are ministering to, praying for, sharing the gospel with, etc. It will help you remember that it is God’s power working through plain-ol’ you!**

—Study by Bryan Wilkerson, with Kyle White



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Participant's Guide

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Teaching Point One: We are jars of clay.

Teaching Point Two: God displays his life-giving power in jars of clay.

Teaching Point Three: God dispenses his life-giving power through jars of clay.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

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God Comforts Our Heartache

Leader's Guide

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God Comforts Our Heartache

God gives comfort enough to share.

Where do you turn for comfort when you encounter loss, pain, or disappointment? Some people turn to food—like fried chicken, mashed potatoes, apple pie, and ice cream. Fatty, sugar-laden foods slow the production of certain stress hormones, so we calm down. If food doesn't work, how about a drink? (They don't call it Southern Comfort for nothing.) Some people turn inward when life hurts, pulling back from their normal routine and relationships. Others turn outward and get active: they socialize, volunteer, or visit family and friends.

Any one of these might offer a measure of comfort in a time of loss or pain, but are they really enough? When life hurts, we need something—or someone—better than that. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians in response to difficulty.

Scripture: **2 Corinthians 1:3–11**

Based On: "Beyond Comfort," by Bryan Wilkerson, PreachingToday.com



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Leader's Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to Leader: *Provide each person with the Participant's Guide, included at the end of this study.*

At one point, the apostle Paul wasn't sure he and his companions were going to make it, as he suggests in 2 Corinthians 1:8–9. We don't know exactly what happened to Paul in Turkey. The word “troubles” is a very general word that could refer to just about any serious hardship. It might have been physical—a life-threatening illness or injury. It could have been some form of persecution. Later in the letter he reminds us that he's been stoned, beaten, flogged, shipwrecked, and left for dead on numerous occasions. But it could also have been some internal anguish—a season of spiritual distress or depression. Whatever it was, it was so painful that he wondered at times if he'd be better off dead. But when he was at his very lowest, he found comfort. Perhaps it is better to say that comfort found him—and it was enough to get him through. In fact, it was more than enough.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3–11.

Discussion Questions:

- [Q] Who comforted you best when you were a kid? How did he or she do it?
- [Q] What are your “comfort foods”? What do you turn to nowadays for comfort?
- [Q] For what current “heartache” could you use some comfort?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: God provides enough to get us through.

What exactly is comfort? The word appears nine times in 1:3–11, and 29 times in this letter. We tend to think of comfort as something that makes us feel better, like our favorite food, a shoulder to cry on, or someone telling us that everything's going to be okay. Comfort is soothing; it eases our pain and relieves our distress. The hotel chain Comfort Inn, for example, promises fresh linens, fluffy pillows, cable television, and a good night's sleep after a hard day on the road. When we call something comforting, we usually mean that it makes us feel better. That's not what Paul had in mind.



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The word *comfort* in the Bible has more to do with strengthening than soothing. It doesn't just relieve our pain; it stiffens our resolve. The Greek word means "to help by giving courage." The English word points us in that direction, too. *Comfort* comes from the Latin root *fortis*, which means "strength." It shows up in words like *forte*, *fortress*, and *fortitude*. Comfort, according to the Bible, isn't about feeling better; it's about feeling stronger. Isn't that what we really need when bad things happen?

- [Q] In what ways has God provided comforting strength to you in bad times?
- [Q] How do verses 9–10 comfort and strengthen you at this moment in your life?
- [Q] How might this biblical definition of comfort change how you comfort others? Give an example.

Teaching Point Two: God is our compassionate Father.

Paul twice identifies the heavenly comforter as "Father." We never really outgrow the need for a parent to come alongside us when we're hurting. Mom's Band-Aids always made us feel better. Dad could fix anything. Paul reminds us that God is a heavenly parent—"the Father of compassion." That's an interesting expression. When kids are hurt or in trouble, they typically go to their mom first. She usually has the softer touch. Dads generally take a different approach; they aren't always known for being compassionate.

