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2 Corinthians 11 – 13

“Paradox Principles”

Pastor Gary Hamrick

Have you ever noticed that sometimes the wisdom of God and the counsel of God’s Word go against the conventional wisdom of the day? It’s the reason why, with our limited understanding, we may sometimes read a certain passage of Scripture and think to ourselves, “On the surface, that just doesn’t make much sense.” One example is **2 Corinthians 12:10**, when Paul writes, “...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.” How could this be, and how would anyone come to the conclusion that this makes rational sense? Who in the world would “delight” in these situations?

For Paul, it’s either one of two things: he’s out of touch with reality or he’s discovered a principle for living. If it is the latter, then it’s a principle that is completely contrary to the conventional wisdom of this world. It may seem unusual; it may seem unreasonable; it certainly is uncommon, but it is spiritual truth for our lives.

When Paul writes, “when I am weak, then I am strong,” it’s a paradox,¹ and it’s just one among many in the Bible. In this study we’re going to look at five paradoxes in the Bible.

Strength is in Weakness

1. **2 Corinthians 10:12b** – “I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”
2. Paul is lamenting some affliction that he’s suffering, and he says the source of this tormenting is Satan.

¹ The American Heritage® New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third Edition, © 2005 – A statement that seems contradictory or absurd but is actually valid or true. The Greek word is *paradoxos*, which comes from *para* (beside/against) and *doxos* (opinion/belief).

3. The Greek word for thorn actually means tent peg, which helps us understand this is something much greater than a small discomfort or irritation. There's been a lot of speculation regarding Paul's affliction.
 - a. Some believe Paul was struggling with an on-going sin issue that he has begged God to deliver him from. Pastor Gary mentioned the fact that the Greek word used for flesh refers to the body rather than the flesh nature.
 - i. **2 Corinthians 11:29** – *“Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?”*
 - b. Some believe Paul was dealing with a constant physical ailment – perhaps an on-going incurable eye disease – that he asked God to heal.
 - c. It is not known what the affliction was, but what is clear is that God chose not to deliver Paul from the affliction.
4. God's will for Paul was that he would experience grace through the difficulty rather than to deliver him from it.
5. Sometimes God's purposes are greater in the midst of our suffering than if he were to deliver us.
6. God does heal people today, but the truth is that we all get sick, despite the claims made by some that God only wants you to be “healthy, wealthy and wise!”
7. The truth is that some times wonderful Christians go through life as testimonies of God's grace without ever seeing deliverance this side of heaven, and Paul can be counted in their number.
8. In Paul's situation, he believes he has this affliction to keep him from becoming conceited over the fact that he received incredible revelations.² (**2 Corinthians 12:1–9a**)
9. It is definitely not the case that everyone that goes through trials and difficulties is being humbled by God, like Paul; it could be that God just wants the person to have a deeper walk with him.
10. It's true that sometimes people experience difficulties so they will be examples of his grace; because it's true that God's grace is sufficient for us, in good times and bad.

Wisdom is in Foolishness

11. **1 Corinthians 3:18–19a** – *“Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight...”*
12. The Bible isn't condemning knowledge, learning or education, and its certainly not saying that stupid Christians are somehow wiser people.

² Pastor Gary mentioned the likelihood that Paul “was caught up to the third heaven” when he had a near-death experience when he was stoned in Lystra. (**See Acts 14:19–20**)

13. It is saying that what the world calls wisdom (the philosophies, the principles, the latest ideas and popular views – are not wise at all.
14. In God’s eyes, it’s all foolishness because it’s nothing more than man’s attempt to theorize about life apart from knowing the Author and Creator of life!
15. **James 3:15** – *“Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.”*
16. God says it is better to be considered a fool who doesn’t go along with the standard of this world, than to be considered wise according to the standard of this world.

Receiving is in Giving

17. **Luke 6:38** – *“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”*
18. It seems foolish to think that the more we give, the more we receive, but it’s what God promises.
19. It’s God’s promise that he will not only take care of us, but he will supply more than we need.
20. Consider these Scriptures that help us understand that we just can’t out-give God.
 - a. **2 Corinthians 9:6** – *“Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.”*
 - b. **Proverbs 11:24** – *“One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.”*

Greatness is in Leastness³

21. **Matthew 20:25–28** – *“Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’ ”*
22. The incident that prompted Jesus’ sermon was James and John, along with their mother, coming privately to ask for the seats of honor when Jesus came into his glory. The other disciples heard about this and they were indignant, so Jesus called them together to give them this simple lesson on servitude.
23. In **Luke 14:7–11**, Jesus made similar remarks about honor being found in humility.

³ Obviously, *leastness* is not an actual word. It was “created” for the purpose of consistency in the outline.

24. Christians are to consider others first and to have a servants heart – first, last and always.

Finding Life is in Losing it

25. **Matthew 16:24–26** – *“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?’ ”*

26. So many people strive to find meaning and purpose in this life, and it seems as though some will stop at nothing to find fulfillment and satisfaction.

27. Jesus, however, says that *“whoever wants to save his life will lose it”* in the end.

28. If you’re living for the temporal, you’ll miss the eternal, but if you surrender your life to Jesus – if you die to self and follow Jesus – you will find *real* life.

29. **John 10:10** – *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”*

Discussion Questions

1. Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
2. Read **2 Corinthians 12:7–10** to provide an overview for this study.
3. Allow the people in your group to share personal experiences about times when God demonstrated that his grace was sufficient, even in difficult circumstances.
4. Spend time talking about examples of Christians who lived as “testimonies of God’s grace without ever seeing deliverance this side of heaven.”
5. Have there been times in your life when you went against the conventional wisdom of the day and saw the Lord do something amazing because of your trust in his Word?
6. Read and discuss **James 3:15**.
 - a. Give examples of current events that demonstrate the contrast between worldly wisdom and God’s wisdom.
7. Read and discuss **Luke 6:38**, focusing on the promise of God to supply above and beyond the need.

8. Read and discuss [Proverbs 11:24](#).
9. Allow the people in your group to share examples of people they know who lived out the Biblical model of servanthood.
 - a. Describe some of the specific characteristics they observed in this person's life.
10. Close your time in prayer by allowing everyone in your group to: asking the Holy Spirit to help them to recognize the paradoxes in life when there is a God-way and a worldly way; ask the Holy Spirit to lead them in life-change so they would depend on the Lord to strengthen and sustain them through difficult times; purpose in their heart to live for the Lord in this life such a way that they will make an impact for eternity in the lives of countless others.