

That's high tech right there. Turn in your Bibles, please, to 2 Corinthians chapter 12. We're going to read verses 1 through 10 and really work more through the back half of that passage, but we'll look at all of it some. A lot of different connections in life have tied me to Yazoo City and Second Prez. I would hear about y'all from Douglas Kelly in prayer meeting in his office all the way in Charlotte. I got here, and right when I got here, David Gilbert just moved, and so I'd preach some up here for y'all. And then, you know, I moved to Starkville, and there's Mr. Clayton on our session, on our search committee.

You guys who, I hope this pulpit and that look familiar. Now you know where it came from. And picture dark wood, but this design, and now you know where that came from. If you hadn't been a Starvel, all of that came from here. And we were glad to be covenantally tied to Second Prejezus City, very much so. We very much identify as being kindred spirits with you all. And then earthly speaking, Max Strawbridge and I, and the Lord, and Mr. Peaster, all All had some conversations and thanks be to God we're here now. So what a privilege to be here. And again, I'm thankful for all these connections to y'all. Give your attention in the second Corinthians chapter 12 as we begin in verse one, this is God's word.

I must go on boasting though there's nothing to be gained by. I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was called 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 called up into paradise. Whether in the body or not, 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 would be speaking the truth. But I refrained from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. 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 and 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."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. Let's pray. Father, again, it's a Friday night, not a Lord's Day morning, but your word is open, your people are gathered, so you've promised you'll bless us, you've promised you'll work, and so we've come to submit ourselves humbly, humbly before you, that we would even behold wondrous things from your law, by your spirit, we ask it all in Jesus' name, amen.

Y'all, I don't know if you've noticed this, and frankly, if you've been able to remain oblivious to this, even better, but there's a lot of talk about manhood and masculinity out there these days. particularly in conservative circles. And y'all, I've got to admit it, it's a little bit perplexing to me. I just, I didn't grow up around men who had to go around talking about manhood all the time. I just grew up around men who were men.

They just were faithful and tried to live out before the watching world what the Bible didn't, and even the best theologians I was around and not the ones, simple faith, complex faith, they just walked foot by foot in front of each other, but today we're trying to come up with all these definitions of manhood, and y'all, I really think the heart of that lies in biblical Christianity being applied to you as a man.

But I wanted to look at three things, these three antitheses, and Paul, an old theologian, he's more of a Dutch northern influence than a southern Scottish guy. He certainly wasn't a Scottish common sense realist. Like this church's history is. But Cornelius Fantill, he always talked about biblical antithetical Calvinism. And he really always talked about, if you look at the scriptures, there really are all these tensions throughout.

The seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. Darkness, light, Jude. Wherever you look in scripture, there are these tensions. And so again, I've picked three for the weekend. Strength and weakness tonight. And then tomorrow we'll look at loss is gain, and then the spirit versus the flesh. But tonight is interesting. And y'all, anytime you're preparing a text, you really think through what's the point? Where's the hook? What can we put our minds around and then begin to develop a picture, right? What's the background of the easel? And here's what I think it is in this passage. Here's how I think you'll understand the rest of what Paul is saying.

Everything about the Christian life, particularly for men, everything about the Christian life is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. Everything about the Christian life is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. And you can't understand why Paul does what he does and why he says what he says in this passage unless you get your head around that. Counter-cultural and counter-intuitive.

And let's unpack that in three ways tonight. In the first part, we need to be protected from ourselves. We need to be protected from ourselves. Secondly, we need to be reminded what the purpose of thorns in the flesh is. And finally, we need to operate under biblical definitions of strength and weakness in the first place then. We need to be protected from ourselves.

All right, y'all. I didn't drop you in early enough for time's sake. We could have read all of chapter 11 just to prepare for chapter 12. But essentially, Paul was having to defend his ministry to the church against a lot of imposters. And what the imposters were doing is they were making up stories and they were greatly embellishing their resumes saying, look at us, look at all the credentials we have. And Paul comes on the scene and goes, well, you know, if you want to go that route, trust me, my resume is much more impressive.

