

“GOD’S PRIDE REDUCTION PROGRAM” **(2 Corinthians 12:1-10)**

One of the greatest Christian thinkers of the past century, and probably the most quoted, is C.S. Lewis. C.S. Lewis had been an atheist for many years before he became a Christian in 1931, and after he had gained some fame as a Christian writer, he was invited to come on a British radio program and answer questions about the Christian faith. One of the questions he was asked was: What is the greatest sin? What sin is worse than all the others? Here’s what C.S. Lewis said...

“There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. The essential vice, the utmost evil, is pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison. It was through pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind.”

When you and I become Christians, God begins to transform the sinful nature we are born with into the new nature we are given once we’re born again. Just because we have a new nature does not mean that sin suddenly disappears – the process of transformation takes place over the course of a lifetime, and the goal is to sin less and less so that we look more and more like Christ. If C.S. Lewis is right, removing the sin of pride from our hearts is key to our transformation.

Pride is a tricky sin, because as C.S. Lewis said, it’s easy to spot in other people but not in ourselves. Some years ago, someone gave me a list of 75 characteristics of pride, and by the time I got through reading it, it left no doubt that pride was a much bigger issue in my life than I thought. It manifests itself in ways we never imagined. Someone said that pride is like a beard – as soon as you shave it off, it starts growing back. It’s something we never entirely conquer this side of heaven, but it’s something God is committed to weeding out of our lives as a major part of our spiritual transformation.

The title of our message today is: God’s pride production program – and we find out not only how He reduces pride, but how being free of pride allows God’s grace and power to flow in and through us. We’re in chapter 12 of 2 Corinthians today, and in chapters 10-11 the Apostle Paul has been exposing the character, teachings, and tactics of the false teachers who had infiltrated the church in Corinth, and were threatening to undo everything Paul had started in church he founded. To get the people on their side, these false teachers tore Paul down – sometimes very viciously – while they built themselves up. “We’re everything Paul is not,” they boasted. “We’re smarter, we’re more charismatic, we’re more sophisticated, we’re better speakers, and we know important people.” They even claimed to not just be apostles, but super apostles.

Paul’s not about to sit idly by and watch these intruders take over the church, so he decides to do a little boasting himself – not to build himself up, but to call attention to the differences himself and the false teachers. Paul was a brilliant, amazing person, and from a human perspective he had a lot to brag about, but rather than boasting about his accomplishments, Paul instead boasts about his sufferings and weaknesses. And in this passage, he tells us why.

Paul begins in verse one by saying... “I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord.” For the umpteenth time Paul voices his distain for boasting, but he’s intent on exposing the false teachers for who they are. One of their claims is that they received special visions and revelations from God. Since only God can reveal visions and revelations, to receive them instantly vaults you to the head of the spiritual line. It not only enhances your spiritual reputation, but can be used as a tool to exert power and authority over people.

They said, “How come Paul doesn’t talk about any visions he’s seen or revelations he’s heard? If he was a true apostle, surely he would have had some supernatural manifestations.” Paul actually did receive a number of visions in the book of Acts, but he didn’t talk much about them, and he tells us why later in the passage.

“But,” he says, “As long as we’re playing this foolish bragging game, I too had a supernatural event happen to me fourteen years ago.” Verses 2-4 says ... “I know a man in Christ who fourteen 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. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.”

Even though he’s had this incredible experience, Paul draws attention away from himself by using the third person... “I know a man.” He’s uncomfortable talking about himself – he doesn’t want to convey that he’s in a super-class of Christians – but he shares for the first time his experience of being caught up to the third heaven. Two questions immediately arise: What is the third heaven, and what does it mean he was caught up?

The ancient Hebrews used the term “heaven” to describe three different realms. There is the atmospheric heaven immediately above us where the birds fly. This is what is meant in Genesis 1:1 when it says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” – heavens being the atmosphere above the earth. Above this are the planetary heavens – the sun, the stars, and planets – which the Jews considered the second heaven. Then there is the third heaven where God dwells. Psalm 33 says that the Lord looks from heaven, His dwelling place, upon all the inhabitants of the earth. Heaven is His center of operations where He sits on His throne, and where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father.

