

The Greatest

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[0 : 00] Let's read in 2 Corinthians chapter 12.! This is page number 970 of the Bible in the little pew in front of you.

! It's 2 Corinthians chapter 12. Page 970. I must go on boasting. Though there's nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows. 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. And he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man, I will boast.

But on my own behalf, I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool. For I'd 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.

[1 : 25] 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.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 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. 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. I have recently become friendly with an older lady who is a member of the Queen's English Society.

Her influence has caused me to read more carefully and to be more precise in expressing myself.

One of the things I have noticed is our propensity to use words in the wrong way.

[2 : 43] For example, having watched a well-taken goal in a game of football, a commentator will say, That was an incredible goal, or that goal was unbelievable. Well, in both counts, of course, the commentator is wrong.

The goal was quite believable because it both happened, and I saw it with my own eyes. And it was quite credible given the level of preparation involved in its execution. Perhaps a better way of saying it would be, that was a really good goal.

Call me pedantic, but I'd rather reserve the words unbelievable and incredible for things which really are incredible and unbelievable. Were it not written down in the Holy Bible and inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, I'd reserve incredible and unbelievable for what we read in 2 Corinthians 12 verses 1 through 10.

These verses, in my view, represent the most profound Christian experiences, which on one hand are almost incredible, but on the other hand are all too believable.

The one, the supreme revelation of the glory of Christ, is beyond our present reach. The other, the strengthening of grace of God in our weakness, is a daily experience for us, without which as Christians we'd crumple, but with which we can stand strong in Christ and testify to the greatest of all truths, that the grace of Christ is sufficient for us, and that His power is made perfect in our weakness.

[4 : 22] Now, in the wider context of this passage, as you know, we've been working our way through 2 Corinthians for the past few months. The Apostle Paul is confronting the poison of the false teachers in Corinth, who boasted in their charisma, their oratory, their appearance.

By contrast, Paul was timid, softly spoken, and unimpressive. He wants to show the Corinthians, in the words of the great Anglican J.I. Packer, that in the Christian life, weakness is the way.

Weakness is the way. It's through our weakness, Christ shines forth in strength. We have the treasure of the gospel in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs not to us, but to God.

To boast about our abilities, our strengths, as did the false teachers, is not the way of the Christ who emptied himself and walked the road of weakness. Rather, Paul and every faithful servant of Christ must not boast about his strengths, but the strength of the risen Christ at work in and through his weakness.

I want us to consider two things this evening, both of which are equally incredible and unbelievable. First of all, the greatest glory in verses 1 through 6, and second, the greatest grace in verses 7 through 10.

[5 : 54] And you'll see Paul in this passage weaving these two things together to reinforce his message that weakness is the way and that Christ's strength is perfected in our weakness.

First of all then, from verse 1 to verse 6, the greatest glory, the greatest glory. Few Christians, if any, truthfully, could testify to having had the kind of revelation Paul details in these verses.

I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Now, in no doubt, Paul was that man, but he does not want to draw attention to himself, so he refers to himself as a man in the third person.

Soon after his conversion, Paul was taken by the disciple Ananias to Damascus, where we read in 2 Corinthians 11, 32 through 33, we read this last week, he escaped by being lowered through a window in the wall.

From there, Paul spent time alone in the desert, receiving various revelations and teaching directly from the risen Lord. And it was presumably during this time, the so-called Arabian time, he was caught up.

[7 : 16] But we don't know for sure. For Paul, grammatically speaking, there were three heavens. The first heaven was the clouds, clouds we see in Glasgow all the time.

The second heaven was what lay beyond the clouds, space, the planets, the cosmos. The third heaven is what we understand by heaven proper, the dwelling place of God.

That's where he went. He describes it in the next verse as being caught up into paradise. The word paradise is only used three times in the New Testament.

To quote my favorite commentator, paradise is a place of rest and bliss for those who enter it after death. It's a place of rest and bliss for those who enter it after death.

Rest and bliss. Such beautiful words. A greater than Eden in the presence of the risen Christ. That's where Paul went.

[8 : 20] But as far as he knows, there's so little about it, he knows for definite. Did it happen in the body or out of the body? He doesn't know. Was it a bodily rapture and that his body was taken to that place?

Or was it a spiritual vision? Again, he doesn't know. Paul doesn't describe, you'll notice, what he saw. But he does say he heard many things.

Things which cannot be told, cannot be uttered. What these things were, we can but speculate. Did he hear the praises of the angels? And the redeemed of God?

Did he hear the voice of Christ himself, a voice which would later be described as being like that of many rushing waters? We don't know, but whatever Paul heard, he cannot say.

