



It's Possible, Part 3

Discussion Guide

Into the Word:

Jeremy shared with us the writings of Paul to the Philippians. Particularly, this verse: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." (Phil. 4:12)

Have you ever been in a job interview and the interviewer asked you, "What is your biggest weakness?" How did you answer?

Suppose you were on a pastor search committee and you got this letter:

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.

How would you respond to this letter?

This could be the cover letter for the restless, contentious, absent-minded, over-the-hill jailbird we know as the apostle Paul. Paul had a strange resume. He had experienced incredible successes and heart breaking lows. Yet, he says he learned the secret to being content.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7–10

One of the secrets that Paul learned was where real strength and confidence comes from. Paul's experiences had taught him something. 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 strong.

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.

How can a person be content in this situation? 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?

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.

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

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

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 problems or seeming impossibilities 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.

That was Paul's second secret to contentment. We must accept God's sovereign will.

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"?

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

Apply the Word

Once we apply Paul's secrets, know where real strength comes from and accept God's sovereign will, we can do the most powerful thing—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.

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

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

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

Taking Action:

Consider 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.