

The Vision and the Thorn

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, St. Silas. My name's Martin Ayers. I'm the senior pastor here. If you could keep your Bibles open at 2 Corinthians chapter 12, that would be hugely helpful.

Or you can look on BibleGateway.com if you don't have a Bible to hand at home, and you can look that passage up. And let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we praise you and thank you for your word that equips us to know you and have our sins forgiven and hope of eternal life and equips us for every good work to live for you in this broken world.

So we pray that you would be our teacher now, that your spirit will open our minds and our hearts to your word and open your word to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.

This is an absolutely great passage of the Bible that we're looking at this morning. And until I started preparing, I'd never heard a sermon on it. We're in this letter written by Paul to a church that he planted that had lost its way.

And he's writing to them with deep love and affection to draw them back to the gospel that he preached, the message about Jesus. And we hear from Paul in this section about an incredible supernatural experience that God gave to him.

[1 : 19] And we hear Paul speak about deep pain in his life. I wonder if you are someone or you were someone who has this incredible supernatural experience of God and you have a great pain in your life, which one would you want to talk about more to people?

Which one would you boast in? For any of us who need help with knowing how we should react, if God was going to bless us with a great experience like that or God was going to allow an affliction in our life, how to respond to that, this is a great portion of God's word.

Now, the false teachers in Corinth were leading people astray and they were very boastful and very impressive. They had great skill in their speaking. And we get the impression they might have boasted in their own visionary experiences of God and promised that you could share that with them if you followed their techniques.

It was a kind of higher life Christianity. It's seductive, this idea that you can leave behind Paul's message about practical godliness and that Jesus cares about all these practical things in your life. And you can come onto a higher state of consciousness and come away from that. And you don't have to wait for heaven. You can enjoy heaven now in day-to-day experience of God. Now, that struck a chord in Corinth and it would certainly strike a chord for us today.

[2 : 44] In Glasgow, we live in an experience-based society. We're an experience-based culture where what we feel to be true is true for us. So first, we hear Paul talk about a vision without permission.

That's our first point, a vision without permission. Look with me again at verse 1. I must go on boasting, says Paul. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord.

I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows.

It's clear that Paul's actually speaking about himself here. In verse 7, he makes that clear. He's speaking about himself. But it's so dangerous for Paul to tell us about this experience that he's had for the reasons that he'll explain that he speaks about himself in the third person as a man in Christ. And he says in verse 2 that he, this man in Christ, was taken up or caught up to the third heaven. I think the best way to understand that, we're not totally sure, is that he was brought into the very presence of God himself.

[3 : 57] We don't know what heaven's like, but the pattern that we were, the best pattern we have on earth for what heaven was like is the Old Testament temple and tabernacle where you had an outer court where anyone could go.

Then you had a holy place where only the priests could go. And then within that you had a third place, the most holy place, where only the high priest could go and only once a year. Because that was the epicenter of the presence of God. So if that's our type of our shadow of what it's like in heaven, the third heaven is the most holy place where God himself is. There is mystery there for us in that, but I think that's the way to understand it. Paul is brought into the presence of God. And Paul himself has great mystery about what he experienced. Look at verse 3. And I know that this man, that is Paul, whether in the body or apart from the body, I do not know, but God knows, was caught up to paradise.

[5 : 02] He doesn't know how he was taken there, but he was. To this place of fullness, of joy, and eternal pleasure, as described in Psalm 16, being at God's right hand.

And God himself has always been like that. God has always been a father, who's always had a son, and in the unity of the Holy Spirit, these three persons have existed in delight and love for one another.

And Paul was granted this experience of being in their presence. But we'll never hear anything else about it. Look at verse 4. Was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.

I don't think we're to take it that this kind of experience was unique to Paul. I think that the living God gives people today wonderful experiences of his holiness, his goodness, his love. We don't know why some people might get that gift, that kind of experience, and many of the rest of us don't have that. But what we do see in Paul is that when you should have an experience like that, which is authentic, it should lead to a deep humility and a deep reluctance to go on to others about it.

[6 : 19] Notice when it happened to Paul. Do you see that? He says in verse 2, it was 14 years before he's writing this. So it's probably in the late 30s AD, just a few years after Jesus rose from the dead.

Now when we read Acts about the early church and Paul's ministry, and we read Paul's letters, just ask yourself, how often is his message shaped by what he saw when he was taken up to paradise? How often and how much is it shaped by that? I think not once. Not once. We don't see him standing up telling people about what he saw.

