



that's Jonathan Edwards. He lived in the 1700's and was arguably one of the greatest theologians America has ever known. He was a genius. He had an immense mind. He had a tremendous grasp of theology, brilliant in his ability to articulate with pen and voice, but seldom raised his voice in the pulpit...but spoke quietly, and yet his sermons were received with amazing power.

Edwards and Englishman George Whitefield are known as the two great theologian of the "Great Awakening" in America (1739-1741). Revival swept this country. He and Whitefield preached to thousands during those years of the "Great Awakening," and thousands came to know Jesus through that preaching. Edwards' sermons were so profound that they're still read today and his books are still famous because of their theological value.

Jonathan Edwards was also a pastor. He pastored a church in Northampton, Massachusetts, for 22 years. And it was during those 22 years that the Great Awakening occurred; and thus, he was pastoring right through the Great Awakening. Amazing...for 22 years Edwards' congregation heard some of the greatest preaching in this country's history, Sunday after. Yet, amazingly after 22 years of pastoring, the church voted to remove him as pastor. They kicked him out of the church.

They took the greatest preacher in American history, certainly one of the godliest men the world knew at that time, and they threw him out of the church. They didn't do it because he participated in some heresy or heinous sin, nor because he had become cantankerous or hostile toward his people. No, they kicked him out because he insisted that before a person could join the church and take Communion, they needed to make a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. That's Scriptural folks. That's Romans 10:9-10. This is very basic Christianity. And yet, for that, the people who had sat under his amazing teaching for 22 years threw him out of the church. You see, they wanted anyone to be able to take communion so as not to offend.

I would say to you, those people had not been listening to Edwards for some time and had instead begun to listen to other voices. Does this sound familiar? Does this sound like Corinth and the Apostle Paul? For Edwards, he became a preacher without a pulpit, and the people in his congregation wanted to make sure he didn't get one. So, they destroyed his reputation in the

community so that no other church would take him. The people to whom he had given the majority of his life, 22 years, 22 years of intense study, passionate preaching, caring for the people...marrying them, burying them...now those same people did everything they could to destroy him so that, no church would take him, all because he stood on the Word of God.

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Eventually he took an assignment, (the only one he could get), to be a missionary to about 15 Native American Indians, a little congregation, in Stockbridge, MA, where he communicated the Gospel very simply, very carefully in second-grade terms. Eventually, there was a school in New Jersey, called the College of New Jersey, which later became Princeton University, who, remembering the greatness of Edwards, invited him to be their president. He refused over and over. He was a broken man...feeling himself utterly inadequate and unqualified for such a responsibility. He felt unworthy and said he would just continue the work at the mission. And yet, the College came over and over and finally were able to overcome his refusals and Edwards relented and took the responsibility and became their president, for all of 6 months, before he died and went to heaven. He was just 55.

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Now church family, it's unthinkable to me that a congregation of people could do what they did to that man. And yet, they did. And it broke him for the remaining years of his life. You see, DEAR church family, this was just like Paul and the Corinthian church. Do you see...the potential to devastate a person is the greatest by those who are the closest to him. You love people, you pour out your life into people, and you get very close to people, and THEN it's those very people who have the potential to inflict upon you the deepest pain and the greatest hurt.

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It's true...some of the deepest pain in life is inflicted by those for whom we care about the most. And that is exactly what Paul was going through when he wrote 2 Corinthians. He loved that church greatly. He had an immense capacity to love people, and he had loved them right into the kingdom, as he shared the Good News of Jesus with them. Paul loved them with the Gospel. Many were saved and he nurtured them and taught them for 18 months of his life and then he left, to continue the work elsewhere. But the false teachers who had come and infiltrated the Corinthian church began the assault, lying about him...discrediting him, and just like with Jonathan Edwards' congregation, they bought it. They believed it. And it devastated Paul. And this is why we have 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians...a defense of Paul and his ministry and ultimately the Gospel.

