

GRACE IN HUMAN WEAKNESS: A THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7–10

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a theological exegesis of 2 Corinthians 12:7–10, addressing the persistent ambiguity surrounding the "thorn in the flesh" and the frequent domestication of Paul's paradoxical conclusion, "when I am weak, then I am strong." Employing narrative-rhetorical criticism integrated with theological hermeneutics, the analysis examines the grammatical features, rhetorical function within Paul's defense of apostleship, and the theological dialectic between grace, power, and weakness. The findings demonstrate that the passage functions not as mere autobiographical consolation but as a paradigmatic argument redefining apostolic authority and divine power. The study critiques both prosperity-oriented readings that promise deliverance from affliction and passive theologies that romanticize suffering. The novelty lies in proposing the Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework, a contextual model positioning divine grace not as compensation for frailty but as the medium through which God's power is manifested and apostolic identity constituted. This framework offers a hermeneutical lens for empowered vulnerability, with direct implications for pastoral practice, spiritual formation, and Christian leadership. The contribution addresses gaps in existing scholarship by integrating grammatical, rhetorical, and theological analyses, moving beyond individualistic readings to establish the passage as foundational for a theology of suffering and grace in contemporary ministry contexts.

Keywords: 2 Corinthians 12; thorn in the flesh; grace and weakness; apostolic authority; theological exegesis

INTRODUCTION

The apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians contains what is arguably the most provocative articulation of divine enablement in the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 12:7–10, Paul discloses a private revelation of heavenly ascent, only to pivot abruptly to a chronic affliction he calls a "thorn in the flesh" (*skolops te sarki*). The passage concludes with a paradox that has generated two millennia of commentary: "when I am weak, then I am strong." This study offers a theological exegesis of these verses, attending to the grammatical, rhetorical, and theological dimensions of Paul's argument. The central thesis is that the passage does not function merely as autobiographical consolation but as a paradigmatic theological argument that redefines apostolic authority and the

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nature of divine power. The study proposes a contextual model, the Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework, which synthesizes exegetical findings with contemporary theological reflection on suffering, power, and spiritual formation.

The interpretive problem is twofold. First, the precise referent of the "thorn in the flesh" remains ambiguous. Scholarly proposals range from recurring malaria and ophthalmia to psychological distress and opposition from rival apostles. This ambiguity has produced a proliferation of speculative readings that often obscure the rhetorical function of the metaphor within Paul's larger defense of his apostleship. Second, the theological implications of Paul's conclusion are frequently domesticated. In some charismatic and prosperity-oriented traditions, the passage is read as a promise of supernatural deliverance from affliction, neglecting Paul's explicit declaration that he will "boast all the more gladly" in his weaknesses. In other contexts, the passage is misread as a passive endorsement of suffering as inherently redemptive, thereby silencing legitimate cries for justice and healing. A rigorous exegetical study that recovers the original rhetorical force and theological depth of the passage is therefore urgently needed.

The urgency of this study is heightened by the contemporary misuse of the passage in pastoral and homiletical settings. The prosperity gospel, in particular, has weaponized selective readings of Pauline texts to argue that sickness and weakness are always contrary to God's will. Conversely, some theologies of the cross have tended to romanticize suffering, failing to distinguish between redemptive participation in Christ's sufferings and the unjust affliction that ought to be resisted. A careful exegetical study that situates the passage within its literary, rhetorical, and theological contexts can correct these imbalances and provide a sound biblical foundation for a theology of suffering and grace.

Despite the substantial body of literature on 2 Corinthians 10–13, several gaps persist. First, many studies focus narrowly on the identity of the thorn, often at the expense of a sustained analysis of its rhetorical function within the so-called "Fool's Speech" (*periautologia*). Second, the theological relationship between the "surpassingly great revelations" (*hyperbole ton apokalypseon*) in verse 7 and the "sufficient grace" in verse 9 is frequently underdeveloped. Third, the passage's potential as a paradigm for understanding apostolic authority and community formation is often overshadowed by individualistic readings that reduce the text to a private devotional comfort. This study addresses these gaps by offering a holistic exegesis that integrates grammatical, rhetorical, and theological analyses, and by proposing a contextual framework for contemporary application.

The novelty of this study lies in its proposal of the Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework. This framework moves beyond a simple binary of strength and weakness to articulate a dynamic, relational model where divine grace is not merely a compensation for human frailty but the very medium through which God's power is made manifest and apostolic identity is constituted. The framework is not a mere synthesis of existing theories; rather, it offers a new hermeneutical lens

that repositions the passage as a foundational text for a theology of empowered vulnerability, with direct implications for pastoral practice, spiritual formation, and the understanding of Christian leadership. This is particularly relevant in contexts where church leaders are expected to project strength and invulnerability, often at the cost of authenticity and pastoral effectiveness.

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a rigorous theological exegesis of 2 Corinthians 12:7–10. The specific aims are fourfold: to analyze the grammatical and syntactical features of the text, including the semantic range of key terms such as *skolops* and *astheneia*; to examine the rhetorical function of the passage within the context of Paul's defense of his apostleship; to articulate the theological dialectic between grace, power, and weakness; and to propose a contextual framework for applying the passage's insights to contemporary Christian life and ministry.

The theoretical framework for this study integrates historical-critical exegesis with theological interpretation. The primary lens is narrative-rhetorical criticism, which views the Pauline letters not merely as repositories of doctrinal propositions but as persuasive communications embedded within specific social and rhetorical situations. This approach, championed by scholars such as Ben Witherington III and Margaret M. Mitchell, emphasizes the need to trace the flow of Paul's argument and to identify his rhetorical strategies. Additionally, the study draws upon the theological hermeneutics of Karl Barth, particularly his emphasis on the Word of God as an event of divine address that confronts and transforms human understanding. This framework allows for an analysis that is both historically grounded and theologically engaged.

A purely historical-critical approach, while essential for establishing the text's original meaning, often falls short of addressing its contemporary theological significance. The quest for the "original" meaning can lead to a form of antiquarianism that divorces the text from its ongoing life in the community of faith. Conversely, a purely theological or devotional reading that ignores the historical and literary context risks eisegesis, reading modern concerns into the ancient text. This study critiques both extremes, arguing for a "critical theology" that maintains a dialectical tension between historical distance and theological relevance. The goal is not to choose between the two but to allow the historical and literary analysis to inform and constrain theological reflection, while allowing theological questions to guide the exegetical inquiry.

A significant academic debate revolves around the identity of the "thorn in the flesh." The major interpretive options include a physical ailment, a psychological or spiritual affliction, and a reference to a specific person or group of opponents. Scholars such as Ralph P. Martin have argued for a physical ailment, citing Paul's reference to his "bodily presence" being weak in 2 Corinthians 10:10. Others, such as Victor Paul Furnish, are more cautious, suggesting that the term is deliberately vague and that its function is more important than its precise referent. This debate is not merely academic; the interpretation chosen significantly affects the passage's application. If the thorn is a physical ailment, the passage speaks directly to issues of health and healing. If it is

opposition, it speaks to the reality of spiritual warfare and conflict in ministry. Recent scholarship has also explored the metaphor of the thorn in relation to the crown of thorns, drawing connections between Paul's affliction and the passion of Christ (Hiramatsu, 2022).

