

APRIL 2024



Bible Study | Faith in Action

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## Prepare

- Bible
- Journal
- Pen/pencil

## Get Started

The book of 2 Corinthians is Paul's answer to people in the church at Corinth who questioned his authority as an apostle. I can just hear them arguing, "If he were a *real* church leader, wouldn't God deliver him from his struggles?" And why didn't God grant Paul this petition? Wouldn't it have legitimized his ministry? But Paul learned, and shared with the believers in Corinth, foundational revelations about God through his hardships.

## Study and Learn

### Read 2 Corinthians 12:7b–9.

When I recently restudied the familiar story of Jesus feeding the 5,000, I was overwhelmed anew by God's care for the needs of people. Of course, He can provide bread—He created wheat. Yes, He can restore bodies and minds—He made them. He is the all-powerful One. Our heavenly Father can do anything!

So, then, why does God sometimes answer our prayers with no or wait? Why does He invite us to pray yet allow trouble to come our way? And why is continuing to pray in these times important?

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul explained the outcome of one of his prayers God answered with no. In verse 7, he said God allowed him to experience a "thorn" in his life—a great difficulty. It remained to prevent him from becoming prideful. Paul came to understand that the side effect of his suffering—humility—was more important to God than Paul's perfect health and strength. Anything Paul could have accomplished without this hindrance did not compare with what the hindrance produced *inside* him.

In verse 8, Paul said he prayed "three times" for God to remove the thorn, demonstrating how he consistently and faithfully brought his petition before God. In many other places in Scripture, we see Paul was committed to asking God for help—for himself, his coworkers, the churches he served, and people who didn't know Christ. Prayer was Paul's first and ongoing response to any challenge. It is the model and mandate of Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets.

In verse 9, Paul shared what God revealed to him about his weakness: that God's grace and power would be on display through it. God assured Paul his limitations would not keep God from working. God's grace would strengthen Paul and would bring people to Christ. God's grace in Jesus Christ, not our competency, is still what calls people to salvation.



When our lives are about getting our way, the end goal of our prayer is an attempt to modify God's behavior. We pray, "God, remove this hardship. I don't deserve it." But God's purpose in prayer is not personal insistence. It is for us to come to know Him more and to be conformed to His will. Then your prayer may become like Christ's, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

Ultimately, to be faithful in prayer, we must trust that God is faithful to us. He always hears His children. God loves us so deeply that He carefully filters what trials and triumphs will shape us into the likeness of His Son. Do you believe that, regardless of circumstances, God is responding to your requests and stewarding your life?

## Apply

Walking through disappointing circumstances is difficult, especially when the suffering lingers for years. Reminding ourselves of God's promises in Scripture guards our hearts against fear and feelings of abandonment. Second Corinthians 12:7b–9 encourages us that asking God to deliver us from trials is appropriate. And asking the Holy Spirit to show us the Father's compassionate purpose for suffering is also fitting (James 5:11).

## Follow Up

As you think about being faithful in prayer this month, search Scripture to answer these questions:

1. Do you believe God invites us to ask anything of Him? Why does God want us to come to Him with our requests? Write out John 14:13 and Hebrews 4:16.
2. Do you interpret a no or wait answer as a failure on His part—a failure to love you well, to understand, or to be holy or good? Talk with God and a trusted friend about any bitterness or doubt that prayer not answered according to your desire has brought in your life.
3. How could a prayer God answers with no help you honor Him?

## Commit to Memory

Verses: **2 Corinthians 12:9**

Challenge: **Philippians 4:6–7**

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**KRISTEN WHITE** enjoys time with her husband, parents, and four adult children and their growing families. She writes for local, state, and national periodicals and curriculum products.

# Faith in Action | Showing Biblical Hospitality to Unchurched Friends

By Alison Howell

The word *hospitality* is often associated with spotless homes and finely set tables. However, biblical hospitality is more about a person's heart than his or her home. First Peter 4:9 says, "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling." So, what does opening our doors and our hearts to our unchurched friends look like, and what can it do to further God's kingdom?

Here are a few tips for practicing biblical hospitality with unchurched friends you know:

## Extend an Invitation

Pray about and discuss who you will invite into your home. Consider unchurched people within your sphere of influence, such as a family whose child plays on the same sports team as yours or a coworker who is in your same stage of life. Invite them over for a simple meal. If they are busy and cannot attend, don't be discouraged. Invite them again.

## Prepare for the Meal

Plan the food you will serve, keeping in mind the meal doesn't have to be fancy. Biblical hospitality is more about conversation that happens around the table than it is about cuisine. Most importantly, pray God would bless the dinner with meaningful conversations and deepened relationships.

## Engage, Don't Just Entertain

Put your guests at ease when they arrive by giving them a small task. Invite adult guests to help you make final preparations in the kitchen or keep an eye on the grill. Set out age-appropriate toys for children, such as a board game or building blocks. Begin the meal with prayer, intentionally thanking God for the food and the person or family who has joined you. During dinner, don't be afraid to ask questions that take the conversation deeper, such as "What do you think about church?" Be sure to listen carefully and respond graciously without feeling the need to correct or offer a complete gospel presentation.

## Follow Up

Send a text or note the next day to thank your guests for joining you. If you learned of any needs during your dinner conversation, consider ways you could meet them, such as offering to carpool or pick up mail. Finally, as you feel led, invite the person or family to attend church with you.

Many people who may not feel comfortable coming to church would gladly accept an invitation to dinner. And that dinner may be the very thing God uses to open doors for intentional conversation and eventually an invitation to church.

**ALISON HOWELL** and her family founded Promised Ministries to encourage families to answer God's call to missions after Alison's daughter felt God calling her to help the people of Haiti.