

XVI. Power in Weakness

April 28/29/30, 2015

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Aim: To learn that God uses our weaknesses to perfect His power.

A. The Revelation in the Spirit (2 Corinthians 12:1-6)

We should note carefully that in this passage it is not his conversion Paul is writing about. We have the record from Luke (in Acts 22 and 26) of two occasions when Paul spoke very clearly about this before two different audiences and there are other passages where he makes at least a brief allusion to it, as, for example, in Galatians 1:13-16 and 1 Timothy 1:13-26. It is clear from a comparison of those passages with the one here that this experience was of a different order.

Paul had many visions (cp. Acts 9:12; 16:9-10; 18:9-10; 22:17-21; 23:11; 27:23-24; Gal. 1:11-12), but the one referred to here was apparently very spectacular, the most amazing and remarkable of them all.

1. Paul's Boast (12:1)

¹I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

At first glance, the story of Paul's vision seems out of place in a section dealing with his suffering and weakness. But the Greeks believed that those who truly represented the gods would experience mystical visions, which some tried to induce through drunken orgies. Undoubtedly, then, the false apostles claimed visions and revelations of their own. The Corinthians, swept away by their phony claims, groveled before those lying braggarts. Thus, it was necessary for Paul (reluctantly) to relate his own genuine vision.

Paul turns now to a question that had apparently been flung at him: 'What *vision and revelations* could Paul claim as credentials for his ministry?' The false apostles may have made much of certain visions and direct revelations they claimed to have had from God, using these in their claim to be authentic servants of Christ. The term 'revelation' is wider and less specific than 'vision,' which clearly implies some visual experience.

1 Corinthians 12-14 indicates that the Corinthians were particularly interested and intrigued by the more spectacular and unusual gifts of the Holy Spirit. The promoting of this preoccupying interest may have been the emphasis of the 'super-apostles.' Again, Paul replies by boasting of his own spiritual experiences, and especially of 'visions and revelations of the Lord.' We must notice, however, that he renews his qualification about the value of such boasting: 'there is nothing to be gained' from it. Boasting about spiritual experiences is especially inappropriate, since if they are genuine, they are God's gift, and completely so. Boasting so easily arises from pride, and it serves to increase pride. Once we start boasting, we inevitably separate ourselves from others and sow seeds of disunity. Proud we separate, humble we stay together.

Before describing his supernatural vision, Paul added yet another disclaimer to the many he had already written, indicating once again how extremely distasteful he found even this boasting he had been forced into. He recognized that such boasting was necessary, but stressed that it was not profitable. Even visions and revelations, including the astounding one he was about to relate, were not helpful to talk about. They did not benefit the church (or else Paul would surely have

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told of this vision many times before), because they are not verifiable nor can they be repeated, and they could lead to pride (cp. 12:7).

Paul continues his theme of boasting. ‘I must go on boasting.’ In the previous sections his boasting focused upon his Jewishness and his service for the Lord Jesus Christ. These were two areas in which his detractors obviously criticized him. However, there were others, and he mentions two more (revelations and weakness).

The boasting that the apostle Paul was required to do was a matter of painful awkwardness for him. When Paul’s opponents, the super-apostles, boasted about their ethnic and religious pedigrees, Paul had reluctantly responded by reciting his own transcending pedigrees—which he quickly turned into an extended boast in his own weaknesses. Now we see the same hesitation as Paul is called to counter his opponents’ boasts in their ecstatic spiritual experiences by describing his own surpassing experience. You can sense Paul’s discomfort and reticence in the opening verse of chapter 12. Though Paul is doubtful of what such sharing will accomplish, he fully understands the dangers of default, so he will again play the fool. Significantly, however, he will not waste his time telling of lesser phenomena but will cut straight to his vision and revelations of the risen Lord. Not unsurprisingly, Paul’s boast in the incredible revelation accorded him will be followed by an even greater boast in his weakness—Paul’s greatest boast of all.

2. Paul’s Vision (12:2-4)

²I 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. ³And 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—⁴and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

a) Third Person (12:2a, 3a)

At verse 2, Paul alters his way of writing. Having written about his own experiences, he now goes on to describe somebody else’s. At least, that is what he appears to be doing – but things are not always what they seem! As we will soon see, he was actually writing about himself.

Paul’s reply is curious. It is as if he is unwilling to identify himself as the man who had the revelations. Thus he writes, ‘I know a man,’ referring to himself not personally but impersonally; not in the first but in the third person.

Paul opens with a bare-bones description of his personal rapture into the third heaven and paradise. The apostle twice refers to himself in the third person with almost identical phrases, but there is no doubt that it is Paul himself, because in verse 7 he switches to the first person and identifies himself as the recipient of the surpassing revelations. Paul’s use of the third person signals his discomfort and embarrassment in indulging in ecstatic biography, which he deems of little profit.

