

# Tested!

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[0:00] Now I read there from Ephesians chapter 1, I used that as the focus of my prayer. And sometimes it's a good thing to do that and to be reminded of the great crucified and risen Saviour in whose power we live our Christian lives.

But sometimes when you hear a prayer like that and the power that is spoken about and the authority and the assurance, and maybe you come to church and you seem to think that the preacher has it all together and he preaches with confidence and with an assurance and with a depth of faith.

And the people you sit beside you presume are doing well in their Christian lives and have it together and seem to be balanced and effective Christians.

And you go out into the world and the message that you get in the world is to be strong and to be confident and to be bold and you think that's how I ought to be in my understanding and in my faith. And yet you find that that is not the case for you spiritually. That you find you're struggling with matters and issues of faith.

[1:19] And your faith can be battered and bruised and you're wondering why that's the case. You may have experienced and know difficulties in your life, relationship problems or illness or tragedy and sadness or opposition or people at your workplace who have no time for you for a variety of reasons.

And you ask yourself, well why and how can my faith cope with that? Or maybe just more theologically you might just ask, well God says he loves me and the preacher says that come to Christ because Christ loves us and yet I'm going through all these things and it doesn't seem to be very loving.

It's a strange love that Christ has. If I loved someone I wouldn't let them go through the things that Christ is letting me go through.

And so we're confused by the theory of God's love for us and the fact that it is real in many ways but we struggle because it doesn't seem like that's the case.

Our faith is being opposed and we are having bad things. Why would a good God let bad things happen to me? Why would these... can He really love me? What is He saying?

[2:43] And so we have these questions, maybe you don't have them just now, but I'm sure you have had in the past. I certainly have and maybe in the future. So our theme today is looking at the fact that our faith is often tested and tried by God and I want to look at the case study as it were of Paul that were given in the chapter or part of the chapter we read in 2 Corinthians chapter 12.

It's a great book. 2 Corinthians is a great letter and we're going to be studying it in our Sunday morning services for a couple of weeks time and it's a great letter.

And here we have this great passage where we're taught so much about the nature of faith and the reality of faith in our lives. And here's the guy, here's the man, here's Paul.

He's the one that you would think would have a great faith and a great life and at some levels that's absolutely right. We look at Paul and we see he's an apostle.

He's one of the founders of the Christian faith. Probably if we were to grade people in lists 1 to 10 or 1 to 20 we would regard Paul as one of the greatest Christians that ever lived.

[4:01] And even in the chapter we read he was extraordinary in his experiences. He got to taste paradise. He was taken up to meet with Jesus Christ in paradise in the most remarkable of experiences.

He must have been such a strong believer having had that. And he writes so confidently and he speaks so well and his faith is so deep.

And yet as we look at him in a sense, odd by him and his faith, what do we see? Do we see a guy that lives in an ivory tower or a preacher that just wheels out theoretical messages all through the Middle East?

No, we find a guy who had tremendous opposition and difficulty and struggles. We didn't read chapter 11, the chapter before the one that we read, but he lists for various reasons and as we go through 2 Corinthians we'll see why he does it.

He lists all the battles and struggles and beatings and persecution and opposition that he's faced. Tremendous difficulties he goes through and he sums up in verse 10 of the passage we read.

[ 5 : 18 ] That's why I die. Insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties. He went through all these things. And more than that, because these are kind of things that happen from outside in many ways, aren't they?

Shipwreck, beatings, imprisonment, they're all things that happen to you. So that's one level. But then he goes on to speak about weakness.

Weakness. The apostle Paul speaking about weakness. And he speaks specifically about a thorn in the flesh that he was given a thorn in the flesh.

As we explained to us in the passage that we read to keep me from being conceited, because of the surprisingly great revelations, it's given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan.

I've got a lot of, I'm going to unpack in this and that's one of the reasons that I give notes with the bulletin sheets. Maybe at some point. It's difficult to take all these things in, rattling through them, but there's references and there's a structure.

[ 6 : 28 ] I hope that you can take with you and look at it more in your leisure if you have time and the inclination so to do. But we recognize that he faced this weakness.

