

SPIRITUAL ECSTASY AND AGONY

2 Corinthians 12:1–10

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We continue our series in 2 Corinthians, which we will be completing during this month.

“I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say. To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:1–10, NIV).

Although in chapters 10–13 of 2 Corinthians Paul is helping us to understand better what it means to be spiritual, it is so easy to fall into the trap of judging spirituality by external results, or even by internal revelation. I periodically find myself at gatherings where other pastors are present, and I notice a kind of pastor game, that those of us in this calling get into. Start up a

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conversation with a friend you haven't seen for a while, and it isn't long before the question arises, "How's your church doing?" If your church grew from three hundred to four hundred and fifty, you're not at all hesitant to say, "Our church has had good growth this past year. If you happen to pastor a church that maybe has only grown twenty-five people, you don't volunteer at that moment any information. You simply say, "The Lord's been good. Our church is comfortably full." Which means you can seat people end to end. "Comfortably full." Or, of course, if your church has grown from three hundred to eight hundred, you can talk about that—you'll get right in there. You talk about the church budget is and what you gave to missions. Even people who are in the ministry, so to speak, have the pressures from the world and the external pressures of how you judge what success is. It's very instructive, then, to turn to the Scripture and find how the apostle Paul portrayed success.

There's no question that, from certain worldly points of view, he was a success. Look at how many churches he planted. Look at what remained from his ministry and the like. But when he defines success, it's not the times "When I had it together" he talks about. It's not the church growth statistics that he's able to point to. It's the times when he has been vulnerable and weak, when he has found, that God was most deeply at work in his life. It's in those weaknesses that he chooses to boast.

That has been his characteristic approach from chapter 10 straight on to chapter 13. Except for this tremendous digression in verses 1–6, in which he responds to a number of super-apostles at Corinth who had gained a platform for their own spirituality by boasting in dreams and revelations. Just like some people are impressed by statistics—how much a church has grown or how many converts they've had—other people are impressed by what spiritual revelations a person has had. Evidently, these super-apostles at Corinth had had an abundance of revelations.

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So Paul says, “It’s time for me to talk about the revelation I have had. I don’t want to do it. I’m not comfortable doing it. It doesn’t serve any good. But I need to do it to show that I am in no way behind these super-apostles that you put your faith in. But just as you have put your faith in them, and they’ve done all this boasting, consider the fact that the revelation I have had is a surpassing revelation. I’ve never once told you about it. Consider that as you measure spiritual pride and success.”

In verses 1–6, he describes the spiritually ecstatic experience he had had. The word “ecstasy” itself comes from two Greek words meaning “being” and “out”. It’s an “out-of-being” experience. In fact, Paul describes the experience as so profound, he doesn’t know—when it happens—whether he’s in the body or out of the body. I would submit to you that that’s a rare kind of experience. I always know when I am in the body. Except those few occasions when I’ve woken up at three in the morning and not known where I was. But those were not spiritual experiences, so to speak. Those were just some nightmares along the way. But a tremendous experience.

I. There are three or four basic things that come out of these six verses that deal with moments of spiritual ecstasy.

If I could just briefly suggest those to you before we look at the second part of the passage, which deals with lessons from spiritual pain.

A. The first lesson out of spiritual ecstasy is that our motives in sharing such experiences with others must be pure. Paul, in verse 1, notes specifically—as he shares this experience—that nothing is to be gained by it. He is not out for any advantage. Neither will it necessarily gain anything for the Corinthians to hear it. Nothing’s to be gained.

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The problem with the super-apostles at Corinth is that they were gaining something from their visions. It gained them a platform for respect, for spirituality. It gained them adherence to their ideas. How do you resist somebody who says, “But I’ve had this marvelous revelation from the Lord”? He looks like such a wonderfully spiritual and pietistic person, and has this great revelation, how do you resist that? They had used their revelation to gain them a platform, to gain them adherence.

When somebody says, “I had a revelation from the Lord that you are to give me or send me money.” How do you resist that? Paul doesn’t use his revelations to gain him anything.

Nothing’s at stake. He is nonmanipulative.

The way an apostle does something is totally different from false apostles. An apostle doesn’t use visions to manipulate people. He does not use visions to enhance his own standing. He does not use visions to get them to perform some sort of activity. He does not use a vision to manipulate people to gain money for a project.

Paul could have launched into a whole catalogue of visions, had he desired. He could have talked about the vision he had of Jesus at his conversion, when the Lord appeared to him. He could have talked about the vision he had that Ananias would come and pray for him to receive his sight. He could have talked about the vision he had when he was called to leave Jerusalem and go to the Gentiles. He could have talked about his Macedonian call, when a man of Macedonia appeared to him in a vision. He could have talked about the vision that confirmed that he should stay at Corinth, when the Lord appeared to him in a vision. All of these are found in the Book of Acts. But not a one of them is mentioned. He uses none of them.

