

Paul has been defending himself against the false teachers' accusations against him in effort to undermine their destructive teaching and remind the Corinthians of his godly behavior when he was with them as well as how much he sacrificed for the sake of the gospel. That was a stark contrast to the false teachers' self-serving, arrogant behavior.

³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, ³³ but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands. 2 Corinthians 11:31-33 Paul returns to one last story of what he has endured. When he was first converted, he went to the synagogues of Damascus with convincing evidence from their own Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ. He was so powerfully convincing that the Jews decided they had to kill him. They convinced the governor that Paul had to die. The governor had the gate watched so that if Paul tried to leave, they would seize him. But the Christians of Damascus did what I like to call "the over the wall in a basket trick." Houses were built into the city's upper walls with windows that looked out of the city. They found a large basket in which Paul could stand as they let it down by ropes probably in the dark of night (Acts 9:20-25ⁱ).

¹ I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 Corinthians 12:1 Paul reiterates that boasting gains nothing, and yet he says he must go on. He feels the false teachers have so influenced the Corinthians that he is forced to show that even by worldly standards of comparison he is more qualified than they are. He is answering the fools according to their folly lest they be wise in their own conceit (Proverbs 26:5ⁱⁱ).

He has given evidence of his sincerity and commitment by listing all the things had endured for the sake of the gospel. Now he moves on to spiritual experiences. It seems the false teachers must have been boasting of how spiritual they are. They may have been teaching their supposed revelations from ecstatic experiences. So, Paul condescends to their boasting and shares his own experience. This passage is the only place in the New Testament in which he speaks of it.

² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.

³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 2 Corinthians 12:2,3 Paul is speaking of himself, but to avoid bringing glory to himself, he refers to himself in the third person. He is the man, for later in the passage he switches to first person (verse 7). Some people think this was from an out of body experience he had when he died from stoning. However, fourteen years earlier he had not started his missionary journeys. By my calculation he was either in Tarsus or in the church in. It may have been after one of the many lashings or beatings that he mentioned, but then again it may have just been in a time of prayer.

In the last fifty years there have been thousands of accounts of people who clinically died and were revived and tell of an out of body experience. They can remember what was done and said in the operating room and even in other rooms in the hospital while they were dead. Some of them tell of leaving this realm and traveling through a tunnel with angel guides who brought them to warm and loving light at the end of the tunnel. Most people identify Him as Jesus. He shows them a review of their life

and the main events that stand out are times of selfishness and times of unconditional love they showed to others. Then, of course, they return, or we would not have the accounts. Their lives usually take a dramatic turn to a more meaningful life.

But there are others who see and experience something like what we would call hell. They remember that as a child in Sunday School they heard of the gospel, and they call out to Jesus and return. That changes the direction of their lives as well.

Paul's case was different. He was already living as a servant of God. He does not tell of a life review. He only shares that he heard things that cannot be uttered. I have read of a number of accounts of people returning from being clinically dead, meaning there was no heartbeat and in some cases no brain waves, who saw a glimpse of heaven, but never that they heard something that was not allowed to be spoken. They say it is hard to express what they saw because they have nothing on the earth that they can relate it to, but not that they heard a secret that could not be shared. While some may be made up to sell books, many of those who experience heaven or hell will not speak of it for fear that people think they are crazy. As the ability to resuscitate people improves, these accounts are becoming well documented.

⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, 2 Corinthians 12:4,5a There are things we are not yet ready to receive. Jesus told the disciples, ¹² *"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.* John 16:12 Some of those things Paul was ready to bear but the rest of us are not. We would misinterpret them or misuse them. Paul could keep a secret. He was in the Spirit. That is why he could say that he could boast of this man but not of himself, for he was not always in the Spirit. He may have been receiving encouragement about the prize that awaited him, which would have helped him endure the suffering he would face.

