

“God’s Ability to Humble”

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Theme: The essence of humility is relying on God’s grace instead of oneself.

Introduction: Humility is not a natural human trait—it is a divine work. Left to ourselves, we gravitate toward pride, self-promotion, and independence. But God, in His perfect wisdom and love, knows how to humble His servants. And when He does, it is never to crush them, but to position them to receive more of His grace and display more of His glory.

In 2 Corinthians 12:1–10, the apostle Paul recounts a unique spiritual experience—a vision of paradise—but he does not boast in it. Instead, he turns our attention to what followed: a thorn in the flesh, a trial that humbled him, tested him, and ultimately taught him to boast in his weaknesses so that Christ’s power might rest upon him. **[read text]**

This text reminds us that God not only permits trials, but He designs them with loving intent to break the pride of our hearts and draw us nearer to His strength. His goal is not humiliation but sanctification. He wants His servants to be useful, and usefulness requires humility.

Here we will consider *God’s Ability to Humble* by looking at three movements in this profound passage:

1. **The Privileges of the Humble**—how even great spiritual experiences are entrusted to the lowly.
2. **The Proving of the Humble**—how trials shape our character and expose our dependence on grace.
3. **The Praises of the Humble**—how those who have been brought low are uniquely qualified to exalt Christ.

As we journey through this portion of God’s Word, we can clearly see the theme of these verses - ***The essence of humility is relying on God’s grace instead of oneself.***

I. The Privileges of the Humble – *12:1-6*

A. The Privileged Disclosure – *vv. 1-4*

1. Although there is a serious danger of pride in a privileged environment, humility can exist among those who realize their privileges are unearned and given to them by God.
2. As Paul has been “*boasting*” of his deprivations, dangers, and difficulties through the previous section, he continues to address how God works to demonstrate the authenticity of Paul’s ministry through the challenges He brings to Paul’s experiences.
3. Paul has “stooped” to boasting because the Corinthians refused to trust anyone who had nothing to show that set them apart from their

competitors.

4. Paul was essentially in a “boast-off” with the false teachers but has flipped boasting by highlighting suffering and tribulations instead of accomplishments and achievements.
5. Thus, he states, “*Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable ...*” – I’ll do it, but it ought not be a factor at all; we ought to be impressed by the truth and not the man delivering the truth.
6. Paul shifts from discussing different trials in his life to describing experiences that caused those trials – “*... but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.*”
7. He then shares a testimony of the level of privilege that he had known because of God’s desire to use him – “*And I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago – whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows – such a man was caught up to the third heaven.*”
 - a) Who – “*a man in Christ...*” – a reference to himself, referring to himself in an objective way to seek humility in his sharing of the privilege.
 - b) When – “*... fourteen years ago ...*” – about 8-10 years after his conversion while he was living in Tarsus (around 41-42 AD).
 - c) What – “*... caught up to the third heaven*” – [ἀρπάζω] – likely a reference to an event when he had been beaten or stoned and left for dead and was taken up by God into Heaven.
 - d) Where – “*... to the third heaven*” – a reference to God’s dwelling place:
 - (1) First heaven – a reference to the air or atmosphere around us in which are clouds.
 - (2) Second heaven – a reference to the location of the celestial bodies – sun, moon, stars.
 - (3) Third heaven – a reference to the Heaven proper, where God dwells in unapproachable light and where His throne of grace exists.
8. He repeats for clarity – “*And I know how such a man – whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows – was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.*”
 - a) Again, Paul doesn’t know whether he was in his physical body or whether his soul was caught up and temporarily clothed as described in [2 Corinthians 5:1](#).

- b) *“Paradise” – a synonym for Heaven, the place where the saints also dwell.*¹
 - c) Notice the essence of His privilege was that he heard *“inexpressible words”* from God – [ἄρρητος] – word too holy or beyond man’s natural ability to relate to and therefore *“man is not permitted to speak”* them.
9. Unlike the charlatans who have a near-death experience and then share in detail what they saw, astonishing those who “buy” their stories, Paul refers to the Word of God, which he alone was privileged to hear, and what strengthened his faith.

B. The Privileged Deference – vv. 5-6

- 1. Yet, Paul does not promote himself at all – *“On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weakness.”*
- 2. Again, by referring to himself in the third person, he is essentially issuing a disclaimer that he should not be credited for the privileges he received; it was God’s work in choosing him, not something he achieved.
- 3. Paul cannot forget how God took a miserable moment of his suffering and sanctified it with the great privilege of encountering His Word in heaven.
- 4. Thus, he states he will not boast, *“except in regard to my weaknesses,”* because it was during such weakness that the Word of God became familiar.
- 5. If Paul had been like the false teachers who aimed to promote themselves with fake experiences, Paul, who had genuine experiences, could surpass them.
- 6. Yet, he refused to do this – *“For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth”* – unlike the foolish boasting of the false teachers.
- 7. But, he refuses to do that – *“but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.”*
- 8. He doesn’t want to impress people with his anecdotes, experiences, or testimonials – but he desires that God’s Word would suffice.

¹ Prior to the ascension of Christ, “Paradise” was a portion of Hades, also called “Abraham’s bosom” where the OT saints awaiting the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ whereby Paradise was relocated to Heaven.

