

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
January 29, 2017

Gladly Boasting in Weakness for the Glory of Christ 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

When I preach there is always a risk that someone will misunderstand my message or draw the wrong practical conclusion from it. That is certainly the case today. So let me begin with a clear statement on what I believe and what we stand for here at Bridgeway.

We believe that God heals today in response to our prayers. We believe in miracles. As you have heard me say on numerous occasions: ***We should never stop praying for healing until such time as God clearly says “No” or we die.***

My reason for declaring this once again is because someone will invariably conclude from what I say about 2 Corinthians 12 that we should simply acquiesce to disease and weakness and hardship and accept them as our “cross to bear” in life. Nothing could be farther from the truth. At the close of today’s service we will once again do what we do every week: we will pray for the sick; we will pray for healing and deliverance and restoration. And nothing I say about what the Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12 should be interpreted as suggesting that we should slack off or be less diligent in our appeals to God for healing.

Now, I hope that is clear. And here is why. While we believe in healing miracles, we are also ***realistic*** about life and suffering and the countless struggles that people face. And the simple fact of the matter is that sometimes when we pray, ***God says No***. We don’t always know why. But that is reality. So today I want to address the question: ***What are we supposed to do when God says No? How can I glorify the Lord Jesus Christ in my weakness, when in spite of my prayers for its removal, it remains?*** That is the issue that this passage raises.

My hunch is that everyone in this auditorium today will face in 2017 some unique and demanding occasion of weakness, an experience or challenge or burden or relationship that puts pressure on your ability to live faithfully for the glory of God. It may have been a tragedy you endured in 2016 or a loss of a job or the end of a marriage. If I may be allowed to use the language of Paul here in 2 Corinthians 12, each of us in our own way has to deal with “a thorn in the flesh”. And what I am calling all of us to do with our own personal “thorn” is what Paul did with his: ***Pray fervently and frequently that God would remove it, but if he doesn’t, resolve by God’s grace to gladly boast in our weakness so that the power and glory of Christ himself might be displayed in and through us.***

Some Crucial Questions

There are numerous questions and issues that arise in this passage that we don’t have time to address today. So I apologize in advance for skipping over much of what is said in this text. I want to briefly address vv. 1-6 and spend the majority of our time on vv. 7-10.

Was this an ***“out-of-the-body”*** experience? We don’t know, because not even Paul himself knew! The experience was so overwhelmingly intense and so utterly shrouded in mystery that Paul was unaware of whether he was in the body or out. Although he is not certain *how* it all happened, he is quite sure *that* it did. Note his two-fold declaration that ***“God knows”*** (in v. 2b and again in v. 3b).

What are we to make of people who speak so casually (if not flippantly) about multiple heavenly visitations that involve conversations with angels, apostles, and even Jesus? Let me be clear about one thing. I have no biblical or theological grounds for concluding that Paul’s translation into the third heaven was a singular event in the history of the church, as if to suggest that no one else in any other era has ever experienced a similar encounter. But I’m more than a little suspicious when people talk of going to heaven the way I do of going to Sonic to get a Diet Coke. Some today lay claim to heavenly transports with only slightly less frequency.

Let’s not forget that there is ***one infallible rule*** by which we may test the validity of all claims to heavenly visitations. If the person “returns” with a report that they saw or heard something that is explicitly contrary to the truths already revealed in Scripture, we are justified in concluding either that the individual has ***deliberately fabricated*** their alleged

experience or is the *naïve victim* of a religious deception. If the former be true, their lack of integrity disqualifies them from any position of leadership in the body of Christ. If the latter, their lack of maturity and spiritual discernment should likewise diminish any influence they may have gained on the strength of their now discredited claims.

What and where is “Paradise” and how does it relate to the “third heaven”? The word translated “Paradise” (*paradeisos*) is found in only two other NT texts: Luke 23:43 (in Jesus’ promise to the thief on the cross) and Revelation 2:7. As for the relation between the third heaven and paradise, observe that Paul says he was taken “*as far as* the third heaven” and “*into* Paradise” (such is a literal translation of the prepositions used). Thus the third heaven points to the height of Paul’s translation and paradise refers to the depth of it. Paradise is thus within the third heaven, the place where the disembodied believers now live in the presence of Christ.

