

2 Corinthians 12 v 7

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[0 : 00] Let's turn again for a wee while to the chapter we read, 2 Corinthians 12, reading at verse 7. 2 Corinthians 12, reading at verse 7.

So to keep me from being too elated by 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 being too elated. 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. It's good to share Christian experience, to share with one another some of the ways in which the Lord works and deals with us.

[1 : 15] But if we had been sitting down with the Apostle Paul around the fireside, and we were talking away, and then he begins to talk, and he began to share with us some of the experiences that he had, we would be going, Whoa, this is something else.

Because we'd realize that he was speaking about things that we couldn't really understand. And in fact, Paul himself says that sort of thing.

He said, He heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. And so, here is this, the Apostle, who was, as we know, one of the, probably the leading missionary of all time.

He was utterly and altogether single-minded in his approach, and yet he had this most unusual and amazing experience.

Now, we are not to spend our Christian life looking for unusual and dramatic experiences. Some people think that the more unusual and the more dramatic an experience is, that the better the Christian they are.

[2 : 36] Now, it may be that you might have an unusual and a dramatic experience, but we're not to go looking for these things. Sometimes we are brought into strange places, and there are Christians who the Lord deals with in quite mysterious ways.

And some people have very, very, very deep experiences. Anyway, the Apostle Paul is telling us about his experience and that he was taken, we're told here, caught up to the third heaven.

Now, I think we mentioned before how the Jews saw three heavens. There was the first, the heaven. They talked about the heaven just where the birds flew. The second heaven was higher still.

It was the place, the sphere of the sun, the moon, the stars. And then the third heaven was the abode of God. It was the place where the redeemed and glory now are.

It was this realm. And so, the Apostle is talking about being taken there. Now, when did this happen, we don't know. What we do know is it happened 14 years previously.

[3 : 46] Because he tells us that at the beginning, I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Now, again, sometimes Paul, of course, was a lot younger then.

And again, I would say that the Lord often manifests himself to his young followers.

And when I say young followers, I don't necessarily mean young in age, but those who have started to follow. Because it is so new, in many ways, so radical, becoming a Christian, that the Lord will often, in the early stages of our Christian life, give a manifestation of his love to us that we might not have later on.

And in fact, quite often, as we go on in the Christian faith, we look back and we hanker after those days and we say, I wish I had that sense of excitement, that sense of thrill, that sense of vibrancy.

I used to have that sense of God's love to me. It's not like that now. But what has come in now is a settledness, a maturity, and a greater sense of stability along the way.

[5 : 07] Anyway, Paul had this amazing experience. And a lot of people think that this experience he had was the account that we have in Acts where he was stoned.

Remember how they took Saul, or Paul, and they stoned him, and they left him for dead. They actually thought that they had finished him off. They thought he was dead.

That was their intention, was to kill him in the same way as Stephen had been stoned to death. And they thought they had actually stoned him to death. But he wasn't.

He was probably as near death as possible. And many people think that it was at this moment that he was hovering between life and death that he was taken and that he had this incredible experience.

And where he saw and was given a glimpse. And it was such an experience. That's why he says, whether I was in the body or not, he doesn't know what happened. So, there's this Paul has this extraordinary experience.

[6 : 16] But it came at a cost. Now, you see, what Paul is actually doing here is he is speaking, or he's writing to the church in Corinth. And the church in Corinth have stopped taking Paul seriously.

Well, I shouldn't say they've stopped taking him seriously. But they're looking at him as an inferior apostle. And they're looking at him as somebody, you see, the Judaizers had come in and they'd created that havoc.

And they'd caused all kinds of divisions. And there were all sorts of things happening. The church in Corinth, while it was in many ways the jewel in Paul's crown, was also a church that was just riddled with all kinds of problems and such like.

And Paul, of course, was never shy to address these things. There was one thing he could never accuse the apostle Paul of was hesitancy or not wanting to say his bit.

Paul always went for the jugular. That was the type of person he was. He was never the kind of person to hold back what was needing to be said. He said it. But he wanted the church in Corinth to understand that he was the real deal.

