

# Adult Teaching Resources

July 8, 2018



## Season After Pentecost: The Perils of Pauline ... Thinking (May 27-July 8)

2 Corinthians 8:1-15 (RCL 8:7-15) – “Motivating Generosity”

**2 Corinthians 12:1-10 – “Heavenly Secrets and Earthly Thorns”**

## A Prophetic Interlude (July 15-July 22)

Amos 7:7-15 – “Walking the Line”

Jeremiah 23:1-6 – “Bad Shepherds and Good”

## Not Your Ordinary Rabbi (July 29-August 26)

John 6:1-21 – “He Did What?”

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# Heavenly Secrets and Earthly Thorns

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

## FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

## Bible Background

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*“... he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”*  
2 Corinthians 12:9

The old song goes, “Lord it’s hard to be humble when you’re perfect in every way.” With all the attention we can bring to ourselves, humility can be a challenging quality to have. The challenge to live humbly in a “look at me” culture is difficult.

Paul understood the challenge and tried hard to point to the source of his strength—Christ. Today, we’ll explore this difficult dance of boasting and humility.

## Opening

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As folks arrive to your class, ask them to find a partner. Then ask each person to, without naming names, describe:

- 1) the most boastful person they know
- 2) the most humble person they know

What do you like most about each person?

What do you like least about each person?

Give each couple time to talk about the qualities of boastfulness and humility.

What would the perfect mix of boastfulness and humility be for you? How have you seen that combination in others?

## Reading the Bible

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What does Paul find necessary to do to his detractors? (boast) What does he actually do? (talks of visions and revelations)

According to the passage, who does Paul talk about? (a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven) Who is Paul really talking about? (himself)

What happened to the person Paul talks about? (was caught up in Paradise, heard things that are not to be told)

What does Paul say he will talk about? (weakness)

What is Paul's hesitation to boasting? (he will not be a fool, doesn't want anyone to think better of him than what is seen or heard from him)

What keeps Paul from being elated? (thorn in the flesh)

What did Paul do with his thorn? (appealed three times for it to leave him)

How did God respond? (God said, "My grace is sufficient for you.")

What is Paul content with? (weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities) Why is Paul content with those things? (his weakness makes him strong)

## Making Connections

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When have you needed to defend yourself in matters of faith and/or religion? What was the situation? What did you do? What was the outcome?

Our Lesson Writer says, "Paul seemed hesitant to boast directly of his own visions, so he began by acting as if he were talking about someone else." Share a time when you hesitated to boast of your own achievements. What could you have boasted about? What kept you from boasting?

When have you had an experience that defied words to describe? Try your best to describe it now. How did you respond to the situation then?

What keeps you humble?

How do you understand the "thorn" of God's doing? Is such a thorn necessary for Paul and his ministry? Why do you say that? Is such a thorn necessary for you and your faith journey? Why do you say that?

Paul asked God to remove his handicap. Have you done the same? What have you said to God?

How do you define grace? How is grace sufficient for us and our weaknesses?

Of what can you boast when it comes to matters of your relationship with God?

## So What?

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In the large group setting, share these words from our Lesson Writer:

“Imagine Paul’s experience: he had known the ecstasy of heavenly transport and the joy of evangelistic success, but also the misery of physical affliction and public humiliation. Paul’s amazing conclusion is that the greatest source of strength was his own weakness, because it forced him to rely on Christ rather than himself.”

What do you say about the greatest source of strength is our weakness? How is that possible? What challenges does that present for you? How can we live the strong humility God desires for us?

## The Challenge

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This week, reflect on the idea of strength from weakness. Where are you weak and when do you find yourself relying more on Christ? When you notice those moments, pray and thank God for your weakness and trust you give to God.

## Prayer

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*Loving God, you gave us a strong model to follow with Paul and his humility. He struggled not to boast, even though he could have. But for your sake and the sake of the gospel, he focused attention back on to you. Help us to do the same, Lord. Help everything we do and everything we say to point others to you. Amen.*

## Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartlege

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartlege, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

**The text**—The Revised Common Lectionary text for the day begins at v. 2, but there’s no good reason to skip verse one, which sets up what comes next: so we won’t.

**A “severe letter”**—Paul’s correspondence with the church at Corinth mentions more than two letters, and what we call 1 Corinthians was not the first one: 1 Cor. 5:9 speaks of a “previous letter” Paul had written. A few scholars think parts of that letter may have been retained in 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1, which seems out of place, though most think those verses were added later by someone other than Paul.