Whatever he heard or saw, it consisted of “things that cannot be told, which man may not utter,” or more accurately, “unutterable utterances” (an interesting paradox indeed!). But is Paul saying that what he heard/saw *cannot* or merely *should not* be articulated? In other words, is Paul referring to *impossibility* or simply *impermissibility*? Was there something about what he heard that by its very nature could not be expressed or was he simply prohibited by God from telling others?

I’m inclined to believe that he heard things that *could* have been disclosed had God granted him permission to do so. Such permission, however, was not forthcoming. But if Paul was forbidden from sharing any information that he gained in Paradise, why was he taken there? What was the purpose of this remarkable journey if he could not communicate its essence to others? Evidently, whatever occurred was designed by God for Paul’s own personal benefit, to strengthen him to persevere to the end in the face of all manner of opposition and persecution.

The primary reason Paul refrains from reciting further visions and revelations isn’t because they didn’t exist or because they were uncommon in his life, but because they cannot provide verifiable evidence of the authenticity of his calling. He is determined to rely only on evidence that the Corinthians can plainly see and hear (v. 6). He preferred that the Corinthians formulate their opinion of him based on *conduct* and *character, not charisma*.

Paul would never have denied the reality of his supernatural experiences, but neither did he expect people to embrace him and submit to his authority based solely, or even primarily, on them. “Look at my life,” said Paul. “Take note of the choices I make and the suffering I’ve endured and the words I speak. Let the consistency of my *character, not the charismatic gifts* I’ve received from the Spirit, be the grounds for your judgment.”

It seems reasonable, does it not, that an experience of the magnitude Paul describes in vv. 1-4 would serve to subdue and perhaps even eradicate sinful impulses from his soul? How could sin possibly continue to exert its influence in the heart of a person who saw and heard the things Paul did? Surely anyone who has been blessed with such a stunning privilege as was Paul would forever cease to sin. Well, not exactly.

It’s nothing short of shocking that rather than being wholly sanctified by his transport into Paradise, *Paul is immediately stirred to pride*. As he reflected on his experience, it seemed only natural for him to conclude: “I must be special! No one else that I know of has entered the third heaven. There’s obviously something unique about me that captured God’s attention and warranted his favor.” In other words, *the result of his “visions and revelations” wasn’t humility but hubris, not gratitude but presumption, not holiness but arrogance*. This isn’t to say that revelatory experiences are sinful, only that Paul is.

Have you ever prayed like this: “Oh, Father in heaven, if only you would transport me into your glorious presence I am convinced that I would be able to overcome this sinful addiction with which I daily struggle. If only you would disclose to me the marvelous revelatory truths that Paul saw and heard, I would have strength to resist all sin. If only you would grant me an experience like his, I’m sure that I would be humbled beyond words and filled with gratitude to such a degree that the mere mention of sin would turn me away in disgust.” Ever prayed that prayer? I hope not.

It was *in order to prevent Paul from falling into pride* that he was given what one has called “a bridle that held him back from haughtiness.” Whatever Paul’s thorn may have been, there can be no mistake about its purpose: *“to keep me from becoming conceited”* (v. 7). The thorn was no accident. God’s hand is evident at every turn. Several questions about this “thorn” need to be answered.

First, where or from whom did the “thorn” come? What is its *source*? Observe that the subject is left unexpressed: there “was given me” (v. 7a). Most commentators recognize this as an example of what is called “the divine passive” in which God is the unidentified cause or hidden agent that accounts for certain events in human experience. It is a conventional use of the passive voice to avoid mentioning the divine name.

Had Paul wanted to say that Satan was the ultimate source, he probably would not have used the Greek verb *didōmi*, the word typically employed to indicate that God had bestowed some favor (cf. Gal. 3:21; Eph.3:8; 5:19; 1 Tim. 4:14). If Satan were the ultimate source of the thorn, more appropriate Greek words were available to express that thought (e.g., *epitithēmi*, “lay upon” [Lk. 10:30; 23:26; Acts 16:23]; *ballo*, “cast” [Rev. 2:24]; or *epiballō*, “put on” [1 Cor.7:35]).

