

Paul's Foolish Boasting
2 Corinthians 12:8-9
Part Six

Hopefully everyone here in this room this morning would profess to be a Christian, a follower of Christ. If this is in fact our profession, that we are a Christian, a follow of Christ, then what should our greatest desire be?

Should our greatest desire be to be healthy, wealthy and prosperous, or should our greatest desire be to please Christ, being the person He would want us to be, and doing the things He would want us to do?

Obviously, if we truly are in fact a Christian, a true follower of Christ, then our greatest desire will not be to be healthy, wealthy and prosperous, but rather our greatest desire will always be to live a life pleasing to Christ, the one who we are professing to follow.

But even though this may be our greatest desire, we will not be able to do this apart from the grace that God Himself provides, for we in and of ourselves are weak and frail.

And how does God provide grace? God provides grace as a reward to those who humbly and diligently seek His grace as they come to Him in prayer. And I hope that this thought will come alive for us this morning as we go back to our study of **2 Corinthians** and to that section of Scripture that we have entitled "**Paul's foolish boasting.**" In this section, Paul, in attempting to protect the Corinthians from the improper boasting of his opponents, whom he considered to be false apostles, chose to engage in a very similar kind of boasting.

This is why we saw Paul boasting of his heritage in **2 Corinthians 11:21-22**. This is why we saw Paul boasting of his sufferings in **2 Corinthians 11:23-33**. And this is why we saw Paul boasting of his visions and revelations in **2 Corinthians 12:1-4**, where Paul, speaking of his experience in the third heaven, or in other words paradise told the Corinthians that he heard and saw things that he was not permitted to speak. So, what then did Paul tell the Corinthians?

Paul, after having spoken to the Corinthians about the surpassing greatness of his revelations in **2 Corinthians 12:1-4**, then went on to explain how he, in spite of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, was able to remain humble and where did he provide us this explanation? He provided us this explanation in **2 Corinthians 12:7-10**. And this is the passage that we began to examine several weeks ago.

So now let me read these verses for you once again. **“Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! (8) Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. (9) And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. (10) Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”** So did Paul in these verses provide an explanation of how he, in spite of the surpassing greatness of his revelations, was able to stay humble? Absolutely!

And this led us to the question that we are now in the process of answering. And what is that question? How did Paul, in spite of the surpassing greatness of his revelations, remain humble before God? And what did we discover the answer to be?

Paul was able to remain humble before God because God gave him a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7). This is made clear to us in **2 Corinthians 12:7** where Paul, speaking to the Corinthians, told them, **“Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh.”** And what was this thorn in the flesh? As I shared with you several weeks ago, no one really knows, but most people believe that it was some kind of chronic physical ailment given to Paul by God in order to help him to remember how inherently weak and frail he was.

And was this a good thing for him, to be reminded of how inherently weak and frail he was? Absolutely! For Paul tells us that it was this **“thorn in the**

flesh” that kept him from exalting himself, or in other words that kept him humble before God.

And why would that have been so important for him to remain humble before God? What does **James 4:6** tell us? **“God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”** This is why this thorn in the flesh that kept Paul from exalting himself and therefore kept him humble before God was so important. So how did Paul remain humble before God? His “thorn in the flesh” kept him humble. And why was this so important? It was important because as long as he remained humble before God, he was in a position to receive God’s grace.

So could God use afflictions in our own lives to accomplish the same end? Absolutely! We, just like Paul, need to be protected from self-exaltation. Or in other words, we, just like Paul, need to be reminded that we in and of ourselves are incapable of being the person that God would have us to be and do the things that God would have us to do apart from Him and His grace.

And what better way to do this than by allowing us to be afflicted with afflictions that are beyond our abilities to control or to manage? There really is no better way. Afflictions are necessary for us as God’s children.

So when we as God’s children encounter afflictions that are so difficult that they remind us of how truly weak and frail we are and how incapable we are of being the person that God would have us to be and to do the things that God would have us to do, those afflictions can prove very useful to us in keeping us from exalting ourselves, and therefore very useful in keeping us humbly bowed before God. So how will we know if we have responded to our afflictions in this way? We will know that we have responded to our afflictions in this way if we do exactly what Paul did after he had been humbled before God by his “thorn.” And this now brings us back to our text and this morning’s message.

So, what did Paul do after he had been given “the thorn” and had become humbled before God?

After Paul had been given “the thorn” and became humbled before God, he initially “implored” God three times, or in other words prayed to God three

times that “the thorn” might leave him (2 Corinthians 12:8). This is how Paul’s spirit of humility, the by-product of Paul having been given the “**thorn in the flesh,**” initially manifested itself in Paul’s life. It initially manifested itself in Paul’s life by him imploring God, or in other words by him praying to God three times that the thorn that God had given him would “**leave**” him, or in other words that the thorn would be “**removed**” from him.

Let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 12:8** and see if this is not so. “**Concerning this** [or in other words “the thorn in the flesh”] **I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.**”

So did Paul in response to the “**thorn**” that he had been given by God, and as a manifestation of the spirit of humility that had been produced in him as a by-product of the “thorn in the flesh” implore God three times that “**the thorn**” might leave him? Absolutely! This is exactly what the verse tells us. So how can we know if we, in response to our afflictions, have truly been humbled by those afflictions? We will know this if we, in response to this affliction, find ourselves initially praying and asking God to remove those afflictions from our lives.

So now let us take a closer look at this verse so that we might better understand what Paul is communicating to his readers and to us through this verse.