In verse 4 Paul says he was caught up to “paradise.” Paradise is a Persian word that means “a beautiful garden or park.” It was used by ancient Persians to describe a big, lush garden where you would go for rest and enjoyment and happiness – what the Bible calls heaven. It’s the ultimate, idyllic garden of joy and blessedness, just as Adam and Eve enjoyed in the Garden of Eden.

Paul says that he was caught up to paradise – to the third heaven – but twice says that he doesn’t know if he was in the body or apart from the body. In other words, he doesn’t know if he was caught up to the third heaven in both body and soul – like Enoch was in Genesis 5 – or if he was caught up only in his spirit. To Paul it didn’t really matter.

Paul says his visit to the third heaven took place fourteen years earlier, which would be around the time he was just beginning his first missionary journey. Some think it may have taken place the time Paul was taken outside the city of Lystra in Acts 14 and pelted with stones and left for dead, and during those moments he was unconscious he was taken to heaven. Paul doesn’t give any details of when it happened because his only purpose is to show that he’s had visions and revelations just as the false apostle claim they’ve had.

After hearing that Paul's been to heaven, we naturally want to know, "What did you see? What it's like? Did you see angels? Did you see loved ones? Did you see Christ?" All Paul says in verse 4 is that he "heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell." Inexpressible things means that what Paul experienced was so transcendent it could not be expressed or described in words. Explaining heaven to earthlings would be like explaining electricity to an isolated tribe in New Guinea. How do you describe the throne room of God?

I think if Paul wanted to, he could find some way to express what he experienced, but the main reason he doesn't is because he's not permitted to tell. In other words, this was a private tour of heaven. What Paul saw and heard was for his eyes and ears alone. Why was Paul blessed with this experience and not others? Last week, in chapter 11, we reviewed the incredible suffering Paul endured as an ambassador for Christ – the beatings, the shipwrecks, the sleepless nights, and his life being in constant danger. Very few Christians will ever face the same level of suffering Paul faced, and God in His grace allowed Paul a glimpse into heaven – a glimpse of his future – to bolster his faith and confidence for all that he could endure the next fourteen years. This, I believe, explains Paul's willingness to suffer all that he did and not throw in the towel. His vision of heaven gave him the confidence to say, "For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am beaten to death, if I die by drowning in a shipwreck, if I die in prison – everything will be okay because I'll be with Christ in heaven."

You and I can live the very same way because we are also given a vision of heaven – not in the same way as Paul – but just as powerfully we are told over and over in scripture about all the blessings that await us in heaven, so we can say like Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:17... "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all." The key to enduring the troubles of this life is to keep eternity in view – that this life is but for a moment, and even the worst suffering we experience will seem like nothing once we are with the Lord and enjoy the eternal blessings of heaven.

Imagine if, like Paul, you went to heaven and back – what's the first thing you'd do? You'd say something, and maybe write a book about it. Quite a few books, in fact, have been written in recent years about people claiming to have gone to heaven – and a movie was made last year about near-death experiences, where people in a coma or near death have seen a vision of heaven. The skeptic naturally says, "It's a hoax," and others are quick to believe every story. What are we to make of it? I'm not sure we're to make anything of it other than it is a person's personal experience. I can't prove that their story is real, and I can't disprove it. But Paul's response to his vision gives us great insight on how we should address these stories.

Paul writes in verses 5-7a... "I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. 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."

Paul knew that the false teachers in Corinth were using visions and revelations to give the impression that they were super spiritual, and posture themselves as spiritual authorities. But once again Paul says, "The only real boasting I will do is about my weaknesses. What I saw and heard in heaven was real, and I could talk about it, but I won't... and the reason I won't talk about it is so you will not think more of me than you should. If you're going to follow me – if you're going to look to me as your spiritual authority – base your opinion of me on my character and conduct, and not on my supernatural experiences."

There's a huge warning here for churches in our celebrity-driven culture. We are naturally attracted to highly gifted, powerful, charismatic people and put them up on a pedestal. The danger is that people will not be so much committed to Christ as they will to the pastor or spiritual leader – and the focus is on his personality, his gifts, and his powerful presence – and not on his character and conduct. The spotlight is no longer on Christ, but on a person.

