

Rapture and Thorns

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. Again, my name is Tommy. I'm the rector of Church of the Advent, and I am delighted to be here this morning. There was an op-ed in the New York Times not too long ago, and the title was this, Americans Stop Being Ashamed of Weakness. And it kind of stood out to me because I resonated with it. The author observed how reluctant we are in our culture to admit any form of weakness in our lives, and then observed how harmful that can be to us down the road. And I have certainly found that to be true in my life, especially 20 years ago moving to Washington, D.C. Many people here are desperately afraid of appearing weak. We want people to think that we are strong, that we are competent, that we are self-sufficient. Anthropologists actually say this is a point of stark contrast between the modern West and other non-Western or traditional societies in other parts of the world, that other societies are much more comfortable expressing weakness, showing vulnerability, but not us. And this morning, we're going to see that this is actually one of the biggest obstacles to knowing God. Our fear of admitting weakness is one of the biggest obstacles, one of the main reasons we struggle to feel any sense of connection to God. We're going to be looking at 2 Corinthians chapter 12, and we're going to be looking at how the Apostle Paul viewed weakness in his own life.

This is a man who learned a lot of hard lessons. And one of the hardest lessons he had to learn is how to embrace his weakness. But because he was able to do that, he experienced profound intimacy with God, and his ministry was empowered in ways that actually went well beyond his natural ability.

And at the end of this passage, he actually says this. He says, when I am weak, then I am strong. Now, what does that mean? We're going to get into it. First, we're going to look at the kind of spirituality that was popular in Corinth, the spirituality that we all want. And then we're going to look at Paul's spirituality, which is the spirituality that we all actually need. Let's pray.

Lord, our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your presence here with us this morning. We don't have to ask. Lord, we don't have to hope that you're paying attention or that you're near or that you're listening. We know that you're here. We are the ones who need to listen. We are the ones who need to pay attention. And I pray that you would open our hearts, that you would capture our hearts, that you would change our hearts through your Word. We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen.

Amen. So first of all, I want to take a moment just to look at the spirituality that is prevalent in Corinth, the spirituality that we all want. Like D.C., Corinth was a highly pluralistic, highly cosmopolitan culture. It was a place where people came to pursue their ambitions. It was a place where you could network and make connections and raise your status. And as is often the case, that surrounding culture had seeped into the culture of the church there. Paul had started the church in Corinth, but then he went on to continue his mission. And since then, the church had drifted more and more in the direction of what we might today call a prosperity gospel way of thinking, beginning to see religion as being about having mystical experiences. Religion is a way to gain material success. The assumption came to be that the more spiritual a person is, the more blessed they are by God, the more successful they will be in life, and vice versa. And that kind of spirituality is always going to be popular, regardless of the culture, regardless of where you are in history.

[4 : 1 8] It's always going to be popular because it appeals to our innate desire to be strong and to be powerful and to be popular and to be important and to be successful. So this is the kind of spirituality that we all want. In our country, this kind of spirituality is always present and it has always been popular. Think of the prosperity gospel televangelists of the 20th century, building their ministry out of books like Norman Vincent Peale's The Power of Positive Thinking. It's this idea that

resonates with the ideals of the American dream, with our obsession with success and productivity. Think of the legions of online self-help influencers today. They make money by playing off our insecurities, by playing off our aversion to weakness. They promise that major breakthroughs are just around the corner, that we have the power to build the kind of life we always wanted. We just need to raise our vibrational frequency. We just need to unlock the power to manifest the life that we want. And in all of this, the assumption about weakness is the same, that weakness is nothing more than a problem to be solved. It's a problem to be solved. And this kind of spirituality, I believe, is plausible in our society, in the West, in ways that it would not be plausible in other parts of the world. And the reason is this, for the last 200 years, there has been such a dramatic increase in wealth and in quality of life for people in our society, that I believe our expectations are massively out of touch with reality. You know, if you think about the assumptions that you make about your life, most of us carry around certain baseline expectations, kind of bare minimum expectations for our lives. We expect that we will generally be safe and healthy and live long lives. Right, so when we get news that that's not the case, we're shocked, we're horrified, we can't believe that's a violation of our expectations.

We expect that if we experience any sickness or pain, it should be brief, it should be infrequent, it should be treatable. And if not, somebody dropped the ball. We expect that we should be able to do whatever makes us happy, that no one should have the right to tell us how to live our lives. We expect that we should be able to have careers and sex lives and relationships and marriages that are totally fulfilling to us. We expect that kids should be something that we have total control over. If we have kids, we should be able to decide exactly when and how and where. If we don't want kids, we shouldn't have to have kids. Right, we treat all of these expectations as sort of rights that we believe we are entitled to. We don't realize that these expectations reveal how ridiculously privileged we are.