Paul clearly refers to himself, but this way of writing in the third person is an expression of humility. He wants to share the experience, but he does not want to focus attention upon himself.

b) Fourteen Years (12:2b)

The vision took place fourteen years before the writing of 2 Corinthians, which was in late 55 or early 56 AD, putting it sometime between Paul’s return to Tarsus from Jerusalem (Acts 9:30) and his commissioning by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1-3). Little is known about that period of

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Paul's life except that during it he ministered in Syria and Cilicia (Gal. 1:21). God may have granted him this personal experience to steel him against the suffering he would experience on his missionary journeys. Having been given a glimpse of the heaven that awaited him, he could face the most relentless and severe suffering that dogged every day of his life. Now, after fourteen years of silence, Paul was apparently relating the vision for the first time.

The experience was a long time ago. His reference to fourteen years takes us back to a period in his life of which Luke says nothing in Acts, except for the bare fact that Paul was in his home city of Tarsus (cp. Acts 9:30; 11:25). It was before he came to Antioch to work there with Barnabas and others, and before he set out from that city on his missionary travels.

The very fact that Paul had told no one about his rapture to paradise shows that he considered private experiences like this as unimportant to his gospel ministry. Fourteen years earlier would have been *circa* 42 AD when Paul was in Tarsus or Antioch before his first missionary journey. Certainly the rapture had been important in Paul's preparation for missionary service. But Paul believed that its subjective individual nature was of no profit to others; otherwise he would have shared it as he repeatedly did with the story of his conversion encounter with Christ on the Damascus road.

a) *Third Heaven (12:2c)*

What does Paul mean by the third heaven? The most common view was that there were three, two visible and the third invisible. The first was the lower visible heaven, where the birds fly; the second, the upper visible heaven, where the heavenly bodies are; while the third is the invisible abode of God Himself. Paul is therefore using Judaism's conventional language here. He had been in the very presence of God in heaven.

Biblical cosmology views the heavens as threefold. The first heaven is the atmosphere. The second heaven is the place of the stars. And the third heaven is the abode of God.

Paul was suddenly snatched up into the 'third heaven,' which, transcending the first (earth's atmosphere; Dt. 11:11; 1 Kgs. 8:35; Is. 55:10) and second (interplanetary and interstellar space; Gen. 15:5; Ps. 8:3; Is. 13:10) heavens, is the abode of God (1 Kgs. 8:30; Ps. 33:13-14; Mt. 6:9).

b) *Ecstatic (12:2d, 3c)*

This man was 'caught up to the third heaven.' Was this a physical or spiritual experience? Luke uses the same verb in Acts 8:39 about something that happened to Philip the evangelist, and this was a clearly physical experience, involving a change of location. Paul was unable himself to say what had actually happened in his case. Probably the experience was so vivid and the verbal communication so compelling to listen to, that he was quite unconscious of himself while it was going on. If it will be like that in heaven, when we see Christ face to face, what a blessing to be rid for ever of self-preoccupation!

Paul's experience of rapture here had been thoroughly ecstatic—so ecstatic that Paul didn't know whether he had been caught up bodily like Enoch or Elijah, or whether it was simply the out-of-body transport of his human spirit. All Paul knew is that it happened, and he had been there!

Exactly what was the reality of the experience was unclear even to Paul, as the twice repeated phrase 'whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I don't know' emphasizes. 'Caught up' translates *harpazō*, the same verb used in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Paul didn't know if it was in the body or out of the body. He did not know if it was solely a spiritual experience or perhaps also a physical one.

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Verse 3 commences with a re-statement of the thought of verse 2. The unusual nature of the experience perhaps accounts for the repetition. He is most concerned that there should be no attempts to categorize this experience. This is in line with what he would later write to the Colossians about those who, perhaps after some mystic experience in which they thought they had encountered angels, went into great detail about what they had seen. Of such a person he says, ‘his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions’ (Col. 2:18). Mysticism and spirituality are not the same for mysticism can make us proud, while true spirituality is always humble.

c) Paradise (12:3b)

Paul identifies ‘the third heaven’ with ‘paradise.’ This word came into Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek as a loan-word from the ancient Persian language. Originally it simply meant park or ‘walled garden,’ not unlike Arcadia, a name used in Greek and Latin poetry, and later in Renaissance and Baroque art, to designate an idyllic rural place. In course of time ‘Paradise’ came to be used by the Jews in several different ways. Because it was appropriate for use of a place with ideal conditions of life, it was applied both to the Garden of Eden and to the future Messianic kingdom, for the latter was often viewed as Eden restored. Between the past and the future was the present or hidden Paradise, as the Jews called it, where the disembodied spirits of Abraham and his fellow patriarchs dwelt in bliss

The parallel designation of ‘paradise’ seals the locale of the third heaven as the very presence of God. The word ‘paradise’ occurs in only two other places in the New Testament: Luke 23:43 and Revelation 2:7. Scholars such as Philip Hughes hold that these three mentions of paradise are mutually defining and that they refer to the presence of Christ throughout salvation history.