It is true of all of us. If you are in the Spirit and totally surrendered to Jesus' life in you, you can boast of this man because it is the new man consisting of the life of Christ in you (Galatians 2:20ⁱⁱⁱ). But we dare not boast of ourselves as we are in the process of being sanctified (Hebrews 10:14^{iv}). We have moments, but even in those surrendered moments it is the life of Christ in us that produces fruit that remains (John 15:4,5^v). Our boast is only in our surrender enabled by the grace of God, and therefore the glory belongs to Him.

^{5b} but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— 2 Corinthians 5b Paul makes a powerful redefinition of what strength truly is. It is recognizing how weak we are. The weaker we realize ourselves to be, the more reliant we are upon God. It is that upside down reality of God's kingdom. It is totally the opposite of the way the world sees things. And yet we judge with a sober judgment (Romans 12:3^{vi}). In other words, we recognize our dependency upon the Lord is the greatest of all strengths. We do not downplay the faith that He has given us. It is a matter of which life we yield to.

This upended the false teachers boasting in their training and pedigree and own abilities and strengths. Paul says, "I am nothing but Christ is everything. That is my strength." Humility is powerful because humility makes way for the power of God and assures that He gets all the glory. I remember a time when I was asking the Lord in prayer for the gift of healing. I thought many could come to Christ if they saw God move in unexplainable ways. My heart aches for those with incurable conditions. But I believe the Spirit spoke to my heart and said that would ruin me. I would become enamored with the

gift and think more of myself than I should. Thank God for not answering all our prayers, especially the ones that would be detrimental to us or to others.

The call of Gideon illustrates this. The account is in Judges 6. ¹⁴ *And the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?"* ¹⁵ *And he said to him, "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house."* ¹⁶ *And the LORD said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man."* Judges 6:14-16 God chooses the weak so that He will get all the glory and the person will know it was God and not them. But Gideon also illustrates how this success can cause us victory to think more of ourselves than we should. After the amazing victory of 300 against the vast army Midian, Gideon made an idol which became a snare to Israel (Judges 8:27^{vii}).

I heard a saying that has stuck with me. "If you think you can do it, you already blew it." You never see anyone in Scripture respond to God's call on their lives by saying, "You got the right man for the job. I am up for it. Good choice God." Instead, those who are called are like Moses who said he could not speak well enough (Exodus 4:10^{viii}), or Isaiah who said, "Woe is me!" and had his mouth sanctified before he could say, "Here am I, send me" (Isaiah 6:8^{ix}). The Lord Jesus chose men who were common laborers. Peter's response to the call was, "Go away from me for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8^x). Do you think Jesus called a tax collector and a Christian killer because they knew they could do the job? Paul calls himself the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15^{xi}), while at the same time having faith in God at work through his life.

⁶ *though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.* 2 Corinthians 12:6 Paul was one of the exceptions to picking the least as far as worldly standards go. He had the best education a Jew could have. He was devoted and sincere, but sincerely wrong. When he had the vision of the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus, what he once took pride in became meaningless for it had led him to be against the truth rather than for the truth (Philippians 3:7,8^{xii}). His credentials and zeal became his humiliation. Since his conversion God had used him mightily, even performing many miraculous healings and deliverance from demons. He could boast about all that God accomplished through him because he would be reporting the truth, but instead he spoke of what he suffered. He did not want people to judge him by past accomplishments or ecstatic experiences but rather by the fruit of his life and words.

How many of us would say the same? It is not about what you or I have done in the past, no matter how special the accomplishment is, but rather judge us by what you see of us and hear from us. Let the person's life in your presence and their words that are an expression of their heart be the standard you use. In other words, judge people by the fruit of their lives, not what they say about themselves or what others say about them (Matthew 7:20^{xiii}). I do not think Paul wanted them to think of him as a super saint, but rather as a flawed man called and empowered by God to be the apostle to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:7^{xiv}). He could not overemphasize the fact that his transformation was a marvelous display of how great God's grace can be. That is to not think more highly of him than they should, but to accurately see how God was using Paul for the glory of God.

