

“Thorn in the Flesh,” 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 (Eighth Sunday After Pentecost, August 4, 2019)

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 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. ⁵On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— ⁶though 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. ⁷So 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. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

PRAY

We have almost finished our summer study in the book of 2 Corinthians, and two things stand out in our passage today which, I think it’s fair to say, is probably the most familiar passage to many of us in the book. If you knew anything at all about 2 Corinthians before we starting looking at it back in May, you knew about verses 2-4, where Paul talks about being “caught up to the third heaven” and you knew about verse 7, where Paul talks about “a thorn ... in the flesh.”

Perhaps you’d heard about those things, but you weren’t sure what they mean because they are kind of mysterious. Paul is, in fact, deliberately vague on some details here in chapter twelve.

Nevertheless, we can answer two questions from this text. The first question is *how should we think of powerful spiritual experiences?* That’s where we’ll look at Paul’s experience in the third heaven. The second question is *how should Christians think of suffering?* That’s where we’ll look at the thorn in the flesh. And then we will invite all believers to take the Lord’s Supper.

First, how should we think of powerful spiritual experiences? Let’s read verses 1-4: “I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 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.”

Paul tells us that fourteen years prior to writing 2 Corinthians, which would have been around the year A.D. 43, he had a spiritual experience. And what an experience it was. He was caught up to heaven. Literally, “the third heaven.” In Jewish cosmology the first heaven consisted of the air around you where the birds fly, the second heaven consisted of what we’d call outer space, the realm of the sun, moon, and stars, while the third heaven was the unseen realm where

God has his throne. Don't think of "the third heaven" as some place on top of the second heaven, or as located somewhere in outer space on the other side of Jupiter or something like that. Think of it as another dimension of existence that is right here with us, that runs parallel to our dimension, but we do not have the ability to access.

Paul was taken to the throne room of God, to paradise. He doesn't know if it was a vision and his soul migrated into the third heaven, or if he went there physically, but it really happened. While in paradise, Paul heard amazing things, glorious things, and either these things were secrets that were meant just for him or they were so wondrous that human language couldn't express them. You could take verse four either way. Then Paul came back to earth.

Throughout church history Christians have had powerful spiritual experiences where the Lord opened up heaven and did something spectacular for them. None perhaps quite so profound as Paul's trip to heaven, but nevertheless extraordinary, and I love reading these stories.

I'll share with you two of my favorites. Blaise Pascal was one of the greatest mathematicians that ever lived. In 1645 he invented the world's first calculator. His father was a tax collector in France and had to perform laborious arithmetical calculations by hand, so Pascal designed a machine to help him in his work. Pascal was a genius, one of the most profoundly intelligent men who has ever lived. Toward the end of his life (and he only lived to be 39) he became a deeply spiritual, Christian man.

After he died they found sewed into the inside of his coat a slip of paper, and on it he had written about an experience that transformed him, and this is what it said: "This year of Grace 1654, Monday, 23d of November ... from about half past ten at night, to about half past midnight, FIRE. GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. GOD of Jesus Christ. My God and your God. Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except GOD."

For two hours God opened up heaven and overwhelmed Blaise Pascal with his love.

Another account from about a century later, January 1742. The Great Awakening of New England, with God using the preaching of Jonathan Edwards as an engine, was reaching its peak. Thousands were being converted all over the country. Edwards was away out of town for two weeks preaching in other churches, but his wife Sarah remained at home in Northampton, Massachusetts. At a gathering with houseguests for mid-morning prayers, Sarah suddenly found herself overcome with a euphoria and sense of peace that "was altogether inexpressible." These raptures continued and increased over the course of the next two weeks, so that Sarah experienced a "ravishing sense of the unspeakable joys of the upper world." During these days she was often overcome physically, so that she might involuntarily rise up out of her chair or feel so transported that she would faint. Yet these experiences didn't confine her to bed. She ran the household and did chores the whole time, but she was so overcome with joy she believed she could endure anything, even disaster for her family, which was her greatest fear, abuse, or martyrdom.

You read church history and you'll find lots of accounts of spiritual experiences such as these, and there's no reason why they can't happen today.

But there are three lessons from 2 Corinthians 12 about these experiences that I think we really need to hear. *First, when an experience like this does happen, the recipient of it is always reluctant to talk about it.* The only reason we know about Pascal's experience is because that paper was found on him after he died. He never told anyone about it. The only reason we know about Sarah Edwards' experience is because when her husband Jonathan returned home, he wrote about it and included the account in one of his books. Even then Jonathan didn't record her name. Scholars later on figured out that he was writing about Sarah.