The parallelism of the two phrases demands that ‘Paradise’ be equated with ‘heaven’ (see Lk. 23:42; cp. Rev. 2:7, which says the Tree of Life is in Paradise with Rev. 22:2, 14, 19, which place it in heaven). The Persian word from which the Greek word ‘Paradise’ derives means ‘walled garden.’ The greatest honor a Persian king could bestow on one of his subjects was to grant him the right to walk with the king in the royal garden in intimate companionship.

He was caught up to paradise. ‘Paradise’ is an oriental word, first used by the Persians, of an enclosure or a walled garden. It expresses the idea of a place of supreme happiness above the earth. ‘The tree of life’ is spoken of as being in the paradise of God (Rev. 2:7). Our Lord Jesus indicated that it is the heavenly home to which the spirits of believers go at death (Lk. 23:43; cp. 2 Enoch 8:1).

What Paul says here shows indirectly but clearly that he believed the disembodied state to be not only one of bliss, but of bliss in the presence of God. This certainly harmonizes well with what he says about being, after death, ‘at home with the Lord’ (5:8) and about the ‘far better’ state of being with Christ (Phil. 1:23), and gives great assurance to the Christian.

d) What Paul Saw/Heard (12:4)

The things Paul heard while in paradise were inexpressible, probably both in the sense that human language was not fitted to convey them and also that he was not permitted to do so, although, of course, it is the latter that is emphasized in the remainder of his sentence. As a Jew, Paul would remember Deuteronomy 29:29; speculation about the future is not only unprofitable but unnecessary.

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Unlike modern charlatans, who claim trips to heaven and visions of God, Paul gave no sensational, detailed description of what he saw or experienced in heaven but mentioned only what he heard. What he heard was in a language unlike anything on earth. Though the apostle understood what was said, there were no words in human language to convey what he heard, nor would he have been permitted to speak about it even if that were possible. The veil between earth and heaven remains in place. What God wants known about heaven is revealed in the Bible; as for the rest, ‘The secret things belong to the Lord our God’ (Dt. 29:29).

The word ‘man’ in verse 4 suggests Paul was taking into account the fact that others may have had somewhat similar experiences and were likewise banned from communicating their content. Perhaps the false teachers recounted strange mystic experiences in reciting their credentials. Even if these were not authentically divined in origin, the claim that they were so made it appropriate to give a reminder of the secrecy of the heavenly realm. If Paul was not permitted to communicate such things to others, this must apply to the false teachers too, if in fact the experiences they boasted of were truly from God.

There in the paradise of the third heaven Paul saw the resurrected Christ, and there he saw the souls of the redeemed ‘at home with the Lord’ (5:8). What he heard was beyond utterance, not because they were unintelligible or because there was any deficiency in Paul, but because God had forbidden Paul to speak of them. They were private. They were given to Paul for his own personal benefit, not to pass on.

What an awesome transcendental experience had been granted to the Apostle Paul! Apart from the book of Revelation there is nothing in the New Testament to compare with it. His personal rapture was Mosaic in its grandeur. But why was it so awesome, we ask, if it was not to be shared? John Calvin supplies the answer: ‘...this thing happened for Paul’s own sake, for a man who had awaiting him troubles hard enough to break a thousand hearts needed to be strengthened in a special way to keep him from giving way and to help him to persevere undaunted.’ Paul was granted a greater view of the glory to come in order that it might sustain him in his epic beatings and shipwrecks and betrayals and heartaches that rose and fell with the fortunes of his churches. This epic experience sustained an epic heart.

Most people, had they been granted an ecstasy like Paul’s wherein they actually had been raptured to paradise (to God, to His Son, to the Holy Spirit, to the souls of the departed, to the discourse of Heaven), would scarcely be able to contain themselves. Today they would write a bestseller—*My Rapture: A Personal Account of My Trip to Heaven and Back*. [DSB: consider the book/movie *Heaven Is For Real*]. Seminars on ‘Five Steps to Your Own Rapture’ would be sold out. The writer’s words would be accorded the status of divine revelation. Why, you could build an entire denomination on it and even fund a college—‘Rapture U.’ Paul, however, from the evidence of the text, would certainly have taken the story of his rapture to the grave were it not for the compelling necessity to boast in it for the sake of the Corinthian church.

3. Paul’s Humility (12:5-6)

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.*

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Verse 5 shows Paul had made a conscious choice not normally to say anything about such experiences. It was only the special constraint under which he was writing this part of his letter that had caused him to tell it. He wished to be judged by others on the basis of his deeds and words, not his private experiences. The deeds were performed and the words uttered in the course of his ministry to them and so were open for all to see and hear.

As in verses 2-4, Paul humbly referred to himself in the third person. Speaking of himself like that also emphasized his passivity in the vision. He did nothing to make it happen; it was something God sovereignly chose to grant, not a reflection of any merit on Paul's part. He was just an ordinary man and would not boast on his own behalf as if he in any way merited the vision God had given him.

