

SERIES: Power through Weakness
SERMON: The Man Who Visited Paradise and Returned to Tell About It
SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10
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We come today to one of the strangest and most fascinating passages in the whole Bible. It contains two remarkable stories—Paul’s visit to Paradise and the thorn in the flesh he was given as a result of his visit to Paradise. This is not an easy passage to interpret or to understand, and I’m convinced we will never understand it fully unless we see it in the context of the dispute that was going on between Paul and the false teachers who had seized authority in the church at Corinth during his absence.

Thus I hope you were able to be with us the past several Sundays. But just in case you were not, I want to do a very brief review. Two weeks ago we examined the whole issue of spiritual predators in the church. Let me remind you of some of the key characteristics of these enemies whom Paul was fighting:

Spiritual predators are dangerous because they measure success by humanistic standards.

Spiritual predators are dangerous because they are doctrinal adulterers.

Spiritual predators are dangerous because they attack the faithful, pawning themselves off as “super-apostles.”

Spiritual predators are dangerous because they masquerade as apostles of Christ.

In contrast, Paul was a faithful and humble shepherd who taught God’s truth and always sought the spiritual benefit of his flock.

Then last Sunday Pastor Dick shared Paul’s unbelievable resume of suffering and persecution for the cause of Christ, which contrasted so sharply with the easy life and success-oriented ministry of the false apostles. They judged a person’s faithfulness by the level of wealth, popularity, success, and influence they were able to achieve. Paul judged his by the level of suffering, persecution, weakness, and humiliation he endured.

In chapter 12 Paul continues to set himself apart from the false teachers by taking the debate to a whole new level: “I must go on boasting,” he says in the first verse. “Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord.” In effect he says, “I’ve contrasted my philosophy of ministry with that of the false teachers; I’ve contrasted my resume of suffering and persecution with theirs; now I will even contrast myself with them in regard to their claims of supernatural visions and revelations from God.”

Here’s what I think is going on: The spiritual predators who had seized power and authority in the church are making claims like we so often hear today:

“I was talking to the Lord last night, and He told me such-and-such.”

Or, “The Holy Spirit gave me this interpretation of Scripture.”

Or, as some of you may recall, “I was praying and I saw a 900-foot-tall Jesus who told me to build a hospital.”¹ (Unfortunately Jesus apparently forgot to tell that particular Christian leader how to run the hospital and it went bankrupt). Perhaps you have heard singers make similar claims. I came across the following rather humorous account from a pastor:

I once preached at a harvest supper where a middle-aged couple performed duets accompanied by an accordion. They introduced each item by saying, “The Lord gave me

this song . . .” I wasn’t convinced. The Almighty would surely have produced something far better than the banal, cliché-ridden and repetitive trash that they sang! It seemed totally unfair to blame him for such substandard material. Nevertheless, some people take it all with the utmost seriousness. In some circles, if a person claims direct communications from God, his credibility rating rockets into the stratosphere. The Lord talks to him! He is clearly not a man to be ignored.ⁱⁱ

Paul decides to fight fire with fire. If they want to talk about their visions, OK, he’ll talk about one of his own.

Paul “brags” about the most amazing experience any human being ever enjoyed. (1-6)

I put “brags” in quotation marks, because I think we will quickly see that he is speaking very reluctantly. Let’s read the first six verses of 2 Corinthians 12:

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.

I have decided to organize this message around a series of questions. The first is this:

Who is the “man in Christ” who had this experience? Well, clearly it’s Paul himself. No serious Bible student argues the point. But if so, why does he speak about himself in the third person? Because he finds it distasteful to speak of himself in a way that even remotely smacks of self-promotion. He is very sensitive to the obvious pride this account could tap into.

Why did Paul keep this amazing experience quiet for 14 years? If you’re anything like me, I love to tell people about the exciting places I’ve been and the important people I’ve met. Sometimes the motive is that I want other people to enjoy the experience vicariously, but to be perfectly honest, sometimes it’s an ego trip—we all tend to think that our own status is enhanced when we know important people or have been to exotic places. But for 14 years Paul kept totally quiet about a trip he took to heaven and back! Why?