A related research tension exists between the "apocalyptic" reading of the passage and a more "pastoral" reading. The apocalyptic reading, associated with scholars such as J. Louis Martyn, emphasizes the cosmic conflict between the ages and sees Paul's weakness as a sign of the cross breaking into the present age. The pastoral reading, often found in homiletical and devotional literature, focuses on the personal comfort and strength that God provides in times of individual trial. This tension is not necessarily a contradiction, but it highlights different dimensions of the text. The apocalyptic reading grounds the passage in the grand narrative of redemption, while the pastoral reading applies it to the specific circumstances of the believer. This study seeks to hold these two dimensions in tension, arguing that the personal comfort Paul experiences is a direct result of the apocalyptic reality of Christ's power being made perfect in weakness.

Within the scholarly literature, there are contradictory findings regarding the purpose of the thorn. Some scholars argue that the thorn was given to prevent Paul from becoming conceited, thus serving a primarily pedagogical or disciplinary function. This view emphasizes human pride as the central problem. Other scholars, however, argue that the thorn's purpose is more revelatory, serving to demonstrate the sufficiency of God's grace and to redefine the very nature of power. In this view, the thorn is not merely a corrective but a vehicle for a deeper revelation of God's character. These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive, but they represent different emphases. The former focuses on the negative purpose of preventing pride, while the latter focuses on the positive purpose of revealing grace. This study argues that the latter is the more prominent theme in the immediate context, as Paul's response is not merely to endure the thorn but to boast in it. Recent theological reflection has also engaged the passage in dialogue with contemporary psychotherapies, exploring the "perfection in weakness paradox" as a resource for resilience and acceptance (Yoon, 2026). Similarly, the passage has been examined in relation to Luther's theology of strength in weakness, highlighting its ongoing relevance for Protestant theological reflection (White, 2026).

The literature review reveals a persistent gap between detailed exegetical studies and practical theological application. While scholars have thoroughly analyzed the grammar, rhetoric, and historical context of the passage, there is a need for a more deliberate and systematic bridge to contemporary issues. Many commentaries conclude with brief devotional reflections, but few offer a robust, theologically grounded framework for understanding how the grace-weakness dialectic can shape Christian identity, community life, and ministry practice in diverse cultural contexts. This study addresses this gap by proposing the Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework as a transferable model for contextual theological reflection. The framework is designed to be applicable across cultural and denominational boundaries, offering a hermeneutical tool for pastors, theologians, and lay leaders who seek to interpret the passage faithfully in their own contexts.

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This study positions itself within the mainstream of critical biblical scholarship while maintaining a commitment to the theological significance of the text. It affirms the value of historical-critical methods but insists that the ultimate goal of exegesis is not merely historical reconstruction but theological understanding and edification. The study is therefore an exercise in "faith seeking understanding," engaging the text with both academic rigor and spiritual sensitivity. It stands in the tradition of scholars who seek to bridge the gap between the academy and the church, believing that the biblical text has the power to speak afresh to each generation. The study acknowledges its limitation as a text-based inquiry without empirical fieldwork, yet it provides a transferable hermeneutical model for contextual theological application. Future research could extend this framework through empirical studies of how pastors and congregations in various cultural contexts interpret and apply the passage in their own practices of suffering, care, and leadership.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 is vast, yet it remains fractured along methodological and theological lines. A review of this scholarship reveals not a cumulative progression toward consensus but a series of persistent debates, unresolved tensions, and contradictory findings that shape the interpretive landscape. This section maps that terrain, critiques the dominant theoretical approaches, and identifies the specific gap this study addresses.

Theoretical Framework: Between Historical Criticism and Theological Hermeneutics

The dominant theoretical approach to 2 Corinthians in modern scholarship has been historical-critical, with particular emphasis on the rhetorical situation of the letter. The work of scholars such as Ralph P. Martin and Margaret M. Mitchell established the framework for reading chapters 10–13 as a coherent rhetorical unit, often described as Paul's "Fool's Speech" (*periautologia*), in which the apostle ironically boasts of his weaknesses to counter the claims of rival apostles (Martin, 2014; Mitchell, 1991). This approach treats the passage not as a detached theological treatise but as a persuasive argument embedded in a specific social conflict. The strength of this framework lies in its ability to explain the function of the passage within Paul's broader defense of his apostolic authority.

However, a purely historical-rhetorical approach has significant limitations. It tends to reduce the text to a strategic maneuver in a local dispute, thereby obscuring its enduring theological claims. The passage is more than a rhetorical counterpunch; it articulates a vision of divine power that fundamentally redefines human agency. Conversely, a purely theological or devotional reading, which treats the text as a timeless source of comfort, risks eisegesis by ignoring the first-century context that shaped its formulation. The challenge, as Karl Barth insisted, is to read the text as a living word that addresses the present while remaining anchored in its historical particularity (Barth, 1956). This study adopts a framework that holds these two dimensions in tension, integrating

grammatical-historical exegesis with theological reflection. The goal is not to choose between historical reconstruction and theological relevance but to allow each to discipline the other.

Research Gap: The Need for a Synthetic Framework

Yulianto's Pauline and biblical-expository writings provide an important Indonesian theological context for this discussion. His chapter-by-chapter treatments of *Galatians*, *Ephesians*, and *Philippians*, *Romans*, *Colossians* and *Thessalonians*, *Mark*, and *John* consistently relate textual exposition to justification, sanctification, perseverance, and Christian formation (Yulianto, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019, n.d.-a). Although these volumes are not narrowly focused on 2 Corinthians 12:7–10, they establish the broader canonical grammar within which weakness must be interpreted: believers receive a new identity through union with Christ, are formed by the Spirit, and learn obedience within suffering rather than through exemption from it. The same christological foundation is developed more systematically in *Christology*, where Christ's person, self-emptying, redemptive work, exaltation, and divinity provide the doctrinal basis for understanding power through cruciform self-giving rather than worldly domination (Yulianto, 2026h).

The theme of suffering becomes explicit across Yulianto's pastoral-theological books. *Would You Heal Me, Lord?* holds divine sovereignty, unanswered prayer, waiting, sustaining peace, providence, and final restoration together, while *When the Storms of Life Strike* interprets tribulation, fear, faith, loss, and restoration through the presence and faithfulness of God (Yulianto, 2026i, 2026b). *Courage to Live* broadens this pastoral field to physical, emotional, existential, moral, relational, spiritual, economic, and bereavement-related suffering (Yulianto, 2026f). *Emotional Healing* and *The Role of the Counselor in Inner Healing according to the Biblical Perspective* further show that divine grace should neither deny psychological wounds nor romanticize pain; healing requires truthful self-examination, Scripture, forgiveness, empathetic accompaniment, prayer, communal gifts, and responsible biblical counseling (Yulianto, 2026g, 2026n). These works reinforce the present study's rejection of both prosperity-oriented triumphalism and passive glorification of suffering.