And now, as he does reticently boast, it is modest and restrained as he continues in the self-effacing third-person. Although Paul would be completely justified in boasting in his amazing experience, he forgoes doing so and boasts in his weaknesses instead. It is because of his sense of unworthiness that Paul, in outlining his 'qualifications,' majors on his weaknesses, both here and in the previous chapter, although he indicates in verse 6 that he was telling the truth in what he had just said.

What Paul would boast about were his weaknesses, for they provided compelling proof of his apostleship. Paul's boast was not foolish, for unlike the false apostles and their specious claims, he was speaking the truth; his vision really happened, and to deny that would be false humility. Nonetheless, he wisely decided to refrain from resting his case for his apostleship on his vision. The problem was that it was not repeatable, verifiable, or even fully comprehensible. Using it to prove his apostleship would open the door for charlatans to claim authority to speak for God based on their own alleged mystical experiences. The true measure of a man of God is not his alleged mystical experiences but his godly life and his faithfulness to the Word of God. The most startling, spectacular vision or supernatural revelation is not as significant as the least righteous act.

By doing this, Paul ensured that authority in the church would not be based on ecstatic experience but on the actions and words of its leaders. Paul forbids any assessment of himself and his ministry by standards other than his actions and words. This provides essential wisdom for navigating the currents of the modern church. We must understand that regardless of how great a personal claim is made to visions and ecstasies, nothing can replace conduct and speech as indications of truly following Christ.

Paul is saying: 'I want you to look at what I am, not what I was. The man I want you to take into account is not the one who experienced an astonishing revelation then but the one you see now, in all his weakness.' In this passage Paul is responding to the new missionaries who are pointing, apparently, to ecstatic experiences as a demonstration of their claims over the Corinthians as against the place of Paul. By his reply Paul rejects accreditation by ecstasy. The simple fact is that Christ commissioned Paul to be their apostle, and the demonstration of that did not lie in the display of ecstatic power, but in the reality of weakness as lived out before the Corinthians.

Paul's determination was to boast only about his weaknesses. When we boast about our weaknesses, we boast about how great God is to use such feeble instruments! Paul did not deny that – humanly speaking – he had plenty about which to boast. However, he did not want anyone to think of him more highly than was appropriate to the integrity of his life and speech.

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B. The Thorn in the Flesh (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

These verses are intimately linked with the previous section, for Paul now writes about the aftermath of his visionary experience.

1. Paul's Thorn (12:7)

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.*

a) First Person

Having reluctantly implied in verse 6 that the visionary in verse 2 to 4 was himself, he says so really plainly for the first time in verse 7. Why is that noteworthy? Because it is just at the point where he begins to write again about his weaknesses. In verse 6 he says he does not want people to think more highly of him than is warranted, and then in verse 7 he shows that God's concern was that he should not think too highly of himself.

Up to this point, Paul has written obliquely of his rapture to paradise from the perspective of the third person, but now as he switches to the first person, he becomes crystal clear. The essence of Paul's thought in verse 7 is that the revelation accorded him was so personally exalting that he needed a humbling thorn in his flesh. Note well that Paul's thorn came to him *after* his 'surpassing great revelations' and in consequence of them.

Verse 7 clearly confirms that the 'man in Christ' in verse 2 was Paul himself. He had received revelations of 'surpassing greatness.' Such spiritual experiences, however, brought the peril of spiritual pride, which is one of the worst forms that pride can take. It indicates that we have lost sight of the cross and our dependence upon the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is nothing good that the devil does not try to turn to evil.

b) The Thorn

To curb Paul's pride, to keep him from becoming conceited, he was given 'a thorn' in the flesh. We are nowhere told what this thorn was. It was physical, since it is described as being in his 'flesh.' What we do know is that it 'harassed' him, implying the regularity and intensity of the problems it caused.

To the catalogue of weaknesses previously given, Paul now adds his most painful experience. It is not about the 'revelation' that caught him up (v. 2) that he will boast, but about the pain that brought him lowest of all, the thorn. In matching the 'super-apostles' Paul speaks of being 'elated' or up-lifted' (the Greek word could almost mean 'airborne') by the 'surpassingly great revelations.' God, however, brought the elated Paul down to earth and pinned him there with a 'thorn.'

The distressing element is described as 'a thorn in the flesh.' The simple but eloquent image of some kind of splinter causing the flesh to fester is, of course familiar to us all.

Certainly, 'because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations' he had experienced, pride was a constant temptation. Therefore, to keep him humble, Paul was 'given ... a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment' him. *Skolops* ('thorn') could be better translated 'stake,' graphically indicating the intensity of the suffering it caused Paul; it was not a small thorn but a large stake.

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What was this ‘thorn?’ The Greek word is *skolops*, which can mean either a ‘stake’ that pegged him to the ground or a ‘splinter’ (or thorn) that constantly irritated him. The word was employed in both senses. It conveys the notion of something sharp and painful that sticks deeply in the flesh and in the will of God defies extraction. The effect of its presence was to cripple Paul’s enjoyment of life, and to frustrate his full efficiency by draining his energies.

c) What Is the Thorn?