Actually, I've been to heaven. I've been to heaven. I can promise you something right now. If in whatever economy the Lord allowed me to go to the third level of heaven, you would know about it. You would know about it. The next time somebody questions my sermon, have you been to heaven? You would know about it.

Paul had the perfect opportunity to quiet all of the opposition, he had the perfect opportunity to solidify his ministry, and instead of saying, sit down and let me tell you how impressive I am, he refused to even acknowledge without saying, I know this man, he's talking about himself, I know this man, this man went to heaven, but I won't even speak of it. Why? because he recognized the great fear and foolishness of thinking this way. He recognized that because of these great blessings and benefits, no doubt given him from God, if he gave life to that resume, if

he gave life to all of the reasons why he had become impressive in man's eyes, he knew he would become conceited.

Now, let's pause and think about this for a minute. Of all the conversations you've had with the Lord when trials came in your life, and of all the conversations you've had with unbelievers and skeptics and people who were perhaps in the church at certain points in time, but all of a sudden life got too hard for them, y'all, the one question that constantly comes up is, why is life so hard for the Christian? Why? Now, I know why life is hard for the unbeliever, but why not a different path for the Christian?

And the answer is, y'all, we need to be protected from ourselves. Go all the way back to the beginning. You and I, Monday morning quarterbacking it, can go, Adam, you had everything, everything. You had one prohibition. How did you let her ruin it? How did you ruin it? How? Because that's what we do. Being related to Adam, that's what we do.

You look back again, whether it be the cycle of the judges, whether it be the patriarchs, whether it be the nation of Israel, as we work through all of those long narratives, what happens is, God comes, he brings the Nebuchadnezzars, he brings the Babylonians, he brings the trials, he brings the times of testing and trying, and the people, with tears and what seemingly, for at least a moment, real repentance, the people return, And God pulls back the trials and He gets rid of and judges the Assyrians and the Babylonians and the wicked kings that He used for a moment are gone. And what happens before long? They become conceited. The leisure of life, the pleasures of this world, y'all for some reason in a fallen state we simply cannot handle smooth waters. And we always, we always fall away.

You know, it's not just theologians, it's not just some old, you know, Confucian fortune cookie proverbs that say, you know, easy times make for weak men. That's baked into the narrative of Scripture. But we're reading this passage and y'all, have you had this thought when you've read this before?

But Lord, Lord, why give him, why give him this knowledge? if he then is gonna misuse it. Right, you see the problem was not that he was called up in the third layer of heaven. The problem was not these blessings that he had. The problem is in his sin, even the apostle Paul, he knew that if left to myself, if not protected for myself, I'm gonna misuse the gift. Because that's what we love to do. We are proficient at misusing the gifts.

And y'all, I can think of it. I remember in seminary, you talking about a prayer life that was, I was trying, I didn't know how to read Hebrew. So what do you do? Lord, I can't read Hebrew. You know, your child has a sickness and you don't know how bad it is, or your wife has a blood test that's negative and it's coming back abnormal and you don't know what it is yet.

In those moments, all of a sudden there's this great spiritual clarity. But very few of us have the gift of maintaining that when times are going well. Very few of us do. Because again, we are related to these even saints, even heroes of the faith in scripture.

So Paul had this amazing gift. God had given him insight and knowledge that none of us have, that none of the other apostles had in the same sense he did. But the way he went about defending his apostleship, the way he went about defending his manhood, and his Christianity, was in humility. Because he knew the worst thing that could happen was to be given over to conceit.

Y'all, it's interesting. Paul, we know, is being this deep theologian, right? You other pastors in here, they tell you in seminary, don't preach on Romans for a long, long time. Don't preach on, wait till you got hair falling out in your grade, then maybe start thinking about Romans. I would say Galatians is the same way a little bit, actually, from front to finish. But Paul was also incredibly practical.

I've done first and second Thessalonians in the last few months, and how frequently he's looking at the church saying, hey, Stop being idle. Stop being busybodies. The man who beautifully lays out for us in Greek that we can't even comprehend the depths of justification also just goes, and by the way, would y'all go work?