At some point, while he was working in Ephesus, individual members of the church from Corinth (“Chloe’s people,” 1:11) contacted Paul, perhaps through personal visits, telling him of problems in the congregation. Paul also received at least one letter from the church requesting his advice (7:1).

In response, Paul wrote what we now call 1 Corinthians. Unfortunately, the letter was not well received, leading Paul to make a visit to the church that he called painful (2 Cor. 2:1). After returning to Ephesus, he wrote another letter that he described as tearful and difficult (2 Cor. 2:3-9; 7:12), and had Titus deliver it to the church. Some scholars think this “severe letter” may be partially preserved in 2 Corinthians 10-13, which is sterner in tone than the preceding chapters.

**Getting caught up**—Paul’s insistence that he (or the person in Christ he claimed to know) had been “caught up to the third heaven” indicates that he did not do anything to deserve or bring about the heavenly transport. He didn’t “pray until he got through,” have hands laid on him, or engage in intentional ecstatic activities in hopes of being spiritual enraptured. This leaves the initiative entirely in God’s hands: Paul’s transport or vision was a gift of grace, not due to his own efforts.

**To speak, or not to speak**—Paul said he would not speak of what he had seen in “the third heaven,” lest he be seen as trying to impress others with his spiritual credentials. This echoes his earlier statement that he spoke in tongues as a private exercise (“more than you all”), but declined to do so in public because the practice did not edify the community, but would only draw attention to himself (1 Cor. 14:14-19). His authority was not based on secret revelations or impressive speech, but on the life he lived before them.

## Digging Deeper *continued*

**Paul's "thorn"**—Paul's reference to having received a "thorn in the flesh" may be drawn from the Greek translation of Psalm 32:4, which has the poet speaking of how God's hand had become heavy, so that "I was tormented with bodily suffering while a thorn was stuck in me." The Greek translation follows a different tradition from the Hebrew text, which speaks of God's hand being heavy so that "my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer."

When Paul quoted from the Old Testament, it was generally from the Greek translation, typically called the "Septuagint."

**Our thorns**—John T. McFadden has noted that Paul's reticence about naming his "thorn" can be for our benefit: "But for those of us who read this text many years later, Paul's omission allows us to filter it through our own thorns." Paul found that his affliction kept him from getting overly proud of his heavenly visions.

"Without the thorn, Paul could have easily fallen into the trap that ensnared the super-apostles, diverted from his urgent mission by narcissistic fascination with his experiences and the sense of self-importance they bring." (John T. McFadden, in *Feasting on the Word, Year B*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3 of Accordance electronic ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], paragraph 14541.)

**Strength in weakness**—Peter S. Hawkins offers a memorable take on Paul's claim to have found strength in weakness after God chose not to remove his "thorn in the flesh." The negative result ". . . does not mean that his prayer goes unanswered, but only that the kind of deliverance he longs for will not be given; the thorn will not be extracted. Instead, Christ will be with him in his pain, will transform a solitary agony into infused strength. Whether in a vision or only in the still, small voice of prayer, the Lord says to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

(Peter S. Hawkins, in *Feasting on the Word, Year B*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3 of Accordance electronic ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009], paragraph 14563.)

**Three times**—Paul said he prayed three times for God to remove his affliction – do you think this is an intentional parallel to Jesus praying three times in the garden for God to remove the "cup" of affliction from him? In both cases, what was the result?

# The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartlege

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## When do we learn best?

Under what circumstances do you learn best? We might think of any number of conditions. Some people learn best in quiet solitude, while others prefer to learn in company with others. Some are auditory learners who like lectures, while others are more visual and crave visual stimulation. Many people are kinesthetic learners, preferring an active, “hands-on” learning environment.

No matter what our preferred learning style, we all have one thing in common when it comes to learning: we learn best when we realize that we don’t know everything already. Perhaps you have known people who preferred their preconceived notions to an open-minded engagement with new ideas. Maybe you’ve tried to teach something to a child who resisted your careful instruction, thinking they already know all they need to know.

We learn best when we recognize our lack in any given area: only then can we gain the strength that comes with new learning. Paul contended that one of his greatest lessons came from recognizing his weakness. Only then could he learn to depend less on himself and more on God – and in that, he found the strength he needed.