

Good morning, CPC! It's so good to say that to you this morning and actually hear you say it back to me! For a year, I've been looking into a camera lens when I say that and now to see you and hear you brings me so much joy. Bonhoeffer wrote, "The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer." It's so true, but I'm not sure I'd appreciate that as deeply as I do now if I wasn't deprived of it for so long.

And I think that sums up this past year. It's kind of a paradox. So much loss, pain, and limitation, but at the same time so much gain, growth, and fruitfulness. For 53 years, we've said here at CPC, "The church is not a building; it's the people." Well, this last year we've proved that. This church never closed even though we were not meeting physically together. We've been doing church every single day of this pandemic, and today we celebrate that, as well as the opportunity to be together in this place.

Do you ever stop and think about the paradoxes of our life with Christ? Life comes out of death. Strength comes out of weakness. Joy comes out of sorrow—fruitfulness out of barrenness. Greatness comes out of meekness. Growth comes out of diminishment.

The Apostle Paul lived that same paradox. It was a paradox others around Paul had a hard time accepting. We've been in 2 Corinthians for some time now, and we've seen repeatedly how they fought the idea that a true Apostle could at times appear weak, unimpressive, and struggle through life rather than master it. So Paul spent a lot of time in this letter defending his apostleship, trying to bring them back to this reality that the Christian life is filled not only with joy, victory, and strength but also death, sorrow, and pain. He'd even say you can't have one without the other.

When it comes to boasting, if he has to do it, he prefers to boast in his suffering and those things that make him weak. We saw last week how he listed about 25 ways he suffered. He ended that list with a story of being lowered in a basket down the side of a wall and having to run for his life like a scared rabbit. What a thing to boast about! Typically, those are the kinds of things you ask God to remove from your life. But in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Paul shows us the very thing you most want to be removed from your life might be the very thing you most need.

### **Paul's Vision and Revelations**

Paul starts on a positive note. *"I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord"* (v. 1). Finally, Paul gives us something to be impressed with. The Corinthians were into the supernatural. They had a penchant for the grandiose and miraculous: tongues, healing, prophesies, visions. To them, this was the stuff of real leaders. No doubt, the false teachers in Corinth claimed to have such experiences. What about Paul? Apparently, he'd never spoke of such an experience. But here, he decides to match them. Notice his hesitancy to do it—there's nothing to be gained by it, but for now, it's necessary. He speaks of visions and revelations. Many of his visions are described in the book of Acts. But Paul seldom talked about it. But now his hand is forced, and so he goes on and speaks of one especially unusual experience.

**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. 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. vv. 2-7a**

Notice Paul speaks of this in the third person as if it happened to someone else. It's not until verse 7 that he actually reveals the mystery man is himself. He does this because he doesn't want anyone to judge him based on this experience. He wants to be evaluated based on what they see in his life—what he does and what he says. To Paul, an experience like this had nothing to do with a person's spirituality or fitness for leadership. What matters is character. A leader should let his life do the talking, not stories, to impress everyone with how spiritual he is.

He says this experience took place 14 years ago. This was likely during the silent years of Paul's life, before his first missionary journey when he lived in his hometown of Tarsus and served in obscurity. Notice 14 years have gone by, and it appears he's not told a soul of this experience.

The nature of this experience was ambiguous to Paul. Twice he says he's not sure if he was in the body or out. This is wild

stuff! He must have been alone when this happened because if someone were with him, they could have told him if his body went with him or not. Either way, it doesn't seem to matter to Paul. God knows; that's enough.

What Paul could say with certainty is he was "caught up" into the third heaven. He's not saying there are different levels of heaven. Jewish people called the atmosphere around us the first heaven. They called outer space the second heaven. And they called the invisible realm where God dwelt the third heaven. So he went to the very dwelling place of God! He calls it "paradise" in verse 4. Remember, Jesus promised the thief on the cross, "*Today you'll be with me in Paradise*" (Luke 23:43). What's amazing is, though Paul actually went to Paradise, he tells us nothing about it! I'm going, "Give me some details! What it like up there?" He says nothing! He won't even tell us what he heard! He's been forbidden to repeat it.

What a contrast it is to so many leaders today who are quick to tell not only of their visions but of all the amazing details of what the Lord revealed to them. The net result is people are impressed with them, not the Lord. They judge the person by his experiences, not his character. "Wow, he must be really close to God to have that happen!" In contrast, Paul kept his mouth shut for 14 years and wouldn't have ever told if he wasn't forced to. He doesn't claim any extra authority because he went to heaven. He's not giving seminars on how to get caught up to Paradise. There's a proper a kind of reverence, awe, and humility that keeps a person silent about such things. I agree with G. Campbell Morgan, who was the pastor of the Westminster Chapel in London for years. He said, "How often people have wanted to tell me of their visions! I'm always suspicious. I want to know what they had for supper the night before. If people have visions of this sort, they are silent about them."