(1) Physical Ailment

Scholars have made many suggestions about the nature of Paul’s ‘thorn.’ Was it persecution, sensual temptation, a speech defect, an ophthalmic disorder, epilepsy, or one of the many further possibilities?

The speculations run wild. And if you’ve suffered from maladies such as earaches, headaches, malaria, hysteria, hypochondria, gallstones, gout, rheumatism, sciatica, gastritis, leprosy, deafness, dental disease, or neurasthenia, a thorn seems an apt metaphor. Others have supposed a specific ailment, such as poor eyesight, noting that Galatians 6:11 mentions Paul writing with large handwriting. But there Paul seems to be writing large for dramatic effect.

What was the thorn? Was it an illness? This is the view of many, perhaps of most, modern commentators, and support for this interpretation has been found in Galatians 4:13-14, where Paul refers to an illness that had some connection with his first coming to Galatia, and which he still had when working among the Galatians, for he says it was a trial to them. Certainly fine Christian people have prayed for God to remove a chronic illness and instead have been given grace to bear it.

The identity of the thorn in the flesh has been much debated. Paul did not describe it in detail, indicating that the Corinthians knew what it was. Most commentators assume it was a physical ailment, such as migraines, ophthalmia, malaria, epilepsy, gallstones, gout, rheumatism, an intestinal disorder, or even a speech impediment. That such a wide range of possibilities has been put forth indicates a lack of specific support in Scripture for any of them.

(2) Temptation

There is a second possibility. Calvin, translating (quite legitimately) ‘thorn for the flesh,’ regarded it as a reference to some particular temptation or temptations to which Paul was liable, so that this was a means in God’s hand of keeping him both humble and dependent on God’s grace. The word ‘flesh’ here would have a similar meaning to that found, for example, in Galatians 5:16-17, where the NIV translates it ‘the sinful nature.’ Luther’s view was similar.

The phrase ‘in the flesh’ could also be rendered ‘for’ or ‘because of the flesh.’ ‘Flesh’ should be understood here not in a physical sense, but in a moral sense as a reference to Paul’s unredeemed humanness. The Lord allowed Paul’s intense suffering to impale his otherwise proud flesh; to humble the one who had so many revelations.

(3) Opposition

As to what the thorn was, we can only conjecture. Some have speculated that the thorn was opposition, perhaps the Judaizers or the super-apostles. Certainly the metaphor is used this way.

There is a third possibility. Some commentators have followed the great fourth and fifth century preacher, John Chrysostom, in finding a clue to Paul’s meaning in Numbers 33:55. There, God

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describes the enemies that would be left in the land of Israel as thorns in the sides of His people. The expression is used in a similar way in Judges 2:3 and Ezekiel 28:24. Perhaps, however, it is its use in Ezekiel 2:6 which is most helpful here, for there the enemies of the prophet are the actual people of Israel who are cast in this role. How appropriate such a background would be to the actual circumstances of Paul's life. Enemies had dogged him wherever he went, and some were within the actual fold of the church, like the false apostles at Corinth.

[According to McArthur], it is best to understand Paul's thorn as a demonic messenger of Satan sent to torment him by using the deceivers to seduce the Corinthians into a rebellion against him. At least four lines of evidence support that interpretation. First, in the overwhelming majority of its uses in the New Testament (including every other occurrence in Paul's writings), *angelos* ('messenger') refers to angels. An angel sent from Satan would, of course, be a demon. Second, the verb translated 'torment' always refers to harsh treatment from someone (Mt. 26:67; Mk. 14:65; 1 Cor. 4:11; 1 Pe. 2:20). Third, the Old Testament sometimes refers metaphorically to opponents as thorns (e.g., Num. 33:55; Josh. 23:13; Judg. 2:3; Ez. 28:24). Finally, the verb translated 'leave' in verse 8 is always used in the New Testament to speak of someone departing. Likely, then, the demonic messenger was tormenting Paul by being the indwelling spirit in the leading false apostle (cp. 2 Cor. 11:13-15; 1 Tim. 4:1). Again, this is consistent with Paul's testimony that his severest suffering came from his concern for the church (11:28-29).

(4) Unknown

It may be wise to take the view of Hughes, who observes: 'The very anonymity of this particular affliction has been ... productive of far wider blessing ... than it would have been the case had it been possible to identify ... the specific nature of the disability.'

Whatever the reality, the fact was that Paul's thorn was debilitating and, likely, humiliating. Actually, the thorn's anonymity has proven a good thing, because it allows a broad application to the afflictions that God ordains for His children.

d) God's Providence/Satan's Messenger

This verse is remarkably helpful in its balance and for the way it relates and yet distinguishes the activities of God and of Satan. Paul writes here of a distressing element in his experience and interprets it in two apparently contradictory and yet actually complementary ways. Satan's assault on Paul did not take place outside of God's will. God is sovereign over all of His creation and will use even the forces of the kingdom of darkness to accomplish His righteous purposes.