[7 : 26] He wasn't out here boasting in order to parade himself. Not at all. But what he is doing, he's trying to give, in many ways, his testimony to show them of how he is a fully-fledged apostle.

And that he is somebody who's been used by the Lord. However, what happened to him? This amazing experience has come at a cost. Because that's what we read in verse 7.

Then, so to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelation, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Or in a sense, becoming too conceited or becoming too caught up. And one of the worst things that can be found in the Christian is spiritual pride.

Where a person will take pride in their gifts. Because a gift, remember, is not something that is naturally in and of ourselves.

[8 : 40] Whatever we have has been ultimately given to us by God. What do you have that you have not received? So it's totally wrong for any person to take any sort of pride or a wrong pride in an ability to pray.

Or to preach. Or to sing. Or to welcome people. Or to be a good Christian worker. Or to have a great theological mind.

Or an ability to discern things. While these are wonderful gifts to be given. To take any pride in these things is offensive in the sight of God.

God has given them to us for the good of the church. And if we try and parade these gifts for our own glory.

Then that is offensive in the sight of the Lord. And so the Lord hates spiritual pride. It's one of the things. There aren't many things that are termed an abomination in the sight of God.

[9 : 47] But pride is one of them. Anyway. As we say. This great revelation came at a cost. Paul was given this thorn in the flesh.

What it was. I do not know. There's been a lot of speculation. A lot of people have put forward different suggestions. As to what this thorn was.

The one thing I think. And it's quite wise. That scripture hasn't absolutely identified. What that thorn was. Is that people could start taking pride.

In that. If they themselves had this. So that if you had a similar thorn. To the apostle Paul. You'd be saying to people. Oh this is difficult. But I'm one with the apostle.

It's the same thing as the apostle Paul had. Well we don't know exactly what it was. But whatever it was. It was so incredibly troublesome.

[10 : 48] And it was that which came to harass him. And you know. In life. There are always things. That will keep us down. We would.

We so often say. I wish. You know. I would be a far better. This is what we often say to ourselves. I would be a far better Christian. If it weren't for this.

In my life. If I wasn't so shy. If I didn't have this pain. If I wasn't so often ill.

If things were better at home. If. If. If. If. If. If. If. We can go through all sorts of things. If I wasn't always battling with these temptations.

If I wasn't facing up to. It doesn't matter where we go. Everybody in here will say. If it weren't for this. I would be a much better Christian.

[11 : 45] That's what you think. That's what I think. That's not what the Lord thinks. And Paul thought he would be a better Christian. Without this thorn.

As far as Paul was concerned. This had come. And it was hampering him. It was harassing him. It was proving such a hindrance to him. And he was desperate to get rid of it.

And he's pleading to the Lord. He didn't. It wasn't just as it was something that you mention in prayer, by the way. It wasn't the sort of thing as he's praying, oh, Lord, also I nearly forgot, see this thorn.

No. He pleaded and he pleaded and he pleaded, Lord, take away this thorn. Three times, and this is talking about the intensity and about the urgency of it.

But the Lord knows what's good for us and he knew what was good for the Apostle Paul. And so we see that's what Paul's reaction was. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

[12 : 58] But as we know that I'm sure that the Apostle Paul, as he battled under this, you often try and picture this man.

Initially, when I became a Christian, I thought Paul would have been this very gracious, gentle sort of person, just so submissive under the hand of God. Yes, he was submissive.

But I think Paul was a bit of a firebrand. Very different to your Barnabas. Your Barnabas was the great encourager. Barnabas would have been a totally different type of person to the Apostle Paul.

I think there was a kind of a ruthless streak in Paul. Yes, he was single-minded. He was totally committed. But he was a gritty character. He was the kind of person you just couldn't put down.

There was a single-minded determination about him. But it would be worth doing a study on the life of the Apostle Paul. But Paul could not. I know, yes, God's grace was sufficient for him.

[13 : 58] But Paul couldn't have achieved all that he achieved, were it not for the type of character and the determination and the doggedness that was in him.

