



Sunday, May 29, 2022

Sunday: Pastor John VanderWindt
Theme: Strength in Christ
Sermon: Living Hope 101 Testimonies
Scripture: 2 Cor 12:1-10

Good morning. What a joy it is to be able to gather together in the house of the Lord. When the world is in chaos, we gather and we are reminded about how Christ is with us and how Christ leads us. There are times in which Christ's presence is very real and there are times in which we wander in what may seem like a wilderness and we go, "Lord, are you here?" In both of those times, God says, "I am with you" and as we sang before, "I am seeking your good" which may be a good that is different than the world's idea of good, but I am seeking your good.

This morning we are going to turn to 2 Corinthians 12. This is a passage in which many of us probably know. We might not know that it comes in 2 Corinthians 12. We might not even know that these two things come so close together. But chances are somewhere in our life, we have heard of Paul's vision in which he was taken up into the third heaven and wondered, "What is that all about?"

Then somewhere in our life, maybe at a different time, we've heard about Paul who had a thorn in his flesh, and wondered what that was all about. Today, we see that those happen within just a few verses. So today we're going to look at those two concepts and we're going to do it in light of, "How do we find strength in Christ, in both of those situations and in light of a broader context of a couple of chapters in 2 Corinthians. So I invite you to leave your Bibles open after we read 2 Corinthians chapter 12.

2 Corinthians 12:1 is where we'll start and we'll read just the first 10 verses and then we'll refer to some other pieces. Paul begins by saying, **1** I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. **2** 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.

3 And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— **4** was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. **5** I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. **6** 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, **7** or because of these surpassingly great revelations.

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. **8** Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. **9** 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. **10** 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.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we come to you this morning and we come within weaknesses because we know that we need You. Lord, this morning we ask that you will speak to each heart, that it may be your words of love, your words of strength and caring, that we may hear and that we may show in our own lives, our gratitude for your gift of life and give you all the glory. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be your words and may you be honored. In Jesus' name, amen.

2 Corinthians 12 outside of context, begins in kind of a unique way because it begins by Paul saying, "I must go on boasting" and we're thinking this does not sound like Paul. As we get to verse 10, he says, "I am not boasting but I am boasting in my weaknesses." So what does he mean by, "I must go on boasting?" If we look back starting in chapter 10, Paul is having a conversation with the people of Corinth. The people of Corinth have been witnessed to by Paul. He has written them a number of letters. Every time he goes back to them, there is this debate. Are you really God's messenger? Because we have other people here who are also saying things and they are showing us how God is at work and then will tell us all the things that they have done in the name of God.

And Paul says, "Okay, let me once again defend my ministry" and he begins what is known to biblical scholars as "The Fools Speech." He begins by saying, "Okay, let me take what you have said about all these great people and let me kind of counteract a little bit. And they tell of all these great things that God has done through them. All these great things that they have done in the name of God. Then Paul goes on in chapter 11 and he talks about it starting at verse 16. He says, "I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then tolerate me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting." Because Paul realizes that when we boast in ourselves, we are just being foolish.

Then Paul takes this whole bit and all the great things that they said they'd done and says, "Here's what I've done for God. I've been beaten. I've been in prison. I've been shipwrecked." But then he ran into a problem. The problem was that these false apostles were bragging about their visions which they had seen. And they would come before everybody else and they would say, "Oh, I am so special because God revealed himself to me in this way. And let me tell you about my time with God and how much I must be loved because God revealed this to me." And Paul for this whole time, he'd been kind of doing the opposite thing. And now he runs into this business with visions, and he says, "Oh, I can't lie. I've had visions. I've had more than one. And in those visions, unspeakable things have been spoken and here I am now to say, 'What do I do?'"

So at the beginning of chapter 12, he says, "I must go on boasting." But notice how he switches. He goes on to say, "I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord." "Just like you did, I will tackle the same topic." But then he changes to the third person. He says, "I know a man in Christ." The scholars believe that this is Paul. He is doing it in third person so as to separate himself to make it not about him, but to again point back to God, and what God is doing.

And so he says, "I know a man 14 years ago, who was caught up into the third heaven." Now the part about the third heaven has raised lots of questions. In Jewish mentality and Jewish concept at that time, there were three levels of heaven. There was the first level of Heaven which is the atmosphere in which we live. There was the second level of Heaven which is outer space. And then there was a third level of heaven, which is where God dwells. The paradise of God.

So in the Psalms, when it talks about the highest heavens, it's talking about that place within where God dwells. And we have to remember that when we think of, "Okay, then are they stacked on top of each other? You've got Earth or the atmosphere around us, and then you've got the outer universe, and then God is outside of that. But that's not the way the Jews thought of it. It was simply a way to determine... "Are you talking about here? Are you talking about the universe? Or are you talking about God's dwelling, which is both here and in the universe?"

So Paul says, "I know a man who was caught up into the third heaven" and then it says, "Whether it's in the body or not in the body." That is in another way getting back at the people in Corinth, because they had this Greek mentality of everything in the body was evil. Everything spiritual was good. And Paul saying, "That is not relevant. It is all about God's glory." Then he says in verse four & five, "... and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that..."

Paul had an encounter with God and in that encounter with God, he was overwhelmed by God's love and grace and presence. And that was for Paul. There are times in our lives when God reveals Himself to us in extraordinary ways. And it is often in times in which we need God's extraordinary grace. And God says and God reminds us, "I am here with you and I will carry you through it. And this is between you and me." And Paul says, "That man, would he have the right to boast about him? Absolutely. Would he be called a fool? No, because it's telling the truth" as we read in verse six, "Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth."

As we read in verse six, "Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth." But this is not something which we need to be talking about because when we do it that way, it's more about us. "Aren't I special because God revealed himself to me this way?" than it is about God. God says, "I want you to enjoy my presence." Christ in His relationship with the church, he calls us the bride and He is the groom.