We don't know what it was, thankfully probably, but we're not told exactly what it was. There's been massive amount of conjecture. What was the thorn in the flesh that Paul had in his life?

I think we can safely say it wasn't a sin. It wasn't a besetting sin because when we ask God to deal with us and redeem us and forgive our sins and take away our sins, then he doesn't not do that.

He doesn't allow us to wallow in and stay in sinful behavior and practice. Although his remaining sinful nature is part of the weakness of his life.

But it does seem to be, the conjecture seems to be well-founded, that it was some kind of physical illness or ailment that Paul had.

[ 7 : 31 ] And it probably was something not very pleasant. And we know that he wasn't the most impressive kind of guy, physically to look at in terms of being a kind of Greek God type person.

He wasn't like that, he wasn't a kind of a donous figure. We're told that he was unimpressive in his being in 2 Corinthians.

I think it's in chapter 10, just a couple of chapters before, he says, By the meekness and gentleness of Christ I appeal to you, I, Paul, who I'm timid when face to face with you, but bold when I'm away. There's a kind of timidity, that's maybe not a physical thing, but I think it went alongside a kind of, maybe an unimpressiveness about what he looked like. And maybe part of that was because of an illness or a disease or some kind of a malarial illness that he had.

We're told in Galatians, when he went to Galatia that he, because of an illness that I preached the gospel to you, even though that illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or with scorn, you know?

[ 8 : 42 ] So you wouldn't normally treat people who are ill with contempt or with scorn, unless maybe it's a particularly repulsive physical illness, which might have caused such a reaction.

But anyway, whatever it was, maybe it was an unsightly illness, but it was a thorn in the flesh. The Greeks would have been, the Greeks in Corinth would have been very unimpressed with a leader, with a leader of the church, with an apostle who was not a strong physical specimen, who was not perfect as it were, because they placed so much emphasis on physical perfection.

And even today, you know, maybe Paul wouldn't make much of a good senior pastor. He certainly wouldn't be on the conference speaking rounds. He's not an uber Christian. He wouldn't be someone that we all look up to and say, well, this is a great example of a Christian. He's such a kind of weak and miserly and poor guy.

So he had this thorn in the flesh and we're told in the passage that he pleads, three times he pleads for it to be taken from him. Maybe reflecting Christ's own pleading and Gethsemane for the cup to be taken from him.

It's a torment to him. He doesn't want it. It's an unwelcome trial. It's a real test of his faith and he wants it removed.

[10:06] And that's where I hope that we plug into where we might be tested in our own faith and where we might question God's love. You could imagine Paul's prayer, can't you? God, I'm the apostle of the Gentiles. I'm going all over that.

I've got churches all over the Middle East. I need to serve them. And you know, I need to have them to think that I'm blessed and favoured by God.

I don't need this illness. I don't need this weakness. Take it away from me. Do you really love me? Do you care about it? Do you care? I'm perishing here. And we can imagine his prayers. And what is God's answer?

What's God's answer to this? Take away my illness or take away this weakness? Take away this opposition? God says in Jesus Christ, no. Three times. No. Plus. It's no plus, isn't it?

It's no plus this amazing revelation of verse 8, which we, as Christians, can trip off our tongues, especially to people who are struggling.

[11:17] Ah, it's okay. You know what Jesus is? My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in your weakness. And we can trip off our tongues and yet not recognise the absolute depth and the power of what God was saying to Paul here.

This greatest of all promises that has been so powerful and so comforting in the lives, particularly of people with faith who are struggling and who are opposed and who are weak and who are ill and who are in tragic circumstances.

Jesus says no plus this promise. What's He saying to Paul? He's saying, Paul, I love you. My grace is sufficient for you. He says, my grace has been gifted. Paul, I love you.

Paul, I love you. I've transformed you and you've experienced my love and you've tasted of that love and you've been into paradise. You know these things.

My grace is enough for you. I love you. I love you, Paul. That's God saying that. It's the sovereign of the universe saying to Paul, we, Paul, who's weak and poor, He's saying, I love you.

[12:31] I love you. But then He also says, Paul, I've worked to do in you. And Paul recognises that because in verse 70 says to keep me from being conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations that was given me a thorn in my side.

