

## **Sermon 7/8/18 II Corinthians 12:1-10 The Weaker I Get, the Stronger I Become**

Dear Strong in the Lord:

Have you ever had a really exhilarating experience that you could not explain or put into words?

When I look back at the special moments in my life there were experiences that I had that were hard to describe with words...

- Being present at the birth of my children
- Watching my son, Casey, pull in a 35 inch musky last August
- Graduating from Seminary after years of study and sacrifice
- Having my eyes span the horizon of the Great Plains the first time as I crossed the Missouri River in South Dakota enjoying the wide open spaces

What exhilarating experience have you had in your life that stopped you in your tracks...that was hard to explain because you were so overcome by the beauty of the moment?

The Apostle Paul had one of these special experiences in his life. As he wrote this letter to the Christians in Corinth he explains briefly what it was.

- He speaks of the visions and revelations that he had received from the Lord
  - Galatians 1:12 **“I received – the gospel – by revelation from Jesus Christ.”**
  - Galatians 2:2 **“I went – to Jerusalem – in response to a revelation...”**
  - Ephesians 3:3 **“The mystery – of God’s grace – made known to me by revelation.”**
- He then describes one special moment where he traveled to heaven
  - v2 Paul speaks of himself in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person **“I know a man...”**
  - v2 He says he was caught up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven
  - the 1<sup>st</sup> heaven would be earth’s atmosphere Gen 8:2
  - the 2<sup>nd</sup> heaven is space Gen 15:5
  - the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven is the abode of God I Kgs 8:30
- Paul doesn’t know how he got there v2 **“in body or out of body”**
  - He only knows he was caught up into heaven and God knows the details
  - Paul says he **“was caught up to Paradise...heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.”** V4

Paul was so overwhelmed by this experience that he could not put into words what he saw because he was not permitted to do so. Since he did not know exactly how he was caught up into heaven – whether in the body or out of it – perhaps he would have had a hard time explaining the whole experience anyways.

Why would Paul share this experience with us?

Why would the Lord direct Paul to put this experience into the Bible for our learning and faith?

Paul is sharing this experience with the Corinthians as part of the defense of his ministry.

There were false prophets in Corinth who were leading the believers there astray. These false prophets took offense at Paul when Paul pointed out their false teachings.

Therefore, Paul was attacked by these false teachers. These false prophets tried to discredit Paul and his ministry. For the sake of the Gospel, Paul responded by reminding them that he was called by God as an apostle. Paul reminds the false prophets that the Lord chose him to be the leader in the church and that the Lord had given him visions and revelations.

Furthermore, the Lord had taken Paul to heaven. Paul is saying that he has seen and heard things that nobody else has experienced.

Paul is saying this to show his credentials as an apostle and servant of God. For the sake of the truth...the truth of the Gospel...Paul shares this experience with the Corinthians and reminds them who is the true spokesmen for God.

Was Paul boasting by sharing this experience? What does he say?

V1f **“I must go on boasting...to visions and revelations from the Lord...I will boast...but I will not boast about myself...”**

- Paul is boasting about what the Lord has done in his life
- Paul is boasting about the power of the Lord in his life that gave him these visions and revelations
- Paul says if I boast about anything regarding myself...I will boast about my weaknesses.

Paul had to tell the Corinthians about this trip to heaven he took because...

- his credibility was under assault by the false teachers
- his message of the Gospel was being questioned as having come from God
- it was the truth - v6 “Even if I should choose to boast, I would be speaking the truth.”

Paul was conscious about being misunderstood. He knew people may think he is boasting about himself. He says: "...I will not boast about myself...so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say."

What Paul is saying here about himself I liken to what Lou Gehrig said in July of 1939 when he was honored at Yankee stadium for his great baseball career. Gehrig at every reason to boast about himself before the cheering crowd. He was the best baseball player of his day and he had to retire because of an illness which would take his life in less than 2 years. But as he stood before the fans at Yankee stadium he said: "Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth."

Paul is telling the Corinthians what I have received from God – the visions, the revelations, the trip to heaven – is by God's grace not my own ability or strength. I consider myself to be the most blessed person on the face of the earth.

I often wonder what Paul exactly heard when he was in heaven.

He says in v4 I **"...heard inexpressible things, things that man in not permitted to tell."**

Paul was certainly blessed by the Lord, as we are, too.

Think of what the Lord has done for us....We haven't seen visions, revelations or heaven as Paul did while he was on earth, but consider how we have been blessed by the Lord.

Perhaps one of the most familiar passages in the Bible is John 3:16. Most if not all of us could recite that passage from memory. Max Lucado has written a book entitled 3:16. The book is all about his one passage in the Bible.