God had a purpose in it, and this was to prevent Paul from being conceited. In fact, 'there was given me' must imply that God was to be viewed as its ultimate Source. The language of gifts and giving is often used of God in the Bible, but it is nowhere said that Satan bestows any gifts. Paul was very much aware of the overall sovereignty of God. This purpose of God is very evident in the passage, for Paul says that the thorn was given to make him humble. We can hardly imagine Satan seeking to make Paul more like the humble Christ!

Paul's reference to the thorn as 'a messenger of Satan' calls to mind the early chapters of the book of Job where the Lord permits Satan to test, but not to kill, Job. God is not the direct but the indirect source of our testing; nevertheless Satan acts within the limits set by God. So then we face a kind of paradox here, but this has an echo in our own experience too. Christians in

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general recognize the overall sovereignty and loving purpose of God, but we also have some awareness of the malign designs of Satan.

The truth here about the thorn that we should all note is that while the thorn was Satan's work, it was God who allowed it. Just as God was the one who was responsible for the ecstasy of Paul's rapture to the third heaven, God was also responsible for the agony of his thorn. Divine wisdom determined that the thorn was what Paul needed, because without it the apostle would have become conceited.

This turned the argument of Paul's critics on its head, because Paul's loathsome thorn (the very thing his critics loathed in him and saw as evidence that God was not with him) was actually proof of the transcending superiority of his experience when rapture into the presence of God. What a stunning rebuke to the super-apostles who worshiped health and well being and who viewed affliction and weakness as the absence of God's blessing.

2. Paul's Prayer (12:8-9a)

a) Paul's Plea (12:8)

⁸*Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.*

This doesn't suggest, however, that Paul enjoyed his thorn in the flesh. He didn't, as evidence by his prayer. Paul would have no sympathy with those who later sought discomfort and destitution and affliction and martyrdom under the delusion that such seeking had apostolic precedent. What Paul sought was the removal of the thorn.

What Paul did about his thorn in the flesh was perfectly natural: he asked the Lord to take it away. Whichever interpretation we take of the thorn, then, we can see there was nothing wrong with praying for its removal. Paul prayed three times, perhaps following the example of Christ in Gethsemane (Mk. 14:32-42). In Luke's account (Luke 22:43), he tells us that the Father sent an angel to strengthen His Son. That this was completely consistent with his real humanity and the conditions that went with it and that it was not special enabling denied to us is clear, for an assurance was given to Paul that God's strength would be given also to him to bear this affliction. There was strength for the Savior, but also for the Savior's disciple. This is a great encouragement to us also. Strength adequate for our own trials will be given by the Lord (cp. Heb. 4:16).

Here his trio of prayers refers to a singular event in which he pled passionately that the thorn would leave him. Significantly, Paul's three prayers parallel Jesus' threefold prayer to the Father in Gethsemane that the cup of suffering be removed, and which also culminated in assurance that the prayer had been answered, even though the cup, as with the thorn, was not taken away (cp. Mk. 14:32-41). In Gethsemane, Christ Jesus pled with His heavenly Father. Here Paul pleads with Christ Jesus risen from the dead. Paul's prayer was a passionate, heart-rending plea like that of Jesus in Gethsemane to His loving Father. And Jesus, like His Father, lovingly answered 'no' to Paul.

Paul describes his spiritual struggle with the Lord about his 'thorn.' Three times he pleaded with the Lord to remove it. This brings to mind the way in which our Lord Jesus prayed three times in Gethsemane that the bitter cup of suffering before him might be removed (Mt. 26:36-44).

Paul followed the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, who, in His time of intense suffering in Gethsemane, also appealed three times to God to deliver Him (Mt. 26:36-44). Paul drew near to

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God in the intensity of his pain. ‘Implored’ translates a form of the verb *paralaleō*, which is frequently used in the Gospels by those appealing to Jesus for healing. Though God did not remove Paul’s pain, that does not mean that he did not answer Paul’s prayer; the answer was simply different from what the apostle had asked for.

Like the Lord in Gethsemane, who prayed more than once, Paul ‘prayed three times’ but to no avail. It was now a matter of submitting to the will of God as He unfolded it. The ‘thorn’ from God kept Paul from imaging himself as a spiritual superman, and revealed to him the reality of his human mortality and weakness despite his extraordinary revelations. The ‘thorn’ also kept Paul pinned close to the Lord, in trust and confidence.

Thus, we must take this to heart: Whenever Christ says no to our desperate passionate pleadings, the ‘no’ is freighted with His perfect, compassionate goodness and love. The Lord’s answers to our prayers are never negative, except in a superficial sense, because ultimately they are fully positive, bringing God’s unending blessing.

b) God’s Answer (12:9a)

⁹*But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

The Lord’s answer to Paul’s prayer was ‘No.’ Instead, he was to bear it, and he would be given the necessary grace and strength. This was a truth Paul had already taught the Corinthians in his first letter (cp. 1 Cor. 10:13). The ‘way of escape,’ more often than not, is a renewed experience of our Savior’s grace. Instead of taking the thorn away from Paul, the Lord promised, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ How priceless a promise verse 9 is for every Christian! How rewarding is any ‘thorn’ that teaches this lesson.