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And church family, it's in this deep pain that Paul finds grace...the grace of God to sustain him. And it's in our passage today that we find not only God's grace, but God's providential care for Paul...in that God allowed Paul to see heaven. This is an astounding passage. The title of today's message is "Paul's Trip to Heaven and Grace." And this message will be the first in our new series that we've titled: "A Higher Calling."

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Follow along now in verse 1 of chapter 12.

**2 Corinthians 12:1-10**

<sup>1</sup>I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. <sup>2</sup>I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. <sup>3</sup>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— <sup>4</sup>and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. <sup>5</sup>On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— <sup>6</sup>though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. <sup>7</sup>So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations,<sup>[a]</sup> a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. <sup>8</sup>Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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.

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What an amazing passage. Paul’s trip to heaven. He wasn’t sure if he went there in his body or just had a vision of heaven. The great Apostle was no stranger to visions, revelations from God. It was his vision of man from Macedonia that had gotten him to Europe and subsequently, Achaia and Corinth. Paul had many visions from God. The Book of Acts is full of them. Acts 9; Acts 13, 16, 18, 20, 22, 23, 27. And perhaps the greatest one, was his first one, when he was on his way to DAMASCUS to kill Christians.



And Jesus put Him on his back...literally striking with such a powerful light that it blinded him...Blinded him...so that he could see... See Salvation in Christ.

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Paul went to heaven...whether in his physical body or just his spirit, he didn't know... But, he went there 14 years earlier... He said he was "caught up." We know that term. That's harpazo...the term for Rapture...to be snatched up...what will one day happen to the church in the Rapture.

**2 Corinthians 12:2**

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

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Paul speaks in the third person, which was common of how Jewish Rabbis taught. Remember, Paul was taught by the great Rabbi Gamaliel and probably remembered how he taught Paul as a young man. But, what is interesting to me is that he hasn't said a word about this for 14 years. As far as we know, he had never mentioned this experience for 14 years. I believe he was afraid to share it...didn't know how to share it...didn't want to brag about it...didn't want to be misunderstood about it.

Let me give you a quick timeline. He wrote 2 Corinthians, around 56 A.D. so 14 years earlier would have been around 42 AD. That would have been about 2 years before he and Barnabas were commissioned by the church in Antioch of Syria to go on their first missionary journey. So, Paul had this experience after his conversion, but before his missionary journeys began. Scholars tell us Paul's conversion on the Road to Damascus happened 35 AD, some 7 years before this vision.

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Those 7 years were made up of three years spent in the Arabian Desert detoxing from all the garbage he had learned as a Pharisee and then he traveled back to Tarsus, his hometown, and then ultimately arriving in Antioch of Syria where he was commissioned. The point is...Paul received this vision or took this trip to heaven before he started his missionary journeys and I want you to think about why.

Do you remember what Pastor Dale preached last week? All the trials and tribulations Paul endured. Beatings, stoning, shipwrecks, being hungry and in danger everywhere he went? He was a marked man... He never knew when it would be his last day. Imagine living like that...and church

family, that's why I'm convinced God let Paul see heaven, so he could endure all of that. God let him see the finish line so he could run the race.

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Listen, Paul was going to suffer perhaps more than any man had ever suffered other than Christ up to that point in redemptive history. And as a part of God's grace, God allowed Paul to see heaven so as to galvanize him, strengthen him with great resolve; otherwise, I'm not sure he could have endured it all. That's why Paul said this to the Philippian Church:

**Philippians 1:22-23**

<sup>22</sup> If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. <sup>23</sup> I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

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In Romans 8:18, he said this:

**Romans 8:18**

<sup>18</sup> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

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He would know. He saw it! Church, the mystery of human suffering will not be completely understood in this life. Ask Job. Ask David. Ask Paul. What God allows us to endure will not be completely understood in this life and that's why we are to set our affections on things above. This isn't heaven, but it's coming! To live is Christ, to die is gain. Paul said that too...because he knows!