That was true of Paul. Why? Because he figured out something, many Christians never get: There's more to be learned in the agony of life than in the ecstasy. Instead of boasting about his visions, he'd rather boast about his weaknesses. Why? What does weakness actually produce in our lives? Here's where Paul gets really personal. Here's where we see the paradox most clearly.

### **Paul Boasts in His Thorn in the Flesh**

*"Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me" (v. 7b).* Here Paul describes not the ecstasy of a vision but the agony of a thorn. He calls it a "thorn in my flesh...a messenger of Satan to torment me." What was Paul's thorn? Scholars love to debate about this. Although some guesses may be better than others, it's all speculation because he doesn't tell us.

Some say Paul is referring to his persecutors, those people who opposed and harassed him everywhere he went. Any frustrating

people in your life who harass you, hinder you, and even harm you? They can be a thorn.

Then there are those who believe he's talking about some kind of spiritual temptation he lived with constantly. Perhaps Paul had a particular problem with lust or pride. Some think maybe it was a propensity towards melancholy and depression.

Finally, many believe Paul is referring to some kind of physical malady or illness. There's good evidence Paul suffered from an eye problem. Others say it was epilepsy, malaria, leprosy, or a speech impediment. This may be the best guess. After all, he says this was a "thorn in my flesh." But we can never know for sure. It's one of those things we can ask Paul when we get to heaven!

I think it's a good thing we don't know because if we knew, we'd want to compare our own thorn with his thorn. Some of us might say, "Well, my thorn doesn't count because compared to Paul's, it's nothing." Others might say, "Paul's thorn is nothing compared to mine. I'd trade mine for his any day. God may use Paul's thorn, but he could never use mine." Perhaps Paul doesn't tell us because he knows thorns come in all shapes and sizes.

There's one thing true about all thorns—they're painful. The word for thorn could just as well be translated as "stake." This might have been a stake in the flesh. That's pain! The word "torment" means buffet, beat, or strike. Paul was beaten down by this thorn. It wasn't just a one-time thing. It started 14 years earlier, and it hadn't let up.

Where do these thorns come from? It all started in Genesis. God created perfection in the Garden of Eden. There were no thorns. But after Adam and Eve rebelled, God cursed the ground and said, "*It will produce thorns and thistles*" (Gen 3:18a). Every jab from a thorn should remind us we live in a fallen world. That's where it all started. Notice also what Paul calls his thorn: "a messenger of Satan." So, where did this come from? From God or Satan? It certainly seems the very same thorn can be used by God to strengthen you and by Satan to tempt you.

We see the same thing in the book of Job. God said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job?" Satan says, "I'd love to consider him. Let me at him." God says, "Fine, but here are the ground rules." So Satan goes and wreaks havoc on Job's life. His purpose is to destroy Job's faith in God. But God has his own purpose. He wants to deepen Job's faith and strengthen him.

So it is with our thorns. God uses them, but he allows Satan to get involved. God's still in charge. He makes the rules. He controls the temperature. Don't believe for one minute God isn't in charge of the circumstances in your life. Nothing can lay a hand on you without His permission. He's never out of control. He always has a purpose, and his purpose is always good.

Why was this thorn given? Twice he says it was given "to keep me from becoming conceited." A person who'd been up to the throne room of God could become proud. So God gave him

something to keep him humble and dependent. I love this! This great man of God admits he had a pride problem and needed to be humbled.

There've been many great people who've succumbed to pride. William Manchester wrote a biography of Winston Churchill. In it, Churchill emerges as one of the great men of his generation. Apparently, Churchill thought so too. Once, after he and his chauffeur argued, Churchill rumbled, "You were rude." His chauffeur, forgetting his position, replied, "You were rude too." Churchill pouted for a minute and then said, "But I am a great man." Manchester writes, "It is an egalitarian fiction that the great are modest."

Guess what? That could have been Paul, or you, or me. We all struggle with pride. Paul did too. And so, God sent the thorn to keep him humble and dependent.

One of the reasons pride is such an insidious disease of the soul is it feeds on good things, things God gives. God gives us intelligence, or the ability to make money; we turn it into pride. God gives us a talent; we use it and become proud. God gives us a heart for himself—a thriving prayer life, a ministry of teaching; we become smug in our spirituality. Pride is a parasite that feeds on goodness and blessing. And so, those like Paul who do great things for God may be given a thorn.

Billy Graham was a great man with a great ministry. But his son Franklin didn't become a Christian until his late 20s. He was, by his own admission, a rebel. So, for twenty-something years Billy Graham lived with an ache in his heart: I'm sure he thought, "Thousands come to Christ at my Crusades, but my son will have nothing to do with him." That's a great man kept humble by a thorn in his side.

What did Paul do about it? Don't make the mistake of thinking Paul always saw his thorn as a gift from God. He didn't see that at first, and we usually don't either. *"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" (vv. 8-9a).* Paul said, "This thorn can't be from God. This is hindering God's work. I could be so much more effective if he just removed this from my life."