So how does the verse begin? It begins with these words, “**Concerning this** [or in other words “the thorn in the flesh”] **I implored the Lord three times.**”

So, what does this word “**implore**” mean? “Implore” (translated a form of the verb “PARAKALEO”) literally means “to call near” (Matthew 8:5; 14:36; Mark 1:40; 5:23; 6:56; 7:32; 8:22; Luke 7:4; 8:41). It was used frequently in the Gospels of those who were appealing to Jesus for healing. And therefore we certainly can see the appropriateness of Paul choosing this word here in this text as He asks that the Lord, or in other words as he “implores” the Lord three times that “**thorn in the flesh**” might “**leave**” him.

So should this prayer, this request, this beseeching, this urging, by Paul be surprising to us in light of the fact that Paul had just told us in **verse 7** that he had been given them to keep him from exalting himself? No, it should not be surprising to us. When Paul was initially given the **“thorn in the flesh”** he did not understand its purpose. All he knew was that the **“thorn in the flesh,”** that had been given to him made his life and ministry much more difficult. This is what he knew and beyond that he knew nothing of its purpose or why it had been given to him, for if he had, he would not have uttered this request but he didn’t know why it had been given him, and having been humbled by God through this particular affliction, felt that he needed for the sake of the gospel and for the advancement of the kingdom to pray to God, to implore God, to urge God, to beseech God that this thorn in the flesh that he had been given would **“leave him,”** or other words be **“removed”** from him. Therefore this prayer, this request, this beseeching, this urging by Paul, that the Lord would remove this **“thorn in the flesh”** from him should in no way be surprising to us.

In fact, this is exactly what we should be doing if we have been humbled before God by whatever means God has chosen to humble us, including the various afflictions that He has permitted to come into our lives. We should, for the sake of Christ and the advancement of the kingdom, pray, imploring God, beseeching God, urging God to take the affliction from us believing, just as **Hebrews 11:6** tells us, that God will reward those who diligently seek Him. This is what we should be doing. This is what Paul did and this is what we should do if in fact our afflictions have done their work and humbled us before God. We should in response to our afflictions pray.

And if we are not presently doing this either we have not yet been humbled before God and still believe that we can somehow manage our lives without God’s help by working smarter and harder, or we are lacking the faith to believe that God does in fact reward those who diligently seek Him. It is one or the other.

Fortunately we know from our text that neither of these things characterized Paul’s life, and this is the very reason that Paul **“implored”** God three times that this thorn in the flesh that had been given him might leave him. He had been made low and he prayed again and again.

The three times that Paul implored God were most likely three separate occasions when the “thorn” was particularly grievous and causing him significant difficulty in carrying out his apostolic work.

It was in those times when Paul was being particularly grieved by the “thorn” and found his apostolic ministry significantly more difficult that he most likely implored God, urged God, beseeched God to take the thorn from him.

So now let me ask you this question. Was Paul’s prayer rewarded as **Hebrews 11:6** has promised to those who diligently seek Him? And what is the answer?

The answer is absolutely! Paul’s prayer was rewarded? But God did not reward Paul’s prayer by taking his “thorn” from him for the simple reason that would not have served Paul or the work of the gospel.

So if Paul’s thrice prayed prayer was not rewarded with his “thorn in the flesh” being removed, how was it rewarded?

Paul’s reward for having humbly and diligently sought the Lord in prayer was the promise of “sufficient grace” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Let me now read for you the very first words of **2 Corinthians 12:9** and see if this is not so. **“And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient.’”** This is how Paul’s thrice prayed prayer was rewarded. It was rewarded with the promise of sufficient grace. This may not have been what Paul expected to hear, but this was God’s answer to his prayer.

So, what is grace? Grace (CHARIS) refers to God’s undeserved favor. How big a deal is God’s grace?

Apart from God’s grace we could not have been saved (Acts 15:11; 18:27; Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7; 2:5, 8; 2 Timothy 1:9. We see this in **Acts 15:11; 18:27; Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7; 2:5, 8 and 2 Timothy 1:9.**

Apart from God’s grace we could not be sanctified (2 Peter 3:18). We see this in **2 Peter 3:18.**

And finally, apart from God's grace we would not be able to be glorified (Ephesians 2:7). We see this in **Ephesians 2:7.**

So is God's grace a big deal to us as believers? Absolutely! Grace is what makes it possible for us to come to know God, to live a life pleasing to God, and to one day be in glory with God. Grace is truly a big deal!

So, how do we get grace? We get grace by coming to God's throne of grace in the time of our need according to Hebrews 4:16, just as Paul had come to God's throne of grace in 2 Corinthians 12:8. In other words, we get grace by humbly coming before God in prayer.

We may not always get what we have asked for, but we will always, as a reward for coming to God humbly and diligently, receive grace just as Paul received grace when God said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient."

So, did God fulfill His promise to Paul? And what is the answer? The answer is absolutely! Even in spite of Paul's miserable situation brought upon him by the "thorn" that had been given him and that had remained with him, Paul was able by the grace of God to carry out his apostolic ministry, and to carry out that ministry extremely well even in spite of his own personal weakness, or in other words even in spite of the thorn in the flesh that had been given to him and that had remained with him.

So, what should we do when affliction comes? We must immediately humble ourselves! And then we must, believing that God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him, pray to God, asking Him to take the affliction from us. And as we do this He will pour out His grace upon us, either by taking the affliction from us or by supplying us the grace to persevere in being the person God wants us to be.

May we by God's grace be quick to come to Him and His throne of grace when afflictions come into our lives so that God might reward us with the outpouring of His grace, which we so desperately need.