So he sees that God had a work to do that there was pride within Him or latent there that would likely come out to the surface if He wasn't giving this thorn in the flesh.

Because hey, I've been to paradise. And you can imagine how that would become a reason for pride within Him. Particularly when He was battling against other false teachers in Corinth.

God recognised that conceit was potentially welling up within Him. And so this thorn in the flesh had a reason to keep Him dependent and humble and close to Jesus Christ.

And even more than that, it was because this is the principle by which God chooses to work in us. That He says, you know, my grace is sufficient. My power is made perfect in weakness.

[13:49] And then Paul goes on to say, for when I am weak, then I am strong. So there's a principle there, isn't it? That God says, I will showcase my power in your weakness.

Notice He doesn't say I will showcase my power despite your weakness. He doesn't say that. It's not, oh, you're pathetic and poor, but I'll still show my power through you.

He actually says, it's in your weakness that my power will be perfected, will be made perfect, will be strong. It's the only way that I can really work is when you recognise that you need my power and you need my grace and you need my love. And sometimes, naturally, we struggle with that concept. And so sometimes God brings into our lives thorns in our flesh or difficulties that throw us onto God for help. See, if our life is a long string of parties, then we will not find that our faith grows and develops because we are self-reliant and contented in that.

But we find this amazing principle at work that as our faith is tested, however that faith is tested in a myriad of different ways, then as we come to God with that, as we cry out to God, then we find that it's in, not despite our weakness, but in that weakness that the power of God is perfect.

[15:28] So that Paul, having recognised that, comes to this amazing conclusion or amazing experience. He boasts in his weakness. Fantastic, you know, that he actually says that, therefore, I will boast more gladly in my weaknesses.

How counter-cultural is that? It's not that Paul has this kind of fatalism about his life. He doesn't have this ridiculous kind of resigned fate. He doesn't write the epistle and say, well, I'm bearing up.

I'm bearing up through the trials. It's harsh, but I'm keeping going with that kind of highland stoicism that we have.

But he is rejoicing because, and we can see that oozing through all his epistles, that joy and that peace. He's no cold stoic, but as he is emptied of that self-reliance and that pride and conceit that wells up within us, which says, okay, I can do it in my own strength. Don't need God. And a wrong view of God that goes with that, then we find that he's changed completely and he can rejoice. When was the last time that you heard a preacher boasting in their weakness? Or Christian leaders, or Christians in the congregation, boasting and rejoicing in their weakness and in that sense of dependence? Amazing.

So we have that case study. So briefly, as we draw it into our own lives a bit more, can I look at faith and our faith?

[17:14] And if you haven't got faith in Jesus Christ, I hope you'll be challenged by the description of faith that is given here. Faith under the spotlight. And can I reject one or two faith lies, I think?

One is the lie that comes from a kind of false idea of our own characters. We say, well, God can never use me because I'm so weak. I'm such a poor Christian. I've got such weak faith.

And he'll never use me. You know, treating God like some chief executive officer who's looking for the best, looking for the cream, looking for the most gifted and say, well, I don't have any of these gifts. I'll be no use to God. I'm just hopeless.

And so we somehow think God will treat us in that way and reject us because we don't have a worldly confidence, maybe. It's a lie from this truth. Also, when we think, well, God can't love me because I've got cancer, God can't love me because my parents have rejected me or because my best friend has died in youth or because my family are going through such hardship.

Now, please don't think I'm belittling any of these circumstances in any way. These are genuinely faith stretching experiences, whatever they might be.

[18:45] But please don't say God doesn't love me or alongside that say, well, it must be because I'm a rubbish Christian or because I have weak faith that God is allowing me to experience these things.

And it's my fault. What kind of love has He? What kind of love is it that would allow me to experience these things? I wouldn't let any of my children go through any suffering unnecessarily.

Why does God seem to do that? He can't love me. I think that's a faith lie that we need to nail.

But on the other side of that, neither should we say, I should look for suffering as if somehow suffering earns favour with God. Kind of a false asceticism. Poverty is a virtue.

Oh, I'm going to suffer because well, I'll get my reward in heaven if I'm suffering now. The parallel isn't that. And that's not what the Bible says. It's not that we look for suffering or go for suffering.