Still, Paul tells us that God is "the Father of compassion." Not the Father of justice or the Father of righteousness. He certainly is just and righteous. But when we're hurting, we can count on him to be compassionate. As Robert Lewis has said, one of the primary responsibilities of a father is to fill his child with strength. Not just to use his strength to help the child, but to build up the child's own strength. Remember that's what comfort is all about—building strength. That's what fathers do.

- [Q] God reveals himself in verses 3–4 as "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles." He seems to go overboard here! What images come to mind when you hear these titles?
- [Q] Does anything keep you from seeing and approaching God as a compassionate, comforting Father? What might help you overcome that?
- [Q] Make a list of ways you've seen God as a comforting Father to you or to those you know.



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Teaching Point Three: God provides us enough comfort to give away.

Paul realizes that the hardship he has endured and the strength he has received enable him to strengthen others in their times of distress. In fact, one of the primary ways God delivers comfort is through people who come alongside us. In other words, when God gives you comfort, he doesn't just give enough to get you through; he gives you enough to give away.

Verse 4 tells us that we jars of clay can never be so broken that there's nothing left inside us. The more freely Christ flows out of our lives, the more freely he flows into our lives. There's a never-ending supply. No matter how many times we get banged around or knocked over, the life and strength continue to flow. In fact, the more we get knocked around, the more people are blessed by what flows out of us.

[Q] What comfort have you received from God?

[Q] How has Christ's comfort "overflowed" from others' lives into yours?

[Q] How has Christ's comfort "overflowed" from your life into the lives of others who are hurting?

[Q] Who needs your overflowing comfort this week?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

When God gives you comfort, it's not just enough to get you through, it's enough to give away. Comfort is not about feeling better; it's about getting stronger. And when God gives you comfort, it's not just enough—it's more than enough.

Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To consider ways to let God's comfort overflow to others.*

Activity: *As a small group, brainstorm specific ways God has comforted and strengthened you. Maybe he strengthened some in the midst of divorce, or financial hardship, or emotional struggles. Even this can serve as a comforting testimonial time! Now brainstorm, as a group, how those broken spots might match up with others' need for comfort. Think of specific people or groups that you could "overflow" into—nursing homes, moms' groups, women's shelters, youth groups, etc. Pray for God's guidance as to how you might minister next.*



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Action Point: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Cor. 1:3–4). Take time to praise God as a group or on your own. End with a time of prayer for those whom God is comforting and strengthening through you!

—*Study by Bryan Wilkerson, with Kyle White*



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Participant's Guide

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Read 2 Corinthians 1:3–11.

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: God provides enough to get us through.

Teaching Point Two: God is our compassionate Father.

Teaching Point Three: God provides us enough comfort to give away.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

When God gives you comfort, it's not just enough to get you through, it's enough to give away. Comfort is not about feeling better; it's about getting stronger. And when God gives you comfort, it's not just enough—it's more than enough.

Action Point: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Cor. 1:3–4). Take time to praise God as a group or on your own. End with a time of prayer for those whom God is comforting and strengthening through you!

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Leader's Guide

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God Is Reliable in Financial Hard Times

You harvest as much as you sow, and never more.

The highlight of a farmer's year is the harvest, which represents a year's worth of planting and tending, of watching and waiting and wondering. When the last sheaf is bundled and the storehouse is full, the farmer feels a sense of satisfaction and gratitude.

Most of us are not farmers, but we still relate to the idea of harvest: we have a God-given longing to do something with our lives, to sow and reap a harvest of significance. When we come to the end of a year, or to the end of our lives, we want to have something to show for our efforts. We want to gather the fruits of our labor, and we hope for an abundant harvest. How can we manage our resources in a way that yields an abundant harvest?