Because we need to, we need to be protected from ourselves. And y'all, I have to say that we start here tonight because that has to be a baseline for us. We have to believe in the doctrine of depravity, not because we're Presbyterians, but because we're Christians, because we're Bible people. We have to believe in the doctrine of depravity because we look at our own hearts and go, it's there. Oh, it's there. And that's not discounting.

That's not discounting the regeneration that's been given us. That's not discounting the new heart we have. That's not discounting the new identity. But it is recognizing that glorification is still in the future. We haven't been perfected yet. And so while we wait for that glorification, that perfection, y'all, we have to be suspicious of ourselves. And it's not pessimism, it's realism. It's biblical realism. We have to be suspicious of ourselves.

So secondly then, how does God accomplish this? Because God doesn't say, hey, here's what you need to do. You protect yourself. He goes, no, I'll do it. We need to be reminded of the purpose of these thorns in the flesh. With Job and with Paul, these two places in scripture, y'all, you have to admit for a moment at least we scratch our heads and go, I don't know what I think about God looking at Satan and saying, yeah, you can harass this one. Is he in his right to? Of course. He's sovereign. He can do whatever he wants.

But at least acknowledge for about three seconds tonight that a little part of you goes, Lord, I'm just going to trust you on that one. I've said before, frequently, the Lord's gonna have to all but audibly tell me to preach through the Book of Job. It scares me too much. I'm being honest with you. It scares me too much.

But here we have to believe in and trust the heart and character of God towards His people. Because at first reading, this does seem cruel, doesn't it? It seems punitive. The thorn in the flesh seems like a curse, doesn't it? That's not how Paul understands it. Paul understands it in his wisdom, in his increasing spiritual maturity. Paul understands it as a glorious protection.

Why? Because it's God saying, I'm gonna intervene, and I'm gonna step in where you're not strong enough, and I'm gonna use every means necessary to protect you from yourself. Y'all, if you remember what God has promised us that he's gonna keep covenant with you, then you also have to recognize that God's promises, he's gonna make sure he completes the work he begins, right? And whatever means necessary.

And so if the thorn in the flesh is the way God keeps his promises to us, y'all, as much as we sometimes wish it wasn't that way, we have to stop and go, then the only thing we can conclude is how gracious of him. At 20, I would have thought, oh, I don't need a thorn in the flesh. At 30, I would have thought, well, I guess maybe sometimes I need a thorn in the flesh. At 40, I'm like, if the Lord removed His sustaining grace from me even for a moment, oh, the ditches I could find. Oh, the ditches I could find.

If the Lord removed That thorn in Paul's flesh, the next city he walked and he would get on top of the temple and be like, I went to heaven! He knew it. He knew it. And so what happens is, even though he prays and prays three times, I pleaded with the Lord that this thorn would go away. Y'all please, please understand God loves us too much to give us what we want with that request. He loves us too much to leave us to ourselves.

Aren't you glad? Aren't you glad? Aren't you glad he builds tall fences? Aren't you glad? People sometimes come to grace, and I promise you the same thing is true here. Usually we don't hear it to our faces, by the way, but people look at the structure we put in place in our circles and think, what is that? Is it legalism? Is it formality? And I always go, no, no, no, no, no, those are fences. The Westminster Confession of Faith is a fence around me so I know where it's safe to roam.

You know why? Because if not, You're telling me if I just shift on this doctrine a little bit, how much more tithe money can we bring in? How many more people will show up? You're telling me if I shift on this doctrine, people will quit messing with me? Oh, give me a minute left to myself.

I could follow all of those practical things. But we build fences around us. It's kind of the Lord to do that. It's wise of us to know where we need fences. Married men, guess what? God has graciously given you with a helpmate who is a fence around you. Because when nobody else can tell me you're crazy, my wife can look at me and go, sweetheart, do you really think that's a good idea? That's a fence around me. But I want to stop and dwell there just for a minute.