1. There was nothing to be gained by divulging it. That’s exactly what he says in verse 1. Paul would much rather be teaching theology or talking about Jesus or exhorting believers to be obedient, because the practical benefit from those efforts is obvious. What is going to be gained by him talking about a unique experience he enjoyed that no one else will experience until after death?!

2. Human language is incapable of describing it. He asserts in verse 4, “he heard inexpressible

things” while in Paradise. Paul has a wonderful command of the Greek language, plus Latin and Hebrew and Aramaic. But this occasion calls into question even his considerable linguistic ability. If you have a hard time understanding that, think about the description John gave of his vision of the risen Christ on the island of Patmos in Revelation 1:12-16:

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

Notice how often John uses the term “like.” He’s not describing the risen Christ literally; he is only coming as close as human language allows. And Jesus is a man! Paul’s problem is that he has seen things that are neither human nor earthly in any sense!

3. God wouldn’t allow him to share it. He describes his experience in the next phrase as “things that man is not permitted to tell.” It’s kind of like the sensitive question I once asked Tim Eley, the FBI agent who used to attend First Free. He said humorously, “I’d be glad to answer that question, but since it’s classified information, I’d have to kill you.” Frankly, I didn’t care *that* much for the information, so I let it go. Paul had gained some classified information about the afterlife, and God didn’t permit him to divulge it.

There is a fourth reason why Paul chooses to keep this whole thing under wraps for 14 years. Look at verse 6: “Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.”

4. Visions are a poor judge or measure of a person’s character. Paul stakes his reputation on the truthfulness of this event, but then he tells us that visions and revelations are not the proper standard by which to judge a man—his words and actions are! If you ever find yourself becoming overly impressed with claims a man or woman is making about visions or dreams or words of knowledge or miracles or whatever, remember what Paul says here: Examine my life and my teaching, because that’s where the rubber meets the road. Supernatural events and visions may be frosting on the cake, but they are not what gives a man authority! That makes it clear why he hadn’t told anyone for 14 years.

Why does he finally reveal it now?” And the answer is related totally to the fight he is having with the spiritual predators in the church there at Corinth. Look ahead to verse 11 for a moment: “I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it.” Paul has revealed this amazing experience because he feels it is the only way to rescue the Corinthian church from the clutches of these false teachers. If the Corinthian believers are going to base their confidence in leadership on things like visions and revelations, he can play that game; in fact, he can beat all the opposition hands down. But how sad that he needs to do it!

Where is the third heaven? The third heaven is, I believe, a reference to the very abode of God. The first heaven is the atmosphere that is our home. The second heaven is outer space, the stellar heavens. And the third heaven is where God is. I don't know if that is a place (as we normally think of a location) or if it's another dimension—it's not important. Clearly Paul went somewhere that no other human being has gone before or since.

When did this happen? Paul gives us one measure of time—it happened 14 years before he wrote this letter. I wish the time markers in Scripture were better, because it might be helpful to know exactly what Paul was doing 14 years before. Maybe that would give us a clue as to how and why this happened. Some have suggested that it happened during one of the stonings Paul endured, and that perhaps he actually was stoned to death, went to paradise, and then God called him back to finish his work. We can't be sure.

Was it a bodily experience or a spiritual one? We don't know, because Paul himself didn't know. He says, "Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows." It doesn't matter. He was so swamped by the beauty and joy all around him in Paradise and by the awe and splendor of it all that he was unaware of whether his body was even there. One last question:

Why did God give Paul this experience if He isn't allowed to tell anyone about it? Of course, he is finally allowed to mention it here in this passage, though he could divulge no details. But I think there is a good answer to this question, and it goes back to the passage Dick so ably preached last Sunday. Virtually every day of his ministry life Paul suffered for his faith. He needed that experience of glory early in his ministry life to prepare him for the difficult years that lay ahead and to see him through it all.