The old adage is that what you use to attract people to church is what you have to use to keep them coming. In other words, if the emphasis of a church is always on the spectacular – spectacular worship, spectacular sermons, and spectacular stories of going to heaven, all the efforts go to keep ramping up the spectacular. That's pretty hard, if not impossible to sustain, and some churches fall apart pretty quickly when a spectacular pastor leaves or falls from grace, or when things are not as exciting as they once were – people leave because their commitment was to a person and not to Christ.

That's why Paul says, “Don't follow me as your spiritual mentor and authority because I have good stories about going to heaven, or because I speak in tongues, or because I give spellbinding sermons – trust me as your spiritual leader because of my character and my conduct – I'm just a man – I'm just a jar of clay – all that matters is the glory of Christ that shines through the broken pot.”

This doesn't mean that Paul was not above feeling prideful. Before his conversion to Christ, he was – by his own admission – was boastful, arrogant, and full of himself. God dealt a heavy blow to his pride on the road to Damascus, but as C.S. Lewis said, pride is one vice of which no man completely conquers, including the Apostle Paul. He says in verse 7b... “Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.”

If you've just been transported to heaven, the temptation is to think, “I must be pretty special. No one I know of has gone to heaven and come back.” Not even Paul was immune from pride. God knew that if Paul was puffed up with pride, he would be tempted to use his missionary journeys to showcase himself and gain followers to himself, and the good news of the gospel would get lost in the shuffle. So to keep Paul from becoming conceited – to keep him humble – he was given a thorn in the flesh to torment him.

This leads to a couple of questions, starting with: What was the thorn given to Paul? The Greek word for thorn refers to a pointed, sharp stake – it wasn't just a splinter or rose thorn stuck in the body that hurt for a little bit but eventually made its way out – it was something very excruciating and chronic. He doesn't say what it was – it was most likely a physical ailment that tormented him daily and kept him from doing all he wanted to do in the ministry. Some think it had something to do with his eyes, since he hints in some of his letters that he can't see well. With all of the beatings he took, it could be just about anything, but he doesn't say what it is – and that's probably a good thing so that we can apply this verse to whatever our particular thorn might be. All of us, I'm sure, have a thorn. It may be physical, it may be emotional, it may be relational – but all of us likely have something painful we deal with daily.

The next question is: Where did this thorn come from? Who gave it to Paul? Paul identifies his thorn as a “messenger of Satan,” but verse 7 says it was given to him – implying it was given by God. Paul sees his thorn as both the work of Satan and the work of God. The Bible says that Satan has a certain amount of freedom to attack God's children – he roams the earth seeking whom he may devour – but his freedom is limited to what God allows him to do. God allowed Satan to afflict Job with painful sores, and He allowed Satan to sift Peter like wheat.

We say, “Why would God allow this? Doesn’t He protect His children from suffering?” The cause of suffering is not always easy to answer from our human vantage point. Sometimes we suffer simply because we’re human, and the natural process of aging wears our bodies down and every day something, somewhere in our body hurts. Suffering is sometimes just part of living in a fallen, broken world. Sometimes we suffer because of our own foolish, sinful choices – like the prodigal son.

Sometimes, as we see in this passage, suffering comes from the hand of God for the purpose of molding and shaping us to look like Christ – like a sculptor who chisels away the rough edges of his sculpture so that it looks like what he wants it to be. The Bible says in many places that pain and suffering are tools to make us more spiritually mature and complete – and one of the main things that God wants to chisel away from our lives is pride, and removing pride can be excruciatingly painful.

So painful, that we cry out to God to remove the pain. In verse 8 Paul says, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.” Like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane who prayed three times for the Father to remove His cup of suffering, Paul prays three times for God to remove his thorn. Three times is a way of saying he prayed a lot – he didn’t just offer up a few casual prayers, but he persisted in prayer... “Lord, please remove this pain, this disability, this limitation that is keeping me from fully serving you.” Paul might have even fasted, he might have gathered people around him to pray, but in the end the answer to his prayer was “no.”