Most people throughout history, and I would say most people in other parts of the world today, would think that we are absurd and ridiculous for expecting life to be like this.

Right now, I want to be clear what I'm saying and what I'm not saying. Am I saying that all of these improvements to our quality of life are bad? Absolutely not. Right, I love air conditioning.

[8 : 02] I love antibiotics, right? I'm thankful for those things. But everything comes with a cost. This is the point. What if the privileges of living in the wealthy modern West, what if the very things that make our lives more comfortable, more pleasurable, actually make it much more difficult for us to have a real relationship with the God who made us?

What if that's the price of living with such a high quality of life, with such wealth? Not because those things are inherently bad, but because they insulate us from our weakness.

And that's the problem. So that's the spirituality we want, spirituality that makes us feel strong and powerful and self-reliant. Here's the spirituality we need. As we said, the Corinthians, they were following false teachers. These teachers are twisting the gospel into a kind of health and wealth scheme. These false teachers tried to prove their legitimacy by talking about the mystical experiences they had, right? They would talk about their mystical mountaintop moments, and then they would promise to share their secrets for a price with other people. But look at what Paul says. They've gone on and on and on about these experiences and how Paul hasn't had anything like this. And he finally says, okay, you care so much about visions. You care so much about revelations. And then he reluctantly shares about a mystical experience that he had had 14 years earlier, where he says he was taken up into the third heaven. Now, this is just a first century way of talking about the highest realm of heaven, being in the very presence of God. Clearly, whatever Paul experienced was profound. And you might expect that after experiencing something that profound, that he would come back and he would tell everyone about it. You might expect that he would come home and he would write a book about his experiences called *The Third Heaven*, and that that book would be wildly popular, and that he would go speak at conferences and youth retreats and campus ministry retreats, right? And then they would option the book, and they would turn it into a movie.

You might expect that there would be *Third Heaven* merch. You could get a t-shirt or a prayer journal, right, or a rubber bracelet or a Yeti mug with the *Third Heaven* logo on it, right? That it would become a whole industry. You might expect that that would happen, but that's not what happens. That's the exact opposite of what Paul does. Paul is bashful. He's embarrassed to even bring it up. He's so bashful that he talks about himself in the third person as though it was

somebody else, as though he's like, that's the old Paul. That's the old Paul. He gives almost no detail about it. And we say, why?

And it's because Paul understands that because of the human heart, mystical experiences like this can be dangerous. Now, you say, you mean being brought into the very presence of God is dangerous for Christians? And I would say it depends. Our hearts are extremely vulnerable to pride, extremely vulnerable to pride. And the problem is when God blesses us with experiences of himself, it is so easy for that to become a source of personal pride. You know, if I have some kind of mystical experience and other people don't, it is so easy for me to start believing that must mean I'm somehow superior to those other people. Have you ever been talking to somebody and they pull out this line, well, God told me this? How do you argue with that? It's like the ultimate spiritual trump card, right? So what do you say? Either you say, well, I don't believe God speaks, or what, right? [12:13] It's the same kind of thing, right? It's a claiming of some sort of set-apart superiority. This is the problem that Paul has realized. He's come to learn this about his own heart.

It's so easy for us to make an idol out of these experiences. It's so easy for us to begin to worship our experiences and to worship our feelings about God rather than God himself, so that our faith becomes contingent on those experiences. If we're not having them, it must mean none of it's true. We're making an idol out of those experiences when we think that way. Paul knows this about himself, and so does God. Now listen to this, verse 7. So, just listen to this. To keep me from becoming conceited, to keep my heart from giving in to that pride, 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, to protect me from pride. This, I would say, is the key. If we understand what Paul is saying here, we begin to see what sets his spirituality apart from the false spirituality that is so prevalent in our society. In order to protect Paul from the pride that might arise in his heart, God gives Paul a thorn. Now, people have debated for centuries what this thorn might be, right? Some people have suggested that it was a spiritual or an emotional struggle. Others have suggested that it may have been some kind of physical ailment. We know that the word thorn could just as easily be translated as a kind of spear. So, this is no minor annoyance. This is something that he's constantly aware of, that it's constantly causing pain to him. What's really most important is not the specific nature of Paul's thorn, because I think this could apply to many different things. What's most important is the way Paul views this thorn in his own life. For starters, Paul is not a masochist.