If a vision that you get is truly from the Lord, it will come to pass if it’s predictive. It will come to pass without your manipulating anybody into bringing it into existence. Paul’s motives in

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sharing his experience were pure. Nothing was to be gained. No exterior motivation. No ulterior motivation.

B. The second thing from his spiritual ecstasy is that an experience of spiritual ecstasy may be so precious that it is best to keep it private. Paul here is describing an experience that had happened to him fourteen years earlier, which he had evidently never shared with the Corinthians. Fourteen years before the writing of the Corinthian letters would put Paul either at Tarsus or at Antioch of Syria, before he began his ministry as an apostle. It maybe was a very earth-shaking kind of experience for him, impelling him to future directions of his life that he'd never disclosed to the Corinthians. He had kept it private. In fact, even now he won't talk about the content of the visions that he had had.

It's very clear that this experience described in 2 Corinthians 12:1–6—where Paul speaks in the third person, “I know a man in Christ”—is another way of humbly coming to grips with the vision. He refuses to say at the beginning, “I had this vision.” It isn't until verse 7 that you find that indeed it was him who had this vision. “Because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh” (NIV).

Something great has happened to him spiritually, but sometimes people have a spiritual experience and they get up and tell it and it becomes “I've had this spiritual experience. What's wrong with you out there?” Have you ever felt badly hearing someone else's testimony? Maybe that's your fault and maybe it's not. There has to be a way to communicate spiritual reality in a way that builds up rather than puffs up.

Paul gives us this great example of spiritual ecstasy, that sometimes something that's very precious can be kept quiet.

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C. The third thing that spiritual ecstasy does is provide us an insight into life after death. He tells us that he doesn't know whether he was in the body or out of the body when he was caught up into the third heaven. Lest any of you think that heaven is a multi-storied hotel, and that there's a second, third, fourth, and so on, floor, let me try to disabuse you of that notion for a moment and simply say that "third heaven" was a Jewish term. The first heaven referred to the atmosphere, the air we breathe. The second heaven referred to the stars and the sun, the moon and the planets, the stellar heavens. And the third heaven was the abode of God, outside of time and space. So there aren't various levels of heaven, there's just heaven. And the third heaven is the heaven that is beyond time and space, outside the universe, the abode of God. Paul says, "I was caught up," and he says, "I don't know whether I was in the body or out of the body" (2 Corinthians 12:2). The word "caught up" is the same word that is used for the church being "raptured" in 1 Thessalonians. That's how powerful a word it is.

But he honestly, in looking back, fourteen years later, had never been able to recognize whether the Lord physically took his body up to heaven for a moment of time, or just caught his spirit up in a revelation and left his body behind. The intriguing thing is that Paul has full consciousness of the Lord's presence in paradise, in the third heaven, whether he's in the body or out of it. That is, you don't need the body to be in the third heaven. It clears up some of the mystery that surrounds this fact, that Corinthians earlier has taught us, that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Yet the body hasn't been resurrected until the Lord comes. So if you die, how can you go be with the Lord, if the body is committed to the grave? Paul gives us an insight here. "Whether in the body or out of the body, I don't know." It holds it perfectly logical that one has a full sense of his own existence, of identity, even though the body may not be present.

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D. The fourth thing that this experience in spiritual ecstasy from Paul teaches us is that spiritual experiences of ecstasy are not for the communication of doctrinal truth, but for edification, for strengthening, for direction. Never is a revelation or a vision in the New Testament experienced by an apostle or a servant of the Lord, his prophet, to communicate some new doctrinal truth. But rather, it is given for building up the person who receives the vision or strengthening them for some task. Generally, you'll find the people who get great revelations are also called to great accountability and cost in their life. It may also be given to provide a sense of direction.

The reason why I mention this is that there is an awful lot more that I would like to know about heaven than I do. Wouldn't you? All we have is what is in the Scripture. Periodically, there are people who come along and give us afterlife experiences. Maybe these can build up and we get our interest all whetted in what the afterlife is like. It's interesting that Paul had an afterlife experience, but he refused to talk about it. In fact, he says, "There are some things about heaven that are unlawful for a man to utter." And he would not speak about it at all.

How different from those who sometimes simply start merchandising a visionary experience.

Our teaching about the afterlife, I think, is best confined to the teaching of what the Scriptures tell us about what heaven is like. If we'll stay with the Scriptures, we'll stay on safe ground.