Human words are insufficient to express this kind of heavenly communication. We need a new language, we need a divine language to express the inexpressible.

[9 : 24] Paul was given a vision of what lies in the future for every Christian believer, for us. Bliss and rest in the paradise of God.

There the risen Christ shall be closer to us than he was to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He shall be our shepherd and lead us to springs of living waters, even as he wipes the tears from our eyes.

Paul heard the glorious voice of heaven's praises and the unutterable truths of the essence of God. He was given a vision the likes of which only Jesus in his earthly ministry was afforded.

No wonder, given that vision, Paul could say earlier in 2 Corinthians 4.17, for this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

This paradise, it awaits all who trust in Christ, an eternal weight of glory in the paradise of God. The very thought of it fills us with longing.

[10:40] Now, if the false teachers in Corinth had received this vision, what would they have done with it? They'd have shouted it high from the rooftops and used it to further their own status and reputation.

They'd have announced that they were channeling the paradise of God into the daily experience of their followers. They'd write books, do interviews, have their own YouTube channel, make a fortune. They'd become even more conceited and proud than they already were. Listen to what I've experienced, they'd say. By contrast, what does Paul do with the vision he'd received? In verse 5, he writes, On behalf of this man, I will boast, but on my own behalf, on my own behalf, I will not boast, except in my weaknesses.

To my knowledge, this is the only time in the New Testament Paul refers to this vision. You see, he's not interested in drawing attention to himself on account of what makes him strong.

[11:44] Rather, he's always emphasizing his weaknesses. He'd be ashamed to stand up in front of a crowd and be called a VIP on account of his deeply spiritual experience of the glory of paradise.

Rather, he wants to talk about the spiritual experience of the grace of Christ working through his weakness. He goes on in verse 6, Though, if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I'd 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.

Paul would not have been lying had he publicized that vision, but he does not want to draw attention to himself or for people to think more of him than they ought.

What he wants his people to see are his weaknesses. And what he wants his people to hear is the message of the grace of Christ. And from this, we derive this central principle of the Christian life. The Christian can choose to bring glory to himself or bring glory to Christ, but he cannot do both at the same time.

[13:00] The Christian can choose to bring glory to himself or bring glory to Christ, but he cannot do both at the same time. People can leave a sermon saying, what a wonderful preacher.

Or they can leave saying, what a wonderful Christ. But if they should choose to leave saying, what a wonderful preacher, that preacher's not done his job, which is to fade into insignificance compared to the glory and grace of the Christ he preaches.

As often said, Professor Dr. MacLeod told all his students, preach a big Christ. Let's not get smart. Let's not display our learning, but rather admit our weakness and preach the glory and grace of Christ.

The Christian can choose to bring glory to herself or to bring glory to Christ, but both that she cannot do at the same time. We're offered a binary option, self or Christ, pride or humility, conceit or sincerity.

None of us have had the kind of revelation Paul had, but some of us may have been privileged to experience expressions and demonstrations of the glory of God. Paul's telling us, don't boast about these things.

[14:17] Speak about them only if you must, lest you become conceited, proud and selfish. Do not draw attention to yourself, lest you draw it away from Jesus.

It is to be him and him alone we preach. Jesus and him crucified. You know, after his conversion, Saul of Tarsus changed his name to Paul.

The name Paul literally means little or least. Humble by name, least by nature.

He says of himself in 1 Corinthians 15, 9, I remember Kirk preaching about this, I am the least of the apostles, I am the Paulist of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God.

Paul never lost his sense of the mercy of God in making him an apostle and that humility bled into his ministry. He didn't draw attention to himself, he drew it only to Jesus.

[15:23] Is that the same for us? Humbled by his grace, we want to glorify the name of Jesus, not our own. We leave behind us our achievements and we focus instead on our weaknesses.

For after all, as Jim Packer says, despite the greatest glory, weakness is the way. So the greatest glory, that's the first point.

Second is from verse 7 to verse 10 and it's the greatest grace, the greatest grace. This is where our sermon gets hard.

There will never be a definite answer to the problem of pain in the Christian life. We might think that having believed in Jesus, everything in our lives would go sweetly, but how often by bitter experience we've discovered how wrong we were.

We both experience pleasures and heights, just like Paul did in verses 1 through 6, but also pains and lows, just like Paul did in verses 7 through 10.

[16:40] The problem Paul highlights is only too human. He had been given a heavenly vision of the glory of God, how easy it would have been for him to become proud and conceited, to think more of himself than he ought.

If Paul had merely been given this heavenly vision, his earthly ministry would have been severely hampered, for how can a proud minister preach a humble Christ?