He's not someone who says, well, I'm just going to seek out suffering because I enjoy it. Or he's not a stoic who says, well, this is going to be better for me in the long run. It's going to make me more resilient. Paul actually says he prayed three times, which is probably just a way of saying he prayed over and over and over and over. He might have prayed 30 times. He prayed over and over, God, please remove this thorn. Please take it out of my life. Please heal me. Please restore me.

Please eradicate this suffering. But God answered Paul's prayer by allowing the thorn to remain. So, Paul prayed and prayed and prayed and prayed that it would be taken away. God let it remain. [15:13] Moreover, Paul understands God's heart as our heavenly Father. He understands God's fatherly love for his people. Paul says, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan. Satan wants us to suffer. Satan wants us to be destroyed. God, on the other hand, sometimes allows us to suffer, allows us to have thorns, but it brings him no pleasure. In Lamentations 3, it says this, verse 32, but though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love, for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men. He doesn't afflict from the heart. He does what is necessary, but it brings him no joy. I often quote Johnny

Erickson Tada, who says this in a different way. Sometimes God uses what he hates to accomplish what he loves. Now, parents understand this intuitively. There are so many times as a parent when we have to allow some degree of suffering in our children's lives. Otherwise, we're not good parents.

We have to allow them to experience the consequences of their actions. We have to give them consequences that seem totally unfair, that seem totally horrible. We have to say no to things that they really want, even though it seems unfair. And we don't do these things because we love to watch our children suffer. We do these things because we love them. And ultimately, we do these things because we know far better than they do what will be best for them in the long run. You know, just this past week on the 4th of July, we had an experience of this. We were setting off some fireworks. Let's just say we had a little more than sparklers going on, maybe some heavy artillery.

And my six-year-old really, really, really wanted to hold one of the more powerful ones. And her idea was to light it, and then she would hold it, and then she would throw it up in the air, and then it would launch into the sky. I thought about it. I said no. I don't think that's a good idea. She was so furious.

It's not fair. Why won't you let me do it? She was so angry. I was so unfair. I was so horrible. But I said no, because I'm mean, and I'm a horrible parent. And we get this old cutting board, one of my old cutting boards, because we needed to create a level surface. And we set that firework on the cutting board, and we light it, and we all back up. Well, wouldn't you know it? It malfunctioned. It tipped over. It didn't launch into the sky like it was supposed to, and it exploded right there on the ground. It blew that old cutting board apart. It blew it apart. I said, hey, that could have been your hand. That's why I said no. Right? So when it comes to our hearts, there is nothing that will blast your heart apart worse than pride. There's nothing that will do more damage to your heart than pride. Pride is the thing that convinces us that we don't need God. Pride is the thing that convinces us that we're better off being in charge of our own lives. Pride is the thing that convinces us to lift ourselves up above other people, and to judge them, and to treat them with contempt.

[18:43] And God is a loving Father, and God knows how dangerous and destructive pride can be. So the most loving thing God can do is anything that protects us from pride. We look at it like my six-year-old looked at the fireworks. That doesn't look that dangerous. I can handle that. Let me have it. But God knows how dangerous it is. And so as a loving Father, He gives us thorns. Now explaining a thorn to a child is hard enough. Explaining a consequence to a child is hard enough. Imagine God trying to explain all our thorns to us. It would be like trying to explain it to an aunt.

But as Paul learns to embrace his weakness, as he learns to embrace this thorn, to recognize it as a gift, he begins to tap into a tremendous source of power. We begin to realize that thorns do far more than simply protect us from pride. Right? Paul prays and asks Jesus to take away the thorn, but here's what Jesus says in response. My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness. In other words, Paul learns this. Weakness is an invitation into God's grace.

Right? Jesus says, Paul, this thorn, this messenger of Satan, it's going to weaken you. It's going to weaken you in such a way that it's going to strip away all of your power. It's going to leave you powerless. It's going to leave you on your knees. This thorn is going to bring you to a place where if you have any power at all, it will have to be the power of my grace. I'm going to strip everything else away. And this is really the core difference between false spirituality, the kind that we find so appealing, and the true spirituality we need. False spirituality, the spirituality of prosperity gospel televangelists, and Instagram influencers. It promises strength, but ultimately it makes us weak. It promises strength, but it makes us weak. It caters to our pride. It promises to make us powerful, and effective, and successful, and important, but all those are empty promises.