In response to Paul’s thrice-repeated prayer, the Lord answered; and the Greek perfect tense indicates that Paul *still* heard him saying: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Here is the ultimate revelation, which stands for all time. Paul no longer prays for the removal of the ‘thorn.’ That lies in the past. The ‘thorn’ is with him still; the Lord’s answer rings in his ears still. The grace of God is not only for the beginning of the Christian life; it is for the beginning, the middle, and the end. Through the pain of the ‘thorn,’ Paul was to learn that we get no lasting glory here, least of all through dramatic religious experiences, though they appear glorious and laden with power.

The Lord granted Paul relief not by removing his suffering but by giving him ‘grace sufficient’ to endure it. The magnificent, rich term *charis* (‘grace’) appears 155 times in the New Testament. ‘Grace’ describes God’s undeserved favor to mankind. Sadly, many evangelical churches today deny in practice the sufficiency of God’s grace for all of life’s problems, supplementing it with the humanistic theories of psychology. When God declared to Paul in answer to his prayer, ‘My grace is sufficient for you,’ He affirmed the total sufficiency of His grace for every need in life—to believe the gospel; to understand and apply the Word to all the issues of life; to overcome sin and temptation (cp. 1 Cor. 10:13); to endure suffering, disappointment, and pain; to obey God; to serve Him effectively; and to worship Him. God’s grace was sufficient for the deepest pain Paul (or any other believer) could ever experience.

Verse 9a follows the pattern known as ‘identical parallelism,’ so common in Hebrew poetry. This means that ‘grace’ and ‘power’ are here treated as virtual synonyms. So in Christian use, ‘grace’ came to be not only the attitude of God in accepting sinners for Christ’s sake apart from their merit, but, as an extension of this, God’s power operating in blessing within their hearts.

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Jesus' 'no' to Paul came in the form of an explanation and is the high point of the entire letter. This is the summit of the epistle, the lofty peak from which the whole is viewed in true proportion. The grand theme, the melodic line, of 2 Corinthians is authentic ministry as Paul describes and defends the ministry of the new covenant. And the persistent motif of authentic ministry is *power in weakness* (cp. 1:8-9; 2:14; 4:7-12; 6:4-10). Paul's utter weakness was the platform for resurrection power. Indeed, 'power in weakness' runs as a thread throughout the letter, reaching its most powerful expression here. The massed force of Paul's repeated eloquent statements of power in weakness is meant to capture our souls and make it the motif of our lives.

God not only wanted to display His grace in Paul's life, but also His power; He not only wanted the apostle to be humble, but also strong. Because 'power is perfected in weakness,' it was necessary for the fires of affliction to burn away the dross of pride and self-confidence; Paul had lost all ability, humanly speaking, to deal with the situation at Corinth. He had visited there, sent others there, and written the Corinthians letters. But he could not completely fix the situation. He was at the point when he had to trust totally in God's will and power. No one in the kingdom of God is too weak to experience God's power, but many are too confident in their own strength.

But what we most need to see is that power in weakness is shorthand for the cross of Christ. In God's plan of redemption, there had to be weakness (crucifixion) before there was power (resurrection). And this power-in-weakness connection is what Paul reflected on when he contemplated Christ's praying three times amidst His weakness and powerlessness in Gethsemane before His death on the cross, which was followed by the power of the resurrection! Paul came to understand and embrace the fact that his thorn in the flesh was essential to his ongoing weakness and the experience of Christ's ongoing power.

3. Paul's Response (12:9b-10)

a) Boast (12:9b)

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

The Lord's promise and gracious reassurance altered and transformed Paul's whole attitude to the suffering God permitted in his life. It taught him not to boast in his strength or strengths, but in his weakness and weaknesses. In this glorious paradox he discovered the secret of blessing – Christ's power then rested on him.

With this, we come to Paul's greatest boast ever. Paul feels no reticence here in boasting, no sense of playing the fool. His shyness has evaporated. Paul boasts 'all the more gladly,' with total enthusiasm. He joyously boasts of his weaknesses—his thorn as well as his beatings and hardships and sleepless nights and hunger and thirst. Why? It is the *power-in-weakness* principle—'so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.'

This is so beautiful, and we must not miss it. 'Rest upon me' is the vocabulary of the tabernacle from the time God pitched His tent with His people (cp. Ex. 40:34-35). It is also the language used of Jesus when 'the Word became flesh and dwelt [literally, *pitched His tent*] among us' (John 1:14). So here in 2 Corinthians 12:9b, Paul employs the same awesome image to teach that the all-powerful Christ 'pitches His tent' with His people in their weakness. Life is not as it appears to be. Christ pitches His tent with the weak and the unknown, the suffering shut-in, the anonymous pastor and missionary, the godly, quiet servants in the home and the marketplace.

