

CALL TO ME — TAKE IT AWAY

2 Corinthians 12:7–10

Good afternoon, church family. Greetings to you in the wonderful name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We have been walking through our series called CALL TO ME. Throughout this series we have seen people calling upon God in many different situations. We have seen prayers in pain, prayers for forgiveness, prayers when people did not know what to do, and prayers when faith was struggling. But today we are coming to a different kind of prayer. What happens when you pray and God hears you, but He does not give you exactly what you asked for? What happens when you say, Lord, please take this away, but it is still there? Maybe it is sickness. Maybe it is emotional pain. Maybe it is a family situation. Maybe it is financial pressure. Maybe it is a relationship. Maybe it is something nobody else knows about. You prayed about it once. You prayed again. You continued praying, but nothing seemed to change. Then questions started coming into your mind: Lord, are You hearing me? Why haven't You changed this? Why are You allowing this? If you have ever prayed like that, today's passage is for you. Please turn with me to 2 Corinthians 12:7–10. Paul says, Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. Church, Paul had a problem. Paul prayed about the problem. Paul asked the Lord to remove the problem. The Lord answered Paul, but He did not remove the problem. Instead, Christ gave Paul something deeper: My grace is sufficient for you. Today I want us to remember four simple words from these four verses: PAIN, PRAYER, GRACE, and POWER.

1. PAIN — I WAS GIVEN A THORN IN MY FLESH

Look at verse 7. Paul says, I was given a thorn in my flesh. Before we understand Paul's prayer, we need to understand Paul's pain. Paul describes what he was experiencing as a thorn. Think about a thorn in your body. It hurts. It irritates you. You don't want it to stay there. Your natural response is to remove it. Paul had something in his life that he desperately wanted gone. But Paul does not tell us exactly what the thorn was. Christians

throughout history have suggested different possibilities. Some have thought it was a physical illness. Others have thought it was some form of opposition or suffering. But Scripture does not clearly identify it. Therefore, we should not pretend that we know. What God tells us is enough: the thorn was real, it was painful, it troubled Paul, and Paul wanted it removed. But notice why Paul says it was given: in order to keep me from becoming conceited. In the verses before our passage, Paul talks about extraordinary revelations he had received. Those experiences could have become a source of pride. Paul could have started thinking too highly of himself. But this thorn continually reminded Paul of his weakness and dependence upon God. Paul saw something painful, but God could see a purpose beyond Paul's pain. Paul wanted the thorn removed, but God knew what He was accomplishing through it. That does not mean we should look at somebody who is suffering and tell them, I know why God is doing this to you. We don't know God's hidden purposes in every situation. But Paul's experience teaches us that God can accomplish His purposes even through circumstances we desperately want Him to change. Sometimes God changes our circumstances, and sometimes God uses our circumstances to change us.

Paul also calls his thorn a messenger of Satan, to torment me. There is a tension here. Paul recognizes something painful and hostile about this experience, yet God remains sovereign over Paul's life. Satan does not have the final word. The thorn could torment Paul, but it could not destroy God's purpose for Paul. Church, sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that if we faithfully follow Jesus, serious pain should never enter our lives. We think, I pray. I serve God. I come to church. I love Jesus. Why am I going through this? But look at Paul. Paul loved Jesus. Paul preached Christ. Paul planted churches. Paul suffered for the gospel. God used Paul powerfully, and Paul still had a thorn. The presence of pain does not mean the absence of God. You can be hurting and still be in God's hands. You can have questions and still be loved by God. You can carry something difficult and still be used by God. Maybe you have something today that you desperately wish God would remove. We should not call every difficulty Paul's thorn in the flesh, but all of us understand what it means to carry something we wish were different. Maybe nobody else knows about your burden. Maybe you smile and tell everyone, I'm doing fine, but inside you are asking, God, why is this still here? Don't immediately conclude that God has forgotten you. The thorn was painful, but God was still present. The thorn was unwanted, but God was still working.

2. PRAYER — THREE TIMES I PLEADED WITH THE LORD

Now look at verse 8. This is where our CALL TO ME series comes directly into the passage. Paul says, Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. Paul did

not hide his pain. Paul did not pretend everything was okay. Paul prayed. Notice the word pleaded. This was not a casual prayer. Paul desperately wanted God to act. And his request was very clear: Take it away from me. That is our title today: TAKE IT AWAY. Sometimes our deepest prayers are not long prayers. Lord, take it away. Lord, this hurts. Take it away. Lord, I am tired. Take it away. Lord, change this situation. Lord, heal me. Lord, restore my family. Lord, open this door. Prayer is not pretending before God. Prayer is bringing our real heart before God. If something hurts, tell Him. If you are confused, tell Him. If you want something to change, ask Him. Paul did.