Scripture: **2 Corinthians 9:6–11**

Based On: "A Crop is a Crop," by Bryan Wilkerson,
PreachingToday.com



God Is Reliable in Financial Hard Times

Leader's Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to Leader: *Provide each person with the Participant's Guide, included at the end of this study.*

We are jars of clay—ordinary, fragile people living in a difficult and dangerous world. The message of 2 Corinthians is that we're unbreakable as long as we have Christ living within us. No matter what life does to us, no matter what the world dishes out, the life of Christ sustains and strengthens us so that we can offer his life to others. When life is difficult—when we find ourselves cracked, knocked over, or turned upside down—the life-giving power of Christ flows out of us and into others. When life hurts, God's comfort is more than enough to get us through; it's enough to give away. Paul addresses the issue of material need and what it means to be unbreakable in the face of financial pressure.

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6–11.

Discussion Questions:

- [Q] Are you a gardener? If not, why not? If so, what was your best crop this year?
- [Q] What is the most significant, fruitful endeavor in which you have ever participated? Why?
- [Q] What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “you reap what you sow”?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: **If you sow generously, you will reap generously.**

One of the reasons Paul wrote 2 Corinthians was to follow up on a fund-raising campaign he began in a previous letter. The believers in Jerusalem were being persecuted and were suffering financially. Paul recognized their need as an opportunity for the Gentile churches around the world to come alongside the Jerusalem church, so he started a collection from churches around the empire. In response to his earlier letter, the Corinthians had pledged to support the Jerusalem church by taking an offering and sending it to Jerusalem. But as of yet, they had not followed through on that pledge. So Paul wrote this letter, in part, to remind them of their commitment.



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In order to encourage them and to address their fears, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the law of the harvest: the more you give, the more you gather. If they would be faithful, God would not only provide all that they needed to keep their commitment, but he would ensure that their gift accomplished good things in Jerusalem.

There's more going on here than a fund-raising appeal. Paul's talking about a lifestyle, not just a one-time offering. According to Paul, the best way to deal with financial pressure is to give generously. That feels counterintuitive—that the more generously you give, the more abundantly God provides. If I'm in need, shouldn't I hang on to what I have? Not when you factor in the law of the harvest. If you want to be unbreakable in the face of financial pressure—if you want to have something to show for your life when it's over—give generously.

[Q] “The more generously we give, the more abundantly God provides.” How have you seen this to be true in your life?

[Q] Is the goal of giving generously that we will get more? If not, then what?

[Q] What keeps Christians from giving generously? How does this “law of the harvest” mindset jibe with our culture's values?

[Q] What does giving sparingly look like? Giving generously?

Teaching Point Two: Every Christian is to give generously.

The word “generous” appears four times in these six verses. In English the word means “to be liberal in giving or sharing; magnanimous.” In the original Greek it literally meant “openhearted.” Generosity is the opposite of fear and stinginess. We all understand the principle. What makes for generous giving? Generous giving is personal, thoughtful, passionate, and cheerful. Sometimes you'll hear people say you should give “till it hurts.” They're talking about sacrificial giving, and there are times when we should give that way. One pastor said, “Give till it feels good.” Give until it feels like you're really making a difference. It really does feel good to be generous!

[Q] Paul's ideas on giving here are above and beyond the regular tithe. Average Christians, studies show, give 3 percent of their income. How much *should* Christians give?

[Q] Is this instruction true for the poor believer, too? Why or why not?

[Q] Where does “reluctance” and “compulsion” come from in our giving?

[Q] “Generous,” in Greek, means “openhearted.” Who do you know who gives in this way?

[Q] “Generous giving is personal, thoughtful, passionate, and cheerful.” How would it look to put these guidelines in practice for one's giving?



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Teaching Point Three: God generously supplies all of our needs.

Remember, we're jars of clay; we're only capable of holding so much. Our fear is that if we give too much away, we won't have enough. The wonderful thing about jars of clay is that when they run out, they can be filled again—and again and again. As long as you have an adequate supply of water or wine, there's no danger of running out. How adequate is God's supply? Paul puts it this way in verse 8: "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." Ask anybody who gives generously if God has ever failed to supply their needs. Ask them if they've ever regretted giving something to God.

