

Cultivating Humility in Ministry Exaltation

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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In the U.S. we love our celebrities. Trips to the Los Angeles area are replete with tours of celebrity's homes, the Hollywood Walk-of-Fame, Rodeo Drive, and you may even spot a celebrity if you wait long enough at Pink's Hot Dogs.

This mindset exists in the church today. In two weeks I will get my picture taken with Dr. John MacArthur as he hands me my diploma. I am personal friends with Stuart Scott. My cousin married G. Gordon Liddy's son Tom, in fact, my mother danced with "G" at the wedding. I have sat at the feet of R.C Sproul, Al Mohler, and Sinclair Ferguson.

The church today is not much different than Corinthian church. The apostle Paul talked about those "super-apostles" in chapter 11 who were boasting about their experience level and their superiority in teaching and preaching in the church. While we don't know everything about these super apostles, we can glean that they were superior in their speaking skills to Paul, they were probably healthier than Paul (since they had not received multiple beatings, imprisonments, and shipwrecks) and undoubtedly, they were more popular than Paul.

As one writer put it, "Paul, however, countered this pseudo-spirituality with one telling blow: this is not when God does his most perfect work. God displays His glory and cultivates our good through suffering and pain, through trails and difficulties, by giving us a thorn not a throne, a cross not a crown."¹

This section of 2 Corinthians is full of biting wit. Let's read it.

Paul has already agreed to look foolish (11:16-17) Though here in verse 1 he reminds his readers, "There is nothing to be gained by it."

He is, in some sense, sinking down to their level, by now listing his qualifications; his resume. Look with me at the list in verses 2-4.

- Paul has been caught up into Paradise (v3). The third heaven (v2) is the very presence of God.
- Paul was caught up into the presence of God. Not by Paul's doing, but by God's will and action.
- The first heaven is where birds and airplanes fly.
- The second heaven is where the sun, moon, and stars are set in place.
- While Paul is speaking in the third person he is certainly is talking about himself.
- It was a very personal experience. It was never meant for Paul to write about r share with others. He is not sure if he was in the body or out of the body. He did not know and did not care. It simply did not matter.

¹ Daniel Akin, "When God Does His Most Perfect Work"

- And verse 4 is amazing! While there Paul heard inexpressible words! Things that he cannot share.
- And Paul refuses to give us any details. Why? Because boasting about personal experiences is foolish.

This is the irony in verse 5. While Paul has many things for which he might boast, he will only boast in his weakness.

One commentator writes,

“God did not give this experience to Paul because he was special, but because he was “in Christ.” God gave this experience to Paul for Paul and no one else.

Further Paul had never talked about this until now and he would say nothing more about it because it

1) Had no value for the Church and

2) It is no indication of one’s spiritual maturity and walk with God.

To believe it to be so is foolish, immature, an evidence of your misunderstanding of the true nature of the Christian life.”²

To boast in the experience, even with it being true, steals from the glory of God and places Paul’s spiritual maturity in his previous experience, not his present life. And he will move immediately then to the antithesis of this by contrasting his qualifications with his “thorn”. Thus, amplifying God’s grace. The text begins, “To keep me from becoming conceited.” Being conceited is one of the attacks upon Paul from those against him in the Corinthians church. As do Paul responds to these attacks by being very open. Paul’s heavenly experience is unmatched by anything any other person has ever experienced. Can you imagine the potential conceit that that experience could have brought? But the Lord wants Paul (and all of us) humble, not conceited.

Everyone wants to know what the thorn is. Speculations abound.

Some think it was persecution against Paul. Others speculate that the thorn was stammering speech, arthritis, malaria, epilepsy, lice, gastritis, dental problems, poor eyesight, and the list goes on and on. In the movie “Paul: Apostle of Christ” the thorn are memories of all those Paul persecuted before his conversion. Paul would dream about these people and then awake from his nightmares repeating to himself, “Your grace is sufficient, your grace is sufficient.”

What do we know about the thorn?

1. The thorn was given from God.

It was given me, says Paul. And while a quick misreading might indicate that the thorn came from Satan, it is clear that God provided the thorn and Satan was simply the messenger. In fact, a truly proper understanding would help us see that the thorn was not simply given by God but was a gift to Paul from God.

² Daniel Akin, “When God Does His Most Perfect Work”

2. The thorn was intended to keep Paul humble.
3. The thorn was a messenger of Satan. Literally, “an angel of Satan.” So God devised it, but Satan dispensed it. Just like in the life of Job.
4. The thorn produced intense suffering. Paul uses the word harass in verse 7. The Greek means “to beat, to strike with a fist, to cuff.

The bottom line is, we don’t know what Paul’s thorn was, and that’s intentional.

There is no reason for us to know. Like many forms of suffering in our lives we cannot reduce them to one universal cause. God is making it clear by being vague, that the promise of his grace does not apply to a specific “thorn.” If that were the case, we would be tempted to limit the grace of God to that specific issue. But we serve a good God. One who promises that his grace is sufficient for any situation be it fear, anger, guilt, shame, jealousy, despair over loss, physical weakness, and other problems that are present in every person. What was Paul’s response? Verse 8. “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.”