⁷ *So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to*

keep me from becoming conceited. 2 Corinthians 12:7 When God gives mortal men great gifts, there is a danger of those men becoming conceited. Paul recognized how uniquely God had blessed him with revelations and used him to spread the gospel, planting churches, and making disciples. He was the one whom God was using to make the doctrines of the early church clear. God used his great knowledge of Scripture to reveal what Paul calls “the secret hidden for ages” (1 Corinthians 2:7^{xv}; Ephesians 3:9^{xvi}), which is that God had always intended for Jew and Gentile to make up the bride of Christ by becoming children of God through faith in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-16^{xvii}).

To keep Paul’s old nature in check, humility was insured by God allowing Satan to afflict him. This teaches us several important lessons.

1 Satan is on a leash. He can only do what God allows him to do (Job 1:12^{xviii}). He loves to afflict, destroy, and kill (John 10:10^{xix}). Imagine how bad the world would be if God turned him loose. That will happen in the Great Tribulation (Revelation 12:13^{xx}).

2 God will use his malevolent behavior for our good when necessary by letting that leash have a little slack. What we often see as calamity has a divine purpose. Sometimes it is judgment. Sometimes it is to restrain our fallen nature.

3 Conceit is dangerous. The Greek word means to be overbearing or self-exalting. When we begin to think that we have accomplished something of eternal value and take the glory for it, we are setting ourselves up for a catastrophic fall. *Pride goes before a fall, and a haughty spirit before destruction.* Proverbs 16:18

4 This tells us that humility is essential for our spiritual life to be effective (Galatians 5:23^{xxi}; Colossians 3:12^{xxii}). The more effective we are for God’s kingdom, the greater the need for humility.

Just what this thorn in the flesh was we do not know for sure. Some charismatics claim it was persecution because they want to believe anyone with faith can be always in perfect health. The issue I have with that is the accounts of other saints in Scripture and since have had severe maladies. Persecution is something all who are in Christ experience (2 Timothy 3:12^{xxiii}).

Many conservative commentators believe it was an eye disease that caused his eyes to bulge and affected his vision. Pamphylia was known to be a region where that was contracted and when Paul went through that area he did not preach (Acts 13:13,14^{xxiv}). It is believed that was because he contracted that disease. Later he says the believers would have plucked out their eyes for him, presumable to give him their eyes and given them to him (Galatians 4:15^{xxv}). He also authenticated a letter that he dictated by signing in large letters, which may have been because he could not see well (Galatians 6:11^{xxvi}). But the fact that we do not know for sure offers us a broad application for what we may be enduring. If we are following Christ and are not under the conviction of the Spirit that we are in rebellion, and therefor under discipline (Hebrews 12:5,6^{xxvii}), then we can see affliction as allowed by God for our good. We may not understand what that purpose is, but we know that God is sovereign over our lives (Psalm 139:16^{xxviii}).

⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 2 Corinthians 12:8,9 Paul went to the Lord in prayer three times to ask for healing. He had seen others healed when he prayed over them. He must have thought that the Lord would surely hear his prayer and heal him. I do not think he lacked faith to

be healed. But after the third time of pleading with the Lord he got an answer. I do not know why he did not hear an answer the first two times. Perhaps on the third time he quieted his soul to listen to see if there was a reason for the affliction. This parallels Jesus three requests in the Garden of Gethsemane for the cup to pass from Him (Mark 14:32-41). In both cases the trial was a necessity. *Whenever Christ says no to our desperate passionate pleadings, the no is freighted with his perfect, compassionate goodness and love.*^{xxix}

What God spoke to Paul is a lesson for us all to hear. *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.* I would guess that Paul was not too excited at first to hear that. It meant people would mock his bulging eyes. It meant people would say as they did to Jesus, "Physician, heal yourself" (Luke 4:23^{xxx}). He may have thought it would distract people from hearing his message. But then the words must have sounded like a glorious promise. "*My power is made perfect in weakness.*" Do you want the power of God perfected in you? Are you willing to pay the price? It may mean a weakness is revealed or an affliction that you must live with. That does not sound inviting. But the power of Christ perfected in that weakness sounds - too glorious to comprehend.