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Did you catch verse 4?

**2 Corinthians 12:4**

<sup>4</sup> and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

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I love commentators who try to commentate on this verse. They say: "Well, let's look a little more deeply into what Paul said there." How can you look more deeply into what Paul said...because he said, "I heard things that I can't tell." Listen, I have no idea what he heard. And I'm okay with that. It makes total sense to me...Paul heard things that couldn't be communicated here on earth. He understood it in the heavenly realm, but no earthly words existed to convey it. And even if he could, he said he's not permitted to...because church, there is still a veil between earth and heaven that hasn't yet been removed. But, I'll tell you this...this is inarguable, what Paul saw sustained for the rest of his life. It was amazing!

So, why is Paul sharing this NOW? He's not said a word in 14 years...why now? Because those false teachers have forced him to it. Have they been to heaven? Nope! Paul shared this to combat the lies and to acknowledge the fact that he didn't want to boast about this experience (contrary to the false teachers...who were all about boasting); yet, it was because of this experience that Paul would have to endure more suffering.

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**2 Corinthians 12:7**

<sup>7</sup> 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.

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The Lord gave Paul a "thorn in the flesh" to keep him from becoming proud, arrogant and conceited because he had seen heaven. Church, do you see the contrast? The juxtaposition, between Paul and the false teachers? Humility versus pride...that's the point of this whole discussion.

Paul was given a “thorn.” Now the word thorn is more than just a “thorn on a rosebush.” The word actually means: “stake.” Paul was given a “stake in his flesh.” That’s a long shaft of wood, sharpened at the end like a pencil, used for impaling a person. Many Christians in the first century died impaled on a stake. What Paul was experiencing was like having a stake driven right through him. It was awful!

So, what was the thorn? Boy, has this been debated through the years! Some say that it was his eyesight, some say epilepsy, or hysteria, or hypochondria, or even a speech impediment. Church this is simple...what does it say? Look at the end of verse 7.

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**2 Corinthians 12:7b**

**a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.**

What is a messenger of Satan? Well, the word “messenger” in the Greek is “angelos,” meaning angel and in the case of Satan’s angels, that’s a demon. Church, Paul had a demon assigned to him to torment him to keep him humble. You say, what did he torment him with... I believe **his past**. Killing Christians. See this artist’s depiction of the killing of Stephen, the first martyr for Christ.



Imagine Paul being the man on the right with the burgundy and white robe. The Bible says in Acts 7 these words:

**Acts 7:58**

**<sup>58</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.**

Don’t you know Satan attacked Paul through THAT DEMON with that memory and the memory of countless others whom Paul killed. That’s why I believe Paul said this in:

**Philippians 3:13-14**

**<sup>13</sup> Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.**

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God allowed Paul to be tormented, like Job, like David...like you...like me. You see, there are times when God, who in His Sovereignty, having TOTAL and complete control over Satan, over demons, allows us to be humbled even by the forces of hell. I’ve experienced this in my life...panic attacks from the pit of Hell and I bet you have to. But, you know what I’ve learned: THANKS BE TO GOD FOR WHAT HUMBLING US! Because the humbling brings us into the presence of God.

(STEPHEN SAW JESUS STANDING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD AS HE WAS BEING STONED). Oh, Christian, embrace the suffering that humbles you, for with the humbling come His presence and His grace! **Yet, Paul still asked three times...take this away from me, please!**

**2 Corinthians 12:8**

**<sup>8</sup>Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.**

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But God said, “No Paul. No.” Oh, how hard this had to be for Paul. Look at all that he was enduring on the mission field...and he has to endure this too! Do you ever wonder if Paul tried to trust in his own ingenuity to overcome this torment? Maybe he could “reason it all away.” I’ve tried to do that, yet we can’t trust in ourselves and our own cleverness, or whatever it might be...we can’t trust in our own ideas, our own strategies to solve our problems, the thorns we ALL face. No! We must totally trust in the Lord! We must come to the end of ourselves, because it’s then and only then that we will begin to see the power of God released through our emptiness, our weakness, our surrender.

