

# Christ Reformation Church

Tillamook, Oregon

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## *God's Word to a Hesitating Church*

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God. (7:1)

*“When I am Weak....”*

**March 8, 2015**

**Sermon Text:** 2 Cor 12

**Scripture Reading:** Luke 16:19-31

### **Introduction-**

With some regularity, books come on the scene that allege to tell the “real” story of someone who has died and seen heaven (or hell) and then come back to tell us about it. The people saw grandpa or aunt daisy and it was a warm fuzzy wonderful place. They can

hardly wait to tell us all about it and get their book published.

In contrast to this, we have a real account here in 2 Cor 12 of a man seeing heaven. That man is, of course, the Apostle Paul. His account however, as we are about to see, is radically different than these other reports of what heaven is like. In fact, he is very hesitant to talk about it and he cannot even put it into words. It is very, very important that we all compare these kinds of reports with Scripture, particularly in light of the fact that, as we have been learning, our enemy is always working his lies and deceptions against us.

Let's remind ourselves of Paul's argument in this epistle. Here were these Corinthians who had heard the gospel from Paul and received it. Then along came these false teachers like scavengers, looking for glory for themselves. They presented another Jesus, another gospel, and were animated by another spirit. And the Corinthians fell for it. They had

distanced themselves from Paul and due to their worldly mindset they were falling for these parasites' argument that Paul was inferior, weak – a nobody – in contrast to them, these “super apostles.”

Paul began this letter jumping right into the defense of his apostleship and message. You recall that he spoke of how he despaired of life itself as he was persecuted by enemies and that in such times the Lord came to him and comforted him – the “God of all comfort” you remember. And he told the Corinthians that the Lord had given him these experiences and hardships, so that he might learn about the Lord’s comfort and thereby be able to comfort other believers as they suffered for Christ. In other words, Paul did not boast about his own strength and greatness and need of no one. Last time as we read the last of chapter 11, we heard him once again telling about the experiences of a true servant of Christ, and it is anything but some “Rambo tough guy hero” image –

2 Corinthians 11:23-26 Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one--I am talking like a madman--with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. (24) Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes

less one. (25) Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; (26) on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;

So we have been learning then that one chief way to expose deceivers who claim to be serving Christ but are in fact agents of the enemy is to compare them with Christ Himself. Or with Paul. Or with the Old Testament prophets. What did their service of the Lord look like? What was their experience at the hands of the world, especially at the hands of false religious leaders –

John 1:10-11 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. (11) He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

Hated. Despised. Killed. Accused of being fools.

Hebrews 11:32-40 And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel

and the prophets-- (33) who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, (34) quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. (35) Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. (36) Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. (37) They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated-- (38) of whom the world was not worthy--wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. (39) And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, (40) since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Compare all of this to so many professing Christians or church leaders today. How do they compare? The truth isn't really that difficult to sort out, is it?

Let's read then what the Apostle Paul says here in chapter 12 –

2 Corinthians 12:1-10 I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. (2) I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. (3) And I know that this man was caught up into paradise--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- (4) and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. (5) On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. (6) Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. (7) So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. (8) Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. (9) But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (10) For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

### **Paul's 'Boasting'**

We know that when Paul speaks of speaking “foolishly” or of “boasting,” he is referring to himself and his ministry/apostleship. He does not like to have to do this, but he is compelled here to defend the gospel and Christ by defending his genuine calling as an apostle. So his purpose now continues to be to show these foolish Corinthians that they have been chasing after wolves while rejecting Christ's true shepherd-

2 Corinthians 11:19-20 For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! (20) For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.

Not for his own gain or glory, but for their benefit, Paul goes on “to visions and revelations of the Lord.”

If you will take a moment and think about this, you will realize that the Lord's way of calling a person to a special office – especially that of prophet or apostle – is to appear to that person. For example:

- Noah
- Abraham (in Ur)
- Jacob (Bethel)
- Joseph (dream)
- Moses (burning bush)
- Samuel (voice at night)
- David
- Isaiah (sees the Lord in the temple)
- Jeremiah
- Ezekiel
- Daniel
- Zechariah (John the Baptist's father)
- Mary & Joseph

Christ, while here on earth, called His apostles. And this brings us to the Apostle Paul's calling. It is the very same pattern –

Acts 9:3-6 Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. (4) And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (5) And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom

you are persecuting. (6) But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

We are not given details about the particular vision Paul is speaking of here in 2 Cor 12. Was it his Damascus Road experience? There are numbers of speculative theories – such as perhaps it was when he was stoned by the mob and left for dead. But we don't know, and we don't need to know. What we know is what Paul tells us here –

2 Corinthians 12:2-4 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. (3) And I know that this man was caught up into paradise--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- (4) and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

Now Paul had "told" what Christ said to him on the Damascus Road many times. You can find him doing so 2 or 3 times in Acts. And those accounts have him telling us what the Lord said to him. So this vision he is speaking of here must not be that one.

Paul says that "this man" (he doesn't name himself because he doesn't want

to exalt himself), was caught up to the "third heaven." Immediately questions begin to pop into our thinking – "Paul, you mean you like ascended into heaven like Jesus did? Or was it a vision that your spirit was caught up and your body stayed behind, like you were in some kind of trance?"

Notice Paul's answer – "God knows. I do not know. God knows." This is wisdom and we will do well to remember it. We must not get all caught up in curious details that will sidetrack us from the main point. God has not chosen to explain lots of things to us – in fact we no doubt lack the capacity to understand many, many things. So we need to have the wisdom to leave such things with the Lord.