Notice that God promises to provide what we need, not what society tells us we must have. This is not a health-and-wealth formula, whereby you give seed money with the expectation that God will reward you with more. It's not a guarantee that you'll never have financial challenges, or that you'll never have to go without something. Rather, this promise assures us that God knows what we need, and that he will provide all we need so we can do all he asks us to do.

[Q] How have you seen God provide all that you need in tough times? Tell some stories about God's providence.

[Q] How do you deal with the temptation to live at "greed level" when God talks about providing for us at "need level"?

[Q] The goal of God's providence is that we will be resourced for "every good work." How have you experienced God's outfitting for more ministry?

[Q] How does verse 8 encourage you at this moment in your life?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Remember that this is a letter written to Christians living in the city of Corinth. Corinth was an affluent city, a cosmopolitan center of trade and culture. There would have been all kinds of people in the Corinthian church—slaves, working class, and wealthy people. Remember, too, that Paul is no stranger to financial need. He insisted on paying his own way as a missionary by working as a tentmaker. As a result, he often went without food or shelter. In other words, financial issues are nothing new. The same principle that was true then is true now: you get as much as you sow, and never more.



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Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To further explore sacrificial, generous giving.*

Activity: *What pressing needs are you and your small group aware of? A missionary in Zimbabwe needs a new laptop. Your church's backyard Bible clubs need Bibles for kids. A relief organization needs medical supplies. Brainstorm and pray about where your money will go, then decide to be sacrificial as a group for the next month or two or three. Each member can decide what he or she will give up for that time: morning Starbucks; a weekly meal out; golf game; etc. Collect the money each week you meet, then be generous in meeting that person's or organization's need. You'll find that you may want this to be a year-round experience for your small group.*

Action Point: **"You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God," Paul writes in verse 11. The ultimate purpose for generosity? God's glory. Take time now for thanksgiving and praise. Spend time recounting stories of God's providence, and ways that he has blessed members of the group so that they could bless others. It's a time to brag on the Lord. End your time with this oldie, but goodie, doxology: "Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here below; Praise Him above, ye heavenly host; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."**

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God Is Reliable in Financial Hard Times

You harvest as much as you sow, and never more.

The highlight of a farmer's year is the harvest, which represents a year's worth of planting and tending, of watching and waiting and wondering. When the last sheaf is bundled and the storehouse is full, the farmer feels a sense of satisfaction and gratitude.

Most of us are not farmers, but we still relate to the idea of harvest: we have a God-given longing to do something with our lives, to sow and reap a harvest of significance. When we come to the end of a year, or to the end of our lives, we want to have something to show for our efforts. We want to gather the fruits of our labor, and we hope for an abundant harvest. How can we manage our resources in a way that yields an abundant harvest?

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:6–11

Based On: "A Crop is a Crop," by Bryan Wilkerson,
PreachingToday.com



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Participant's Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

We are jars of clay—ordinary, fragile people living in a difficult and dangerous world. The message of 2 Corinthians is that we're unbreakable as long as we have Christ living within us. No matter what life does to us, no matter what the world dishes out, the life of Christ sustains and strengthens us so that we can offer his life to others. When life is difficult—when we find ourselves cracked, knocked over, or turned upside down—the life-giving power of Christ flows out of us and into others. When life hurts, God's comfort is more than enough to get us through; it's enough to give away. Paul addresses the issue of material need and what it means to be unbreakable in the face of financial pressure.

Read 2 Corinthians 9:6–11.

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: If you sow generously, you will reap generously.

Teaching Point Two: Every Christian is to give generously.

Teaching Point Three: God generously supplies all of our needs.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Remember that this is a letter written to Christians living in the city of Corinth. Corinth was an affluent city, a cosmopolitan center of trade and culture. There would have been all kinds of people in the Corinthian church—slaves, working class, and wealthy people. Remember, too, that Paul is no stranger to financial need. He insisted on paying his own way as a missionary by working as a tentmaker. As a result, he often went without food or shelter. In other words, financial issues are nothing new. The same principle that was true then is true now: you get as much as you sow, and never more.