And I would imagine that as Paul pleaded before the Lord that this thorn was affecting him, it probably even was going for his temper. I can almost imagine Paul being one of these people who had to pray about his temper.

A lot of people have to pray about their temper. I knew a good man. And he was a good man. I remember him saying to me, boy, he had the most fiery temper I think I ever came across.

And I remember him saying to me, you have no idea the amount of time I spend on my knees because of my temper.

And so it is in life where people have all sort of different things with regard to their personality and so on. And so there's no, I would imagine that as Paul is pleading here, all sort of things are going on through him.

[15 : 04] But at the end, the Lord is saying to Paul, no, I'm not going to take the thorn away. That's what the Lord says. But this is what the Lord said in verse 9, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

It's really quite an amazing statement. And then, therefore, because of what the Lord said, that's what Paul then goes on to say, therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Now, we don't like weakness in any shape or form. We don't like weakness in our mind when we feel unable to deal with the challenges and some of the issues in life, and we feel that we've failed

and not been strong enough in our mind.

We don't like when we're weak in body and we find ourselves unable. We don't have the physical strength to do something that we're wanting to do. We don't like when we're spiritually weak as well, when in the face of temptation and with the doubts and maybe satanic attacks and all these things. So that weakness in any shape or form is something that's difficult, something that we're not happy with. And yet, Paul says, I'm going to actually glory.

[16:39] I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses. Now, Paul, of course, is facing weaknesses, and he goes on to list. Now, when Paul here is talking about weakness, he's not talking about weaknesses that we might have, say, with regard to, as we said, a temper, or with regard to lust for power, or for improper relationships, or with regard to money, or with regard to popularity, popularity, or a name, or anything that's with us, or with regard to absolute consuming lust.

It's not that type of weakness that Paul is talking about. He mentions the weaknesses that he has to face. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses.

And then in verse 10, he spells it out a little more clearly. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses. Insults. That's one of the things that he has to deal with.

Maybe you have to deal with that, where people insult you because of your faith. They mock you. Maybe there's somebody here. Maybe a young person.

And because you go to church, in school, people mock you. They make snide remarks. They make a wee bit of fun of you.

[18:07] Because you go to church. Or because you love the Lord. That is hard to bear. Now, the apostle knew all about that. The Lord Jesus Christ knows all about that.

They experienced the insults. Insults. Hardships. That's really where things don't work out the way you expect.

It's kind of where life has changed completely for you. Where it's become really difficult.

Persecutions.

That's where you're being treated irrationally because of your faith. Where people, very simply, where people are prejudiced against you.

And it could affect you at work. It could affect you in your social standing in the community. There's a, some people have a prejudice against you simply because you're a Christian.

[19:10] These things are hard. Calamities. The idea here is of being pressed down under a weight that has come about through your world being thrown upside down.

And so Paul is saying, I've experienced all these things. The insults. The hardships.

The persecutions. The calamities. How do I deal with it? Do I try and fight it? Do I put on the stiff upper lip and say, right, I'm going to be a stoic?

No, God has said, my grace is sufficient for you. I want you to discover my sustaining, preserving, helping, upholding grace in all these difficult situations that you go through.

Christianity is radical. Because when you think about, for instance here, the insults and the persecutions, you and I know that if you're insulted by somebody, or somebody does something mean to you, something wrong, their natural instinct is, I'm going to get them back.

[20:34] And the quicker you get back, the better. The faster they come back, the better. That is not the way of Christ.

Remember what our Lord Jesus said. Jesus said, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians, when reviled, this is what he's saying, when reviled we bless.

When we're persecuted, we endure. When we're slandered, we entreat. But it's very interesting what Paul goes on to say when he's talking about this. But do you know what he says?

When we live like that, do you know what the world thinks of us? We have become, and still are, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. What's tough?

That's actually what the world thinks when you don't try and get revenge. When you act with the Spirit of Christ, the world thinks, oh, they're stupid.