Just like in a marriage, there are times for just the husband and the wife to enjoy and that is not stuff to be broadcast. That is stuff to build up their intimacy with each other.

Paul is saying, "Just like that, there are times when God reveals Himself to us in such a way that we are to just bask in his glory. In fact, there are stories throughout church history which give that evidence. Due to time, I'm not going to go into them but you can look them up. If you look up Pascal, for example. He reveals how he became a Christian and after he died, there was found in the inner part of his coat a little note which was pinned there. And on it, there was a date in which it talks about how from 10:30 to a little after 12:30 one night, he had an extraordinary encounter with God. It changed his life.

There is Sarah Edwards, who is the wife of Jonathan Edwards, one of the great revivalists in the States and all around the world in many ways. She too had an encounter with God when Jonathan Edwards was on a trip. And after she died, Jonathan Edwards wrote about it. But it was this special time in which God said, "I've got something special for you. Let me remind you that I am here."

In today's society, it's really easy to say, "You know, it'd be for the benefit of others for me to share this." Then there's the piece that comes right after that. In verse seven it says, "... or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me." There are times... and we read this throughout Scripture... where God allows Satan to do things.

And we go, "Why, Lord?" Here Paul doesn't become conceited. There are times when in the Old Testament, we look at the story of Job. God allowed Satan to mess with Job's life. First his possessions, then his family, then his health. Let's put this into perspective for just a moment. We have the word of God. When we get tormented or when things are difficult, we can go to Scripture and we can be reminded that God is with us. Job didn't have any scripture. Job was on his own. And yet in that space, God met Job where he was.

Last week for those of us who gathered, put out a couple of chairs. Notice that they're tied together.



What we talked about last week in Corinthians where Glenn talked two weeks ago about how we need to when we sit in the chair, to look as if we have Christ right next to us. So that we have Christ's perspective on all of this. So that we see things through Christ's eyes and we are reminded when we are doing things that we shouldn't, that Christ is always right there.

Today Paul takes that just a little bit further. Today Paul says, "I want you to remember that not only when things are good but when things are really hard, Christ is right here with us. When you are being tempted or tormented, Christ is there with you. And so he talks about this thorn in the flesh. There has been debates for 1000's of years as to what that thorn might be.

So whether it was physical, whether it was spiritual, whether it was demonic... you can look up for whichever one you want to support and there'll be support for it. We're just going to leave it as something that kept Paul from being conceited. And then it says in verse 8 & 9, "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."

This prayer of Paul is not the first time that we should think of this prayer. If we go back a number of years before Paul got to know Christ, Christ was in the garden of Gethsemane. He prayed three times that God would remove this cup from him. And God said to Jesus in many ways, the same thing that he says to Paul. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Now I don't think any of us would say Christ was weak. Let's read on just a bit further in verse 10, where it says, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses" and here are the weaknesses that he mentions... in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. Those are the weaknesses. It's not the time that I am tempted to do something wrong in my sinful desire. I do that. That's not a weakness. That's a sin. That's not something to boast about.

And Paul is saying, "When I am insulted, when I am going through times of hardships, when I'm in prosecution, when I am in difficulty... in those times, I see God working and in that I can boast. Let me take you back to the cross. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed three times for the Father to take the cup from him. And then we'll watch what happens over the next many hours. We see how Jesus was insulted. We see how Jesus went through hardships. We see how Jesus was persecuted. And we see the difficulties that Jesus made from that. Then we also see how Jesus responded.

When Jesus was on the cross, he didn't try to have the last word and say, "Hey, God, I'm tired of this. Send some lightning and kill them all." Or as God did in the Old Testament, "Open the earth and swallow them up because they're not following you." No, that's not what Jesus said. He just said, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." We sang this morning that God is with us in those times. He has it for our good and for His glory.

Sometimes, within the world's view, our good does not match up with what God's glory it is. Sometimes within our lives there are hardships, there are difficulties. There are times that we have to just say, "Lord, I need you in this space and I'm going to trust you. Now, don't take this for saying, "Well, Paul prayed for something three times and it didn't happen so I guess I've just got to endure it for the rest of my life." That's not what Paul is saying. Paul doesn't say, "Stop praying for healing." What Paul is saying is there is a point in which we have to totally depend on God and not depend on ourselves. There is a point in which we have to say, "Lord, we need to rest in you."

Let me take you back to the end of verse nine where it says, "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." The word for rest upon is ἐπισκηνώση (Ep-is-kay- na-o) which is very rarely used within scripture. In other documents, it's often used in the aspect of billeting soldiers. And so another way to interpret this would be, rather than saying, "... so that Christ's power may rest on me, instead saying, "Christ's power may dwell with me or abide with me." Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me."

When you are going through hardships, these chairs are attached (refer to picture above). Jesus isn't going anywhere. Fight with him. Allow him to dwell with you. And in fact, maybe sometimes you need to say, "Hey, Jesus, can I just sit on your lap for a while? I need to be held, because it is only by your power that I can do this." So when Paul talks about weaknesses, it is the idea that we are doing something different than what the world says. The world says, "Get revenge." The world says it's all about you. The world says, "You need to look good and make yourself powerful."

And Paul is saying, "That's not what it's about. My life is about making Jesus look good. If that means I have to be insulted, or if I have to suffer hardships or persecution, I'm okay with it. Because to God be the glory forever and ever. And I will boast in that. Amen.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we thank you for the reminder this morning that you are with us. Lord, we ask that you will help us to remain in a space in which we may live within our weaknesses. That we may respond to world situations as you would and Lord, that we may be reminded of your power and your grace each day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Transcribed by: *Liza Perry*