**2 Corinthians 12:9-10**

**<sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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.**

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God uses suffering to put His grace on display. The Lord answered Paul, not by removing the pain, not by removing the trouble, but by increasing the grace to match the trouble. Listen, it’s in suffering that God makes us powerful? In suffering we become powerful, because we become like Jesus...and it’s His power that comes to rest on us in our suffering. Suffering draws us into the presence of God! But, we’ll never know the presence of God in our suffering as long as we rely on our own resources...no...we have nothing in ourselves that we can lean on or trust in that can make us strong enough to overcome...it’s only by leaning into Jesus that we overcome! Are you doing that today? To NOT do that will wear you out dear Christian!

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Paul had to lean into Jesus throughout his life, or be crushed. God allowed Paul to have this terrible pain and experience of not only this thorn...this demon attacking him...but the pain of this terrible mess in the Corinthian church. Why? Because it’s in our deepest pain that we learn the most profound truths and it’s in those deepest pains that we experience the “GRACE of God.

The “CHARIS”...that’s the Greek word for “grace.” It’s used 155 times in the NT and it refers to that which God has given to us in Christ, not because we earn it, or deserve it, but because He willed to give it to us. It’s grace... What is that? **“God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense:”** See it...

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# God's Riches At Christ's Expense

because of Jesus, because of the grace extended to us by God (allowing His Son to be butchered for us)...that's how we can know salvation and there's nothing we could do to earn it...we just had to accept it by choosing to surrender our lives to Jesus and following Him. Have you done that?

Jesus said: "My grace is sufficient." Is that enough for you? Just: "Sufficient." That word has taken a bad rap because it seems like it's weak or not enough. But, it is...it's like a blanket that covers the entire bed from your feet to your chin. It covers completely, it's totally sufficient to keep you warm. You need nothing more! That's God's grace! The great Bible Commentator, Warren Wiersbe says it this way:

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**"In the Christian life, we get many of our blessings through *transformation*, not *substitution*. When Paul prayed three times for the removal of his pain, he was asking God for a substitution: 'Give me health instead of sickness, deliverance instead of pain and weakness.' Sometimes God does meet the need by *substitution*; but other times He meets the need by *transformation*. He does not remove the affliction, but He gives us His grace so that the affliction works *for us* and not *against us*."** Warren Wiersbe, Bible Commentator

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Oh, it's easy to resent suffering, pain, because it's so unpleasant. But we must come to understand that God uses the suffering to accomplish His will. There are no accidents with God. Even Jesus learned in suffering.

### **Hebrews 5:7-8**

**<sup>7</sup> In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. <sup>8</sup> Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.**

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I've learned the most in my life in suffering. Have you? I've had the greatest spiritual growth in my life, simultaneously as I was experiencing the greatest pain in my life. It's when we embrace the **plan** of God...even in the pain that we can finally see the hand of God.

When Paul accepted his pain, it released the power of God. Have you accepted your pain? Can you see it as a gift? Ugh! As hard as it's been, OR AS IT IS RIGHT NOW...can you see that for whatever reason the Lord has allowed your suffering...can you accept it, can you allow it to be transformative? No, Jesus didn't give Paul an explanation for not removing the thorn, but instead, He gave him His presence and His peace through His grace. It's been said, "We don't live on explanations from God; we live on His promises."

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Jesus said, "In the world, you will have trouble." It goes with life, whether you're rich or poor, we all have trouble. We're fallen creatures and we live in a fallen world and we can't personally extract ourselves from this world of trouble, or from the other fallen people in this fallen world. People who fire Jonathan Edwards, or discard the Apostle Paul... So, you and I deal with emotional troubles, marital troubles, children troubles, physical troubles, economic troubles, it just goes on and on, and it's all a part of life. But we have grace! Amazing grace, that is sufficient...it covers and sustains in all times!

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