Paul clearly didn't want to talk about his experience. Paul doesn't say, "Let me tell you what happened to me fourteen years ago." In verse 2 Paul simply says, "I know a man in Christ ...". That's it. Paul describes this experience in the third person, in such a way so that unless you read it carefully, you can't be sure he is talking about himself.

Let me be clear: Paul is not reluctant to talk about Jesus. He is not reluctant to talk about the gospel. He went all around the world proclaiming the good news that God became a man in Jesus Christ and died on the cross in our place for our sins, that the grave could not hold Jesus, and if you would only trust in Christ you would be reconciled to God and experience his perfect love and care forever. He'd tell anyone that.

But this experience was too personal, too powerful, for him to talk about. In fact, we know nothing about it, except what's included in these verses. We don't know any details. We certainly don't know what it is Paul heard in heaven. When something like this happens to you, the last thing you want to do is brag about it.

Second, if such an experience does happen, it doesn't give you any kind of special authority over other people. It's a real problem inside Christianity. People try to exercise influence over other Christians because of an experience they've had or claim to have had. They approach other believers and say, "I've had this vision, or this dream, or I can speak in tongues or have the gift of healing, therefore you need to listen to me and follow me."

We hear stories all the time about people going into heaven just like Paul did, do we not? Someone gets into a car accident and at the hospital is declared legally dead. Ninety minutes later, they are revived, and soon thereafter they begin to tell the people around them that during that ninety minutes they'd entered heaven and seen God. They begin to speak in churches about their experience, they write a book about it, the book turns into a major motion picture, and all of the sudden they become a spiritual authority for other people.

Now, maybe they did die and go to heaven, or maybe they didn't. It's impossible for us to know. But here's the lesson: just because someone claims to have had this kind of experience does not require you to pay any more attention to their instruction or advice than you would anybody else.

Paul was an apostle. He had authority over the Christians in Corinth and, indeed, all over the world. But he never said, "You've got to listen to me because I've been to the third heaven."

Instead, he says he doesn't want anyone thinking "more of me than he sees in me or hears from me." 2 Corinthians 12:6c. That's the test.

Paul says, "My authority as an apostle is not grounded in me having this experience. I was an apostle before this experience ever happened. And if I have had an experience it should show up in my character. If you listen to me it must be because you look at my life and say, 'That man has been with God.' Examine my life, listen to my arguments from Scripture, but don't follow me or anyone else because I say I've had an experience! People can be deluded or confused. It happens all the time!"

There are people in our community who will come up to you and say, "I had a dream about this, and this is what you have to do." Or they'll say "God told me that you must do" this or that with your life. Maybe they are sincere, maybe they aren't. But the point is you are free to do what they say and you're free to ignore them. Someone tried to pull that on Charles Spurgeon once. Spurgeon, the most famous preacher of the 19th century, was walking down a London street one day when a man he didn't know came up to him and said, "Mr. Spurgeon, God told me that I am supposed to preach at your church this Sunday." Spurgeon had a congregation of five thousand people. This would have been a big deal. But Spurgeon's reply was perfect. He said, "Well sir, when God tells *me* that, you can." Needless to say, that man didn't preach in his church on that Sunday or any other. That's how you deal with that kind of nonsense.

Third lesson: we aren't commanded to seek out these powerful experiences. As best I can tell from my reading of the Bible and church history and my time as a pastor, these kinds of spiritual experiences don't happen to all Christians and the reason why they happen to some and not to others is hidden inside the counsel of God. We just don't know.

Who wouldn't want to be overwhelmed for days or weeks with joy from heaven? I would love for it to happen to me. But nowhere in the Bible are we promised an experience nor are we commanded to seek that out. I'm not talking about the singing we just finished doing, the joy that comes from fellowship. I'm talking about these experiences – we are not commanded to seek them.

You know what we are commanded to seek? "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law." Galatians 5:22-23. We are commanded to seek the fruit of the Spirit, but that fruit just isn't as exciting as getting caught up to the third heaven, is it? But it's so much more important. The fruit of the Spirit is guaranteed to make us more like Jesus, while an experience is not.

Friends, if you spend your time seeking an experience instead of seeking to obey God and glorify him by how you love and serve others, you know what you're like? You're like a man who wants to be physically intimate with a woman without committing yourself to her. You're just after the sensation. That kind of behavior does not honor women, nor does just seeking an experience honor the Lord.

If those are the lessons we are to learn, then why does Paul bring up this spiritual experience in the first place? Paul himself says in verse 1: "Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will

go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.” If Paul really means that, then why does he talk about it?