When the Lord afflicts us, do we actually believe that that's actually the highest expression of his love for us? Because it means he is committed to us, and it means he has a vested interest in bringing us safely home. It means he wants to be with us in heaven forever, and he's gonna ensure that that happens. We can all day long pick apart, Lord, why in your sovereignty did you make it this way?

Y'all, that's way above my pay grade. But what I do know is, if your heart's anything like mine, a moment of brutal honesty says to me, Lord, don't remove the thorn in the flesh. I'm not safe without it. I am not safe without it. Paul believed that. So y'all, and by the way, when we're going through trials that just affect us, I think you and I could process a little bit better.

But it's when our spouse, it's when our children, it's when our loved ones, it's like, okay, Lord, leave them out of it. Leave them out of it. And then you have to stop and realize, well, no, he's working in them too. Don't be so arrogant. He's working in them too.

But y'all please understand, the thorn in the flesh was not punitive. It wasn't harsh or unkind. In fact, I would say from an earthly standpoint, it's how we have the writings of the Apostle Paul we have. By the way, if you're thinking, was he going to tell us what the thorn in the flesh was?

I have no idea. Some commentators say it was a physical thorn in the flesh. I don't think so. I think it was more of some sort of temptation. Why? Because if he was of weak physical disposition, I'm not sure if you read back one chapter, the beatings he took, and the shipwrecks in the prison stays. I'm not sure somebody with weak health could have gone through all of that. This is speculation. Believe what you want about it. I'm not saying that. It does say it to the Lord. But we don't have the Apostle Paul's contribution to Canaan without this thorn in the flesh.

Men, there's something or a multitude of things the Lord has protected you from by being kind enough to keep you from being conceited and keep you humble and to keep you relying on him. He has protected you from something or again, at least in my case, probably a whole pile of things that would have ruined you. It would have ruined your ministry. It would have ruined your family, your life.

But this takes spiritual maturity. This takes somebody who has wrestled with the Lord, somebody who has thought deeply about the things of the Lord. Lord, not only are you not going to let me talk about these things, and you're going to give me a thorn in the flesh.

But anything, y'all, verse 9, anything that causes us to come to this conclusion, Anything that causes the Lord to say to us, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness, it's a good thing. You talk to any Christian out there, you all know stories, I know some of your stories. You talk to any Christian out there who has gone through a trial, and when you're doing the reconnaissance at the end, and when you're going back and saying, let's think about what the lessons are, After a little bit of the tears dry up, after some of the trauma dries up, there will be a moment where a clear testimony shows forth from God's people where they say, I know something of the Lord's grace and kindness to me that I otherwise would have never known. I know something of the nearness of God and of the quality of his commitment to me that if I hadn't gone through this trial, I never would have known. And as painful as it is for us to say sometimes, and through tears, no doubt, we will have to say, yes, it's true. And the constant theme we get from Paul throughout his writings is, all of these calamities have been worth it. Because I have a deeper understanding of the goodness of God at the end of them all.

And if we believe God is who he says he is, and if we believe he's doing the work he's promised he will do, then what you and I really do want more than anything in this world is a greater glimpse of heaven now. A greater foretaste now. And so I don't like it any more than you, but if what the scriptures say to us is he uses the thorns in the flesh to prepare us more for heaven, and he uses the thorns in the flesh to keep his promises to us, then I'm not gonna dare pray for more, but I'll be thankful for the one I got.

I'm not crazy. But I will be humble enough, hopefully, to stop and say, Lord, Every step of the way, I've needed exactly the chastisement you've given me. I've needed all the protective measures in place you've given me. I've needed that. You speak for yourself, but this man needs that. I need it. We need to be protected from ourselves. We need to be reminded of the purpose of our thorns in the flesh. And finally, we need to operate under biblical definitions of strength and weakness.

Y'all, our denomination's been in a strange, well, I don't know how long it's been, actually. Maybe when sonship kind of got on the scenes when it started, but you hear more and more preachers really that they camp out in weakness as if that's the final resting place of the Christian life.