[21:37] But what Paul is trying to say here is, it doesn't matter what the world thinks. It's what God thinks. It's what the Lord thinks. And the Lord has set out for us how we are to live.

This is basic, radical Christianity, and it's hard. It goes against all and every natural instinct within us. The Lord turned everything on its head by his life, by his teaching, and he lived it.

And that's why we need, that's where we need the grace. So as Paul is going through all this, he also notices, remember, when he talks about the thorn that was given in the flesh, he terms this as a messenger of Satan to harass.

Paul is very aware that what has happened into his life, what has come into his life, is satanic.

Because we've got to remember that Satan is the one who is out to destroy.

God is always out to save. Satan is out to destroy. And throughout your life and my life and everybody's life, we are in the pathway of a collision, as it were, between heaven and hell, between good and bad, between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness.

[23 : 01] And we're always being caught up in these conflicts. And one of the things the Bible does, it's like it pulls back the screens so that we're able to see behind the scene to a certain extent and to understand some of the things that are going on.

And so Paul is aware Satan is at work and that this is part of what he's doing. And you would think then because of this that if Satan is involved that all Paul would have to do is to say, Lord, you're my shepherd, you're my king, you're the one I serve.

This is our messenger of Satan, then please take this thorn away. But the Lord is saying no. All you're saying is true, Paul. But I know I am actually going to work this difficulty, this trial, this pain, this thing you don't want, I'm actually going to work it for your good.

And you know, Paul obviously had the potential for glorying in himself. He was, remember, a Pharisee of the Pharisees. He'd been brought up in that way.

He knew all about taking glory to yourself. And the Lord is keeping Paul down. And Paul has come to understand that for the Lord, his humility, Paul's humility is more important than even freedom from pain, even his own comfort.

[24 : 39] These were hard lessons for Paul to learn. And so Paul is saying, For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, and so on.

Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. See, that's God's purpose for you and me, my friend, that the power of Christ may rest upon us so that the glory of Christ will be seen in us.

I don't think we realize how important we are to God. And God is at work where our life is very short. The only way I can liken it is to, you know when a company might be building a lot of homes, a particular company, and they build a lot of homes, and sometimes there's one of the homes is a show house.

And they build that home and they furnish it and they have it and it's looking great. And if you want to see the kind of homes you're going to be building, they're going to be building, you go into that show house because there it is.

[25 : 52] That's how it is. Well, in a sense, the believer is like that, like a show house for God's power and God's grace and God's glory in this world.

That's what we're like so that people will see the work of God in our hearts, in our life, through the difficult things, through the pains.

It's not the way we want it. It wasn't the way Paul wanted it. And I'm sure there's many people here today and your life is most certainly not the way you wanted.

But our life is short. The Lord is taking glory to himself through your life. You are the spiritual show house.

And remember what elsewhere it says in the Bible, that we are living letters, living epistles read by everybody. And so we've always got to remember, here's our life.

[27 : 06] But the Lord ultimately is making our life what he wants it to be. So we need to ask the Lord to give us that grace.

And sometimes when you come to the Word you say, this is tough. And it is. But you know what the Lord is doing in you and what he has prepared for you.

If you could see it today, you'd be saying, oh Lord, now I understand. I hadn't grasped that. I now understand, but that's not where we are.

We're having to go by faith. May we all today then have this faith that will lean and trust and accept the Lord. Let us pray.

Oh gracious Lord, we pray that we might indeed rest ourselves in your care. So often we are baffled and confused in life, but we pray for that grace to be sufficient.

[28 : 11] As Spurgeon used to say, there's even grace in the grammar. My grace is sufficient for you. May we continue to discover that to be true.

Oh Lord, bless us and uphold us. Shield us and shelter us with thy love. Help us all to be witnesses for you. We give thanks for every effort and every endeavor and all that goes on in this congregation and throughout this island seeking to spread the word, whether it is done at an official level or at an unofficial.

We pray that the word of God may indeed go out in power up and down our land. Watch over us, we pray, and forgive us our sin in Jesus' name. Amen.