

WHAT IF . . . ?

What If You Struggle with a Permanent Disability?

2 Corinthians 12:1–10



LET'S BEGIN HERE

We are all disabled in one way or another. Our disabilities may not be obvious to other people, but they are there nonetheless. Like an illusionist who skillfully hides a playing card in the palm of his hand or up his shirtsleeve, we too hide our pains, heartaches, diseases, wounds, broken parts, and imperfections.

Shame and pride keep our disabilities safely tucked out of sight. In shame, we fear the humiliation of finger-pointing when others see our weaknesses, and in pride, we suppose that a show of perfection will elevate us to heights of success and acceptance.

However, a disability is not necessarily a disadvantage. What disables can *enable* us to achieve what we never imagined possible as we depend on a power outside ourselves: God's grace. In this study, Paul's story teaches that weaknesses can unlock spiritual power and raise us to higher levels of maturity. We just have to be vulnerable enough to show the hand we've been dealt.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

In 2 Corinthians 12:1–10, Paul revealed parts of his life that he had held close to his vest. Read this passage once to get the flow of his thoughts, and then read it again with the following four-point outline in mind:

- Paul's unsurpassed privileges (12:1–4)
- Paul's uncommon humility (12:5–6)
- Paul's inescapable pain (12:7–8)
- Paul's paradoxical power (12:9–10)

Quotable

*God uses pain
and brokenness to
replace arrogance
and pride to make
us consciously
dependent on Him.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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Searching the Scriptures Study Tool

When searching the Scriptures, gather resources that will guide you in your study. Make certain you have a Bible dictionary and a concordance handy as well as a reliable commentary on the book of the Bible you're studying. One resource that we'll refer to throughout this study is Chuck Swindoll's commentary, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: 1 and 2 Corinthians*, which is available at the Insight for Living Ministries online store: insight.org.

Now let's use our *Searching the Scriptures* tools of observation, interpretation, correlation, and application to discover the treasures in this passage.

Observations of 2 Corinthians 12:1–6

Putting the first two main points together, make observations of what you see in 2 Corinthians 12:1–6. First, what experience does Paul mention in verse 1, and how does he describe it in verses 2–4?

Second, what do you notice about Paul's humility in verses 5–6?

According to the timeline on page 278 of Chuck's commentary, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians about AD 55 while he was in Macedonia. If he had his vision 14 years earlier (12:2), where would he have been? Read Acts 9:30 for a clue.



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Paul’s “wonderful revelations from God” (2 Corinthians 12:7) occurred sometime before Barnabas brought him from Tarsus to Antioch (Acts 11:25), which happened about a year prior to his first missionary journey. During that time, Paul kept his story a secret in order to avoid drawing people’s attention away from Christ and to himself. Now the apostle was on his *third* missionary journey, having planted churches in Asia, Macedonia, and Greece—including the troublesome church at Corinth.

Paul had already dealt with problems of immorality and disorderliness. Now Paul’s opponents in Corinth were slinging mud at him, forcing him to boast in himself to defend his apostleship. This was a fine kettle of fish for humble Paul who found himself in a terrible bind. He always put Christ and the gospel center stage and never sought the spotlight for himself (2 Corinthians 12:5–6). What was he to do?

Read the complete introduction to 2 Corinthians in Chuck’s commentary for a fascinating explanation of the background of this letter and, specifically, Paul’s defense of his ministry. Also, you can access a helpful online source at <https://lumina.bible.org>. Click on Constable’s Notes, and read his introduction to 2 Corinthians. What additional observations does your research uncover?

Chuck sums up,

As Paul wrote his response to this new turn of events in the drama of the Corinthian church, he unleashed his emotions like never before. . . . He “boasts” in the manner of his adversaries, setting forth his superior qualifications as an apostle of God (11:16–12:21), *concluding that his authority comes just as much from his suffering in weakness as from his astonishing revelations and miracles.* (emphasis added)¹



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Observations of 2 Corinthians 12:7–10

Although the false apostles intended to lure Paul into prideful boasting, Paul did what only a true apostle would do: exalt the power of Christ. What words and phrases stand out in 2 Corinthians 12:7–10?

How does Chuck explain what Paul refers to as “a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan” in his commentary on page 469? For an additional resource, read Constable’s notes on 2 Corinthians 12:7 at lumina.bible.org. What does your research reveal?

Interpretation of 2 Corinthians 12:1–10

Now let’s summarize the passage. Read 2 Corinthians 12:1–10 again, and this time, write down in your own words what the passage is saying.

As you interpret a passage, you will discover timeless truths that apply in any culture. For example, here’s a principle from Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 12:6, “I don’t want anyone to give me credit beyond what they can see in my life or hear in my message.” *The most effective witness isn’t accomplished by spiritual bragging but in a changed life and a clear message about Christ.*



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Now you try. In the chart below are some statements from the passage. Write down the principles that you glean.

Bible Verses	Principles
So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh. (2 Corinthians 12:7)	
Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” (12:8–9)	
I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. (12:9)	
That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (12:10)	

Paul’s painful affliction was a disability in the sense that it disabled him from functioning in his own strength. It also pulled the plug on his pride! No neon marquee displayed Paul’s credits. Because of his limitations, he had to give credit to Christ who worked beyond Paul’s weakness.

What a paradox! The pain that limited Paul gave him access to Christ’s unlimited power! Once Paul settled into this truth, he could say, “I was glad to let it happen.”

I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ’s strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.
(2 Corinthians 12:9–10 MSG)



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Correlation with 2 Corinthians 4:5–10

Correlate this passage with an earlier passage in Paul's letter, 2 Corinthians 4:5–10, and write down the insights you gather as you compare this passage with what you learned in 12:1–10. What additional treasures of truth do you uncover?



Bring It Home

Application is the final step. Pick one of the principles above, and write it in such a way that is most effective to you. Use “I” statements as you state your desire to put the truth into practice, and give an action plan for what you intend to do.

Chuck's applications give you further encouragement.

- *Accept your disability.* God has a plan that might seem beyond your abilities. This will give you perspective!
- *Think of your disability as a friend, not an enemy.* It can draw you closer to God as you depend on His power. This will give you joy!
- *Focus on the flower, not the thorns.* See your disabilities in light of the “glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever!” (2 Corinthians 4:17). This will give you hope!



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A FINAL PRAYER

As you would write in a journal, conclude this study by writing your own prayer to the Lord, reflecting on Christ's power and His presence through your disability.

Father,

Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale, 2015), 285, 286.



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SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

STUDY



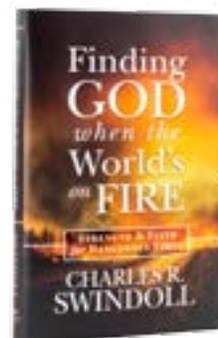
Tools for Digging Deeper



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For the 2017 broadcast, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by the Pastoral Ministries Department in collaboration with Mark Tobey, based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.



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