Action Point: “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God,” Paul writes in verse 11. The ultimate purpose for generosity? God's glory. Take time now for thanksgiving and praise. Spend time recounting stories of God's providence, and ways that he has blessed members of the group so that they could bless others. It's a time to brag on the Lord. End your time with this oldie, but goodie, doxology: “Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here below; Praise Him above, ye heavenly host; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

—Study by Bryan Wilkerson, with Kyle White



God Is Glorified in Our Weakness

Leader's Guide

Leader's Guide

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God turns our weakness into incredible strength.

It's the most dreaded question of the job interview, and when the time comes, you can't seem to push the words out of your mouth. "Tell me," the interviewer asks, "what's your greatest weakness?" How do you answer that question? If you don't come up with something, you sound arrogant, but if you come clean with your weakness, they might not hire you.

Revealing our weaknesses is one of the last things in the world we want to do. But who are we kidding? We don't have to deny or disguise those weaknesses or dismiss them as insignificant. On the contrary, we can own our weaknesses and allow God to turn them into strengths.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:7–10

Based On: "A Strange Resumé," by Bryan Wilkerson,
PreachingToday.com



God Is Glorified in Our Weakness

Leader's Guide

Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to Leader: Provide each person with the *Participant's Guide*, included at the end of this study.

Shepherds in Jesus' day must have spent a lot of time looking at the stars. Jewish shepherds were maybe you heard about the manager being interviewed for a new position. "My department has turned a profit every quarter for the past five years," the candidate says. "I've never had a personnel problem, and I've always gotten superior performance reviews."

"Very impressive," the interviewer replied. "And what's your greatest weakness?"

"I tend to exaggerate."

[Q] In job interviews, what have you stated as your strengths? What do you communicate when asked about your weaknesses?

Let's imagine that a pastoral search committee received a cover letter from a candidate that read like this:

I would like to apply for the pastoral vacancy you advertised. I have many qualifications that I think you would appreciate. I'm a good organizer, and I have been a leader in most places I've gone. I have been able to preach with power, though people say I am not terribly eloquent. I've done some writing, but some people have found my letters hard to understand, and I'm the first to admit my handwriting is barely legible.

I'm over 50 years old. I have never preached in one place for more than three years at a time, and most of the churches I've served have been small. In some places, my ministry has led to riots and disturbances, and I've been jailed on several occasions—unjustly, of course. My health is not good, but I get quite a bit done and have a good work ethic. I generally work well with people, but I have been known to knock heads with colleagues and have found that there are some people I simply can't work with. I'm pretty good with names, but have been known to forget who I've baptized. I don't have a permanent address, but I will do my best to keep in touch.

[Q] What would be your reaction to this cover letter?

This could be the cover letter for the restless, contentious, absent-minded, over-the-hill jailbird we know as the apostle Paul. He has a strange résumé! He wasn't applying for a position when he wrote this letter to the Corinthian church, but he was fighting for his job. Even though he had founded the church in Corinth, many people there were beginning to question his credentials as an apostle. He wasn't one of the original disciples. He wasn't as gifted a speaker as some others.



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He found himself in trouble just about everywhere he went. In short, he wasn't the kind of leader the Corinthians wanted to be associated with. So he finds himself in the awkward position of persuading his readers of his credentials for ministry. He goes about it in an unconventional way.

According to Paul, disabilities don't disqualify us. In fact, when we own our weaknesses, God can turn them into strengths. Weaknesses keep us dependent on Christ and allow him to shine through us in ways he couldn't if we were healthy and strong. In 2 Corinthians 12:7–10, Paul tells us how. Read this passage.

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Ask God to take your "thorn" away.

Instead of boasting in his ecstatic experiences, Paul chooses to boast about his weaknesses and infirmities. There has been much speculation about what Paul means by a "thorn in the flesh." The word we translate "thorn" could just as accurately be translated "stake" or "spear." The word was used to describe a sharp instrument that caused pain, lodged deeply, and was difficult to remove. So the "thorn in the flesh" was not a minor annoyance; it was not a "pain in the neck." Rather, it was a chronic source of pain and anguish so debilitating that it hindered his ability to serve Christ.