That gets us to the second question: how should Christians think of suffering? For Paul’s third heaven experience to make any sense, you must remember the context of the last part of the book of 2 Corinthians. The point Paul makes over and over again is how he will boast in his weaknesses. We see it in 11:30, where he writes, “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” He says the same thing in 12:9.

So what does Paul’s incredible spiritual experience have to do with him boasting in his weaknesses? Verse 7 tells us: “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.”

Paul went to heaven and heard amazing things. Maybe he needed to hear the revelations. He’s the apostle who basically wrote the New Testament. I hope he did hear amazing things.

But give that kind of experience to anyone, including Paul, who was a sinner, a proud man, a gifted man, and you’re asking for trouble. You’re asking for him to become conceited, insufferable, arrogant, and impossible to deal with.

To keep these revelations from wrecking Paul and destroying his ministry, God gave him a thorn. We don’t know what the thorn was. A thousand Ph. D dissertations have been written on this topic, but its precise nature remains a mystery. The one thing we do know is that the thorn, whatever it was, weakened Paul. You might even say this thorn crippled him in some capacity. It was so bad we read in verse 8 Paul pleaded with the Lord to take it away, but the Lord refused.

There are those who say believers aren’t supposed to suffer. That if you’re suffering it means you’re doing something wrong as a Christian. You’re not living by faith, or you’re not claiming the promises. Don’t believe them. God allowed Paul to suffer and feel weak, and he will allow us to also.

Why? For the same reasons. *We are a danger to ourselves as long as we feel strong.* We feel like we don’t need other people, we don’t have to take advice, and we have it all figured out. We will make foolish decisions. People who feel strong are proud, and as Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

And it also makes us a danger to others. When you’re proud, you’ll feel like you don’t have to be patient with others, you don’t have to be considerate with others, and you can just use them for your own ends. ***But no one can feel strong and proud in the midst of being brought to their knees by suffering.***

On Sunday, September 9, 2001, the churches of New York City were pretty much empty. The Sunday after, September 16, 2001, the churches were full of worshipers. I’ve heard from more than one person who lived there at the time that some churches had to spontaneously announce second and third morning services on that day to accommodate all the people.

What happened to bring about that change? The September 11 attacks. And these proud New Yorkers, many of whom hadn't thought about God in a long, long time *suddenly felt weak*. They had a thorn, and they cried out for help.

I'm not saying, by the way, that all those people died on September 11 just to get other people to go to church. Who knows what a sovereign God purposed when he allowed that evil to happen? My point is this: nothing in my life makes me feel my need of God's grace and mercy, and nothing in my life prompts me to show it to others, like feeling weak (whether because of sickness, or professional setback, or a family issue I have no control over), and I know every time God allows it to happen *it's a good thing for me. It humbles me and draws me closer to him.*

Let's read verse 7 once more: "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." I really like how the old King James verse translated verse 7 – it didn't say "harass" but "buffet." The Greek word literally means to knock something about as if it's being struck by a strong gust of wind.

My wife and I lived in Louisiana when Hurricane Katrina hit. We weren't right on the coast, we were inland a bit, but we still got a lot of wind. At the height of the storm I walked out in my yard and it was all I could do to stand up straight. I was buffeted by the wind. But I went and stood under the one big tree in my yard, and when I did I found I could stand out in the wind.

We live in a modern world where it's possible to go for years and feel like you're able to stand all your own. When you feel weak, there's a pill for that, or a drink for it, or you can distract yourself with TV or a vacation. But there is a storm coming for all of us, and one day if you are standing only on our own two feet it will blow you away. You need something to hold onto, and there's only one tree that's going to stand no matter what. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles ..."
Galatians 3:13-14.

Friends, only by trusting in the work of Jesus on the cross, who proved God's love for you by dying for you, can you stand in the storms of life and death. *And when the winds of suffering buffet you now, it's to remind you that ultimately your only refuge is found at the foot of the cross.* That's why Paul can say, "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." ²
Corinthians 12:10. The only way to be strong is by clinging to the cross in weakness.

We're going to take the Lord's Supper now. We invite all believers to participate with us in the Lord's Supper, whether you're a member of this church or not. Whether you've been baptized or not. Even if you started believing in Jesus during this service. But in the Lord's Supper we remember not only that Jesus saves, but that he saves by becoming weak, by being despised, by letting sinful men break his body and pour out his blood on our behalf. If you're a believer,

don't be surprised when you feel weak. Instead, use it to remind you to run to the cross and get more grace, and then you'll be stronger than you can possibly imagine. PRAY