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There is a ‘power’ that brings elation; but it is the power of the flesh, not the power of Christ. It is the newcomers’ ‘power-in-power,’ as exemplified in their claim to be ‘above’ (*hyper*) Paul in missionary travel, ecstasy, and revelations. The power of Christ is rather power-in-weakness. This is not merely a warm ‘devotional thought.’ It is at the very heart of the gospel and the argument of this letter (cp. 1:8; 4:7; 6:7). There is great glory; but it is not yet. It will be revealed at the end, our afflictions having drawn us closer and closer, throughout our lives, to the grace of Christ. This then, is the climax of Paul’s boasting.

b) Contentment (12:10a)

¹⁰*For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.*

This brings us to Paul’s disposition, the way he approached his life and ministry. There is no value in the endurance of hardships and indignities in themselves. There is no virtue in suffering. Everything turns on the phrase ‘for the sake of Christ.’ Only a fanatic would find contentment in self-inflicted suffering and miseries. But a Christian will find a special contentment in sufferings endured ‘for the sake of Christ.’

His words, ‘for Christ’s sake,’ perhaps indicate that he wants to distinguish between problems that may be his own fault and those that are undertaken in the context of commitment to his vocation to spread the gospel of Christ.

The two general words, ‘weaknesses’ and ‘difficulties,’ form a frame for three other expressions, ‘insults,’ ‘hardships,’ ‘persecutions,’ which would certainly be appropriate if the thorn is to be understood as the enemies and other afflictions Paul encountered in his service for Christ.

Verse 10 summarizes the truth of this passage. *Eudokeō* (‘well content’) could be translated, ‘pleased,’ or ‘delighted.’ He was thrilled with the weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties he endured for Christ’s sake, not because he was a masochist, but because when he was weak, then he was strong.

c) Motto (12:10b)

For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The final sentence of verse 10 looks like a kind of motto, summing up what Paul had found in experience and the attitude to which he had been brought. It expresses the paradox of the Christian’s experience in serving Christ. The weakness and the strength were both objective facts – he had real weakness, not just a feeling of it, and God imparted real strength to him. Not only so, but they were co-ordinate rather than consecutive experiences.

This is because such a believer understands and has taken to heart the *paradox of power*—‘For when I am weak, then I am strong.’ The spiritual math is never, ‘my weakness plus his strength equals my power.’ Rather, it is, ‘my weakness plus His strength equals His power.’ The paradox of power is: ‘For when I am weak, then I am strong.’ God doesn’t need our perceived strengths, if that is what we depend upon. He wants our weaknesses, our sufferings, our inadequacies, our disabilities, our failures, our fears. Even more, He wants us to boast of our weaknesses, so that Christ in His power will pitch His tent in us. Christ in us! That is the reward of those who serve Him with their weakness.

That was why, for Christ’s sake, he delighted in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties. When he was weak, then he was strong. This principle is neither new nor unique to

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the New Testament (Is. 40:29; cp. 2 Cor. 4:7). It is the natural consequence of God's deliberate choice of 'what is weak in the world to shame the strong' (1 Cor. 1:27). This is a principle by which to live! As we are humbled by our difficulties, so we are strengthened by our Savior's all-sufficient grace.

In some mysterious way it is within God's plan that our present existence is marked by sin and suffering. From one point of view God abhors and hates these things and will one day overthrow them. And yet is it not through the awareness of our sins that the grace of God holds us near Christ for forgiveness right through our lives? And is it not, also, in the pain of the suffering of both body and mind, that the same grace pins us closer to Christ, who says to us, 'My power is made perfect in weakness?'

More important than special – and perhaps exciting – spiritual experiences is the daily experience of our Savior's grace. Claims about spiritual experiences are not to be taken at face value: they are always to be judged and tested by the clear teaching of the Bible. While spiritual experiences may come to us at special meetings, they are just as likely, if not more so, through our proving God's promises in tough situations or in suffering. Knowing God is more important than experience-seeking. Knowing Him is more important than spiritual gifts. The best test of spiritual growth and health is our desire to know God.

Essential to true wisdom is the recognition of our weakness. Weakness is a distinct theme in both 1 and 2 Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:26-31; 2 Cor. 4:7; 12:9-10). Paradoxically, our weakness is an asset.

Having a proper perspective on trouble, trials, and suffering is the cornerstone of Christian living. Focusing all one's 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.

Paul shares the challenge that came to him through many kinds of difficulty, including weakness, hardships, and persecutions (v. 10). Our Lord Jesus made sure that the ever-present difficulties that accompany discipleship are not in small print (Lk. 9:57-62). Difficulties are inevitable for Christians wherever they live in the world. Samuel Wilkes, an eighteenth-century Christian, aptly observed, 'A Christian never falls asleep in the fire or in the water, but grows drowsy in the sunshine.' Difficulties show how securely anchored we are in our faith in God.

For next time: Read 2 Corinthians 12:11-21.