I don’t like “no” answers, and I’ve received a lot of “no” answers over the years, as I bet you have as well. “No” answers don’t seem to make any sense. Doesn’t God want me to be well? Doesn’t He want me to be functioning on all cylinders? The health, wealth, and prosperity teachers will tell you if something is wrong, you pray in faith and God will heal you. If you’re not healed, if your thorn still persists, the problem is your lack of faith. This is very personal for me, because I prayed for years for God to take away my chronic pain and mobility issues. I prayed three times, times three hundred, and there was a certain point where I sensed God say “no.” I still occasionally pray for healing, but have learned that “no” answers are just as much an answer to prayer as “yes” answers. Verses 9-10 tell us why, and are some of the most important verses in the Bible on dealing with suffering.

Paul writes... “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. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

I thought about doing a whole sermon on just these verses, they’re so powerful. In short, God answered Paul’s prayer, but not in the way he expected. Paul wanted relief from his thorn, and naturally assumed the relief would come by God removing it. But God granted relief not by removing it, but by adding to Paul’s life a sufficient supply of divine grace and power to bear with the suffering and benefit from it.

A good summary sentence of these verses would be: Weakness provides the opportunity to experience God’s grace and power, so that we are made strong in God’s strength and not our own. By “weakness” Paul means that you’ve exhausted all your abilities to control your circumstances and solve your problems. This is Paul’s story over the past fourteen years – he’s been weakened by beatings and shipwrecks and dangers on every hand in spreading the gospel. On top of all this, he has a thorn in the flesh that daily torments him. With nowhere else to turn, his suffering drives him to depend on the Lord.

Part of the problem is that it takes a long time for us to come to learn to depend on God. We like to depend on our own strength, our own ingenuity, our own effort, our own solutions – and our self-dependence short-circuits God’s power and strength to work in us. Pride gets in the way. God says, “Paul, in order for my grace and power to work in you, I’ve got to make you weak – I’ve got to knock the pride out of you so that you depend on my strength and power – and the more pride you have, the sharper the thorn must be.”

When you say, “Lord, I’m at the end of my rope – I resign as the CEO of my life – I give you free reign to do your work of transformation, and I accept whatever you give me” – when you say that, His grace and power begin to work in you. Grace and power are virtually synonyms, and speak of God’s divine provision for every need. His “sufficient” grace means that your problems and your suffering will never exceed his provision. Notice in verse 9 Paul says, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” The word “rest” is the same word used of God’s glory dwelling or resting in the tabernacle. It’s the same word used in John 1:14 where it says that the Word – who is Christ – became flesh and made His dwelling among us.

The point is that the weaker we are, the more God’s grace and power can make its home in us. What inhibits that power is pride, and the antidote to pride is suffering. Paul learned to embrace suffering, not because he liked it, but because of what it produced in him. In contrast to the false teachers who boasted about their prideful accomplishments, Paul boasted in his weaknesses. In fact, in verse 9 he says, “I boast *gladly* about my weaknesses.” This doesn’t mean that we should seek suffering or not pray for it to be removed. But if God says “no” we can accept it with gladness, knowing what it will produce in us.

In verse 10 he says, “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Can you say that? I’m not sure Paul said that right away. I’m sure that he – as a very proud, self-made man – wrestled with the idea of accepting weakness and relinquishing control of his life to the Lord. But God chiseled away at his pride to bring him to complete dependence on Him, and God’s power came bursting out of him.

How else do you explain receiving a total of 195 lashes, being stoned nearly to death, and being ridiculed, and enduring fourteen years and of extreme suffering? At the end of the day he knew that no matter what happened to him, it was temporary. Just as Jesus humbled Himself and suffered on the cross and was exalted to glory in heaven, Paul had confidence that all his suffering would someday be removed, and God would crown him with glory. Knowing this enabled him to faithfully serve God to the end and put the gospel above his own needs for comfort.

Perhaps God has given you a thorn – whether your thorn is the result of living in a fallen, broken world, or is the result of foolish, sinful choices you’ve made in the past, or is given to you by God – it all is a part of His pride reduction program. God may choose to remove your thorn someday, or like Paul, it may be something you live with the rest of your life – but it’s all designed to transform you into the image of Christ, and to allow God’s grace and power to flow in you and through you – and like Paul, you can say, “I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”