Several other writings sharpen the doctrinal dimensions of the grace-weakness dialectic. *Prosperity Theology* critiques the reduction of blessing to wealth and bodily success by placing suffering, discipleship, stewardship, and eternal treasure within the biblical account of flourishing (Yulianto & Rinawati, 2026). *Hamartiology* situates human brokenness within rebellion, divine wrath, discipline, judgment, atonement, justice, and grace, whereas *The Fractured Imago Dei* traces the distortion and restoration of human identity through Christ, adoption, renewed thinking, and ecclesial belonging (Yulianto, 2026c, 2026e). *Spiritual Warfare* adds the reality of demonic opposition while emphasizing justification, repentance, Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and spiritual disciplines rather than sensationalistic accounts of power (Yulianto, 2026m). *Having the Mind of Christ* and *Wisdom, Understanding, Knowledge, Intelligence, and Prudence* similarly interpret

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transformation as renewed thinking, humility, holiness, love, freedom from anxiety, discernment, and Spirit-enabled wisdom (Yulianto, 2026j, 2026d). Together, these works locate weakness within a larger theology of sin, sanctification, spiritual conflict, and restored personhood.

Yulianto's devotional and practical works extend the discussion into ordinary Christian formation. *The Beatitudes* presents kingdom blessedness through poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, hunger for righteousness, mercy, purity, peacemaking, and faithful endurance under persecution (Yulianto, 2026r). *Success without Losing God* resists achievement-centered identity by subordinating reputation, integrity, vocation, wealth, and public witness to God's kingdom (Yulianto, 2026q). *Parenting* applies biblical formation to parental example, discipline, communication, the fruit of the Spirit, digital restraint, and intergenerational faith transmission, while *Knowing Personality Colors in the Light of Christian Faith* signals an effort to relate personal difference to Christian self-understanding (Yulianto, 2026l, n.d.-b). These studies are relevant because Paul's boasting in weakness is not merely an individual coping mechanism; it reshapes leadership, family life, communal relationships, and the criteria by which Christian maturity is assessed.

Yulianto's recent journal research further develops these interdisciplinary and contextual implications. His study of daily renewal in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18 proposes that Christian resilience emerges through the tension between the wasting outer self and the renewed inner self, an eschatological revaluation of affliction, and communal participation (Yulianto, 2026p). This argument is the closest direct precursor to the present study, but it addresses 2 Corinthians 4 rather than the unanswered plea and sufficient grace of 12:7–10. His work on righteous suffering in Job resists retributive and single-cause explanations by integrating divine sovereignty, satanic agency, epistemic limitation, and transformative encounter (Yulianto & Wibowo, 2026). Related collaborative studies examine secret prayer, cross-bearing, and self-denial as sources of transformative spirituality; gospel contextualization among the Dani people; biblical responses to silo mentality in church leadership; sociology of religion in dialogue with dogmatic theology; Christian parenting in the digital era; and character formation through Christian education (Manihuruk et al., 2025; Tedjo et al., 2022; Senjaya et al., 2022; Prayitno & Yulianto, 2024; Halawa et al., 2024; Hariyanto & Yulianto, 2026). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that grace is embodied through prayer, mission, collaboration, education, family formation, and contextually responsible ministry.

Finally, Yulianto's work at the intersection of theology, education, and emerging technology broadens the anthropological significance of weakness. The Generational Discipleship Integration Framework joins catechesis, community, and digital-cultural context in the formation of Generation Z (Yulianto, 2026k). His studies of artificial intelligence in computer-science education advocate theory-informed adoption, pedagogical accountability, privacy, and preservation of learner autonomy, while a related collaborative study highlights personalization and predictive intervention

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alongside algorithmic bias and curricular risks (Yulianto, 2026a; Yulianto et al., 2026). His posthuman theological anthropology proposes a Relational-Embodied-Enacted model of the *imago Dei*, challenging the reduction of personhood to cognitive performance and reaffirming embodied, covenantal, and vocational human uniqueness (Yulianto, 2026o). Although these studies move beyond Pauline exegesis, they strengthen the present article's critique of performance-based accounts of human worth and power: neither apostolic authority nor human dignity is grounded in invulnerability, efficiency, or autonomous capacity.

Theoretical Critique: The Limits of the Identity Quest

A substantial portion of the scholarly literature is preoccupied with identifying the "thorn in the flesh" (skolops te sarki). The major interpretive options include a physical ailment, such as recurring malaria, epilepsy, or an eye condition; a psychological or spiritual affliction, such as persistent temptation or a demonic assault; and a reference to a specific person or group of opponents who harassed Paul's ministry. Ralph P. Martin, for instance, argues for a physical ailment, citing Paul's admission that his "bodily presence" was weak and his speech contemptible (2 Cor. 10:10) (Martin, 2014). In a more recent contribution, Hiramatsu (2022) draws a suggestive parallel between the crown of thorns worn by Christ and Paul's thorn, arguing that both signify a participation in Christ's suffering for the sake of the outcast. This reading moves beyond the purely biographical question to a theological one, linking Paul's affliction to the pattern of Christ's humiliation.

Despite the ingenuity of these proposals, the quest for the thorn's precise identity has reached an impasse. The text itself is deliberately vague, and the Greek term skolops can denote anything from a splinter to a stake. Victor Paul Furnish (1984) has argued persuasively that the ambiguity is intentional; the function of the thorn in Paul's argument is more important than its referent. This study concurs. The relentless focus on identification has often diverted attention from the rhetorical and theological work the thorn performs in the passage. The thorn is not merely a biographical detail to be decoded; it is a rhetorical device that enables Paul to redefine the very nature of apostolic power. The interpretive energy spent on identifying the thorn might be better directed toward understanding why Paul leaves it unnamed and how its ambiguity serves his argument.

Academic Debate: The Purpose of the Thorn

A second major debate concerns the purpose of the thorn. The text states that it was given to prevent Paul from becoming conceited "because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations" (v. 7). This has led many interpreters to emphasize the pedagogical or disciplinary function of the affliction. In this view, the thorn is a divine corrective, a check on human pride. The emphasis falls on Paul's

need for humility. This reading has deep roots in the tradition and continues to inform pastoral applications that interpret suffering as a means of character formation.

A contrasting view, however, argues that the thorn's purpose is not merely negative but revelatory. The affliction serves not only to humble Paul but to create the condition for a deeper disclosure of God's grace. In this reading, the thorn is not simply a problem to be solved but a vehicle for revelation. The divine response to Paul's prayer, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9), is not a consolation prize but a theological revelation that redefines the relationship between divine power and human frailty. This view has been articulated most forcefully in recent scholarship by White (2026), who examines Luther's interpretation of the passage and argues that the "strength in weakness" motif functions not merely as a pastoral comfort but as an ontological claim about the nature of God's presence in the world. The debate, then, is between a primarily ethical reading (the thorn humbles Paul) and a primarily theological reading (the thorn reveals grace). These are not mutually exclusive, but they represent different emphases with different pastoral implications.

Research Tension: Apocalyptic and Pastoral Readings

A related tension exists between what might be called the apocalyptic and the pastoral readings of the passage. The apocalyptic reading, associated with scholars such as J. Louis Martyn, situates Paul's weakness within the cosmic conflict between the present age and the age to come. In this framework, Paul's affliction is a sign of the cross breaking into the present age, a manifestation of the power of the resurrection operating through the weakness of the crucified Messiah. The thorn is not merely a personal trial but a cosmic event that participates in the in-breaking of God's new creation.

The pastoral reading, by contrast, focuses on the individual believer's experience of suffering and the comfort that God provides. This reading is prominent in homiletical and devotional literature, where the passage is often used to assure the afflicted that God's grace is sufficient for their particular trials. The tension between these two readings is not necessarily a contradiction, but it highlights different dimensions of the text. The apocalyptic reading grounds the passage in the grand narrative of redemption, while the pastoral reading applies it to the specific circumstances of the believer. This study argues that these two dimensions must be held together. The personal comfort Paul experiences is not a private consolation but a direct result of the apocalyptic reality that Christ's power is made perfect in weakness. The pastoral application is only possible because of the cosmic claim.

