

Teaching Plan
EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Date: May 27, 2018

Lesson Title: "Finding Strength"

Lesson Passage: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; 13:2-8

ABOUT THIS LESSON

The Lesson Passage is based on the conclusion of Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. Paul was struggling with a dilemma. He regretted having to boast, for boasting was very distasteful to him. But his credentials as an apostle were under attack by bitter opponents in Corinth, and he was forced to defend his reputation by describing the visions and revelations that the Lord had given him. But he also confesses that he had been given a chronic malady (a "thorn in the flesh") to keep him from taking excessive pride in his virtues and achievements, so that he would continue to rely completely on the Lord's grace. Paradoxically, when hardships and difficulties made him realize his weakness, he experienced the strength of Christ.

TEACHING/LEARNING GOALS

- (1) Explain why Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was also a blessing.
- (2) Explain what Paul hoped to accomplish by visiting Corinth again.

TEACHING PROCEDURES

1. *With reference to Paul's "thorn in the flesh" testimony in 2 Cor. 12:7-9, share these thoughts:* (1) "A thorn in the flesh" could just as accurately be translated "a stake in my body." This might suggest a recurrent stabbing pain, perhaps like the symptoms attributed to neuropathy today, although we can't know its exact nature. (2) Paul's statement about the origin and purpose of this persistent malady is somewhat obscure. The "thorn" or "stake" was a "messenger of Satan" (v. 7), but we can surmise that its effect ("to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations") was God's purpose, not Satan's. The chronic suffering that resulted from this physical ailment kept Paul from the pride and arrogance that he might have felt as a result of his special visions. (3) Three times, Paul asked God for release from this vexing problem (v. 8). (And we can believe that these were earnest and prolonged prayers; not casual petitions.) APPLICATION: Three truths about prayer emerge from Paul's testimony: First, he had no fatalistic attitude toward his pain. Believing that wellness is harmonious with the Creator's purpose, he did not hesitate to pray for healing. Second, he prayed with persistence ("three times"), a practice that Jesus had dramatized in his parable of the persistent friend in Luke 11:5-8. Third, he accepted God's refusal with a positive interpretation. APPLICATION: God's "no" is never a blank refusal. He responds with answers to prayer that are not always immediately recognized as such. Paul received an answer that was even better than the one he wanted, the assurance that he would receive divine grace that would be sufficient to carry his burden and still do his appointed work.

2. *Read 2 Cor. 12:10, then call attention to the paradoxical statement, "when I am weak, then I am strong."* COMMENT: In many instances, the struggle to overcome defects has developed capacities that would otherwise have lain dormant. Moses had a stammering tongue, but became Israel's premier teacher and lawgiver. Jeremiah was overwhelmed by a sense of inadequacy that made him feel that he was "only a youth"; but we know him as one of the greatest Old Testament prophets. Finally, ask the class to ponder this thought-provoking quotation: "It may be that God refuses to remove our weakness because He needs it."

3. *Comment on 2 Cor. 13:1:* (1) Though verse 1 is not included in our lesson passage, it is needed to establish a context for what Paul says next. Before concluding his letter, Paul reminds his readers that he is preparing to visit Corinth for the third time. He is forewarning them in the hope that his visit will be constructive, not destructive. (2) The second part of v. 1 is a quotation from Deuteronomy 19:15, which states that no one should be convicted of crime if there were only one witness against him; there had to be at least two witnesses. Paul is not threatening to take his opponents in Corinth to court. He is talking about a church matter and is saying that he will abide by the biblical rule in deciding on the punishment of the church members who are found guilty of unchristian conduct. (3) *Suggest that 2 Cor. 12:21 tells us something about the nature of their sins.*

4. *Interpret his stern warning in 2 Cor. 13:2-4:* (1) When Paul was in Corinth the second time, he warned the people who had fallen into sin before that visit. Now that he is about to make another visit, he writes the same warning to those people, and to all others who have fallen into sin. His warning is that when he arrives in Corinth on his third visit, he will deal with them very severely. (2) *Share this paraphrase of vv. 3-4:* "You will have all the proof you want that Christ speaks through me. When he deals with you, he is not weak; instead, he shows his power among you. Though when he was crucified his weakness lay in the fact that he was a mortal human being, he now lives by the power of God. As his apostles, we share Christ's weakness. But when we come to Corinth and deal with you, we, too, shall have God's power to act."

5. *Summarize his closing message in 2 Cor. 13:5-8:* "Test yourselves, to find out for sure if you are faithful followers of Jesus Christ. I trust that you will find that I am a true apostle. But, actually, I'm not really concerned about you think of my apostleship. My only concern is that you do what is right in relation to Christ and the gospel."

CLOSING THE LESSON

Close with the significant thought reflected in 2 Cor. 13:8: Though Paul's performance as an apostle has been under attack, that is not his main concern. His primary motive is not proving that he was right and they were wrong, so as to win the debate. His one concern is that they understand and live in obedience to the gospel, regardless of what they think of him.

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