Now I want us to move to the second paragraph and another watershed incident in Paul's life, one that takes us from the heights of mystical exaltation to the depths of human weakness. Please note that these two incidents are intimately related.

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:7-9a).

Paul was given a thorn in his flesh to prevent conceit following this amazing experience. (7-9a)

What was this thorn? Ask any three Bible scholars and you'll come up with at least four opinions. I think you can gain something of an idea about what is talking about if you just think of a literal thorn in your finger. Until you get it out you can't think about anything else. It's painful, it's irritating, and it inflames the flesh around it. But the Greek term used here is actually broader than just a thorn from a rose bush. It is also used to describe objects like a fish hook or even a stake. That raises the stakes a bit, doesn't it?

But Paul is probably using the term more symbolically than literally. He is describing himself as a man impaled, pinned to the ground, writhing helplessly, due to some physical or mental or emotional trauma. Ever felt like that? You'll notice that Paul doesn't give us any symptoms, and I think it is probably just as well that we don't know the exact nature of the complaint. It is general enough to fit the suffering we all experience at some stage in life.

Who gave it to him? Well, Satan is named as the source of this thorn. It's actually called "a messenger of Satan," and the term "messenger" is the Greek word *angellos*, from which we get our English term "angel." An angel of Satan is, of course, a demon. This thorn is demonic in origin. But that doesn't completely answer the question, "Who gave it to him?", because God is also clearly involved. I find it instructive that in an effort to get rid of this thorn Paul doesn't rebuke Satan; instead he prays to God. I would assume that ultimately the thorn came from God; at least He allowed it.

That shouldn't shock us, because there are other examples in Scripture of God being active in the very same circumstances where Satan is active. The paradigm example is from the first chapter of Job. Satan delivers terrible suffering on Job, but only with the permission of God. Or consider Joseph, who told his brothers regarding their sale of him into slavery, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." This thorn in the flesh is certainly Satan-inspired and Satan-delivered, but that doesn't prevent God from being active behind the scenes and using it for His glory.

What was its purpose? This is a question we can answer with certainty because Paul specifically identifies the purpose: "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh." I told you once about my hour-long meeting with President Bush. And if you came to my house, I'd show you a photo of it. I like to tell my friends about it (I used to tell even more people when the President was popular!). But Paul's experience is so far above meeting the President of the United States that there's no comparison!

Lots of people meet with the President, and all of them get their pictures taken. But NO ONE ever visited Paradise before. Can you imagine how tempting it could be for him to feel conceited about this experience? Can you imagine what we'd be subjected to if one of the leading TV preachers had been in Paul's shoes? I shudder to think about it! At any rate, to prevent Paul from swelling with pride, God gave him a daily reminder of his finiteness and weakness.

What did Paul do about it (the thorn)? He prayed that God would remove it. In fact, he prayed three times about it. Now let me share with you my opinion, and that is all it is, my opinion. I don't think this means that on three separate days he sat at the dinner table and prayed, "Lord, please take the thorn away." My strong suspicion is that he is speaking of three intense periods of prayer over a considerable length of time, probably involving fasting and deep pursuit of the heart of God. I also suspect Paul focused not on relief of the pain but rather on his ministry; in other words, I can just hear him ask God, "How is it going to advance the cause of the Gospel if I am unfit to preach or to travel? Lord, please heal me for the sake of the Gospel!"

Why didn't God answer his prayer? He did. He said "no". Is that a facetious answer? I don't think so. And Paul apparently didn't think so; he accepted that answer as final and quit praying about it.ⁱⁱⁱ God in effect said to Paul, "No, I'm *not* going to take away the pain, the weakness, the debilitating trial represented by the thorn, *but* I will give you sufficient grace to handle it." When God's people are at the end of their rope, they sometimes think they need a miracle. But what they need even more is for God to stand by them and pour out His grace. And that grace has its greatest effect and impact when we are at the end of our resources. Do you know the song, *He Giveth More Grace*?

