

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL

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Worship Series: *Uncovered*

**Service Theme: *Definitions Uncovered: Blessings Are Cursed;
Curses Are Blessed***

**Sermon Theme: *Navigating Culture Shock (February 13, 2022)
2 Corinthians 12:7b-10***

In the summer of 2012, 4 friends and I went backpacking through Europe, from Sweden down to Italy. It was an amazing trip, with so many memories--and sermon illustrations--made! But early on, I had to navigate through culture shock-- that disorienting feeling you get when encountering an unfamiliar culture.

For instance, in Sweden, you have to pay to use the public toilets. And when you get pizza, the most popular kind isn't pepperoni, but curry, banana, and ham. And in summer, it doesn't get dark until about midnight, and the sun rises again around 3AM. Being in a foreign country can feel like being in a different world, because so much is different from what you're used to, what you'd expect, or what you'd prefer.

But Adam helped me navigate that culture shock. Adam was my classmate from high school and college. He married a Swedish girl and moved to Sweden, so he served as our de facto guide there. Since he'd lived in both countries, he helped us understand that culture, and even helped us appreciate the differences. Except the pay toilets, I never appreciated those.

Having someone explain the differences is key to **Navigating Culture Shock**. Friends, that's what I want to do for you this morning. Not the culture shock from being in a foreign country, but from living in a different kingdom—the Kingdom of God!

As God's Word reminds us, our lives as citizens of the kingdom of God won't always be what you'd expect, what you're used to, or what you'd prefer. But if we can understand those differences, we can even

come to appreciate them! One big difference is how the world and God define things. As our service theme points out, that's especially true for two words: **Blessed** and **Cursed**.

How the world defines those words is fairly obvious. A person is blessed when everything goes according to plan. When they and their family are happy and healthy and possess everything they want. Lives like that cause people to gratuitously use the infamous “#blessed” on their social media accounts. But I've never seen someone post that they lost their job, or their savings, or their house, or their health, or their relationship and close it out with “#blessed.” Because hardships and difficulties fit much better with the world's definition of what it means to be “cursed.”

To be cursed means your life is full of seemingly negative things. Nothing goes according to plan. Your body seems to be falling apart. Your relationships are a mess. After a long string of heartbreaks, health complications, or hardships, someone might even say, “I think I'm cursed.”

But God defines those words differently. The Apostle Paul helps us to understand those differences today. The Apostle Paul was one of the most important missionaries and influential leaders in the early Christian church, faithfully preaching the good news of Jesus, and planting Christian churches all over the world. On top of that, he wrote more of the divinely-inspired books of the Bible than any other author. And if that wasn't impressive enough, just before our sermon text in 2 Corinthians 12, Paul reveals that God had given him a unique glimpse of heaven, allowing him to hear and experience ***“inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.”*** Talk about a life filled with countless blessings!

But then Paul tells us something that sounds a lot more cursed than blessed. ***“Therefore...I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.”*** This “thorn in the flesh” as Paul describes it was no minor annoyance. The Greek word translated “torment” means to be continually struck with fists. Or picture it like waves continually slamming against a ship caught in a hurricane. As Paul says, it was a

“messenger of Satan.” What message do you think Satan was trying to get through to Paul? “Use this thorn as a reason to stop doing missionary work, or maybe even as a reason to question God’s love and goodness!”

Whatever Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was, it was a debilitating and unrelenting hardship. Not exactly something that makes you say, “I’m so blessed!” And so Paul takes this hardship to the Lord in prayer! **“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.”**

Certainly, for a faithful, richly blessed Gospel servant like Paul, God would immediately take away this thorn, right?

But although Paul pleaded with God to take his thorn away, God says no. So, according to the world’s definitions of blessed and cursed, we’d have to assume that Paul was cursed, not blessed. If God allowed such a terrible thing to afflict Paul, and refused to take it away, God must have been angry with him, had stopped loving him, or had cursed him! Most religions since the dawn of time have assumed that if something bad happened to someone, it was because the gods were angry, and were exacting vengeance on that person for some wrong they’d done. Even those today who aren’t “religious” generally navigate life with a karma-heavy mindset: bad things should happen to bad people who do bad things, and good things should happen to good people who do good things.