Realizing the amazing declaration God had given him, he burst out with, *I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.* If weakness means the power of God in its perfection resting on me, I will brag about how weak I am. Let the false teachers brag about how great and strong they are. I will be boasting in my weaknesses. Can we embrace that concept? Do you want the perfect power of Christ to rest upon you? *Rest upon* is the Greek word used for the presence of God in the tabernacle. It is the word used to describe the Word made flesh in a human body (John 1:14^{xxxi}). Paul is saying the power of Christ will set up a tent over my weakness!

Some of us have asked and asked for some weakness to be removed from our lives. Would you stop for a moment and consider how that humbles you? Do you see how it drives you to prayer to ask for God's help? Now do you see why He has not taken it from you? It is so the power of Christ can rest on you! His power is perfected in our weakness. I think maybe we should stop right here and jump up and down for joy! We have been looking at our weakness all wrong. We thought God could not use us because of it, but that is precisely why He can use us. That weakness makes us humble and that means God's power can rest on us! Hallelujah!

¹⁰ *For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* 2 Corinthians 12:10 *The literal translation of this verse gives a startling emphasis to it, and makes it speak for itself with a force that we have probably never realized. Here it is: "Therefore I take pleasure in being without strength, in insults, in being pinched, in being chased about, in being cooped up in a corner for Christ's sake; for when I am without strength, then am I dynamite."*^{xxxii} Paul has given us a new perspective, heaven's perspective. He has shown us the need for humility, but in doing so He has shown us how to be a powerful instrument of God. He has shown us why afflictions remain and the need for them. Now our challenge is to take this heavenly perspective and look at ourselves and others differently. Watch out for what the world esteems! It is almost always the opposite of what God approves. The humble Christian is a dynamite in Jesus' hands!

Questions:

1 What happened to Paul in Damascus? 2 How was Paul's "out of body" experience unique? 3 Why did he not tell us what he heard? 4 Why could he boast in that man? 5 What does he boast in and why? 6 How did Gideon illustrate this? 7 How should we discern the character of people? 8 Why did God afflict Paul? What may it have been? 9 What are the lessons learned from God's answer? 10 How has this changed your perspective?

ⁱ **Acts 9:20-25 (ESV)**

²⁰ And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." ²¹ And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" ²² But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ. ²³ When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, ²⁵ but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

ⁱⁱ **Proverbs 26:5 (ESV)**

⁵ Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Galatians 2:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

^{iv} **Hebrews 10:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

^v **John 15:4-5 (ESV)**

⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

^{vi} **Romans 12:3 (ESV)**

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

^{vii} **Judges 8:27 (ESV)**

²⁷ And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.

^{viii} **Exodus 4:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue."

^{ix} **Isaiah 6:8 (ESV)**

⁸ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."

^x **Luke 5:8 (ESV)**

⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

^{xi} **1 Timothy 1:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

^{xii} **Philippians 3:7-8 (ESV)**

⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

^{xiii} **Matthew 7:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

^{xiv} **Galatians 2:7 (ESV)**

⁷ On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised

^{xv} **1 Corinthians 2:7 (ESV)**

⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

^{xvi} **Ephesians 3:9 (ESV)**

⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things,

^{xvii} **Ephesians 2:11-16 (ESV)**

¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

^{xviii} **Job 1:12 (ESV)**

¹² And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.” So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.

^{xix} **John 10:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

^{xx} **Revelation 12:12 (ESV)**

¹² Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

^{xxi} **Galatians 5:23 (ESV)**

²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (gentleness is also translated meekness. Humility is implied.

^{xxii} **Colossians 3:12 (ESV)**

¹² Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,

^{xxiii} **2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)**

¹² Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

^{xxiv} **Acts 13:13-14 (ESV)**

¹³ Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem, ¹⁴ but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.

^{xxv} **Galatians 4:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.

^{xxvi} **Galatians 6:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

^{xxvii} **Hebrews 12:5-6 (ESV)**

⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”

^{xxviii} **Psalms 139:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

^{xxix} R. Kent Hughes, [*2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), p. 213.

^{xxx} **Luke 4:23 (ESV)**

²³ And he said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’ What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.”

^{xxxi} **John 1:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

^{xxxii} Streams in the Desert.