That God is the ultimate source of the thorn is also evident from its purpose, namely, to prevent Paul from being puffed up in pride. Satan would have loved nothing more than for Paul to feel elated, elite, and arrogant as a result of his experience. ***Whatever Satan’s role in the thorn may have been, you can rest assured it wasn’t his design that Paul be kept humble!***

But if the thorn was from God, why does Paul say it was “a messenger [lit., ‘angel’] of Satan”? We must remember that God often uses the devil to accomplish his purposes (cf. Job; 1 Cor. 5:5). Although Satan and God work at cross purposes, they can both desire the same event to occur while hoping to accomplish through it antithetical results. Satan wanted to see Jesus crucified, as did God the Father (Isa. 53:10; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28), but for a different reason. The same is true in the case of Job. What Satan had hoped would destroy Job (or at least provoke him to blasphemy), God used to strengthen him.

The same is true here. Although we can’t be sure, it seems likely that the demon was not acting consciously in the service of God. Most likely by God’s secret and sovereign providence this demonic spirit was dispatched to Paul intent on oppressing and thereby hindering (or even destroying) his ministry. The *divine design*, however, was to keep Paul from sinful pride and to utilize this affliction to accomplish a higher spiritual good (cf. 12:9-10).

Note also that the *purpose* of the thorn was “to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited” (v. 7). The verb “harass”, also translated “buffet”, means “to beat or strike a blow with a fist” (cf. Mt. 26:67). The present tense of the verb may be Paul’s way of telling us that the affliction recurred periodically throughout his life and was even at this time bearing down heavily and painfully on him. This is confirmed in v. 8 where Paul says he prayed three times that he might be delivered. Perhaps the affliction had flared up on three distinct occasions when its humiliating effect would have been most evident.

Of greater importance is that the thorn was “in the flesh” (v. 7). The Greek permits either of two translations, depending on how one interprets Paul’s use of the word “flesh”. If “flesh” is a reference to his physical body or his “mortal existence,” *in* the flesh is the appropriate rendering. That is to say, the thorn was embedded in his body, as if some sort of physical malady or some experience battered his body in an extremely painful way. However, if “flesh” refers to his fallen nature, *for* the flesh or *with regard to* the flesh would be more accurate. If one adopts the second view, Paul is more likely to be describing a thorn that was relational in nature.

We now come to the question everyone asks: ***What exactly was the thorn?*** I’m not going to burden you with the numerous theories. I’ll focus only on the ones worthy of consideration.

Some argue that the thorn is simply a reference to all *the enemies of the gospel* who opposed and persecuted Paul during his evangelistic and theological labors. Alexander the coppersmith and Hymenaeus and Philetus are among the first who come to mind (see, 2 Tim. 2:17; 4:14). Taking the term “Satan” in its Hebraic sense of “adversary,” “thorn in the flesh” would be a collective and figurative expression for all of Paul’s opponents: those who contended with him and fought against him, those who cast him into prison, those who beat him, who led him away to death, etc. In effect, the “thorn” is a collective reference to all those who were responsible for the sufferings he described in 2 Corinthians 11:23-33.

Appeal is often made to 2 Corinthians 11:14-15 where Paul’s opponents are described as the “servants” (lit., “ministers”) of Satan, who is himself “an angel of light” (but note that in 12:7 the word is “messenger”, not “servant”). We are also reminded that in the LXX, the Greek translation of the OT, this word “thorn” is twice used metaphorically

of one's enemies (Num. 33:55; Ezek. 28:24). Thus, on this view when Paul speaks of his “thorn” he means something similar to our modern idiom, “a pain in the neck”.

Some get more specific and argue that the thorn refers not so much to Paul's enemies in general but to the Judaizing, anti-Paul movement which was so obviously present and active in Corinth. But I think it is unlikely Paul would have said that God gave him something as evil as the Judaizing movement. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the thorn was given to Paul immediately subsequent to the heavenly rapture. The latter occurred in 41-42 a.d., but Paul did not enter Corinth and encounter opposition there until some eight to nine years later.

Furthermore, Paul has already said in 2 Corinthians 4:7-15; 6:9-10; and 11:23-28 that *opposition and persecution are normal for every person in ministry*. No servant of Christ is exempt from such resistance. Yet, Paul describes his thorn as something *uniquely* his, given to him for a particular reason subsequent to a truly *singular* event. Is it likely that Paul would have prayed to be delivered from an experience which was the common and expected lot of all who shared his faith? I don't think so.