Contradictory Findings: The Nature of Divine Power

The scholarly literature also contains contradictory findings regarding the nature of divine power as it is manifested in weakness. Some interpreters emphasize the sufficiency of grace as a form of

divine compensation. In this view, God supplies what the human being lacks; grace fills the gap left by human frailty. The emphasis is on God's provision in the face of human lack. This reading has been influential in pastoral contexts, where it offers assurance that God will provide strength for every trial.

Other interpreters, however, argue that the passage makes a more radical claim. Divine power is not merely a supplement to human weakness; it is constituted by that weakness. The power of God is not revealed despite weakness but in and through it. This reading, which has gained traction in recent theological scholarship, suggests that weakness is not an obstacle to be overcome but the very medium through which divine power operates. Yoon (2026) has recently explored this "Perfection in Weakness Paradox" in dialogue with third-wave psychotherapies, suggesting that the Pauline formulation resonates with contemporary understandings of acceptance and commitment. While this interdisciplinary engagement is promising, it risks domesticating the theological claim into a psychological principle. The contradictory findings in the literature reflect a deeper theological disagreement about the relationship between divine power and human agency.

Research Gap: The Need for a Synthetic Framework

The literature review reveals a persistent gap between detailed exegetical studies and practical theological application. While scholars have thoroughly analyzed the grammar, rhetoric, and historical context of the passage, there is a need for a more deliberate and systematic bridge to contemporary issues. Many commentaries conclude with brief devotional reflections, but few offer a robust, theologically grounded framework for understanding how the "Grace-Weakness Dialectic" can shape Christian identity, community life, and ministry practice in diverse cultural contexts. The recent work of Tamba, Sinaga, and Sinambela (2025) on shepherding as a manifestation of God's grace, and of Dwiraharjo and Young (2025) on new creation and life transformation in Christ, suggests a growing interest in connecting Pauline theology to practical ministry, but neither addresses the specific dynamic of 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 in a sustained way.

Furthermore, the existing literature often treats the passage in isolation from its broader literary context. The "Grace-Weakness Dialectic" is not confined to verses 7–10; it is anticipated in Paul's earlier reflections on apostolic suffering (2 Cor. 4:7–12; 6:4–10) and culminates in his paradoxical boast, "when I am weak, then I am strong" (12:10). A synthetic framework is needed that traces this theme across the letter and articulates its implications for a theology of empowered vulnerability. This study addresses this gap by proposing the "Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework," a transferable model for contextual theological reflection that moves beyond the binary of strength and weakness to articulate a dynamic, relational understanding of divine grace as the medium through which God's power is made manifest.

Research Position

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This study positions itself within the mainstream of critical biblical scholarship while maintaining a commitment to the theological significance of the text. It affirms the value of historical-critical methods but insists that the ultimate goal of exegesis is not merely historical reconstruction but theological understanding and edification. The study is therefore an exercise in "faith seeking understanding," engaging the text with both academic rigor and spiritual sensitivity. It stands in the tradition of scholars who seek to bridge the gap between the academy and the church, believing that the biblical text has the power to speak afresh to each generation. The proposed framework is offered not as a final word but as a contribution to an ongoing conversation about the meaning of grace and weakness in the Christian life.

METHODS

The Method section for this study is structured around a qualitative, library-based research design, as the inquiry is fundamentally exegetical and text-driven. The nature of the primary data, which consists of the Greek text of 2 Corinthians and a body of secondary theological literature, precludes the use of empirical instruments such as surveys or interviews. Consequently, the methodological framework is designed to ensure rigor, transparency, and reproducibility within the parameters of documentary research.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a library-based or documentary method. The approach is not a simple literature review but a structured exegetical investigation. The research design is organized into three integrated phases: textual analysis, rhetorical and narrative criticism, and theological synthesis. The first phase involves a detailed grammatical-historical analysis of 2 Corinthians 12:7–10. This includes an examination of the syntax, the semantic range of key lexical terms, and the immediate literary context within the larger "Fool's Speech" of 2 Corinthians 10–13. The second phase employs rhetorical criticism to trace the persuasive function of the passage, analyzing how Paul constructs his argument to defend his apostolic authority. The third phase integrates these findings into a theological synthesis, culminating in the proposal of the "Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework." This phased design allows for a systematic movement from the details of the text to its broader theological implications.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

As a text-based study, the "data" are the textual witnesses and scholarly interpretations. The primary source is the Novum Testamentum Graece (NA28) text of 2 Corinthians, with a focused analysis on 12:7–10. The secondary sources were selected based on three criteria: scholarly rigor, relevance to the passage, and representation of diverse interpretive perspectives. The selection includes peer-reviewed journal articles and academic monographs that engage with the passage from historical-critical, rhetorical, and theological vantage points. This includes works that address the "thorn in the

flesh" debate (HIRAMATSU, 2022), the theological function of "strength in weakness" (White, 2026), and the integration of the passage with contemporary psychological frameworks (Yoon, 2026). The selection process was purposive, aiming to build a comprehensive conversation with the existing scholarship rather than to achieve statistical representativeness.

Analytical Procedures

The analytical procedures are qualitative and interpretive, following the principles of exegetical analysis. The first procedure is a close reading of the Greek text. This involves a syntactical analysis of verses 7–10, paying attention to the function of conjunctions (*dio*, *kai*), the tense and mood of verbs (e.g., the perfect tense of *eirēken* in v. 9), and the case of key nouns. The semantic analysis focuses on the term *skolops* (thorn), tracing its usage in classical and Hellenistic Greek literature to establish its semantic range. The second procedure is a rhetorical analysis, which identifies the passage's place within the broader argument of chapters 10–13. This involves mapping the rhetorical structure, identifying the use of irony and boasting (*kauchēsis*), and assessing how the passage functions as a *peripeteia* or reversal in Paul's defense. The third procedure is a theological synthesis, which moves from the exegetical details to articulate the relationship between grace, power, and weakness. This synthesis is not imposed on the text but is derived from the textual and rhetorical analysis.

Coding and Thematic Analysis

While this is not an empirical qualitative study with interview data, a form of thematic analysis is applied to the secondary literature to map the scholarly conversation. This process involved a systematic review of the selected sources to identify recurring themes and interpretive categories. The initial coding was open, identifying units of meaning such as "identity of the thorn," "purpose of the thorn," "nature of grace," and "definition of power." These codes were then grouped into broader axial themes, such as "pedagogical vs. revelatory purpose" and "apocalyptic vs. pastoral readings." This thematic mapping was not used to quantify the literature but to clarify the structure of the academic debate and to identify the precise points of tension and gap that this study addresses. The outcome of this analysis is a conceptual map that positions this study's contribution within the existing landscape of scholarship.

The "Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework"

The central methodological output of this study is the development of the "Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework." This framework is not a pre-existing model that is applied to the text; rather, it is an inductive construct that emerges from the exegetical analysis. The framework is developed in three stages. First, the exegetical analysis establishes the textual basis for the dialectic, showing that Paul does not present weakness and strength as a simple binary but as a paradoxical unity. Second, the rhetorical analysis demonstrates how this dialectic functions as a persuasive strategy to

redefine apostolic authority. Third, the theological synthesis articulates the framework's components: the "thorn" as a catalyst for divine encounter, "grace" as the sufficient power of God, and "weakness" as the locus of that power's manifestation. The framework is proposed as a transferable hermeneutical model, intended to be tested and contextualized in various pastoral and theological settings.