He pleaded for the Lord to touch his own body. But the Lord didn’t answer Paul as Paul desired. Three times Paul pleaded. But did the Lord say no? Not necessarily. How did the Lord answer? “My grace is sufficient for you.” In this case, I contend that Christ's answer was better than what Paul asked for.

So what did Paul do? Did he become bitter? Did he become depressed? No. And apparently Paul quit asking. Sometimes, Jesus’ answer to our prayers is better than physical healing. Sometimes Jesus’ answer is better than the material things we ask for. Sometimes Jesus answer is better than emotional healing.

Do you remember the Israelites in the desert? They prayed for meat rather than manna. And so God sent them diseased quail, and many of them died.

Sometimes God, in judgment, will grant the prayer request.

And sometimes in his love, God will give the answer that is better for us, rather than what we ask. In this case, God’s grace comes as empowerment to Paul. So, Christ gave Paul something better than the removal of the thorn. And I can imagine that every time Paul dealt with that thorn, he remembered to surpassing greatness of the grace of Jesus.

Verse 9 points us to a reality. God made it clear to Paul that he would not take away this suffering. And just as the cup did not pass from Jesus, the thorn was not taken away from Paul. What applied to Paul here applies to us as well:

- Paul was to trust Jesus.
- Paul was to trust that Jesus was using this for Paul’s good.
- Paul was to trust in the greatness and grace of our Lord through this “thorn”
- Paul was to understand that he was weak, a jar of clay per se.

The Lord's grace is enough to bring contentment. The grace was sufficient for the task. The grace was of such power that Paul could be satisfied with it. Sufficiency and satisfaction go together. One of my Greek lexicons states it this way, "to be sufficient or adequate for a particular purpose, with the implication of leading to satisfaction."³

Paul finishes the thought with an interesting connection between power and weakness; specifically between Jesus' power and Paul's weakness. And so, it takes our weakness to bring Christ's power to its intended purpose. Paul uses this word, "weakness" over and over in 1 and 2 Corinthians. We see it here in our text this evening in verses 5, 9, and here in 10. But we also see it in:

- 1 Corinthians 2:3, "I came to you in **weakness** and fear, and with much trembling."
- 1 Corinthians 15:42-43, "So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in **weakness**, it is raised in power."
- 2 Corinthians 11:30 Paul says, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my **weakness**."

Why this repeated boasting in weakness? So that the power of Christ may "rest upon him, take up residence within him."⁴

Remember the context of our passage this evening?

"Paul wrote 2 Corinthians because some critics in the church were attacking his claim to be an apostle. They said he was a fraud, and one of their accusations was that he was weak and unimpressive.

So how does Paul respond? He embraces their accusation. "You say I'm weak. You're right. I am weak. But you're wrong, too, because I'm also strong. Weak and strong at the same time. Those are my apostolic credentials. Christ puts His strength on display in my weakness."⁵

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.

This is incredible! *I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.* Who would say that? That's certainly not how we would consider contentment. For us it's having our needs, wants, and heart desires fulfilled. And not just being fulfilled but being fulfilled in the way we desire and on our time schedule. But not Paul. For Paul, contentment was having sufficient grace from Christ to fulfill his every need and the power of the Lord to sustain him.

³ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Vol. 1: Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (598). New York: United Bible Societies.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Daniel Akin, "When God Does His Most Perfect Work"

For when I am weak, then I am strong. Kent Hughes calls this the paradox of power.⁶

We read this final verse and often just see a list of words. But as we studied back in chapter 11, there is meat to them.

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; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.
(2 Corinthians 11:24-30)

There is speculation that because of Paul's frequent imprisonments and beatings, that at some point he could not stand up straight, that his partial blindness may have been a result of a beating as well. In other words, Paul was crippled for Christ.

But the Apostle Paul did not quit. He did not slip into a deep clinical depression.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.
(2 Corinthians 4:8-10)

Gladys Aylward grew up in London, England, in the early 1900s. As a teenager, she read a story about the Chinese that changed her life. She knew she must go tell them about God's love.

Gladys was a very small woman. She didn't like that about her because she also looked quite frail. And Gladys had coal black hair. Oh, how she wished she could have more blondish hair like her friends. Gladys failed missionary training school. The director told her she wasn't smart enough to learn Chinese, and they would not accept her. The other men around the table told her she was too small and too frail to go. Gladys went home discouraged. She took out her little suitcase and laying her Bible on top of it, knelt to pray. She was too small and too frail and had coal black hair and was poor. Her suitcase, Bible, and a few sets of clothes was all she owned. But Gladys was determined. If the mission board would not send her to China, she would find her own way there. To save money for her trip, Gladys went back to the only job she knew, being a maid. She finally saved enough money for boat fare to China. When the ship arrived, she looked out over the crowd and realized they were all small, and the children were frail, and they all had coal black hair. And she thanked God that the things that made her weak, he would use to reach the lost for Christ.

⁶ Kent Hughes, Sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, March 19, 2017