He was "caught up" to what Paul calls "the third heaven" and "paradise." Perhaps the first and second heavens are 1) the sky, and 2) the stars, while the third is God's heaven. We have already heard this called "paradise" in the account of the rich man and Lazarus. It is the heaven where Christ is and where all His people are whose earthly lives have ended. Paul in other words was "caught up" into the presence of God.

*"and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter."*

Once again we see the obvious difference between this genuine vision of heaven and the false ones that are so common. Not many books would sell if the message was “I can’t tell you what I saw or what I heard.”

What does Paul mean by “cannot be told” and “may not utter”? Does he mean that the Lord instructed him not to tell, or does he mean that he could not if he wanted to because there are no words to describe it? There have been times in Scripture when the Lord told someone not to tell – Daniel, for example.

But the *content* of what Paul heard and saw is not the point here. Paul’s purpose is not to impress us with his experience and gather a following for himself. That is exactly what these false apostles would do – and perhaps they were doing something like this. Paul’s purpose is to validate his calling as an apostle *and to teach these Corinthians that the Lord chooses to work through our weakness. It is his “weaknesses” that Paul will “boast” about.* He has told them this before:

1 Corinthians 1:20-29 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (21) For since, in the wisdom of God, the

world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. (22) For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, (23) but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, (24) but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (25) For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (26) For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. (27) **But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;** (28) God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, (29) **so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.**

This is something that is absolutely and unfailingly true about God. *He works through our weakness for His glory.* And that is what Paul learned. Listen to him again –

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 So to keep me from becoming conceited

because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, **a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.** (8) Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. (9) **But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."** Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. (10) For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The principle seems to be that the greater the extent the Lord chooses to use us, the lower He is going to have to make us. The Bible is filled with many, many examples of this very thing. You think of David killing Goliath. Of God choosing and using Israel, the smallest and least of the nations, to humble and lay low the world's great ones like Pharaoh and Egypt. And of course the ultimate example is the Lord Jesus Himself as He came into this world and suffered and died, thereby effecting the redeeming power of His Father for us.

You see this in 13:4 – *“For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God.”*

We see this vital truth then –

*“If I am going to see and experience God’s power, then I must come to terms with my weakness. I must learn that hardships, persecutions and calamities are not hindrances to being effectively used by the Lord, but in fact as they show me my weakness and keep me from boasting, they make me a fit instrument for the Lord to use.”*

Do you see how freeing this is? If you think that for the Lord to use you then you must be “great,” that you must be popular and well-liked in the community, a top-achiever and so on, then you are thinking like these Corinthians were. So much of what students are taught in seminary regarding what a pastor must be and what a church must be and what church members must be – is absolutely false. The Lord does not work through our self-devised slick public relations programs. “Converts” produced by such gimmickry are false converts – their faith rests upon men, not upon Christ.

What kind of people does the Lord work His power through? Well,

people who know they are weak, like Paul. People who do not boast of themselves, but only of the Lord. People who repent of their sin, rejecting quarreling, jealousy, anger, slander, anger, hostility, impurity, sexual immorality and so on. Humbled, holy people. Weak people who know Christ.

Jeremiah 9:23-24 Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, (24) but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD."

### A Final Word About Warfare

Paul tells us that the lesson he learned, and was reminded of by that "thorn in the flesh," whatever it was, is that God works through our weakness, not through our boasting/strength. Now, what is this divine power for? When I am weak, then I am *strong*, for what?

And I suggest that the answer is, *for battle*. Remember what Paul said in this regard earlier –

2 Corinthians 10:3-6 For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. (4) For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. (5) We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, (6) being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

Waging war. The weapons of our warfare. Divine power for destruction of enemy strongholds. This warfare is directed against every "lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God."

It is this:

Ephesians 6:10-13 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. (11) Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. (12) For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (13) Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able



to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

The calling we are in, the work we are given to do for Christ in this world, *is warfare*. And the first lesson of “boot camp” is – *when I am weak, then I am strong*. That is to say, when I acknowledge that this battle must be fought by God’s power and not mine, I am on the right path. It is the weaponry of the Lord that is the only effective armament in this battle.

You see it illustrated many times back in the Old Testament:

Exodus 17:8-12 Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. (9) So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." (10) So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. (11) Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. (12) But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his

hands were steady until the going down of the sun.

The pattern there is always the same. Fight the battle according to the Lord’s plan – which means trusting in His power and not man’s – and there is victory. Fail to trust, and there is defeat.

This is what these Corinthians had not learned. The Lord does not work through men like these false apostles who put themselves off as impressive and great and mighty.

So here is this battle we are in. Men and women and children in this community are lost. They are blind and they are dead in their sin, unable to see the glory of Christ. Satan is the author of this blindness and death. How are we to break through it all? Well, there are only two possible answers: by using weapons of our own design, or by using Christ’s divinely empowered weapons. By our strength, or by the Lord’s strength. One means victory, the other certain defeat.

One of the most fundamental ways this principle applies is in regard to our salvation in Christ. How are we saved? By our own doing? Of course not. While we were DEAD in our sins, Christ died for us. By grace, not by works. By Christ’s power, not by ours.

Legalism denies this. These false teachers at Corinth, just as they do today, were teaching that our standing before God depends upon our own performance. That is a lie.

Another example is our prayers. Pray is the language of faith. When we are not praying, we are not relying on the Lord, but upon ourselves. When we pray in faith, we are acknowledging that we are weak, but He is strong.

I have no idea what the Lord's plans are for this church. Will this place ever be filled with people who are genuinely seeking the Lord and worshipping Him? I don't know. But I do know that His pattern is to take His people, humble them with some "thorn in the flesh to keep them humble," and then begin to work through them. So if the Lord should choose to call lost people to Himself, and use us to be His instruments in doing so, we must never, ever forget – look around you – was it some "power" we created in this place that saved them? Of course not.