Most decisive against this view is that the fact that Paul says he received the thorn “fourteen years ago” (12:2). Since we know that 2 Corinthians was written in either late a.d. 55 or early 56, Paul could have received his thorn no earlier than a.d. 41-42 (at which time he would have been in his native Syria-Cilicia [Gal. 1:18,21; 2:1; Acts 9:29-30; 11:25]), a full eight years after his conversion to Christ (assuming, as most scholars do, that Paul was converted in @ 33 a.d.). Yet we know from Acts 9:23-30 and elsewhere that Paul encountered Satanically inspired opposition to his ministry from the moment of his conversion.

A few have argued that it was a speech impediment, possibly a severe stutter (10:10; 11:6). But Paul readily denies dependence on rhetorical eloquence. Furthermore, if Paul stuttered or had a more severe form of speech impediment, it was most likely something he had from childhood, at least. Yet, he says here that the thorn came in response to his heavenly experience only fourteen years earlier.

Other suggestions offered down through the centuries include epilepsy, malaria, gallstones, kidney stones, gout, deafness, dental infection, rheumatism, earaches, headaches, sciatica, arthritis, and leprosy (has anything been left out?!). Many have adopted the view that Paul suffered from a severe case of *ophthalmia* or *conjunctivitis*. In Galatians 4:13-15 he said,

“You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What then has become of the blessing you felt? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me” (Gal. 4:13-15).

Evidently Paul suffered from a painful eye affliction that was especially humiliating, because loathsome and repulsive to others. Although the statement in v. 15 may only be figurative, emphasizing the sacrificial love the Galatians had for Paul, it is just as likely an indication that this distressing illness from which he suffered was related to his eyes. We should also note that Paul closes his letter to the Galatians by saying, “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand” (6:11), a statement consistent with his suffering some sort of ophthalmic disorder.

In conclusion, there was great pastoral wisdom in Paul's decision not to identify the thorn in the flesh. If he had been any more specific as to its nature, those who themselves never suffered from the same affliction could easily conclude that the passage has no bearing on their lives. But in leaving the door open, so to speak, concerning the nature of the thorn, each of us is able to identify with Paul's struggle and to learn and grow from the way in which he yielded to the sovereignty and sufficiency of divine grace. And to that we now turn our attention.

How to Respond when God says No

So, are you feeling *weak* today? I'm not talking about your weakness for chocolate or alcohol or your weakness for sexual lust or any such thing. ***The weakness I have in mind is not sin.*** It has nothing to do with your refusal to obey God or your propensity for jealous rage or greed or your disinclination to forgive someone who betrayed you. The apostle Paul would never boast in wickedness or gladly acquiesce to evil in any form (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9-10). Weakness should never be equated with laziness, mediocrity, or passivity.

Weakness means being “so utterly burdened” beyond your strength that you despair of life itself (2 Cor. 1:8), and this for no other reason than that you chose to be faithful to the gospel of Christ. Weakness means embracing your identity as a “jar of clay” (2 Cor. 4:7) so that all power may be seen as belonging to God, not you. Weakness does not mean suffering the consequences for your dishonesty or deceit, but enduring affliction and persecution and perplexity in order that the life of Jesus might be manifest in your body (2 Cor. 4:8-11).

For Paul, weakness meant exposure to a litany of undeserved dangers (2 Cor. 11:26) and an embarrassing nighttime escape (2 Cor. 11:32-33). Weakness was what he felt anytime the thorn launched another painful, debilitating, or humiliating assault against him. Weakness is suffering financial hardship (6:10; 1 Cor. 4:11) in the course of ministry. Weakness is feeling deep within one’s soul and body the frailty of creatureliness and one’s utter inadequacy to accomplish anything apart from the fresh and sustaining supply of power and grace.

Weakness means enduring insults without retaliation (2 Cor. 12:10) and suffering calamity without bitterness (2 Cor. 12:10). ***Weakness means any experience or event that requires incessant conscious dependence on the strength that God supplies.*** Weakness means any situation or circumstance, in the service of Christ, that is difficult to bear and is beyond your control and cannot be avoided without sinning.

That’s what I mean by *weakness*. But how or why should one “boast” in weakness? Paul’s answer is that because without it we never experience the fullness of divine power. Weakness can be good because without it mercy remains a mystery. Paul was content with his weakness because it compelled him to look beyond himself for answers and thus magnified the sufficiency of divine grace.

There is nothing to suggest that Paul enjoyed the thorn or was happy about its presence. He was repelled by it and longed for deliverance. He is initially unaware of any spiritually profitable use or sanctifying power in the thorn. It was clearly something that he believed was too oppressive to bear, thus his repeated prayer for its removal.