How can a proud minister preach a humble Christ? How can a conceited minister preach a crucified Christ? As we've seen, it's impossible to both preach ourselves and Christ.

So to keep Paul from becoming proud, he was given a thorn in the flesh. Who gave him this thorn? It wasn't Satan, for he was the thorn. It was God. The God who showed him this heavenly vision gave him a thorn.

Now the thorn is a small, sharpened bit of wood. It's a scelf in your finger. It's the splinter in your toe. It's painful.

[17:48] It's deeply painful. And God has allowed Satan to harass and buffet us with it. In his grace, and this is hard teaching, to keep us from becoming proud, conceited, and self-sufficient, God has given us, as one commentator calls it, something terribly humbling.

Something terribly humbling. What was the nature of Paul's thorn? Some suggest it could have been a problem with his sight that he was going blind. Others that Paul suffered from epilepsy. We don't know, and that's good, because we can place our particular sufferings here, and call them the thorn which God has given us to keep us from becoming proud, to keep us reliant upon him. How those thorns hurt. How painful are these thorns? How constant are these thorns? Make no mistake, every one of us here has a thorn given to us by God to keep us from becoming proud, to keep us reliant on him.

Some thorns seem very obvious, others less so. Whatever it is, it harasses us, it buffets us, it brings tears to the eyes of our hearts, it's so painful. The thorn I have isn't the thorn you have.

[19:19] What serves as a thorn to me wouldn't bother you in the slightest. And what serves as a thorn to you wouldn't make me lose a night's sleep.

We're all individuals, and God has given each of us a person-shaped thorn to keep us as individual Christians from becoming proud and self-reliant.

Now, no one in their right minds would want a thorn like this, so it's entirely reasonable for Paul to say, three times I've pleaded with the Lord about this, verse 8, that it should leave me. Just like Jesus prayed three times in the garden that the cup would be removed from him, so we plead with the Lord, take the thorn away.

I'd love to have heard the prayers of Paul, his heartfelt prayers of pain and desperation. Lord, take this thorn away.

We cannot possibly pray for the thorn in our lives to be taken away with passivity. We plead with God. We cry out to God.

[20:25] We pour our souls out to God. Lord, please take this thorn away. should not a merciful God answer our prayers?

I wish he would. But he's got a better word for us. In his vision of heaven, Paul heard inexpressible things.

But now on earth, he hears the voice of the living Christ saying to him, my grace is sufficient for you. For my power is made perfect in weakness.

Tell me you wish it wasn't so. But the power of God is perfected in the pain of the thorn. The power of God is perfected in the pain of the thorn.

Whatever the nature of the thorn Paul had, it meant God's power was at work in him and through him. The gospel he preached assumed us a new level of spiritual vigor so that it was received by his listeners no longer as the word of man but as it really was the very word of God.

[21:37] And we're going down here, aren't we, into the deepest of Christian experiences. that unless we are broken by the hard experiences of our lives, God can do nothing with us.

Let me say that again. It's hard. Without the thorn, we're useless in God's service. It's a profound, it's a painful truth, but it's a truth nonetheless from the hand of our loving and wise Savior. If we're to be at all useful to God, expect a thorn and even though you wince at the pain of it, don't be surprised because it's for you.

But with the thorn, and this is the important thing, with the thorn comes the grace of Christ. The greatest words Paul ever heard weren't those he heard in his vision of heaven, but those of the living Christ who said to him, my grace is sufficient for you.

My grace is enough for you, Paul. Just when you think you can't go on any longer, Jesus gives us grace to cope and to keep going. What is that grace?

[22 : 57] The American writer Warren Wearsby describes it this way, it is God's provision for our every need when we need it.

It is God's provision for our every need when we need it. The dying Christian gets that grace to keep on clinging to Christ through the dying process.

The depressed Christian gets that grace to get out of bed in the morning. The blind Christian gets that grace to see the colour of light in the new heavens and the new earth.

With words which really are often better felt than told, one of the most powerful passages in the entire writings of Paul, we get down deep into the daily experience of the Christian.

We are not promised tomorrow's grace today, but we are promised God's provision when we need it. need it. Why though? Why? It is to keep us reliant upon Christ and not on ourselves, for it is, as Paul says in verse 10, in our weakness we are truly strong.

[24 : 12] God loves us too much to allow us to stray from Him. God loves us too much to leave us to our own devices. How often we have experienced spiritual barrenness during high points in our lives.

Everything is going well at home, at work, in the church, and we subtly begin to forget about God and to begin to rely upon ourselves. And then comes the thorn to remind us that when we are strong in ourselves, we are weak in Christ, but when we are weak in ourselves, we are strong in Christ.