- a) *“... sees in me” ... through the difference the Word has made in his life (Christlikeness).*
 - b) *“... hears from me.” - through what he preaches about the person of Christ Jesus.*
9. *“The true measure of a man of God is not his alleged mystical experiences but his godly life and his faithfulness to the Word of God.”²*

II. The Proving of the Humble – 12:7-8

A. The Proof through Pain – v. 7

1. Paul’s authenticity has already been defined in the context of what he has suffered for the sake of Christ.
2. He leans into this sphere of proof through what he credits God of using to produce humility in his life – *“Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh ...”*
3. Note that God afflicted him to *“keep [him] from exalting [himself],”* meaning to maintain his humility.
4. The *“thorn in the flesh”* has stirred great debate among expositors between two main perspectives:
 - a) *It refers to the false teachers who proved to be enemies that caused Paul immense distress, as mentioned in 2 Corinthians 11:28.*
 - b) *It refers to a chronic physical condition or illness that caused Paul humility—likely an eye problem such as pterygium, a benign (non-cancerous) growth of the **conjunctiva**—the clear, thin tissue that covers the white part of the eye (sclera) —that extends onto the **cornea**, the transparent front part of the eye.*
 - (1) *It is commonly caused by excessive exposure to bright light – such as when he saw the Lord on the road to Damascus - Acts 9:8-9, 17-18.*
 - (2) *The symptoms include inflammation, redness, and a visible, grotesque white growth in the eye, often causing loss of vision if it extends over the pupil – cp. Galatians 4:13-15; 6:11.*
5. He continues to lament the malady, referring to it as *“a messenger of*

² John F. MacArthur Jr., 2 Corinthians, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 399.

Satan to torment me – to keep me from exalting myself.”

- a) Again, this is an important element in the belief that this refers to false teachers.
- b) However, Satan can send a message to us about God's unworthiness, as shown by his commission from God to torment Job to disprove Satan's claim that a little tribulation will cause Job to deny God – *Job 2:3-6*.
- c) Likewise, God used Satan to remind Paul of his limited resources and how much he needed God's grace.
- d) In this case, “messenger” [ἄγγελος] – refers to the means of delivering a message, and here it refers to his disease.

B. The Proof through Prayer – v. 8

- 1. Yet, in a similar way as Job, Paul does not become arrogant or condemn God.
- 2. Instead, he sought the Lord, leaning into grace – *“Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.”*
 - a) *“implored”* [παρακαλέω] – to call someone to come alongside to help, referring to his praying in the Spirit, who is called our paraclete or “Helper.”
 - b) *“three times”* – throughout his suffering, Paul repeatedly drew near to God but sought relief through healing.
- 3. It seems that each time he prayed, God answered him with a clear “no,” and attempted to align him with His purposes.
- 4. Such is the true purpose of prayer: not to alter God's will, but to align our wills with His.

III. The Praises of the Humble – 12:9-10

A. The Praises for the Sufficiency of Grace – v. 9a

- 1. God's answer to Paul's pleadings in prayer was to respond clearly – *“And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’”*
 - a) *“sufficient”* [ἄρκέω] – describes grace that is enough to bring contentment.
 - b) *“perfected”* [τελέω] - to bring something to completion or a finish, to fulfill something.
 - c) *“weakness”* [ἀσθένεια] – a state of debilitation or incapacity.

2. Basically, God replied that His grace is sufficient to turn Paul's weakness and struggles into the fulfillment of His purposes – which is humility.
3. The *“power”* for this is indeed *“My grace”* – that unmerited favor that enables the person to endure affliction and pain, keeping Paul humble before the Lord and faithful to Him.
4. He praises the Lord for this grace – *“Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about My weaknesses ...”*
5. He conveys that it was his pleasure to serve the Lord faithfully despite his affliction because it proves the sufficiency of God's grace in and through his life.

B. The Praises for the Strength through Grace – vv. 9b-10

1. In fact, the supernatural strength Paul experiences because of his affliction reveals the power of grace – *“... so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”*
2. Since Paul's calling was to bring glory to Christ by demonstrating the veracity of grace and proclaiming the truth of God's grace, he says, *“Therefore I am well content with weaknesses ...”*
3. He then describes what he is willing to endure *“for Christ's sake:”*
 - a) **Diseases:** *“... with weaknesses ...”* [ἀσθένεια] – afflictions of the body demanding sustaining grace.
 - b) **Disdain** - *“... with insults ...”* [ὑβρις] – the hostility of others demanding the affirmations provided through grace.
 - c) **Distresses:** *“... with distresses ...”* [ἀνάγκη] – calamities in circumstances or experiences that cause one to rely upon sustaining grace.
 - d) **Denunciation** - *“... with persecutions ...”* [διωγμός] – the physical harassment carried out by those who seek to silence those spreading the truth, leading individuals to rely on God's sustaining grace.
 - e) **Difficulties:** *“... with difficulties ...”* [στενοχωρία] – the anguish caused by various stresses or pressures (literally meaning narrowness), where options or solutions are limited and one must rely on grace.
4. Too many people dismiss the idea that grace is enough and believe that well-being depends on other things, like finances, family, or manipulation of feelings (psychology).

5. To them, the solutions offered by God in these areas are inadequate and insufficient.
6. If God's grace is enough to deliver us from the guilt, penalty, power, and even the presence of sin, then it is enough to sustain us through the many dangers, toils, and snares we encounter along the way.
7. Under the guidance of God's Spirit, who inspires what Paul says, he states, *"...for when I am weak, then I am strong."*
8. He is fully capable of bringing God glory despite his weakness because of God's power supplied through grace, all to the glory of Christ, whom Paul preaches.

The essence of humility is relying on God's grace instead of oneself.