Paul didn't look. He pleaded for it to be removed.

[19:51] He wasn't ascetic. He wasn't someone who just denied himself things and suffered somehow in the sense that it would bring him closer to God.

Not as can we ever say that our weakness is excused if it's sinful. And say, oh, it's okay just to be weak and sinful because well, God will look after us and forgive us.

But Paul in Romans 6, he nails that particular argument, shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase our abound? No way. So we don't carry on sinning and with a sinful weakness in order somehow to receive more grace.

That's not the formula, as it were, of God's grace. But let's embrace some faith truths that we find in this passage and generally from God's word.

One is our faith rests on a crucified and risen Saviour. So we find that same, in a sense that same, both paradox and parallel.

[21:06] Galatians 2,20, I've been crucified with Christ. I no longer live but Christ lives in me. And we have that in chapter 13 of the same of the letter that we've been reading in verse 4 where he says, For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness.

Yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him. Yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you. So there's a parallel between our weakness and what Jesus did on the cross and the perceived weakness of a nailed man to a cross.

Despised foolishness, ignorance, a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to Greeks. This wasn't the kind of Saviour they wanted. Maybe it's not the kind of Saviour you want.

You want a big, showy Saviour, an intellectual giant who's going to look so appealing to everyone. And yet here we have the Gospel that moulds itself in a weak Saviour, at least a weak Saviour to the world.

A nailed, crucified, humbled, emptied Saviour who dies on the cross in her place. And yet in the power of God is raised. And it's through his death that we see his salvation and his grace and his glory and evil being defeated.

[ 22 : 31 ] As it were, at evil's zenith, at its greatest point where all the power of evil was ranged in its strength against God to defeat this inherited, the Son, to get the inheritance.

We find it's turned on its head and used to be most glorifying to God in our salvation. And in the same way, weakness which, as we see, God allows Satan to bring into our lives, Satan to destroy our faith, is turned on its head by God for our victory.

And so even what is bad becomes used for our good and for God's glory. And that is the model of a faith.

Strength in vulnerability. You can never be, and I can never be a Christian if we are proud and independent. And if we just have God bow down to us, as it were, our servant, our slave.

We come to him in weakness. We come to him in need. We come to him as sinners. We come to him as proud and look for his strength to be perfected in our weakness.

[ 23 : 48 ] Not an excuse for it. So we see our faith reflects as crucified and risen Savior. But our faith will always be. And if you're a Christian, and if I'm a Christian, we need to recognise this really important.

Our faith will be refined by Christ. It's His gift. It comes from Him in the first place. He's perfecting it, and He will refine it in our lives. Perfection or maturity is the process we're going through. And very often the biggest battle to maturity spiritually is pride.

Very often that is the root sin that keeps us from growing in grace, from bending our knee, from praying, from serving, from being obedient, from loving Him.

And so Jesus is saying, you know, your humility in Christ, recognising your true place as created gloriously in relation with the Father, to recognise that humbly is more important than your comfort, than your pleasure, than your freedom from pain and opposition.

Now that's really strong and really challenging stuff. Because so often we see people, and we're tempted ourselves, say, well, I don't see much value in being a Christian.

[ 25 : 10 ] I don't see His love really affecting me positively. I see nothing but trust. And how often have you met people who've become Christians, who've had a relatively easy life up to that point? And the moment they become Christians, their life gets just overwhelmed with trouble and difficulty. And you think, well, why do you do that, God?

What's the point of that? And they question the whole nature of faith and the nature of God's love. And it's never easy, but we find His refining process at work in our lives. If our lives were plain sailing, if it was all victory, if it was all pleasure, if it was all ease, would we be relying on God? Would we love Him? Would we serve Him? Would we be dependent? Probably not. Because the tendency for us is to go our own way.

So that Christ even uses Satan as a loud into our experience. And bad things are allowed to draw us closer to Him.

So that even the evil is sanctified and used by God. It's temporary. It's never random. It's never loveless. But it uniquely will display His power in our lives.

Because people will look on and say, how do they still love Jesus Christ when they are experiencing A, B or C in their lives?

