

Boasting In Our Weakness

A Sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Preached by Paul Liberati, May 2, 2021

Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me – 2 Cor. 12:9

Every once in a while we find ourselves in the very difficult situation of having to maintain two seemingly incompatible aspects of our Christian calling. Most of the time this takes place in the context of a stewardship responsibility where, at any given time, we may have to *both* defend our authority *and* maintain our humility. In my experience this is one of the most challenging aspects of the Christian life and yet it's something that each of us, at one time or another, will have to wrestle with for himself.

For example this is the line that husbands are called to walk when we exercise our stewardship responsibility in relation to our wives. This is the line that mothers and fathers walk as they exercise their responsibility in relation to their children. It applies to business owners and supervisors. It applies to judges and civil magistrates. And of course, this is something that applies to the officers of the Church of Jesus Christ. In every one of these positions, we are called to exercise legitimate, God-given authority and, at the same time, maintain true humility.

In the big picture that describes the tension that we have in the context of our passage. In these verses, the apostle Paul is at the tail end of a section in this epistle where he's reinforcing his apostolic authority. And yet we can see that, as he does so, he is very careful to maintain his humility before the Lord Jesus Christ.

To appreciate the tension that Paul is dealing with we need to understand something about the background to this epistle. By the time Paul wrote this letter he knew

that a group of judaizers had come into the church and were causing trouble in the Corinthian congregation. In fact, Paul says that they came in with a different spirit, they were preaching a different Jesus, and trying to convince the people of God to embrace a very different gospel message. In the process of all that they knew that, if they would be successful, they first of all had to undermine Paul's apostolic authority. And so they did. They not only challenged his credentials but they also tried to exalt themselves in the eyes of all the people.

That put Paul in a very difficult situation because, as an apostle of Jesus Christ, he knew that he had a stewardship responsibility to protect the Corinthians from the dangers of false doctrine. And so, in a very real way, he had to meet the challenge of his opponents almost *tit-for-tat* and *point-for-point*. You can see that in chapter 11, where he sets out to prove that there was nothing that these men could claim about themselves that gave them any real advantage over Paul himself. He says, "*Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I.*"

You see Paul could go *tit-for-tat* with these men all the way down the line; and yet the truth is that he only did it because it was absolutely necessary; the situation demanded that kind of response.

Well then, our text this morning Paul is continuing in the same course. And from what he says in verse 1 you get the impression that the judaizers were boasting in much more than their national heritage. In fact, if Paul is still involved in the *point-for-point* comparison that he began in chapter 11 then it seems that, in some way, these men were also boasting in their personal spiritual experiences. So in verse 1 Paul says, *I will now come to visions and revelations of the Lord.*

But again, notice that even as he continues in his defense, Paul is very careful not to exalt himself in the process. You can see that because in verses 2-6, he talks about his visions and revelations of the Lord *in the third person*. In verse 2 he says *I know a man in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven*. In verses 3 and 4 he says, *I know a man who*

was caught up into paradise. And then again in verse 5 he says, *Of such a man I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast.*

Now, Paul's language here is confusing for many people. In fact, because he speaks so consistently in the third person some commentators question whether Paul is really talking about himself. However, I think we can know he is because in verse 7 he switches back to the first person and never changes the subject. And so the grammar should not confuse us. But what should amaze us is that, even though Paul did have these exalted spiritual experiences, he was very reluctant to talk about them with other people.

I think it's fair to say that if you and I were there, and we had these kinds of experiences we would have already told just about everyone that we know. And yet Paul didn't do that. In fact, in verse 2 he says that he kept his own experience concealed in his own heart for *more than 14 years*. The very fact that he did that tells us that Paul didn't believe those kinds of personal spiritual experiences added any real benefit to the gospel ministry.

That's very different from the way people think today. In fact, today, many Christians are almost entirely preoccupied with things like visions and Revelations and stories about people who died and went to heaven, or died and went to hell, and came back to tell the story. Most of the time they decide to write a book to provide the world with all the colorful details of "what they saw" and "what they heard." What's interesting, however, is that in this passage Paul provides us with none of those details. In fact he says that, even if he wanted to, he could not share the details of his experience. And why was that?