Limitations of the Method

The primary limitation of this method is its text-based nature. The study does not include empirical fieldwork, such as interviews with pastors or congregants, which could provide data on how the passage is currently interpreted and applied in specific contexts. Consequently, the proposed framework is a hermeneutical proposal grounded in textual analysis, not an empirically validated model. The study does not claim to offer quantitative evidence for the framework's effectiveness. This limitation is acknowledged to maintain scholarly integrity and to delineate the scope of the study's claims. The transferability of the framework is argued on theological and exegetical grounds, but its contextual application would require further empirical research in specific settings.

FIGURE 1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

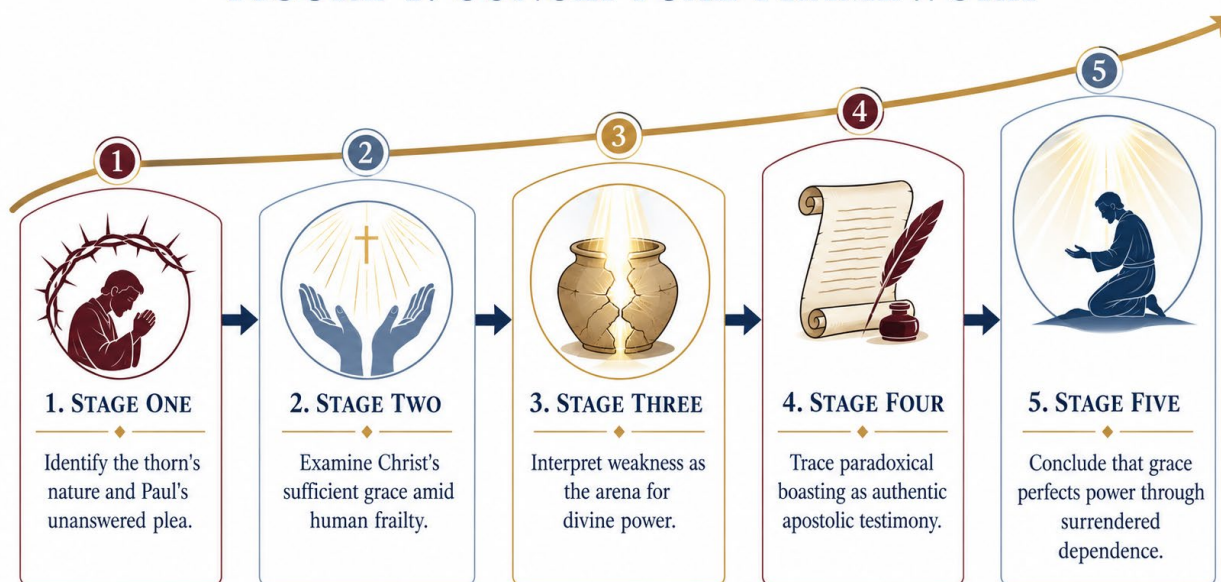


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents a five-stage conceptual framework for interpreting Paul's "thorn in the flesh" and the theology of divine grace in 2 Corinthians 12:7–10. The framework begins by identifying the nature of the thorn and Paul's unanswered plea for its removal, then examines Christ's sufficient grace amid human frailty. It subsequently interprets weakness as the arena in which divine power becomes most evident and traces Paul's paradoxical boasting in weakness as an authentic

expression of apostolic testimony. Finally, the framework concludes that God's grace perfects divine power through surrendered dependence, demonstrating that human limitation is not an obstacle to ministry but a means through which Christ's power is revealed.

TABLE 1. INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK

Aspect	Analytical Focus	Contribution
Aspect 1: Textual and Literary Context	Examination of the immediate literary structure of 2 Corinthians 10–13, the rhetorical function of the "fool's speech" (<i>periautologia</i>), and the placement of the thorn passage within Paul's broader apologetic narrative.	Establishes that verses 7–10 function not as a detached autobiographical aside but as the climactic resolution of Paul's paradoxical boasting in weakness, thereby grounding the exegesis in the epistle's overarching rhetorical strategy.
Aspect 2: The Nature of the "Thorn" (<i>skolops</i>)	Semantic analysis of <i>σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί</i> , including its usage in the LXX and Hellenistic literature, alongside a survey of historical interpretations (physical ailment, demonic opposition, psychological distress, or persistent persecution).	Synthesizes lexical evidence to argue that the term's ambiguity is itself theologically significant, as Paul deliberately withholds specificity to universalize the experience of divinely permitted affliction.
Aspect 3: The Sufficiency of Grace (<i>hē charis mou arkei</i>)	Theological analysis of the divine declaration in verse 9, focusing on the present-tense "sufficiency" (<i>ἄρκει</i>) and its relation to Pauline grace theology (e.g., Rom 5:20–21; 2 Cor 8:9).	Proposes that grace is not merely pardon or empowerment but the very mode of divine presence that redefines the ontology of weakness, transforming it from a condition to be removed into a locus of Christ's indwelling power.
Aspect 4: Power in Weakness (<i>dynamis en astheneia</i>)	Exegetical examination of the paradox "when I am weak, then I am strong" (<i>ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατός εἰμι</i>), including its grammatical force (conditional-temporal clause) and its resonance with the theology of the cross (1 Cor 1:18–25).	Argues that Paul redefines <i>δύναμις</i> christologically: true power is not the negation of weakness but the divine capacity that perfects (<i>τελειῖται</i>) itself within it, thereby inverting Greco-Roman ideals of self-sufficiency.
Aspect 5: The Apostolic Vocation and Pastoral Application	Investigation of how Paul's "boasting in weakness" functions as a paradigm for apostolic ministry and, by	Demonstrates that the pericope establishes a vocational ethos wherein leadership legitimacy is

	extension, for communal ecclesial life, including the role of prayer (v. 8) and contentment (v. 10).	grounded in transparent vulnerability, making grace visible through the minister's own insufficiency.
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Table 1 presents an integrative framework for interpreting 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 within Paul's broader defense of his apostolic ministry. First, the literary context of 2 Corinthians 10–13 shows that the thorn passage serves as the climax of Paul's paradoxical "boasting in weakness." Second, the ambiguity of the "thorn in the flesh" (*skolops tē sarki*) allows it to represent various forms of divinely permitted suffering rather than one specific affliction. Third, Christ's declaration, "My grace is sufficient for you," reveals grace not merely as forgiveness or assistance but as the sustaining presence of God amid human frailty. Fourth, Paul's claim that divine power is perfected in weakness redefines strength according to the theology of the cross, challenging Greco-Roman ideals of independence and self-sufficiency. Finally, this theological paradox shapes an apostolic and pastoral model in which prayer, contentment, surrendered dependence, and transparent vulnerability become marks of authentic Christian leadership, enabling Christ's power to be visibly manifested through human insufficiency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The exegetical analysis of 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 yields several interconnected findings that require careful theological interpretation. This section presents the results of the grammatical-historical and rhetorical analysis, followed by a discussion that integrates these findings with contemporary theological reflection. The discussion is organized around three central themes: the semantic and rhetorical function of the thorn, the dialectic of grace and power, and the redefinition of apostolic authority. Each theme is examined in light of the scholarly literature and assessed for its implications for contemporary Christian life and ministry.