### **3:16**

Lucado writes about this one passage: *"A twenty-six-word parade of hope: beginning with God, ending with life...Brief enough to write on a napkin or memorize in a moment, yet solid enough to weather two thousand years of storms and questions. If you know nothing of the Bible, start here. If you know everything in the Bible, return here. We all need the reminder. The heart of the human problem is the heart of the human. And God's treatment is prescribed in John 3:16. He loves. He gave. We believe. We live."* P. 8 3:16

How we have been blessed by the Lord...May each one of us say like Paul "I will not boast about myself but about what the Lord has done for me."

May each one of us modify Lou Gehrig's statement and say..."I am the most blessed person on the face of the earth."

The story is told of Martin Luther on his death bed. Luther was experiencing severe headaches and pain all over his body. He was offered medicine to relieve his pain but he declined and said: *"My best prescription for head and heart is that God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."* p. 10 3:16  
The Apostle Paul knew all about pain...physical and spiritual. Paul knew all about the hardships of life. Look at v 10 and see what Paul says he experienced in life:

**"...weaknesses...insults...hardships...persecutions...difficulties..."**

Lucado says: *"Life at times appears to fall to pieces, seems irreparable."* P. 21 3:16

Paul shares with us one particular time when his life was shattered perhaps into many pieces.

He writes in v7ff *"...there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me."*

Why would the Lord allow Paul to endure this? Paul says: *"To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations..."* v7  
God sent this "thorn" to keep Paul humble. God has a reason for sending this "thorn" to Paul which Paul says was a "messenger of Satan." Like Job's suffering, Satan was the immediate cause but God was the ultimate cause.

What was this "thorn" Paul experienced? We are not sure because Paul does not identify it.

Bible students and scholars have offered their suggestions....they are...

- some physical illness – malaria, epilepsy, an eye disease - Gal 4:13-15
- a demon influencing the false teachers who were causing trouble for Paul in Corinth

Whatever this "thorn" was, Paul says he asked the Lord three times to remove it from his life.

Whatever this "thorn" was it seemed to be hampering Paul's Gospel work among the people.

What are you praying for right now for God to remove in your life?

- physical pain

- emotional pain
- spiritual pain
- pain caused by another person

### **What “thorn” are you dealing with right now?**

Has the Lord taken it away for you?

Like Paul, we may long to be relieved from whatever pain we are experiencing.

- Paul “pleaded” with the Lord...please take this pain from me...
- This was an earnest appeal on Paul’s part
- Relief from the pain is what Paul desired, so do we!!!

What was the Lord’s answer to Paul? V9 The Lord told Paul: **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”** One commentator said about the Lord’s answer to Paul: *“The Lord’s words are still ringing in Paul’s ears and glowing in his heart. It was an answer which cleared his mind, tempered his feelings, steeled his will.”* P. 295 Ministers of Christ – Meyer

The Lord told Paul: **“My grace is enough for you....for your work...for your life.** To be rid of your pain is not necessary...I will not relief your pain but I will give you my strength.”

- My grace is “sufficient” = constantly available to you
- Paul took no pleasure in the pain but rejoiced in the power of Christ

God’s power shows up in weak people...people like you and me.

- we rely on God not our own energy and effort
- our weaknesses help develop our faith and dependence upon God
- “But by the grace of God I am what I am...” I Corinthians 15:10
- “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” Philippians 4:13
- “...struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.” Colossians 1:29

Paul says our frail human bodies are like earthen vessels...clay pots...that are cheap, breakable and replaceable.

Paul says: **“We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”** I Cor 4:8-9

Why...why do we keep going...why are we not destroyed? Paul says: “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed...” I Cor 4:10

The clay pots that were breakable and replaceable in Paul's day were used as a place to store valuables like money, jewelry and important documents. What do we carry around in our body?

Answer: The death and life of Jesus – the Gospel of forgiveness of sin, eternal life and God's grace given to us.

God uses us...frail and expendable as we are...for His work of the Gospel.

God's power overcomes and transcends us the "clay pots."

Paul's weakness did not cripple him but strengthened him.

Through Paul's weakness Christ was put on display. Paul says his suffering was...

- the source of his power because he relied on God
- an opportunity for God's power to shine through

When we are riding high in life we may be tempted to rely on our own strength, abilities and resources...which may lead to pride in ourselves.

Paul was not boasting about himself. He viewed himself as lowly, common, expendable and replaceable. Paul said: "I am glad to boast about how weak I am...the less I have the more I depend on God."

When we are weak, when we have God filling us with His power, then we are strong.

Lucado says: *Life at times appears to fall to pieces...but it's going to be okay.*

*How can you know? Because God so loved the world. And...*

- *Since God has no needs, you cannot tire him*
- *Since God is without age, you cannot lose him*
- *Since God has no sin, you cannot corrupt him*

*If God can make a billion galaxies, can't he make good out of our bad and sense out of our faltering lives? P. 21-22 3:16*

**For when I am weak, then I am strong!**