And that’s why Christians experience culture shock from living in the kingdom of God. According to the world’s definitions, blessed Christians should only experience good things, right? So, when we suffer or face hardship, we’re tempted to either assume God’s not being fair to us, or to be overwhelmed with guilt and despair, because we assume God is cursing us for some terrible thing we’ve done. Things are not what we’d expect or prefer!

But that’s why, in order to navigate the culture shock, we need a guide to explain the differences to us. God’s definitions of what it means to be blessed or cursed are very different from the world’s. That means God’s refusal to remove Paul’s thorn wasn’t a curse, but a blessing. As God explained, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made**

perfect in weakness.” Paul understood why God didn’t remove the thorn, so much so, that he repeats the thought twice in the Greek. **“In order to keep me from becoming conceited.”** Therefore, what the world calls cursed, God calls blessed, in keeping with his definitions of those words. As the prophet Jeremiah defines, **“Cursed is the one who trusts in man...and whose heart turns away from the LORD”** and **“Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him.”**

God allowed Paul to struggle with suffering and weakness to ensure that Paul would remain blessed according to God’s definition—that he would continue trusting in the LORD. Without it, Paul could have easily become conceited, trusting in his own power and abilities instead of trusting in God—cursed, according to God’s definition!

That’s how we navigate the culture shock of Christian suffering. In God’s kingdom, God takes even the curse of pain and suffering and turns them into blessings for his people.

That gives us a beautiful working definition of what it means to be truly blessed. Not the absence of difficulty, hardship, or suffering. But the ability to endure and be joyful, even in the middle of difficulty, hardship, or suffering because you trust in God’s power, control, promises, and love.

As God promised Paul, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** And when God says “sufficient,” he doesn’t mean “good enough to get by.” The Greek word means “leading to complete satisfaction.” With trust in God’s grace and power, Paul could be completely satisfied, even with the thorn in the flesh still tormenting. Like a tree planted by the stream doesn’t have to fear when heat or drought comes, because it’s connected to its source of life.

And when the “heat” comes in our lives, we don’t have to be afraid either. We can be completely satisfied, because God’s grace is sufficient! Because our weaknesses are opportunities for God’s power

to be put on full display; opportunities for God's power to accomplish his ultimate goals for us.

We know he'll keep that promise, because in Jesus, we see the ultimate example of how God redefines curses and blessings. Jesus, the only perfect person, the only one who deserved nothing but perfect blessings suffered the ultimate curse of hell in our place. Through the all-powerful God suffering ultimate weakness—through Jesus suffering the curse of hell on the tree of the cross, we who deserve nothing but to be cursed eternally receive the greatest blessing of eternal life!

Jesus' curse led to the ultimate blessing. Paul's thorn was an opportunity for him to trust in God—to be blessed! And so are yours. What's interesting about this text is that Paul never tells us what his thorn in the flesh was. It's likely that the Corinthians he wrote to didn't know either. And I think that's the point. Because God didn't inspire Paul to tell us what the thorn was, that means every single one of us can plug ourselves and the “thorns” in our lives into this account too!

Whatever your thorn or thorns in the flesh are—whatever weakness, struggle, or hardship that you've repeatedly asked God to take away, but he hasn't—Addiction. Depression. Anxiety. Infertility. Health problems. Loss. Financial difficulty. Fill in the blank for your life. God is using that which the world would call cursed... to be a blessing for your soul. An opportunity to trust in him. An opportunity for his power to shine through in your life.

Although the culture shock of suffering often leads us to panic, rely on our own strength, or rely on other things or people for joy, we don't need to! Because no matter what thorns we face, God's grace is sufficient for us! ***When we are weak, he is strong!***

I heard a fellow pastor describe life this way. Imagine two people on board the same plane. One is terrified of flying, and the other is perfectly at peace with flying. During the flight, the one passenger is an absolute trainwreck. Each bit of turbulence just about sends him over the edge. And the other passenger closes his eyes, and sleeps

peacefully until the plane touches down. Which of the two reached their destination? Well, obviously, they both did, because whether the people were confident in him or not, the pilot did his job faithfully. But which of the two had the more enjoyable flight?

Our pilot is always perfectly in control. He will absolutely safely lead us to our final destination. But how much better will our lives be if, even when difficulty and hardship rises up, we rest safely and confidently in him? Blessed are you, when you trust in the LORD! No matter what spiritual culture shock you have to navigate, trust in the one who turns curses into blessings; the one who bore the ultimate curse, for your eternal blessing.