Well in the first place, he says that there were some very basic things about his experience that he didn't even understand. In verses 2 and 3, he says that he didn't know whether he was *in the body* or *out of the body*, or what was going on. He says "*only God knows.*" But also, he says that, when it came to the things he did hear, and he did understand, he was not permitted to share them. In verse 4 he calls them inexpressible words "*which it is not lawful for a man to utter.*" So once again we see that the only reason

Paul tells us anything about his experience in the first place is that the situation at hand compelled him to do so.

And in verse 6, he really confirms that for us. There he says that if he wanted to he could tell us a whole lot more than he actually does. And he says that no man could say he was crazy because everything that he *would* say would be true. But instead, he purposely holds back. And the reason for that is that the last thing he wants to do is exalt himself in the eyes of other men.

As you think about the tension that Paul is holding and the restraint that he's exercising in this moment, you begin to realize what an amazing display of Christ-like humility this really is. And I would remind us that in this passage Paul is giving us an example to follow. He is warning us about the danger of exalting ourselves in the eyes of men. And do you know, brothers and sisters, that the only way you and I can avoid the tendency of exalting ourselves in other men's eyes, is if we first of all learn to stop exalting ourselves *in our own*?

You see as long as we still believe that in some way our gifts and our abilities and our spiritual experiences make us better than the next man, we have not learned, as Paul had, the wisdom and humility of Jesus Christ. In Romans chapter 12, Paul reminds us how important that really is. "*For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.*"

You see the Bible teaches us, in many places, that if any one of us would ever be used of the Lord in any significant capacity we absolutely cannot be filled with pride.

Now, as you consider Paul's example, it does raise a very interesting question. And that is: Where did Paul get this kind of wisdom? Where did he get this kind of humility, that was able to keep him from wanting to exalt himself in the eyes of men? I mean, after all, wasn't Paul a sinner? Wasn't Paul just as full of pride as any one of us here today?

Well, of course he was and, in fact, that's exactly why he tells us in verses 7 -10 that humility was not something that he had by nature, but humility was something that he

himself had to learn. Paul says that it was God who had to humble his pride. And to do that He had to give Paul a very painful trial of suffering to endure. Look at what he says in verse 7: “*And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.*”

Interestingly, Paul doesn't tell us exactly what this trial consisted of. He simply describes it as a *thorn in the flesh* and a *messenger of Satan*. And because of that, there's a lot of questions about what he means here, and down through the years commentators have come up with all kinds of possible interpretations.

For example, one interpretation is that the “thorn in the flesh” is a symbol of persecution. And of course, those who take this position point out the fact that several times in the Old Testament (Numbers 33 and Judges 2) it's the enemies of God's people that are described as “*thorns in their sides.*” And, that's certainly possible here because, in verse 10, Paul mentions *persecutions* in the list of his own trials.

Another interpretation picks up on the term *flesh* and it says that a “thorn in the flesh” must be a real physical infirmity. And there, the most common opinion is that Paul suffered from a disease in his eyes that made it very difficult for him to see. Again that's also possible because, in Galatians 4:13 Paul mentions the “infirmity in his flesh” and in verse 15 he says that the Galatians loved him so much that “they would have plucked out their own eyes and given them to him.” When commentators see that, they immediately make the connection to our text.

In any case, no one knows for sure what Paul means by his *thorn in the flesh*. But if you think about it, it's probably better that he doesn't tell us what it was. That way, you and I can think about this passage in terms of our *own* thorns in the flesh. Because the truth is that God, in his own wisdom, uses all kinds of different trials in our lives to bring about the very same results that we see here in the apostle Paul. Notice here that *two times* in verse 7 Paul says that the purpose of our suffering is to keep us humble in our own eyes *and* to teach us to cast ourselves entirely upon the grace of Jesus Christ.