You know who the most likely self-help customers are? The people who are most likely to buy all the self-improvement stuff that's out there? It's the same exact people who purchased similar products 18 months earlier. Right? It's the same people who come back again, and again, and again. They're chasing the promise of a quick fix, a breakthrough, but they never find it. It never comes.

True spirituality is the opposite. It promises weakness. It guarantees weakness, but ultimately it makes us strong because it strips away our pride. It teaches us not to rely on ourselves.

[21:52] It teaches us to rely on the grace of Jesus Christ moment to moment. And in the grace of Christ, we begin to tap into an infinite source of strength, an infinite source of strength.

Most Christians these days believe what this verse says. The grace of Christ is sufficient. His power is made perfect in weakness. This is one of those that we love to memorize and teach our kids as we should. But I would say very few of us have ever experienced this because most of us spend a lot of time and energy trying to insulate ourselves from anything that makes us weak. But here's the thing. You can't have your cake and eat it too. If we run from our weakness, we are running from the arms of Christ.

If you run from your weakness, you're running from the arms of Christ. If you've ever met someone who has learned this hard lesson, you know exactly what I'm talking about.

I'm thinking now of a very close friend of mine, a guy I really love. Alcoholism has been his thorn, one of his thorns, for his entire adult life. Now he's about a year and a half into his sobriety.

And over the last years, year, year and a half, he has completely transformed. He is shockingly honest about his weakness. Shockingly honest about his failures and his vulnerabilities. And he has

described his struggle for sobriety as sometimes a battle for the next five minutes, for the next five minutes, for the next five minutes. And every step of the way, he's crying out to God to give him the grace to make it through the next five minutes. And I talked to this guy about this battle. And I know most Christians, including me, we can talk theologically about the grace of Christ. But this is a man who knows it viscerally. He knows it in the marrow of his bones.

[24 : 11] I want to invite you to rethink the weakness in your life. I feel like God has been teaching me a lot about my own weakness this year.

Frankly, I've experienced a lot of personal failure. I've just realized there are a lot of things that in my life, in my ministry, that I am simply not good at. And that's been hard. And I don't know what your thorns are. You know, for some people, their thorn might be chronic pain. It might be an illness. It might be a disability or some form of mental illness that's chronic. For others of us, it might be circumstantial. It might be unemployment.

It might be unwanted singleness. It might be infertility. It might be an unplanned pregnancy. It might be addiction. You know, I've known Christians like Wesley Hill who refer to their unwanted same-sex attraction as a thorn in the flesh. Wherever in your life you feel most powerless, most hopeless, most incompetent, wherever you feel like God has been most silent when you have cried out, the invitation is to stop running from those places. The invitation instead is to ask, what would this part of my life look like if I fully believed that this weakness was a gift from a God who loves me? What would my life look like? How would it change the way I think, the way I feel, the way I act, if I believed this area of weakness was a gift from my loving Father?

Because those places of weakness are the very places where we are most likely to encounter the grace of Jesus Christ in ways that actually transform us from the inside out.

And we say, well, how can we be sure? And we find the answer to that question. We find the guarantee to that in the Garden of Gethsemane, where we have Jesus Christ knowing that He is about to face unimaginable suffering at the weakest moment of His life. And just like Paul, Jesus prays three times that the Father would take it away.

[26 : 42] And just like Paul, the Father's answer is no. But while Paul only had to endure a thorn, Jesus wore a crown of thorns.

Jesus suffered more than we can possibly imagine. He knew weakness on a level that we can't even begin to fathom. And yet, because Jesus was willing to become weak, He's able to offer unlimited strength to His people.

And this is why we know, why we are guaranteed that we can trust Him with our weakness. Because He's the one who is able to guarantee that one day there will be no more weakness. There will be no more suffering. There will be no more thorns and thistles. Because one day every tear will be wiped away. Let's pray. Lord, we are tapping into some deep mysteries here and we need Your guidance.

We need Your Holy Spirit to take Your Word and make it flesh. To press it like a salve into those places of pain and hopelessness.

[27 : 55] To enter into those places of weakness and meet us there. Lord, so that when we turn to that darkest place in our life, that darkest, most fearful corner.

Lord, that we know that as we move into that darkness that we will find You. And that You will be that light in the darkness. That You will be the life that comes out of the tomb.

Lord, we pray this. That we wouldn't just know and believe intellectually. But that we would all experience Your grace viscerally. Lord, we pray this by Your grace.

And in the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.