So he prayed for it to be removed so he could get on with the business of preaching. Paul was a great man of prayer. If anyone had the faith to move mountains, he did. But three times, he prayed, and each time the thorn remained. It reminds me of Jesus praying three times in the Garden for the "cup" he was about to drink to be removed. It is no wonder because in just a few short hours, a crown of "what" would be placed on his head? A crown of thorns! As with Paul, three times, the Father denied his requests and said to His Son, "You must drink this cup."

Sometimes, we can have all the faith in the world, and God still says no. He wants us to come to him with all our troubles, to

pour our hearts out. But sometimes He says no. In those times, true faith is seen in accepting and living with the thorn rather than being delivered from it. For many years I lived with a thorn. It was a daily struggle, and I often prayed for God to remove it, but he didn't. I had to learn the very thing I most wanted to be removed from my life was the very thing I most needed.

That doesn't mean God never removes a thorn. Some thorns come and go. But God determines when to remove it, not us. And when we ask and ask with no result, maybe it's better to seek God's perspective on our limitations than to ask Him to remove them. Maybe God knows what's best. That's what Job learned. When Job questioned God about why all these terrible things were happening to him, God replied, *"Job, where were you when...the morning stars sang together...?" (Job 38).* In other words, "Job, do you know better than me? Job, trust me."

So after three requests, Paul gave up. But God didn't just say no to Paul; he also gave him insight that would mark his life forever. God said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." With that word from God, he stopped praying for deliverance. The matter was settled in his heart.

Such a paradox! Power perfected in weakness! How can that be? Paul expands on this:

**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." vv. 9b-10**

With that insight, "power is made perfect in weakness," Paul decided to "gladly boast" in his weaknesses. Such a contrast to what I do with my weaknesses. I deny them, cover them up, and try to compensate for them. I grit my teeth and endure them, or sometimes I just wallow in self-pity. You see, a thorn will either make us angry and bitter or more pliable and dependent on God.

So let me ask you, would you embrace weakness if you knew God's power would be perfected through them? Through weakness, we experience the sufficiency of grace. He supplies enough grace to carry us through. But we can't experience that power until we've run out of strength. We can't have that power when we're strong and proud. Paul sums it all up, "When I'm weak, then I'm strong." Sounds like a paradox. But that's the benefit. With our eyes on that, we can actually live joyfully with a thorn.

But, let's get real. What does it mean—strength in weakness? I think I've misunderstood this. I always thought this meant somehow my weakness will be overcome by his strength, so I'm no longer weak. My weakness is somehow replaced with his power flowing through me, so what was my weakness now becomes His power. But that's not what it says! It says His power is perfected IN weakness! Not in spite of weakness, but

in weakness. We stay weak! We don't get fixed by God's power, but right in the midst of our brokenness, his power is displayed. People look at our lives, and they're perplexed. They see weakness, brokenness, hurt, but they also see God sustaining us, mellowing us, and deepening us. They see Christ being formed in our life!

Do you know what has hit me this week? If this is how God operates in each of our lives, then we're a community of people with thorns. The Scottish preacher Alexander Maclaren said, "Please be kind to everyone you meet because everybody you meet is fighting a battle." It's true! The church isn't a group of people who have it all together. We're weak, frail, and hurting. That's why this must be a place where we encourage one another and are patient with one another. People with thorns can be hard to live with sometimes. They need grace. They need help and support.

Those words, "When I'm weak, then I'm strong," have come to mean a lot to me. Before I came to CPC in 1986, I'd spend two years studying Greek and Hebrew in Scribe School at Peninsula Bible Church. I then spent four years working as a youth pastor in Pleasanton. After that, I spent two more years studying church history and theology at Denver Seminary. When I came to CPC at age 30, I thought I was kind of a big deal. Even though I was kind of the "second" guy, I thought this church was lucky to have me.

But then the elders told me my preaching ability was below average, and I was best in kind of a support role. For nine years, I wrestled with that. I had dreams of preaching and leading a big church. I tried to get other churches to hire me, but no one was that interested. I'm an achiever by nature, but my inadequacy haunted me in those years, and nothing I did could change that.

But God was teaching me this lesson: "When I am weak, then I am strong." And now I look back and see that learning that lesson prepared me for leadership far more than any seminary class I ever took. I had to die to myself and my abilities. God had to bring me to the place where I was willing to serve in whatever way he saw fit. He didn't want my intellect or my talents. He wanted my weakness. I now look back and see the very thing I most wanted removed from my life was the very thing I needed the most. And I have to continue to learn that lesson. As I prepare for my retirement from CPC, I have to rely on Him to supply the strength in my weakness for the new challenges that lie ahead.

I doubt you have to think long or hard about what your thorn is. Some of you have endured unspeakable things. Some of you live

each day with the reality of unmet expectations—a bad marriage, chronic pain, infertility, singleness, a rebellious or estranged son or daughter. Perhaps it's time you stop fighting it, or denying it, or trying to pray it out of your life. Perhaps it's time you surrender to the One, who in his sovereign wisdom has chosen not to remove it. I can't explain it but take away the thorn, and you wouldn't have the beauty or the joy. It's time to embrace the paradox: The very thing you most want removed from your life might be the very thing you need the most.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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