We never see him as part of his reasoning as to the truth about Jesus, saying to people, I know it's true, let me tell you what happened to me. We don't see him writing to churches about how to have the same thing happen to them.

We just hear about it here and with deep reluctance from Paul. It's a man in Christ and that these things people are not permitted to tell. So what we see in Paul's life is that this vision led to a kind of holy shyness.

[7 : 30] A shyness to speak about it. It leads to a holy shyness and a holy boldness. The holy shyness is about a reluctance to speak about the experience that he had and yet the holy boldness was to speak about Christ.

His whole life is driven towards making Christ known from the scriptures, revealing the mystery to the world that's now been revealed. The mystery locked up within the Bible about how God was going to rescue people from ourselves and from our sin.

Rescue us from his holy wrath against our sin and how that plan has been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus and his dying for sins and his rising again to rule and his ascension into heaven crowned as king.

These are what drives Paul's message. He has this boldness to speak about Christ and it's Paul who tells us in 2 Timothy 3 that the scriptures have everything we need in them to be made wise for salvation, to be saved.

And the scriptures have everything in them that we need to be thoroughly equipped for every good work. And so Paul speaks of them with boldness and with the utmost reluctance about his experience.

[8 : 48] The fruit of the vision in Paul's life, if anything, was a greater drive to be a herald about Christ. There was an American minister 150 years ago, D.L. Moody, who had a vision and he

describes it like this.

Some time later, and again with reluctance, just notice that, he says, one day in the city of New York, oh, what a day. I cannot describe it. I seldom refer to it.

It is almost too sacred an experience to name. Paul had an experience of which he never spoke for 14 years. I can only say that God revealed himself to me.

And I had such an experience of his love that I had to ask him to stay his hand. And the effect on Moody's life, again, was boldly to speak about Jesus with others.

He became one of the most pioneering evangelists in the history of the church. If you've had an experience like that, or God gives you an experience of his goodness or his holiness like that, then let's let Paul be our model of how we respond to that, what we do with it.

[9 : 59] I think we do see today in churches a danger here that if we experience that or people in our church experience God in a special way, if we start to build the spiritual life of our church on that, or our own spiritual life on those experiences, and we start to base our confidence in Jesus on those experiences, what can happen is that if you're one of the people who has that experience, you're just left always wanting the next one.

You always want the next experience because ultimately that's what your stability is based on. And so you start, the temptation is even to start trying to engineer things to get something like it again.

And if you're someone who's not had that kind of experience, but your church is built on them, you either fake it because you're under such pressure socially and emotionally with the people around you to almost pretend you've had an experience like that, so you fake it.

Or, perhaps even worse, or even more sad, you just check out, you just become cynical and think, you know, maybe the whole thing is a sham because I've not had that experience that they've had. And so your confidence in Jesus and the historical claims about him is undermined. So if you have an experience like that or you've had one, of course, let's be thankful for it, that it's precious and it's come from God's generosity and his goodness to encourage you.

[11 : 38] But if you haven't had one, let's be assured it's because you don't need one. God is good and if you really needed a vision like Paul had, if that would be best for you, God could grant it to you and I take it he would grant it to you.

But what we do all need is Christ and he is everything we need. In him we have every spiritual blessing. In him we have inexpressible and glorious joy on offer today in the pain and grief of trials in this life.

In him we have living hope of forever with God in paradise. We need him and he is all we need. So Paul's given a vision without permission to speak of it.

Instead, he tells us about deep pain. That's our second point, a thorn without relief. In verse 6, Paul gives us the first reason why he won't boast in the vision.

It's because it's not how we should judge him or anyone else. Have a look at that. He says, even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so, no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say or because of these surpassingly great revelations.

[12 : 58] We don't judge Christian leaders today or like Paul by their revelations that they had. We judge them by their character and their message.

And the thorn comes in verse 7. Have a look with me. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.

Paul is using that pain that maybe we could all relate to of the idea of having a thorn get stuck in your body somewhere. That's the picture of something else in his life that's caused him great ongoing pain.

He doesn't tell us what the thorn is and I think that is good for us because it means we can apply it to all kinds of different pain or affliction that we might experience.

It might be that Paul's talking about the opposition and persecution that he endured. We've heard in this letter about floggings and lashings and beatings and stonings.

[14 : 04] It could be that he's describing a strong temptation to sin that never left him, a besetting sin in his life, a temptation. It could be that.