And notice also that, in verse 7, Paul doesn't get distracted with the fact that the devil is involved in his suffering. He sort of just mentions the devil in passing and then he moves on to focus on the Lord. That's important because it reminds us that Satan has absolutely no power in himself and that even he can only do what God allows him to do. So rather than waste any of our time “chasing” or “rebuking” the devil, we need to do what Paul did, and that is to find our strength in Jesus Christ alone.

Paul says that his affliction only drove him to seek the Lord earnestly and continually *in prayer*. When you read that you really get a sense of the intensity of his trial. In verse 8 he says, “*Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.*” Here, Paul is giving the details of his prayer because he wants us to know something of the magnitude of his suffering. And the purpose is to show us that you and I can identify with his experience.

You know, I think the tendency—when we find ourselves in the midst of a difficult situation—is to just assume that our situation is somehow unique. We say things like: “You don't know what I'm going through” or “You don't know how it feels.” And that might be true, depending on who we're talking to. And yet at the same time, the Bible does remind us that somewhere in the body of Christ there's always someone who *does* know what you're going through and *does* know how it feels.

In fact, in 1 Corinthians 10:13, the Bible says, “*No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man*” And in 1 Peter chapter 5, Peter says exactly the same thing. In verse 9, he says that anytime you're tempted to believe that you're the only one who's suffering in this world, you need to remember that “*the same afflictions are experienced by your brethren that are living in this world.*”

But you know, that's not all the Bible says about this. It also says that even when you are alone; even when it's true that there's no one else there to comfort you in your suffering, you can still know with absolute certainty that Jesus Christ himself is standing by our side. In fact, that's what David said as he prayed to the Lord in Psalm 23. He said “*Yea*

though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil. Why? He says, For you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me."

Likewise, when the apostle Paul was in Rome, at the preliminary hearing of his trial, he said that no man stood with him, but all men forsook him on that day. And so in one sense you can say that he was all alone, facing what he called in 2 Timothy 4:17 "*the mouth of the lion.*" And yet, even in that lonely situation, Paul makes it clear that Jesus never left his side. He says, "*Nevertheless, the Lord stood with me, and he strengthened me.*"

Congregation, as you hear those words, the thing you need to remember is that this is what the Lord does for every one of his suffering people. In the same way that he stood with David, and he stood with the apostle Paul, so the Lord Jesus Christ promises to stand with you. There can be no greater comfort than to know that the one who suffered more than any man has ever suffered in this world is your savior, and that he will never leave you, never forsake you—but instead, he stands at all times ready and willing to provide you with every bit of the strength and grace that you need. All you have to do is leave off with the notion that you are strong, and find your strength in the Lord.

You see Paul prayed to the Lord, and he asked the Lord to remove his thorn in the flesh, but in verses 9 and 10 the Lord reminded Paul that he had a different plan for his life. Rather than remove the affliction he decided to use that affliction to bring about the manifestation of his *own* power in the life of the apostle Paul. And so he says, "*My grace is sufficient for you; my strength is made perfect in weakness.*"

And so you see the reason that Paul was so humble; the reason he was able to resist the temptation of exalting himself was that, in his suffering he came to learn that it's only to the degree that he *dies* to himself that he can ever live by the power of Jesus Christ.

In verses 9 and 10 we reach a *crescendo* of sorts because it's only there that Paul can finally say, "*Most gladly therefore I would rather boast in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in weaknesses, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, all for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*"

In the beginning of this chapter the apostle Paul set out to defend his authority and to defend his integrity. But the way he did so was totally different than the judaizers would have expected. You see, they were only interested in trying to prove that they were strong with their own strength and wise with their own wisdom. And that their credentials and experiences were superior to Paul's.

But Paul knew that his authority didn't come from himself. It came from the one who called him to preach the Gospel and do the work of the ministry. And because of that he knew that he didn't have to compete with other men's natural abilities.

Did he neutralize their claims? Of course he did. Did he demonstrate that their arguments were weak and false? Absolutely. But the key thing is that he never did it in the interest of advancing his own personal cause. He only did it to preserve the truth of the Gospel for the glory of God and the good of God's people. And, brothers and sisters, as we consider that lesson, may the Lord bless us also with the same Christ-like humility, even in the exercise of legitimate, God-given authority. **Amen.**