That's not how Paul refers to weakness in this passage. That's not how the scriptures speak about weakness. Weakness, y'all, is the trampoline that we jump on the springboard back into the strength that is Jesus. Look how he uses that language here. Weakness, it's the human limitation we have resulting from the fall and resulting from our actual sin, right? Weakness are these basic limitations we have. But strength is walking in the promised work of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives. Back to the beginning.

There's something incredibly countercultural and counterintuitive about showing our manhood and our masculinity by saying, I'm weak. And if I'm ever strong, it's because of God's work in me. Y'all, you go on a job interview. And this is always, by the way, for pastors, this is one thing, but for all you men who aren't pastors, who went out there and had to bring home the bacon in different ways, right? Like, we're always applying wisdom to this because what I'm not saying to you is you have to walk into your boss and say, you know, I just don't think I'm capable of doing anything. I'm not confident in any task you've given me. But at some point in that journey, there has to be a moment where you and your testimony can say, do you want to know how I've done these things for you?

The Lord. He has increased as I have decreased. None of those tensions. No matter where you find yourself, no matter what your calling is, you have to, in your personal devotions to the Lord, in your confessions of sin during your worship services, we have to come to the grips of whatever good is happening, He is doing.

And again, and the springboard, the trampoline for that grace, for that strength is for us to acknowledge need and weakness. Sinclair Ferguson, oh, maybe eight years ago, he came into the John Reed Miller Lecture Series at RTS back still out on Clinton Boulevard.

And he basically was saying anything in Paul really can, in some form or fashion, be tied back to his conversion story on that road to Damascus, right? And I want you to think about, just for a minute, the way the Lord found him. What does it say in Acts now? Saul still breathing threats of murder? And will the Lord come to him? He said, Saul, Saul. You remember Martha, Martha, Mary, Mary, Saul, Saul. When he says the name twice, Saul, Saul, why you persecuting me? And shortly thereafter, Saul had to be led.

Y'all think about this for a minute. He was probably thinking they're gonna kill me. There's no way I'm making it through this alive. This is a trap. But in utter weakness, an utter weakness, the Lord began to rebuild the Apostle Paul. But he tore him down first. Took him off that horse first. He made him go study and meditate first and learn.

But it was in that moment of acknowledging weakness that the Spirit moves And all of a sudden we find an apostle who is characterized by strength, by the ability to accomplish anything. Biblical manhood is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. Biblical manhood is being protected from ourselves, is being thankful and worshipful when we think about the thorns in the flesh that God has given us. And it's making sure we recognize that our weakness is but a temporary moment for us to say, but Lord, give me strength. But Lord, give me strength. Again, weakness is not the posture we wish to stay in. Weakness is the posture we take when we say, Lord, you fill my cup.

Lord, you work by your spirit and power. Lord, you dictate my life by your wisdom. Lord, you lead and I will follow. You teach me and I'll walk in paths of righteousness for your name's sake. Y'all, this is the way man's chief end is accomplished. This is the way we glorify God and enjoy him forever. is that we give up any notions of self-sufficiency. We give up any notions of being our own prophet, priest, and king. We give up any notions of having the map charted out from A to Z and knowing every step to take and knowing every right answer and every wise move. And with childlike faith, with childlike dependence, we come back to the Lord. time and time again.

And we say, Father, don't strengthen me sometimes. Don't strengthen me just when I've come to the realization that I'm in over my head. Don't strengthen me just in those deep moments of trials. But always, always make up for my weakness with your strength. Make up for my foolishness with your wisdom. Make up for my conceit by granting me humility.

Y'all, I'm telling you, as crazy as it sounds, whatever will bring us to the end of that rope that makes us look up and say, your grace is enough, that is exactly where we want to be. In the name of the Father and of the Son. and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Let's pray. Father, thank you for your Spirit's presence with these men on a Friday night. They paid attention after a delicious dinner, even. Your Word is true. Your Spirit has been promised to give us eyes to see and ears to hear. And so, Father, would we enter through the narrow gate? Will we look for the ancient paths? And in our weakness, would we springboard ourselves into your fullness and strength? We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.