The thorn, let's acknowledge it, let's be honest about it, very painful it is. It brings with it a deeper reliance upon God and a deeper faith in His grace and His provision for us.

When we have the thorn, we read our Bibles more, we pray more, and we long for God's work and presence in our lives more.

And it takes a thorn to do it. I'm not sure I like the translation of verse 10. where the ESV says, I am content for the sake of Christ, and I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, so on.

[25 : 31] I'd rather translate this verb as, I consider it worth it. I consider it worth it. For the sake of Christ, and I consider the weakness, the insults, the hardships, the persecutions, and the calamities worth it.

We don't have to like the pain of the thorn. But we need to understand what it's doing in our lives. It is throwing us back on God as the only source of grace and love and provision.

We don't have to like it. But it's throwing us back on God. We have to know what He's doing with it. So, Paul heard two words in our passage. The first, heavenly.

The second, earthly. Of the two, I want to argue that the second is the most important for us, whereas none of us have heard the inexpressible sounds of heaven yet, we all hear the words of God tonight saying to us, every one of us here, my grace is sufficient for you.

The living, exalted, risen Jesus says this to you, each one of you, and to me tonight, my grace is sufficient for you. We trust preachers who walk with a limp, because they've got a thorn in the flesh.

[26 : 51] We don't trust preachers who have it all together, for like us not, they're not relying on the strength of Christ, but on their own native talents and abilities, like the false teachers of Corinth.

So, we began this evening with the words incredible and unbelievable, and how these words are often misused. Let me suggest that I have seen the incredible, and I have seen the unbelievable in my almost 23 years of ministry among you, things for which I have no logical explanation other than that the supernatural grace is sufficient for us in our weaknesses.

I have seen dying Christians triumphing in the goodness of God. God's I have seen depressed Christians persevering and growing through the mental torture.

I have seen hardened non-Christians being transformed by the saving power of Christ. I've seen young Christians grow into adulthood and maturity in Christ.

None of these things I can account for other than that the powerful grace of Christ has been at work in them and through them. All of them have this one thing in common.

[28 : 15] The grace of Christ was enough for them, for the power of God was made perfect in their weakness. They didn't boast in themselves of their achievements, but they looked to Jesus for his daily sustaining and strengthening grace.

I don't know what your particular thorn is tonight, but it's what God has given you to keep you close to him and reliant upon his grace and upon his love and upon his strength.

But I do know this, whatever we may feel, this purpose for us is loving, gracious, and wise.

And though we may not have chosen this thorn for ourselves, for not in a million years would we have chosen this thorn for ourselves, one day we'll consider it worthwhile because it kept us close to the heart of the Christ who for us wore a crown of thorns and it made us useful in his service.

Incredible and unbelievable are grossly overused words in the world, but grossly underused in the church. We reserve them for things that are truly supernatural, the grace of Christ toward us.

[29 : 41] Because the truth is that unless we experience the grace of Christ through our trials, we will never experience the glory of Christ in the new heavens and the new earth.

Unless we experience the grace of Christ in our trials, we'll never experience the glory of Christ in the new heavens and the new earth. The grace of which Paul speaks in verses 7 through 10 is the seed of the glory to which he refers in verses 1 through 6.

The grace he refers to in verses 7 through 10 is the seed of the glory he refers to in verses 1 through 6. Glory is grace and flower. But from beginning to end you'll notice this passage, it's all about Jesus.

It's all about him. Everything. Grace is with us today. Glory is being with him forever. And if you want to use these words, please feel free.

My Queen's English Society friend won't criticize you for it because she's a Christian too. This is an incredible and unbelievable privilege.

[30 : 52] But it's ours as Christians. Let us pray. Lord, we struggle to believe it, but it's there in black and white for us.

that to believe in Christ and to offer ourselves up as living sacrifices and the altar of sacrifice is to invite a thorn. To want to be useful in your kingdom is to invite a thorn.

And how we thank you that with the thorn comes grace. Grace sufficient for us. Your power made perfect in our weakness. And Lord, we ask and pray for those who are going through special difficulties at this time.

whether in spirit, in body, or in mind, in relationship, in work, in church, whatever it is, whatever that thorn may be, we pray, Lord, that not only would you help them to cope and give them the grace they need, but that you would in time help them to consider it worth it.

Just so that they could experience the deeper grace of Christ. We long for the day when we shall be in paradise, heeding inexpressible things, having learned a new language, the language of heaven itself, and praising you together with all the redeemed of God and all the angels.

[32 : 17] Glory be to you, O Lord, Father, Son, and Spirit. Amen. Amen.