The Grammatical and Semantic Analysis of the Thorn

The phrase *skolops te sarki*, commonly translated as "thorn in the flesh," presents a significant interpretive challenge. The term *skolops* appears only here in the Pauline corpus and is rare in the broader New Testament. Its semantic range includes a pointed stake, a splinter, or a thorn, and it is frequently used in the Septuagint to denote instruments of punishment or sources of persistent irritation. In Numbers 33:55, for example, the *skolopes* are described as those who will trouble Israel if the inhabitants of the land are not driven out. This background suggests that Paul's use of the term carries connotations of divine discipline and persistent opposition, rather than a merely incidental discomfort. The qualifying phrase *te sarki*, "for the flesh," indicates that the thorn is located in the realm of physical or embodied existence, though this does not necessarily restrict it to a purely somatic ailment. The angel of Satan who torments Paul, *angelos Satana*, further complicates the referent, introducing a spiritual or demonic dimension that resists a purely medical

reading. The ambiguity is likely intentional. Paul does not specify the nature of the thorn because its function, rather than its identity, is what matters for his argument. This finding aligns with the cautious position of scholars who argue that the deliberate vagueness of the term serves a rhetorical purpose, directing the reader's attention away from the specific affliction and toward the divine response (White, 2026).

The immediate context of the passage strengthens this interpretation. In verse 7, Paul states that the thorn was given to prevent him from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, *te hyperbole ton apokalypseon*. The term *hyperbole*, from which the English "hyperbole" derives, denotes an exceeding or surpassing quality. Paul's use of this term is striking. He does not merely say that he received revelations; he says they were surpassing in their greatness. This hyperbolic language sets the stage for the paradox that follows. The very thing that might have elevated Paul above others, his visionary experience, becomes the occasion for his humiliation. The thorn is thus not a punishment for sin or a sign of divine displeasure, but a protective measure, a divinely appointed check on human pride. This reading is consistent with the pedagogical interpretation of the thorn, which emphasizes its role in preventing conceit. However, the passage moves beyond this negative function. The thorn is not merely a restraint; it becomes the site of divine revelation. Paul's threefold prayer for its removal is met not with deliverance but with a promise: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9). The answer to Paul's prayer is not the removal of the affliction but the revelation of a new understanding of divine power.

The Rhetorical Function of the Passage within the Fool's Speech

The passage must be understood within the broader context of Paul's so-called "Fool's Speech" in 2 Corinthians 11–12. In this section, Paul engages in a form of ironic self-commendation, boasting in his weaknesses rather than his achievements. The rhetorical strategy is complex. Paul adopts the persona of a fool in order to expose the folly of his opponents, who boast in their credentials and accomplishments. His own boasting, however, is subversive. He boasts in his hardships, his imprisonments, his beatings, and his constant anxiety for the churches. The passage in 12:7–10 represents the climax of this strategy. Paul's refusal to identify the thorn, his threefold prayer for its removal, and his eventual acceptance of it as a means of experiencing Christ's power all serve to redefine the very nature of apostolic authority. Authority, in Paul's argument, is not derived from impressive credentials or successful ministry, but from a profound identification with the crucified Christ. This rhetorical function has been noted by scholars who emphasize the persuasive intent of the passage. Paul is not simply sharing a personal testimony; he is constructing an argument that undermines the criteria by which his opponents evaluate apostolic legitimacy (McBain, 2022).

The rhetorical force of the passage is further enhanced by its structure. The threefold repetition of Paul's prayer, the direct divine response, and the concluding aphorism, "When I am weak, then I am

strong," create a memorable and persuasive unit. The aphorism functions as a summary of the entire argument, encapsulating the paradoxical relationship between weakness and strength. It is not a statement of resignation or passive endurance, but a declaration of a new reality. The power of Christ, which is made perfect in weakness, is not a compensation for human frailty but its transformation. This transformation is not a removal of the weakness but a redefinition of its significance. The weakness remains, but it is now understood as the very condition for the manifestation of divine power. This reading challenges both the triumphalist interpretation, which sees the passage as a promise of supernatural deliverance, and the ascetic interpretation, which sees it as an endorsement of suffering as inherently valuable. The passage instead offers a third way: weakness is not to be sought for its own sake, nor is it to be escaped at all costs, but it is to be embraced as the locus of divine encounter.

The Dialectic of Grace and Power

The divine response to Paul's prayer, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness," introduces a theological dialectic that is central to the passage. The term *charis*, grace, is a key Pauline concept, denoting the unmerited favor of God. In this context, however, grace is not merely forgiveness or acceptance; it is the enabling power of God that sustains and empowers the believer. The adjective *arkei*, "is sufficient," indicates that this grace is adequate for every circumstance. It is not a partial or occasional provision but a complete and continuous supply. The second clause, "for my power is made perfect in weakness," explains the nature of this sufficiency. The verb *teleitai*, "is made perfect," carries the sense of being brought to completion or fulfillment. Divine power, *dynamis*, reaches its full expression not in spite of human weakness but precisely through it. This is a radical redefinition of power. Power is not the absence of weakness but its transformation. The weakness becomes the medium through which divine power is manifested.

This dialectic has significant implications for understanding the nature of God's interaction with humanity. It suggests that God does not simply work around human limitations but works through them. The divine power is not a substitute for human effort but a presence that infuses and transforms human frailty. This understanding challenges the common assumption that divine power and human weakness are mutually exclusive. Instead, they are dialectically related. The weakness is not eliminated but is taken up into the divine purpose and given new meaning. This is not a form of masochism or a glorification of suffering, but a recognition that human limitations are the very place where God's grace can be most clearly seen. The passage thus offers a profound theological anthropology. Human beings are not autonomous agents who achieve greatness through their own strength, nor are they passive recipients of divine favor. They are participants in a divine drama in which their weakness becomes the stage for the revelation of God's power. This understanding has been explored in recent scholarship that connects the passage to third-wave psychotherapies, which emphasize acceptance and commitment rather than the elimination of suffering (Yoon, 2026).

The redefinition of power in this passage also has implications for understanding Christian leadership. Paul's apostolic authority is not based on his impressive credentials or his successful ministry, but on his identification with the crucified Christ. His weakness is not a liability to be hidden but a credential to be embraced. This is a counter-cultural vision of leadership that challenges the prevailing models of power and success. The leader is not the one who is strongest or most capable, but the one who is most transparent about their limitations and most dependent on divine grace. This vision of leadership is particularly relevant in contemporary contexts where Christian leaders are often expected to project an image of strength and success. The passage offers an alternative model, one that is grounded in vulnerability and dependence on God. This model has been explored in the context of pastoral ministry, where the recognition of one's own weakness can be a source of authenticity and connection with those who are suffering (Tamba, 2025).

The Redefinition of Apostolic Authority

The passage concludes with Paul's declaration, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me" (v. 9). The verb *kauchaomai*, "to boast," is used throughout the Fool's Speech, but here it takes on a new meaning. Paul does not boast in his achievements but in his weaknesses. This is not a form of false humility or a rhetorical ploy, but a genuine expression of his theological conviction. The weakness is not something to be endured but something to be embraced, because it is the means by which Christ's power is manifested. The phrase "so that Christ's power may rest on me" indicates the purpose of Paul's boasting. The verb *episkeinose*, "may rest," carries the connotation of a tent or tabernacle dwelling. The image is of the divine presence taking up residence in the midst of human weakness. This is a powerful image of incarnation. The power of Christ is not an external force that descends upon Paul but an indwelling presence that transforms him from within.