When the Lord Jesus told Paul that his “power is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9) he did not mean that in its absence power was defective or deficient, but that in response to our conscious dependence upon him, when weakness welcomes God’s intervention, it is afforded a great opportunity to be seen as sufficient and sustaining. ***Divine power performs at its best and reaches its optimal expression in relation to our conscious confession of the inability to do anything of value apart from his gracious presence.***

Thus, God’s supply is a never-ending flow, a self-replenishing river of spiritual resources to equip and uphold and sustain us in the midst of every weakness. There are several important lessons Paul learned, and I hope we learn them as well.

First, he learned something about divine providence and how to respond to it. His reaction in v. 9, once the Lord had declined his request three times, was not one of passive resignation to an inexorable fate, but a ***joyful delight*** in the privilege of being an instrument for the manifestation of Christ’s resurrection power.

Second, although Paul willingly embraced his thorn, it was only ***after*** he had passionately prayed that it be removed. Clearly, he believed that physical affliction was something from which we are to pray to be delivered. At one level, the thorn was the work of Satan’s messenger and must therefore be resisted. At another level, it was used by God to sanctify the soul of Paul. Whereas pain is ***not inherently good*** (and only a perverse soul would think otherwise), it can be ***instrumentally beneficial*** in the hands of a good God.

Third, in “gladly” (v. 9b) acquiescing to weakness Paul does not mean that we are to seek out suffering on our own. He is not encouraging morbid, self-imposed anguish or asceticism. His affliction was God-given, for Christ’s sake. ***Paul’s joy was not in pain but in his experiential realization of the complete adequacy of God’s grace in Christ to meet his every need in spite of it and to transform his weakness into an opportunity for the glory of Christ to be displayed.***

Fourth, Paul anticipated that the power of Christ might “rest upon” him (v. 9b). This is a rendering of a verb, found only here in all of biblical Greek. Related terms are often used of God “pitching his tent” among his people (see Ex. 40:34) and of the Incarnate Christ “dwelling” among us (John 1:14; cf. Rev. 7:14; 12:12; 13:6; 21:3). Christ’s abiding

and sustaining presence is experienced not so much in ecstasy as in weakness, not in moments when we feel strong but when his power has its greatest opportunity to be seen.

Fifth, Paul learned that his spiritual purity was more important to God than his immediate physical pleasure. Of greater value to God than Paul's comfort was Paul's holiness. If, in the divine wisdom, it was necessary to give him pain in order to protect him from pride, Paul was willing to yield to the divine purpose. If, in the wisdom of God, the best way to make Paul humble was to make him hurt, so be it.

Sixth, so much of what passes for contemporary Christianity speaks often of strength and triumph and victory, but not in the sense in which Paul does. For them it means *avoidance* of hardship and *deliverance* from weakness. For him it means *perseverance in* hardship and unyielding faith *in spite of* weakness. In the case of the former, we are seen as strong and smart and worthy of praise. In the case of the latter, Christ alone is center stage.

The *triumphalism* present in first-century Corinth and so prevalent in our own day has redefined Christianity so that it promises to the unsuspecting soul freedom from affliction, freedom from suffering, and an ever available and always victorious deliverance into some nebulous higher and undoubtedly more prosperous and pain free life. Paul, on the other hand, was “happy” or “well-pleased” (v. 10) with what they would consider a curse, namely, “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities” (v. 10b). For only then, and by means of the incessant supply of grace, was Christ magnified.

Seventh, the ultimate aim of God in orchestrating our weakness, whether by means of a messenger of Satan, annoying circumstances, or long-held dreams that come to naught, is to glorify the sufficiency of the grace and power of his Son. *Can God magnify Christ by providing escape from suffering and triumph over trials? Yes! And each time he does we must give him thanks and praise. But when he doesn't, but instead chooses to fill us with power and joy in knowing that our weakness is a platform for his praise, we must also give thanks and praise.*

Concluding Prayer

“Father, we know that you are a healing God whose power is without limit and whose heart is inclined to do good things for us, your children. We ask that you would deliver us from our weakness, be it physical disease, emotional distress, financial pressure, or relational strain. But if not, if for whatever mysterious reason your answer at this moment is either No or Wait, may our weakness and dependence upon you become a platform on which the sufficiency of the grace and sustaining power of Jesus Christ can be seen. Amen.”