We have no idea what really is ahead for us, do we? We have not even begun to get an idea of what God has prepared for those who love Him (1 Corinthians 2:9). What we do know is

contained for us in Scripture, and it would be best for us to stay within the safety of what the

Bible tells us, rather than what someone else is trying to prognosticate. An afterlife experience.

Ecstasy—a wonderful thing.

Some people seem to say, I don't need any spiritual experiences in my life. Just give me the

Word and I'll obey it. But I think that that attitude may omit one of the opportunities that the

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Holy Spirit gives us in life to really press into a deep personal experience with God. A dimension of the Holy Spirit that, maybe in some other avenues, wouldn't have opened for us. Paul encourages experience. What he discourages is the abuse of experience. With the experience of spiritual ecstasy also comes an experience of spiritual agony. Paul's description of being caught up into the third heaven is sandwiched between two rough moments in the text. On the one side of the sandwich is the Damascus escape in a basket over the city wall—a rather unglorifying, humiliating experience to get dumped over the wall in a basket. We looked at that last week. Then, right after this experience of being caught up, Paul describes his thorn in the flesh, so the basket and the thorn are the two pressing sides, and the ecstasy is in the center.

II. Three critical things about this thorn.

A. One is that the thorn stands for the pain we cannot remove and God will not remove. The thorn stands for the pain we cannot remove, no matter how much we might want to. It's impossible for us to remove it. And God will not remove it.

This, of course, raises the whole question of what Paul's thorn was. There are as many ideas as there are biblical commentators on what the thorn was. Anybody who tells you they've got the one sure thing and they know what the thorn was, you've got to know, they don't know what they're talking about.

What was the thorn? John Calvin said the thorn in Paul was spiritual temptation. It was the temptation to doubt, to shirk his apostolic duties, and the sting of conscience when temptation won in his life. That was his thorn.

Luther said the thorn was the oppression and the persecution he experienced.

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I would suspect there's a little bit of reading into the text that Calvin's thorn was spiritual temptation and Luther's thorn was oppression and persecution. How easy it is to read our experience into the apostle's.

The Monastics said that Paul's thorn was carnal temptations. That was their thorn. Some have said that his thorn was his physical appearance—he looked so ugly that it was a cross to bear. Others have said he had epilepsy and that was his thorn. And others have said he had headaches. When you get a migraine, it feels like a thorn in your head. Others have said, perhaps with more justification from the biblical text, that it was probably his eyes. He does admit to the Galatians, in chapter 4, that they would have taken out their eyes and given them to him. And he says, at the end of Galatians, “See what large letters I'm writing with my own hand”—eye trouble that maybe caused him headaches. Others have said he got malaria when he was on his first missionary journey. Malaria produces pain. Still others have said the thorn was his wife. That person obviously was not happily married, therefore, they transposed that into Paul. The Scriptures never talk to us about Paul's wife, although there may be a suggestion that he was married.

The thorn actually was not a rosebush thorn but a stake—a sharpened wooden shaft that was used for impalement. If you wanted to impale someone, that was the thorn. Whatever this thorn was, it was in his flesh.

Always, when we use “flesh” in Scripture, it can mean one of two things. Either the body, the flesh. Or the spirit of man that is alien from God—the flesh, like Paul uses it in Romans 7. More likely, the simpler meaning is to be preferred here. The flesh here refers to the physical body. And he said the thorn was something that buffeted him. The NIV says “tormented” him. But “buffeted” is actually the word. It's the same word in the Greek, which is used to describe Jesus

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being hit with fists. He was buffeted. So this thing in the flesh, this thorn in the flesh, slapped him around. It was painful. It crippled his enjoyment of life. It frustrated his full efficiency. It may have been humiliating.

He says that behind this thorn is a messenger of Satan, because he recognizes that the immediate work of the enemy is behind all of our afflictions. But behind the immediate work of the enemy is the permissive will of God. He discovered what Job was experiencing.

Since we believe that the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write Scripture, I think we can have a fair reason to know why the thorn is not defined. And why it will never be defined. All of us who truly serve Christ will, at one time or another in our life, have a thorn. If Paul's thorn gets defined, then we'll say, "He didn't know what I'm going through." But the very fact that the Holy Spirit caused him to leave it undefined, means we can all identify with the text. The thorn may be visible. Or it may be private. The thorn may be physical or it may be psychological. The thorn may be something from which we pray to be released, but have not been.

Paul prayed three times for the removal of the thorn, and no doubt he does this because Jesus in Gethsemane prayed three times for the removal of the cup. He exercised permission. He exercised the right to ask for the thorn to be removed. But it wasn't. And that thorn came to stand for the pain he could not remove and God wouldn't remove.

B. Which leads us to the second truth about the thorn. That is, when God does not remove the thorn, he gives us a word about the thorn. His word simply is this "My grace is sufficient for you." Or the new English Bible puts it this way, "My grace is all you need."