It could be an emotional thorn, a deep sadness in his life. I think the most natural way to read this is that Paul is describing a physical health problem. It could be that it's one that was because of the floggings.

It could be something else but a continuous pain in his body and in his mind that he had to endure. But the fact that Paul is not specific may be a kindness to us because it means that we can look at how he learned from his thorn and think about a thorn in our lives.

Just think about Paul's theology about his thorn. He experiences it but he still has a cast iron faith in the sovereignty of God. He doesn't allow going through something very painful to make him change his theology and think God isn't in charge, God isn't good.

He believes through the tears Jesus is on the throne and he could have taken this thorn away and in his goodness he has not done that. And who is behind the thorn?

[15:22] Look at verse 7. Who's behind it? It's a messenger of Satan. I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.

So the acting agent who is morally responsible for bringing this evil on Paul is Satan. There is a spiritual person who is evil and he torments and he tempts and he devours people and he denies God's word and he is at work in Paul's life and he's at work today.

But when Paul says I was given a thorn in verse 7 so he says in order to keep me from becoming conceited I was given a thorn. There he means I was given it by God because that's who he prays to, who he pleads with to take it away.

So Satan never catches God off guard. Satan is on a leash. He can only act where God gives him permission. We could never look at something and say that was the devil's work and God could not have stopped it.

We couldn't say that. We can pray to God to take it away. And Paul knows that although Satan wanted to bring this thorn for harm the sovereign God would only have given him permission to do that if God could work through it for some greater good.

[16:54] Just also think about Paul's prayer against the thorn. So look at verse 8. three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.

Paul is certainly not out there looking to suffer. There's nothing unchristian in pleading with God to take pain away.

Nothing sub-Christian about that. Paul pleads with the Lord. And when relief doesn't come he pleads again. And then when it doesn't come again he pleads a third time.

Sometimes I find in pastoral ministry that people are going through a hard time and they'll say to me I don't get the point of praying about it. If we believe God will just do what's best anyway what's the point in praying?

Well Paul trusts that God is sovereign. He trusts that God knows best. But that doesn't lead him into some kind of passive fatalism. He wants to walk through the suffering with God and that includes that he trusts that God listens to prayer.

[18:03] So he pleads with the Lord for relief in hope that God will answer that prayer by bringing relief. But then let's think about Paul's lessons from the thorn.

When Paul has prayed and the relief doesn't come he trusts that God has good purposes in the suffering. And we need to hear that for our own experiences of apparently unanswered prayer. Prayer is never actually unanswered. Paul here experienced a kind of disappointment with God. You know if you were one of Paul's companions surely you would have seen this as apparent disappointment with God to have prayed like that and not seen the answer that he was hoping for. And yet it didn't drive Paul away from God. He looked at the situation with the eyes of faith and all good all powerful all wise God must have reasons that I can't fathom why he won't give me what I'm asking for.

Because I'm his child and I've asked him and this is the response. So Paul looks at well what is God teaching me through the thorn? What is God teaching me?

[19:19] Look at verse 7 again. In order to keep me from becoming conceited. He gets that in his own life perhaps because of the vision the revelations and visions he would have become proud and the thorn has humbled him.

Paul's afflictions have taught him other things. In chapter 1 of this letter he tells us that the pressure that his team went through in Asia was so awful they despaired even of life even of their own lives. And then he says but this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. God taught Paul to rely on him to depend on him what it truly meant to depend on him and not himself by bringing him to despair even of life.

So in Paul's life God didn't save him from the thorn because God was saving him from something else. That's the principle and I take it that principle holds true today. Folks I know this is hard because it might be that in our own lives until glory we can never see we can never work out why that why that could have been justified that thorn in my life.

What was God really teaching me through that? It might be that we don't see the answer but I take it the principle is right that God only allows Satan to be at work in our lives where God is working through it in us for something greater or he is saving us from something worse in his love.

[20 : 51] So here in chapter 12 we've got Paul's account of two things and let's just think about how completely upside down this message is from Paul that he has a vision where God takes him into the throne room of heaven and he's not allowed and he doesn't dare speak of it and Paul has a deep persistent ongoing agonizing thorn in his flesh and instead of covering that up he boasts freely about it.

There's no sense of oh well people might not accept my message if they know about this. People might not trust God if they hear what's going on in my life nor rather he speaks freely of it. Now why is that?

That's our third point. So we've thought about the vision without permission the thorn without relief. Our third point is a grace that's never lacking. The answer to Paul's prayers comes in verse 9 so let's pick things up again in verse 8.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it the thorn away from me but 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 about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me.