[ 26 : 43 ] And lastly, and very briefly, as we see faith, we see not only is that God refines our faith in this way, but our genuine faith will be, at the same time, reliant on Christ.

Great example here of Paul as he is reliant on Christ. See Paul is a thorn in the flesh. What does he do with that? He leads to the Lord for it to be taken away.

That's a great example of reliant faith. He doesn't just stokely accept it at that level. He tells God what He wants. Lord, I want rid of this. I don't want this trial. I don't want this illness. I don't want this trouble. I don't want this torment in my life.

He's absolutely human. He's like you and me. He wants rid of these things. But you know the great example is that he goes to God with it. He goes to a Savior, to Him. And that's where we go in our troubles, in our trials, in our difficulties, and in our let downs, and in our grief, and in our confusion,

in our trouble, and our lack of understanding.

We take it to Him and we plead with God for what we want. But at the same time, we listen for what He says. He may well answer our prayers.

[ 28 : 03 ] He may well take away our thorn in the flesh. Or He may say, no, plus. He may say, no, but listen, I love you. I love you. I've expressed that love.

My arms splayed open and nailed to a tree. I love you. And I'm loving you right through to the end, to perfection. And I will go on loving you. And no one in the world loves you more. But I'm using this because there's still work to be done in you.

And I'm using this because it reflects and reveals my power most. Not despite you. Please don't think I'm working despite you. I'm working in you and through you.

Because I love you. And that is the great truth of the Gospel. And that is the faith that drives us to Christ. Do you have and do you share? And can you experience and know any of these battles and struggles and realities of a loving faith?

It's very radical, really, for us, so that we get to the point where as we understand that by His grace and power, we too can rejoice.

[ 29 : 27 ] I'm not sure I've got to that stage yet. I don't know about you. But we look to God. 1 Peter 1 and 6 says, in this, again, this is not just Paul.

Peter, in this, I greatly rejoice. Though now for a little time, while you may have had to suffer griefs in all kinds of trial, these have come so that your faith of greater worth and gold may be proved genuine.

So Paul and Peter recognized, he saw that too, and was able to greatly rejoice. Not because of sufferings, not somehow because we earn anything through suffering.

That's not the case at all. I must re-emphasize that. But we rejoice, even though we want rid of these things in our lives, we rejoice in however God answers us.

And that can't be manufactured. I can't manufacture in myself or in anyone else that sense of rejoicing in weakness. It's entirely counter-cultural.

[ 30 : 33 ] It's a spiritual reality where we see that evil has been defeated. Even the bad things that happen are not happening for our destruction, but for our spiritual good.

And that our sins are forgiven and be taken from us, for God's glory, for our good. So that when our faith is tested, which undoubtedly will be, when we struggle with opposition or with terrible illness, or with unemployment or with inexplicable experiences which don't reflect blessing which we think we should have in Christ.

Let's not just be stoic. Let's not just say, oh, I'm bearing up. Let's not just survive but grumble our way through it.

But let us rejoice that God is perfecting His power in us, and that will be reflected in how we love and how we serve Him.

It's a great challenge to us, certainly a great challenge to me. This evening we hope to look in a completely different way at faith, looking at it to be shared.

[ 31 : 45 ] I want to use lots of different examples from the Bible and not say terribly much about each one, but then on Wednesday evening spend some time discussing what we've looked at in terms of sharing our faith.

And I hope also if you have questions about faith being tested that we can discuss them on Wednesday evening at our time when we're together for prayer and consideration of these things. Let's bow our heads together in prayer. Heavenly Father, we ask that we would understand a little bit more by Your grace and with the Holy Spirit's power and enlightenment as to the nature of Your love which is uniquely different because it's perfect and because it works perfection in us because we are not used to that.

Lord, remind us that You are right and good. And as we look through the finished work of the crucified and risen, scented Saviour, remind us that You indeed do love us.

We pray that we would not abandon or reject or make our understanding of that love really shallow and Hollywood-esque, but rather that we would see its spiritual uniqueness and its divine bearing.

[ 33 : 14 ] Bless each of us today and bless all those who worship with us for the first time. We rejoice and thank you for them. And we pray Your blessing on them and on us in Jesus' name. Amen.