This redefinition of apostolic authority has profound implications for the life of the church. The church is not a community of the strong but a community of the weak, who are empowered by the presence of Christ. The apostle is not a heroic figure but a vulnerable witness, whose weakness is the very means by which the gospel is proclaimed. This understanding challenges the tendency to equate apostolic authority with institutional power or personal charisma. Instead, authority is grounded in faithfulness to the crucified Christ and in the willingness to embrace weakness as the locus of divine power. This is a counter-cultural vision that has the potential to transform the church's understanding of leadership, ministry, and mission. The passage thus offers a robust theological foundation for a theology of suffering and grace that is both personally comforting and communally formative.

The Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework

The exegetical findings of this study can be synthesized into a contextual model for contemporary theological reflection. The proposed "Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework" is not a simple binary

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of strength and weakness, but a dynamic, relational model that articulates the interplay between divine grace and human frailty. The framework consists of three interconnected dimensions. The first dimension is the recognition of weakness. This involves an honest acknowledgment of human limitations, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. The second dimension is the reception of grace. This involves a posture of dependence on God, trusting that divine grace is sufficient for every circumstance. The third dimension is the manifestation of power. This involves the transformation of weakness into a site of divine encounter, where the power of Christ is made manifest. These three dimensions are not sequential but cyclical. The recognition of weakness leads to the reception of grace, which in turn leads to the manifestation of power, which deepens the recognition of weakness, and so on.

The framework is transferable to diverse cultural contexts. In contexts of suffering and persecution, it offers a theological foundation for endurance and hope. In contexts of prosperity and success, it challenges the temptation to rely on human strength and offers a vision of leadership grounded in vulnerability. In contexts of pastoral care, it provides a framework for accompanying those who are suffering, not by offering easy answers but by entering into their weakness and pointing to the sufficiency of divine grace. The framework is not a prescriptive model but a hermeneutical lens that can be adapted to specific situations. It is an invitation to see weakness not as a problem to be solved but as a mystery to be entered into, a place where the power of Christ can be experienced in new and transformative ways.

Limitations of the Study

This study is a text-based inquiry that does not include empirical fieldwork. The findings are derived from a careful analysis of the biblical text and the scholarly literature, but they have not been tested in the context of lived Christian experience. The proposed framework is therefore a theological construct that requires further refinement and validation through practical application. The study also acknowledges the inherent limitations of any exegetical enterprise. The meaning of the text is not fixed but is shaped by the interpretive community and the questions that are brought to it. This study has approached the text from a particular theological perspective, and other perspectives may yield different insights. The ambiguity of the thorn, in particular, remains unresolved, and the interpretation offered here is one of several possible readings. Despite these limitations, the study offers a robust theological analysis that has the potential to inform and enrich contemporary reflection on suffering, grace, and power.

CONCLUSION

The exegetical analysis of 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 reveals a passage of profound theological depth. The thorn in the flesh, whatever its precise referent, functions as the occasion for a revelation of divine grace that redefines the nature of power and authority. The passage challenges both triumphalist and ascetic readings, offering instead a dialectical understanding of weakness as the

locus of divine power. The proposed Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework provides a transferable model for contextual theological reflection, with implications for pastoral care, spiritual formation, and Christian leadership. The study acknowledges its limitations as a text-based inquiry but offers a hermeneutical lens that can be adapted to diverse contexts. The passage remains a powerful witness to the paradoxical truth that divine strength is perfected in human weakness.

NOVELTY

The novelty of this study resides not in the mere synthesis of existing exegetical positions but in the construction of a new hermeneutical model designated the "Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework." This framework is proposed as a corrective to the interpretive fragmentation that has characterized much of the scholarly conversation surrounding 2 Corinthians 12:7–10. Previous studies have tended to compartmentalize the passage into discrete exegetical problems, most notably the identity of the thorn, the rhetorical function of the Fool's Speech, and the theological relationship between revelation and suffering. While these inquiries have yielded valuable insights, they have often failed to integrate the passage's constituent elements into a coherent theological whole. The Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework addresses this deficiency by repositioning the passage as a unified argument in which divine grace and human weakness are not antithetical poles but mutually constitutive realities within the economy of God's redemptive action.

The framework advances beyond the conventional binary of strength and weakness that has dominated both popular piety and academic commentary. Traditional readings have frequently understood the passage as a divine exchange: God supplies grace as compensation for human frailty, and the believer's weakness becomes the occasion for divine intervention. The Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework, by contrast, argues that Paul's formulation in verse 9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness," establishes a more radical theological claim. Grace is not merely a resource that meets the believer at the point of need; it is the very medium through which divine power becomes operative in human experience. Weakness, in this construal, is not simply the absence of strength but the condition of receptivity that allows divine power to manifest itself authentically. This dialectical relationship, the framework contends, constitutes the very structure of apostolic identity and, by extension, Christian existence.

The novelty of this proposal lies in its integration of three exegetical insights that have been insufficiently correlated in the existing literature. First, the framework foregrounds the rhetorical function of the "surpassingly great revelations" (*hyperbolē tōn apokalypseōn*) in verse 7 as the necessary backdrop for understanding the thorn. The thorn is not an isolated affliction but a divinely appointed counterweight to the revelatory experience, preventing the apostle from construing his visionary encounters as grounds for self-exaltation. Second, the framework emphasizes the performative character of Paul's boast in verse 9. Paul's declaration that he will "boast all the more gladly" in his weaknesses is not a resigned acceptance of unavoidable hardship but a deliberate

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rhetorical strategy that subverts the Corinthian valuation of power and eloquence. Third, the framework connects the passage to the broader Pauline theology of the cross, in which divine power is paradoxically revealed through weakness and suffering. The Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework thus offers a reading that is simultaneously exegetically rigorous and theologically constructive.

The framework also introduces a contextual dimension that distinguishes it from purely historical-critical treatments. While the passage is rooted in the specific circumstances of Paul's conflict with the Corinthian community, the framework proposes that the dialectic of grace and weakness constitutes a transferable hermeneutical model for contemporary theological reflection. This model is not offered as a universal template that disregards cultural particularity but as a heuristic device that can be adapted to diverse contexts of suffering, ministry, and spiritual formation. In this respect, the framework resonates with recent scholarship that has explored the intersection of Pauline theology and contemporary pastoral practice, particularly in contexts of affliction and marginalization. The framework's emphasis on empowered vulnerability offers a constructive alternative both to prosperity-oriented readings that deny the legitimacy of Christian suffering and to passive resignation that fails to recognize the transformative potential of grace.

The Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework is therefore not an integration of existing theories but a new interpretive construct that repositions the passage as a foundational text for a theology of empowered vulnerability. It offers a coherent account of how divine grace operates not despite human weakness but through it, and it articulates a vision of Christian leadership that is grounded not in the assertion of power but in the embrace of dependence upon God. This constitutes the study's principal contribution to the field and its point of departure for the exegetical analysis that follows.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study, while offering a sustained theological exegesis of 2 Corinthians 12:7–10, is not without its constraints. The most significant limitation is its methodological dependence on textual and literary analysis. As a library-based inquiry, it does not incorporate empirical fieldwork, interviews, or survey data. Consequently, the proposed Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework remains a hermeneutical construct awaiting validation through practical application in congregational and pastoral settings. The study does not claim to have measured the framework's effectiveness in shaping spiritual formation, pastoral care outcomes, or leadership practices; such claims would require empirical testing beyond the scope of this exegetical project. Similarly, the absence of quantitative data means that no statistical generalizations can be drawn regarding how contemporary readers or faith communities actually interpret or apply this passage. The study's conclusions are therefore offered as theological proposals rather than empirically verified findings.

A further limitation concerns the inherent ambiguity of the biblical text itself. The identity of the skolops remains unresolved, and while this study has argued that its rhetorical function outweighs its precise referent, this interpretive stance may not satisfy readers seeking a definitive answer. The study also operates within a particular theological tradition, namely Protestant evangelical hermeneutics, which inevitably shapes the reading of grace, power, and suffering. Readers from other traditions, such as Orthodox, Catholic, or Pentecostal frameworks, may arrive at different emphases. The study acknowledges this perspectival limitation and does not presume to offer a universally exhaustive interpretation.

The research also did not engage in a comparative analysis of how the Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework might function across diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts. For instance, the experience of weakness in contexts of systemic poverty, chronic illness, or political persecution may differ qualitatively from the Pauline experience of apostolic affliction. While the framework is intended to be transferable, its contextual adaptability requires further refinement through case studies and cross-cultural theological dialogue. The study's engagement with contemporary literature on suffering and spiritual formation, including recent integrative work on the perfection-in-weakness paradox and third-wave psychotherapies (Yoon, 2026), remains suggestive rather than exhaustive.

Future research should pursue at least three trajectories. First, empirical studies are needed to test the pastoral applicability of the Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework. Qualitative research designs, including semi-structured interviews with pastors, chaplains, and congregants experiencing chronic illness or disability, could illuminate how the framework resonates with lived experiences of weakness. Thematic analysis of such interview data, following established coding procedures, would provide grounded insights that textual analysis alone cannot supply. Second, comparative theological studies could examine how this passage has been interpreted in non-Western Christian traditions, particularly in contexts of suffering and martyrdom, where the dialectic of grace and weakness may carry distinct connotations. Third, interdisciplinary research could explore the intersection of this Pauline theology with contemporary psychological understandings of vulnerability, resilience, and post-traumatic growth. The recent integrative review by Yoon (2026) suggests promising avenues for dialogue between biblical theology and psychotherapy, yet much work remains to be done in developing robust, evidence-based models of pastoral care grounded in the Pauline vision of strength perfected in weakness. Such research would not only extend the academic conversation but also serve the practical needs of faith communities navigating the complexities of human frailty and divine enablement.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study returns to the central paradox articulated by the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7–10, where divine power is disclosed precisely in the context of human frailty. The

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exegetical analysis has demonstrated that the passage functions not as a private autobiographical aside but as a deliberate rhetorical and theological argument that redefines the nature of apostolic authority and the economy of divine grace. The "thorn in the flesh" (skolops te sarki), whatever its precise historical referent, operates within Paul's argument as the necessary counterpoint to the "surpassingly great revelations" (hyperbole ton apokalypseon), establishing a dialectic in which human weakness becomes the privileged site of divine enablement (Hiramatsu, 2022; White, 2026). This reading moves beyond the longstanding scholarly preoccupation with identifying the thorn's exact nature, a debate that, while historically significant, has often obscured the passage's more profound theological contribution (Martin, 1986; Furnish, 1984).

The proposed Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework offers a hermeneutical lens that synthesizes the exegetical findings with contemporary theological reflection. Rather than treating grace as a compensatory force that merely fills the gaps left by human limitation, the framework posits grace as the very medium through which divine power is made manifest and Christian identity is constituted (Yoon, 2026). This is not a semantic distinction but a substantive theological claim with practical consequences. When grace is understood as compensation, suffering becomes an obstacle to be removed or endured until deliverance arrives. When grace is understood as the medium of divine presence, weakness becomes a space of encounter, a place where the sufficiency of Christ is not only proclaimed but experienced (McBain, 2022). The framework therefore challenges both the triumphalist readings that dominate certain prosperity-oriented traditions and the passive resignation that can characterize some pastoral responses to affliction (BĂLAN, 2025).

The study has also demonstrated the rhetorical sophistication of Paul's argument. Within the broader context of the "Fool's Speech" (periautologia), the passage serves to subvert the Corinthians' criteria for authentic apostleship. Paul's opponents apparently boasted in visions, eloquence, and visible signs of power. By contrast, Paul grounds his apostolic legitimacy in the very experiences that his opponents would regard as disqualifying: imprisonment, persecution, and physical affliction (Kalu & Ituma, 2022). The conclusion, "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10), is therefore not a paradox for its own sake but a deliberate inversion of the Corinthians' value system. It repositions power not as the absence of weakness but as the presence of Christ's power within weakness (White, 2026). This rhetorical strategy has direct implications for contemporary understandings of Christian leadership, particularly in contexts where ministerial effectiveness is measured by visible success, numerical growth, or charismatic performance (Tamba, Sinaga, & Sinambela, 2025).

The theological implications of this study extend beyond the immediate Pauline context. The passage offers a robust foundation for a theology of suffering that avoids the twin errors of glorifying suffering as inherently redemptive and dismissing it as incompatible with faithful discipleship. Paul neither seeks out suffering nor denies its reality; he reframes it as the context in which the sufficiency of grace is disclosed (Dwiraharjo & Young, 2025). This reframing has

pastoral significance for communities facing persecution, chronic illness, or prolonged adversity. It provides a theological vocabulary that acknowledges the reality of pain while affirming the presence of divine grace within it (Boaheng, 2024). The framework proposed in this study offers a transferable model for contextual theological reflection, one that can be adapted to diverse cultural and ecclesial settings without losing its exegetical grounding (Sairwona et al., 2026).

The study acknowledges its limitations. As a text-based inquiry, it does not include empirical fieldwork, interviews, or statistical analysis. The findings are derived from careful exegetical engagement with the biblical text and interaction with the scholarly literature. Consequently, the proposed framework has not been tested in specific pastoral or congregational contexts. Future research could address this gap by employing qualitative methods, such as focus groups or in-depth interviews with pastors and congregants experiencing various forms of affliction, to explore how the Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework might be received, adapted, or challenged in practice (Hsu et al., 2025). Such empirical engagement would complement the theological and exegetical foundations established here, offering a more integrated understanding of how this ancient text continues to shape contemporary Christian identity and practice (Wilson Mdabuko, Muriithi Ndereba, & Mojola, 2026).

In sum, this study has argued that 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 presents a paradigmatic theological vision in which human weakness is not the antithesis of divine power but its appointed vehicle. The Grace-Weakness Dialectic Framework offers a constructive contribution to biblical theology and pastoral practice, challenging prevalent readings that domesticate the passage's radical claim. The apostle's conclusion remains as provocative today as it was in the first century: it is precisely in the acknowledgment of our limitations that the power of Christ finds its fullest expression. This is not a counsel to passivity but an invitation to a different mode of strength, one that is grounded not in human capacity but in divine grace.

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