Notice also that Paul prayed three times. He prayed, and the thorn remained. So he prayed again. The thorn remained, and Paul prayed again. Repeated prayer is not necessarily unbelief. Sometimes repeated prayer demonstrates faith because every time we return to God we are saying, Lord, I still believe You are the One who can help me. Maybe you have been praying the same prayer for months or even years. Keep bringing your burden to God. If you are praying for healing, keep praying. If you are praying for your children, keep praying. If you are praying for your marriage, keep praying. If you are praying for direction, keep praying. If you are praying for restoration, keep praying. If you are praying for God to open a door, keep praying. God is able to heal. God is able to restore. God is able to provide. God is able to change circumstances. Paul believed that, and that is why he asked.

But now we come to the difficult part. God did not remove Paul's thorn. This is Paul. Paul knew God. Paul had faith. Paul prayed sincerely. Yet the thorn remained. Therefore, we cannot say that whenever somebody prays and the problem remains, they simply don't have enough faith. Paul's experience proves otherwise. So was Paul's prayer unanswered? No. His prayer was answered differently. Verse 9 says, But he said to me... Don't miss those words. Paul called, and the Lord responded. The answer was not silence. The answer was not what Paul requested, but it was still an answer. Sometimes we say, God didn't answer my prayer, when what we actually mean is, God didn't give me the answer I wanted. Those are not always the same thing. Prayer is not a method for controlling God. Prayer is a relationship in which we honestly bring our desires to a God whose wisdom is greater than ours. Paul knew what he wanted. God knew what Paul needed. Paul could see the thorn. God could see Paul, Paul's heart, Paul's future, Paul's ministry, and everything He was accomplishing through Paul's life. This is where faith becomes deeper. It is easy to trust God when He gives us exactly what we requested. But can I trust Him when His answer is different? Can I say, Lord, I don't understand Your answer, but I still trust Your heart? That is mature prayer. Calling to God does not mean God promises to follow our plan. Calling to God means we trust Him enough to bring

everything to Him and then trust Him with His answer. Sometimes God removes the burden. Sometimes God gives us grace to carry what He has not yet removed.

3. GRACE — MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU

Now we arrive at the heart of this passage. Paul says, Take it away. Christ answers, My grace is sufficient for you. Paul asked for removal. Christ promised grace. Paul wanted the thorn to leave. Christ promised that His grace would remain. Notice what Jesus does not say. He does not say, Paul, your pain isn't real. He does not say, Stop thinking about it. He does not say, You don't have enough faith. Instead He gives Paul a promise: My grace is sufficient for you. What does sufficient mean? It means enough. Christ is saying, Paul, what I give you will be enough for what you must walk through. The thorn may remain, but grace will remain too. Paul may wake up tomorrow and discover that nothing has changed, but when tomorrow comes, grace will still be there. Paul may feel weak, but grace will still be there. Paul may face another difficult day, but grace will still be there. And notice the first word: MY. Jesus says, My grace. The answer to Paul's prayer is deeply personal. Christ does not simply give Paul a principle; He directs Paul back to Himself. My grace. My power. Paul wanted something removed from his life, but Jesus wanted Paul to discover more deeply that Christ Himself was enough for his life. Sometimes we want God to give us strength today for the next ten years. We want to know exactly how everything is going to work out. But God often gives us grace one day at a time. You may not have strength today for something that could happen next year. You don't need next year's grace today. You need today's grace. And when tomorrow comes, Jesus will still be there.

Maybe you have been praying only, Lord, change this. Keep praying. But perhaps you also need to pray, Lord, until You change this, give me grace to walk through it. Maybe your prayer has been, Lord, remove this. Add another prayer: Lord, until You remove it, keep me close to You. Maybe your prayer has been, Lord, make this easier. Add another prayer: Lord, if it is not easier today, make my dependence upon You deeper. There is a huge difference between saying, God hasn't removed it, therefore God doesn't care, and saying, God hasn't removed it, but His grace is still sufficient.