He didn't know what I'm going through, but the very fact that the Holy Spirit caused him to talk helps persons who are going through difficult things in their life. I find that as we open our hearts to the Word and to prayer, the Lord speaks to us some word. Often what gives us strength to

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carry us through difficult moments is from the Scripture. Paul had his word from the Lord, “My grace is all you need” (2 Corinthians 12:9). What Paul says is, “All I really need in life is to know everything’s ok between God and me. I thought I needed something more than that, but when it comes right down to it, all I need to know is that everything’s ok between God and me. That His grace has been given to me. His grace, therefore, is sufficient for physical weariness, for physical pain, for opposition, for slander.”

A Sunday School teacher was asked by a child why it was that Jesus came to His disciples three times and said, “Watch and pray,” the first two times, but when He came the third time, He said to them, “Sleep on and take your rest.” Why didn’t He say the same thing all three times? Why did He say the last time, “Sleep on and take your rest”? The teacher was quite baffled at the child’s question. Then a little child suddenly said, “I think I know! It was because Jesus had seen the face of His Father and He didn’t need their help anymore.”

Paul said the Lord spoke to him, “My grace is all you need. My power has its full development in weakness. That’s where My power is going to be displayed—in the vulnerable parts of your life. In the parts in which you don’t seem to have it together, that’s where I’m going to breathe My Spirit and give you energy and ability to face that and come through it successfully.”

I realize, when I’m talking to an audience this size, that surely I’m talking to someone who has not gotten what they wanted. Maybe what you wanted was a courtship, but that has been broken off. Maybe you received serious news medically. Maybe you’re grieving. Maybe you are going through a divorce or its aftermath. Maybe you have an insensitive spouse or an insensitive child or an insensitive parent. Maybe you’re going through an economic reverse. The Lord is saying to you, as you go through that thing, that His grace is sufficient, it’s all you need and His full power is going to be developed in your weakness. Peter says, “These have come so that your faith—of

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greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:7). No one has ever had a defect that cannot be made useful. If God does not remove the thorn, He seeks to give you a word about the thorn.

C. The third thing about the thorn is our response to the thorn: God’s answer can transform our life or deform our life. How we respond determines whether we’re going to be transformed or deformed by that experience of pain. Whether it’s psychological pain, physical pain, or spiritual pain. The thorn drives us close to God.

Paul refused to take a fatalistic attitude about the thorn. He determined to boast more about his weakness. He determined to rise to the challenge and say, “If this is going to be the case, then, rather than face the thorn defeatedly, I will face it defiantly, and I will turn it from a matter of shame to a matter of glory, and say, ‘God uses me even with this.’”

We do better to exult in our weaknesses rather than in our strength. And to marvel that, when we are weak, He is strong. We have to go on hungering in our life for deep and mystical experiences with God, experiences of spiritual ecstasy. But we need to keep our feet planted in the world of suffering and pain and need, because it is in those times when God is most glorified in our life, and when God is making out of the lumber of our life, not a tavern, but a temple. He is at work in us.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, as we come to You in prayer, we want to take a moment to think of the weakness that we are struggling with. The thorn in our flesh. How we hate it. How we resist it. We recognize that it wasn’t sent by You. It was permissively allowed by You. But it comes from the enemy. Just as the cross came against You and the permissive will of the Father, it was still Your

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enemy. So that thorn is our enemy, that stake that is driving at us and keeping us from enjoying life to the fullest, keeping us under the maximum amount of stress and pain and adversity. We've wanted it removed, and to this moment, you haven't removed it. What, Lord, can we do about it? We take a moment and kick back and glory in our weakness. There's really nothing we can do about it. It's all You. Everything we have, Lord, is Yours anyway. Everything we are is Yours. Everything we hope to be is Yours. So we just give ourselves to you in a fresh way. And we say, Lord, "I know that through this time I'm being pressed to the wall by the stake, by the thorn. I'm being impaled by it. There's something happening in my life that's producing strength." What is happening is that Your strength is flowing into me. I may not always be aware of it, but at the present moment, as I go through this, I may not be aware of that strength. But because Your Word teaches me that You are pouring Your strength into the weak moments of life, I can confess and believe that it is there. And that I will emerge from this stronger and more powerful, as Your servant. Because my hope and my trust is in You. Your grace is all I need, Lord. Your power is being perfected in my weakness. The enemy has hit me a good blow. But Lord, You're going to help me hit back harder. I thank You for that. I will glory in my weakness. Let no one here, Lord, be crushed by their impalements in life. But rather, fashion that impalement into an instrument of healing, an instrument of strength for our life. We ask, in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.