In Paul's case the answer to his prayer that came along with this thorn from Satan was that Jesus would provide enough grace to bear it. Now when we looked at this passage with the staff team last week someone asked the natural question was this only true in Paul's case or do we think this would always be true?

[22 : 37] Could we apply that to our own lives? I think the answer to that is probably to ask in what situation would our heavenly Father who is good and loving ever put one of his children through something and not provide them with the grace to enable them to bear it?

For any of us surely the Lord can say my grace is sufficient for you. We think of Psalm 23 the Lord is my shepherd therefore I lack nothing we lack nothing that we need.

Or in Romans 8 we're reminded Paul writing to suffering people he who did not spare his own son but graciously gave him up for us all how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things?

So we might have days in our lives where we if we listen to ourselves to our feelings what we hear is God cannot be for me for me to have to endure this thorn and we have to speak to ourselves these words of Jesus that he says my grace is sufficient for you.

is one of the things God is saying to you and me this morning will you trust that my grace is sufficient for you for today?

[24 : 02] Sometimes as Christians we find it easier to trust that God's grace is sufficient for my past as God in his grace covers my failings and counts me righteous and we find it easier to trust that God's grace is sufficient for my future that I know where I'm going now I'm going to be with God forever and death has lost its sting but what we find even harder than that is to trust that God's grace is sufficient for my today His grace is sufficient to keep you to protect you to uphold you to strengthen you to make good use of your pain in your life to deliver you from your pain so that in him you really do lack nothing for today then we get the next part of the Lord's word to Paul my power is made perfect in weakness it works well for the Lord when we as his servants share Jesus with others in ways that looks weak to them when we look weak to them so that when people come to faith and grow in faith it's obvious that it was God's power at work not us not our power so that Paul says despite the pain despite the prayers for relief despite the hardships they are a delight to him look at verse 10 that is why for Christ's sake

I delight I delight in weaknesses in insults in hardships in persecutions in difficulties for when I am weak then I am strong in other words not that he is strong but rather if he can't rely on his own skills and talents and good health in his ministry then he will have to rely on God more and God will work through him in power so his priorities will be fulfilled that's where the strength is I was reading this week about Charles Spurgeon who was this great preacher in the UK he was in London in the 19th century he was the pastor of a mega church 4,000 souls in his church and there were church plants

there was an orphanage and his sermons and writings are still read by many today generations later Charles Spurgeon was struck down by terrible physical suffering kidney disease rheumatism gout such that he spent a third of his Sundays in his ministry unable to be at church he couldn't preach he was so unwell his wife was so unwell she became housebound from age 33 to when she died she couldn't be at church with him and support his ministry all those years he was also publicly and viciously slandered and criticized and he had depression that made him weep uncontrollably like a child and God was using him all that time to save literally thousands of people thousands of people so it was obvious he was at work wasn't Charles Spurgeon who was strong and he knew God's grace in his suffering he said this

Charles Spurgeon I am afraid that all the grace that I have got of my comfortable and easy times and happy hours might almost lie on a penny but the good that I have received from my sorrows and pains and griefs is altogether incalculable affliction is the best bit of furniture in my house affliction was the best bit of furniture in his house for what the Lord taught him of his grace so folks how encouraging this morning for we as a church because we are a very weak church we are very weak we're part of a tiny network a network that other people might look at with pity we're located in a city with hundreds of thousands of people where you look around and think how can we ever get across to you the gospel about Jesus the news you need to hear and at the moment we can't even travel to church to gather because a virus is making it too dangerous in our mortal bodies and most of us as individuals are very weak myself included but the good news of the gospel here in chapter 12 is that the living God can teach you more through your brokenness than through a vision and that it suits him to work powerfully through you when people see weakness in you so when you come to God when you approach him he doesn't need you to put your game face on and he doesn't need you to show him what you can offer him he wants you to trust him in your thorns to be willing to accept your own weaknesses with honesty and to depend on his power at work in you to make Christ known let's have a moment of quiet and then we'll respond in a prayer just a chance for ourselves to reflect with God on what he's saying to us this morning almighty God and loving heavenly father help us to trust your grace not just for our past and not just for our future but for today we praise you that your grace is sufficient and may we as a church learn from you what it means not to be concerned when our ministry looks weak when we are making Christ known in weakness but as we do that may we depend on you and may you work by your spirit through us with your power in Jesus name Amen