*He giveth more grace when the burden grows greater;
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase.
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.*

*When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.*

What does Paul's experience with the thorn say to us about trials in our Christian experience? I'm kind of tired of talking about health/wealth theology, as we've addressed it many times in our study of 2 Corinthians, but I don't know how I can fail to bring it up once more in this particular context. How could anyone possibly preach that health is guaranteed in the atonement in light of Paul's experience? Friends, I speak with all the conviction I can muster: our obsession with blessings relating to this life, such as physical health and material prosperity, flies directly in the face of biblical teaching.

Now the final point I wish to leave with you this morning is this:

Paul learned to boast in his weakness, not in his strength, so that Christ's power could rest on him. (9b, 10)

Look at the middle of verse 9: "*Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*"

How does our weakness make Christ's power more accessible? It's simple: when we feel strong and capable we are prone to lean on our own understanding and our own power. But when we come to the end of our rope, the end of our resources, we are much more inclined to turn to God.

Is it really possible to *delight* in weaknesses, insults, hardships, etc.? Yes, I think it is possible. Not easy, by any means, nor common, but possible. Paul hated the pain and suffering he endured as much as the next man, but if going through it could make him the kind of man God could use fully, then he was ready for it, even anxious, even able to delight in it. Joni

Eareckson Tada, a quadriplegic since her late teens, calmly announced that she would rather be a prisoner in a wheelchair and know Christ than to be fit and well without him. That's the attitude Paul is expressing.

Conclusion: Is it really true that “When I am weak, then I am strong”? I came across an article last week that was written several weeks ago by John Piper, a pastor-theologian from Minneapolis, and to me it captures the essence of Paul's conclusion:

What we saw in the Islamic demonstrations over the Danish cartoons of Muhammad was another vivid depiction of the difference between Muhammad and Christ, and what it means to follow each. Not all Muslims approve the violence. But a deep lesson remains: The work of Muhammad is based on being honored and the work of Christ is based on being insulted. This produces two very different reactions to mockery. If Christ had not been insulted, there would be no salvation. This was his saving work: to be insulted and die to rescue sinners from the wrath of God. . . .

That's the most basic difference between Christ and Muhammad and between a Muslim and a follower of Christ. For Christ, enduring the mockery of the cross was the essence of his mission. And for a true follower of Christ enduring suffering patiently for the glory of Christ is the essence of obedience. “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Matthew 5:11).

Even in the church today there are many who are like Paul's opponents: brash, playing to the gallery, enjoying the limelight, wanting a platform to occupy and a group of people to dominate. But it is when believers are out of answers, out of confidence, and out of strength, with nowhere else to turn but to God that they are in a position to be most effective. No one in the kingdom of God is too weak to experience God's power, but many are too confident in themselves.

Friends, developing a proper perspective on trouble, trials, and suffering is the cornerstone of Christian living. Focusing all our efforts on removing difficulties is not the answer. Believers need to embrace the trials God allows them to undergo, knowing that those trials reveal their character, humble them, draw them closer to God, and allow Him to display His grace and power in their lives. As James said, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

i. Let me tell you bluntly that in 95% of the cases, I simply don't believe their claims. I'm not saying God can't give a vision or a revelation, but I am suggesting that He does that very rarely today. I wish those who are always claiming “God told me” would simply be honest enough to say, “I have a strong impression that I should do such-and-such” instead of trying to trump

everything as divine revelation.

ii. J. Philip Arthur, *Strength in Weakness*, 218.

iii. There's a profound passage about prayer in Romans 8—just prior to the verse that so many glibly repeat—"All things work together for good . . .," but that verse is hardly even understandable without what precedes. Listen to these words: "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will" (Romans 8:26, 27). What that tells me is that the Holy Spirit intercepts our prayers and re-prays them in accordance with the will of God, and God answers the Spirit's prayer. I always get an answer, but sometimes it's not what I asked for but what the Spirit asked for. And I'm very grateful for that because I have been known to ask for things that would have been disastrous.