The first way we can respond to a thorn in the flesh is to ask God to take it away. Paul is not suggesting that we simply give in to our weaknesses and vulnerabilities without a fight. Remember, God created us to live; there was no sickness or death before the Fall. When we encounter things that hinder us from fulfilling our God-given purpose, we ought to push back against those things.

That's what Paul did. In verse 8 he writes, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me." He fervently and repeatedly asked God to remove his thorn. He didn't enjoy being sick; he didn't seek out suffering. He asked God to take it away so that he might serve Christ at full strength. We should do the same thing until God shows us otherwise.

[Q] Do you usually pray for healing and deliverance when someone is sick or suffering? If so, is that risky? Explain.

[Q] Is praying that "God's will be done" in these situations just a way of covering all our bases and God's reputation? Explain.



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[Q] What's your "thorn in the flesh"? What personal weakness or vulnerability causes you pain or hinders your ability to serve Christ freely and effectively?

Teaching Point Two: Accept God's sovereign will.

Sometimes God takes the thorn away, but sometimes, in his wisdom, he does not. It doesn't matter how hard we pray or how much faith we muster up. Like Paul, we have to accept God's sovereign will. In verse 7, Paul indicates that God allowed the thorn for a purpose: "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations." God allowed this thorn in order to protect Paul from pride and to bring greater glory to God's name.

Sometimes God allows sickness and suffering into our lives in order to accomplish some greater good—something we may never understand in this life. So sometimes when we ask him to take the pain away, he says, "Not yet." He will eventually heal and restore and deliver; if not in this life, then in the life to come.

[Q] Has God removed any of your "thorns in the flesh"? If so, what was the result? If not, why do you think he is saying "not yet"?

[Q] When do you know it's time to stop praying for your own "thorn removal" desires?

[Q] What examples have you seen of believers relying on God's sovereignty, despite chronic sickness and/or suffering?

Teaching Point Three: Appropriate God's grace.

Once we accept our situation as God's will, we must appropriate God's grace. Grace here refers to all of God's resources—his strength, joy, and peace. Notice *appropriate* is an active word—aggressive, even. It means "to take possession of something or make use of something for oneself, even without permission."

We, of course, have permission to take hold of God's grace; it becomes available to us when we invite Christ into our lives. But we still have to appropriate it. There's nothing passive about Paul's response to his thorn in the flesh. According to verses 9 and 10, he not only endures his weakness, he boasts in it. He knows that God can accomplish things through his weakness that could not have been accomplished through his strengths. We can't stop at acceptance. We have to appropriate God's grace—actively and aggressively take hold of it. We must claim his promises, obey his commands, ask for strength, and then seize the opportunities our weaknesses afford us.

[Q] What does God's promise that "my grace is sufficient for you" mean?

[Q] What does it mean that God's "power is made perfect in weakness"?



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[Q] How have you experienced the above promises?

[Q] Do you delight, for Christ's sake, in your weaknesses/insults/hardships, etc.? How could you grow more in these areas?

[Q] What would it look like for you to appropriate God's grace in this way today?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

We all have weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and imperfections. We're just clay pots, after all—ordinary, fragile, imperfect vessels. But when we own those weaknesses, God can turn them into strengths, so that we become unbreakable.

Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To consider what it means to rely on God's sovereignty despite suffering.*

Activity: *Pop some corn! As a small group, watch the 1979 film entitled Joni. It's about Joni Eareckson Tada's struggle with disability and how God uses her weakness to display his power. You can get this movie on DVD from World Wide Pictures (<http://shop.wwp.org>). Or perhaps you can think of other films that illustrate this truth. Enjoy the discussion!*

Action Point: **Remember thinking about that person in your world who is "relying on God's sovereignty, despite chronic sickness and/or suffering"? This would be a good week to take them out for coffee just to hear about God's work in their life. Maybe you could even offer a day of service to him or her.**

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Teaching Point One: Ask God to take your "thorn" away.

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