And church, ultimately we understand grace through Jesus Christ. Our greatest problem was not sickness, finances, relationships, or difficult circumstances. Our greatest problem was sin. We could not remove our own guilt. We could not save ourselves. We could not earn our way back to a holy God. So God did for us what we could never do for ourselves. Jesus Christ came into this world. He lived the righteous life we could not live. He went to the cross. He carried our sins. He died in our place. He was buried, and on the third day He rose again. That is grace. We did not earn it. We did not deserve it. God gave

it. Therefore, if you are carrying something painful and wondering, Does God still love me? don't measure God's love only by whether your circumstances changed. Look at the cross. Your thorn may leave you with questions, but the cross shows you God's heart. The Christ who gave Himself for you is the Christ who says, My grace is sufficient for you. Sometimes God delivers us from something. Sometimes He carries us through something. Paul wanted deliverance from the thorn. Instead, Paul discovered sustaining grace. Sometimes the greatest testimony is not, God removed every difficult thing from my life. Sometimes the testimony is, I don't know how I made it through, except that Jesus carried me.

4. POWER — MY POWER IS MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS

Now listen to the rest of Christ's answer: For my power is made perfect in weakness. Paul wanted weakness removed, but Christ showed Paul that his weakness could become the very place where Christ's power would be displayed. Paul responds, Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. Notice the change. In verse 8 Paul says, Take it away. In verse 9 Paul says, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses. What changed? As far as this passage tells us, the thorn did not change. Paul changed because he heard the word of Christ. Paul now understood his weakness differently. He had seen weakness only as something he needed removed. Christ showed him that weakness could become a place where divine power was displayed.

Our world teaches us to hide weakness. Look strong. Prove yourself. Handle everything yourself. Even Christians can begin believing that God only uses people who have everything together. But Paul says, When I am weak, then I am strong. Paul is not saying weakness itself is strength. He is saying that his weakness forces him away from self-dependence and toward dependence upon Christ. The strength is not Paul's strength. The strength belongs to Jesus. Sometimes one of the most dangerous attitudes in our spiritual life is, I've got this. I can handle everything myself. We become dependent upon our intelligence, experience, money, plans, abilities, or position. Then something happens that reminds us, I cannot do this by myself. I need Jesus.

Paul continues in verse 10: That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. Paul is not saying pain feels good. He is not celebrating suffering itself. He is saying that none of those things can prevent Christ's power from working through him. Paul has discovered that his weakness does not disqualify him from being used by God. In fact, when Paul reaches the end of his own strength, it becomes clearer that the power comes from Christ.

So our prayer begins to change as we move through these four verses. At first we pray, Lord, take it away. That is a biblical prayer. Paul prayed it. Keep praying it. But then we

hear Christ say, My grace is sufficient for you. And another prayer begins: Lord, if You don't take it away today, let Your power rest on me. If the situation remains, don't let me walk through it without You. If I must experience weakness, let my weakness point people to Your strength.

Church family, look at the movement of these four verses one final time: PAIN — a thorn in my flesh. PRAYER — Three times I pleaded with the Lord. GRACE — My grace is sufficient for you. POWER — My power is made perfect in weakness. The passage begins with a thorn and ends with strength. But the strength does not come because the thorn disappeared. The strength comes because Christ's power rests upon Paul. Maybe you came today praying, Lord, TAKE IT AWAY. Keep calling to Him. God is able. He can heal. He can restore. He can open the door. He can change the circumstances. But don't make the removal of the thorn the condition of your trust in Him. If He removes it, praise Him. If today He doesn't remove it, listen again to Jesus: My grace is sufficient for you. The thorn may remain, but His grace remains. The weakness may remain, but His power remains. Your circumstances may not have changed, but Jesus has not changed.

So don't walk away from Jesus because the thorn remains. Walk closer to Jesus. Don't stop praying because God's answer was different. Keep calling to Him. Don't pretend you are strong enough by yourself. Depend upon Christ.

Maybe your prayer today needs to become: Lord, I still want You to take it away. But I trust You. If You don't take it away today, give me grace for today. If it remains tomorrow, give me grace tomorrow. Don't let this pain push me away from You. Draw me closer to You. Let the power of Christ rest upon me, and through my weakness let people see Jesus. And if you have never trusted Jesus Christ, your greatest need is not simply for God to remove a difficult circumstance. Your greatest need is Christ Himself. Jesus died for your sins and rose again. Turn from your sin and trust Him. Receive the grace you could never earn.

Church, remember these four words: PAIN. PRAYER. GRACE. POWER.

We came saying, Lord, TAKE IT AWAY.

And perhaps He will.

But until He does, Jesus says:

MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU, FOR MY POWER IS MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS.

His grace is sufficient. His power is enough. Jesus is enough.

May the Lord help us to trust Him when He removes the thorn and also when He gives us grace to walk with Him while the thorn remains.

May all the glory go to Jesus Christ. Amen!