



Fool's Talk, Part 2

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Grace Church | 2.22.20

Just recently I was part of a group that was asked to recommend some reading. Now, I enjoy reading, and I try to read a book or two a month, but sometimes it comes in spurts. So I wouldn't classify myself as an avid reader. Regardless, I always love to recommend a good book. BUT this particular time, I was asked if I had read any good *memoirs* lately? And as I considered this request, I realized that there was nothing that I could recommend. I don't read a lot of memoirs. And I was surprised as there were plenty of suggestions pouring in. I could not find any stats to back me up, but it seems like there are perhaps more memoirs flooding the market than ever before.

If you've done anything or experienced anything extremely significant, and you are a capable writer of some kind, or if you are famous enough to basically get a ghost writer, you may be eligible to join the memoir writing train. I did a simple search on Amazon to try to discover: what are the current top selling memoirs? Here are a few:

- *Becoming*, by Michelle Obama. 10 Million copies sold. She certainly has lived an interesting life. Maybe I'll pick that one up.
- *Open Book*, by Jessica Simpson. Probably a hard pass on that one.
- The number two best seller, called *Fixing the Fates: An Adoptee's Story of Truth and Lies*. That title clearly pulls you into an interesting and unique story.
- Another one called *Upstairs at the White House: My Life with the First Ladies*. Apparently everyone is curious about living in the white house. With Michelle Obama.

Now there are plenty of powerful, interesting, and even helpful memoirs. It's helpful to hear of unique experiences different from our own. One of the first autobiographical memoirs ever written is *Confessions* by Augustine. Highly recommended. Usually, unless you are Augustine, chances are your memoir sells a lot of copies only if you are able to highlight your lie in a way that is more interesting or more applicable than the normal one. It sells if you are famous. Chip Gaines has a memoir. Why? Because people will buy it. You need some sort of experience. I would put money on the fact that someone will publish a COVID-19 memoir here in a year or two. So what am I getting at here? Well, this morning, we will see in our text the apostle Paul continuing his "memoir" of sorts. And it's an incredibly interesting memoir, because Paul has a story that could sell millions of copies. He has an experience that no one else can compare to. And yet, what he



chooses to reveal about his life is not his angle into the interesting and supernatural and unique. The power of his story in Christ comes from his humiliation, not his exaltation.

And so today in our text we will continue to learn a lesson that reshapes and reframes the way we see ourselves, the way we tell our story, the way we see our weakness. Here is what we will learn: **the very part of you that is most humiliating may just be your greatest gift to glorify God. Your hidden, normal life, and your constant, remaining thorns... that is the power of Christ in you.** The memoir of every Christian is not built on the power of unique experience or popular fame, but on the power of God's sufficient grace.

Paul's Personal Experience of Paradise

Let's first see how Paul enters into the second part of his "fool's speech". If you remember last week, we talked about how Paul has entered into a satirical boast, in the format of his opponents, the false "super-apostles", in order to show just how silly and foolish they are. So he is doing something that they would do, which is boast in themselves, their experiences, and their resumes, but he is doing it in an entirely different way than they would. He began his fool's speech last week by showing the Corinthians how if they are judging him and his message by the same standards for which they judge the super-apostles, than he does measure up. He is a hebrew of hebrews, he checks every box of outward glory. But his speech then makes a drastic turn: instead of boasting in his outward impressiveness, his boast is full of his suffering and dependence. He has exposed the false apostles boasting as worthless by turning it on it's head. Boasting in self-sufficiency and self accomplishment is foolish when what really shows faithfulness to Christ is persecution, suffering, and dependence.

If last week we learned of the foolishness of self-boasting, this week we see in full color the strength of the gospel. So today Paul continues his fools speech. We see this in **verse 1**. The false super apostles were known, as many were in the Corinthians day, to hold "visions and revelations" in high esteem. These were not particularly uncommon experiences. The culture of the ancient world at the time longed for some sort of communion and revelation from the divine. So it's not unlikely that the false apostles and opponents of Paul pointed to some sort of supernatural vision as part of their credentials for ministry. And so Paul continues in his satirical fools speech. "They boast of visions and revelations? Well then so will I, although it is foolish", he says. Buckle up Corinthians, let me tell you a story.

In **verse 2-4** he begins. Now this is a very interesting anecdote, how often do you hear someone say they were caught up in the "third heaven"? We should not take this experience as some kind of prescriptive call to desire visions and revelations. Paul is making a particular point here. First notice how this experience is **special**. It's a one time event. Fourteen years ago, Paul says. This is important for several reasons. Primarily, I find it curious that this is the first time Paul is brining this up. He has had other visions in the New Testament, like when he received a vision of a man



telling him to go to Macedonia, or at his conversion where he had a vision and really saw the resurrected Christ. But this one is different, he has sat on it for fourteen years.

Why? Because this vision is also extremely **powerful**. Paul says he is caught up into the “third heaven”. The way the Scripture describes “heaven” is multifaceted. Often in the OT the Hebrew word for heaven is simply translated as “sky”, like the atmosphere and the place where clouds float around. There are also times when the Biblical authors describe heaven as outer space, the place where the stars are. Finally, Biblical authors use the same word “heaven” to denote the place where God dwells, the very throne room of God. God isn’t in the sky, or in outer space, but the same word “heaven” is used to describe the spiritual realm where God dwells and rules. This is what Paul has in mind here when he says the “third heaven”, and the Corinthians would have known this. What he means by this is more clear in **verse 3**. He is caught up into “paradise”. This is often equated with the throne room of God as well in Scripture, as we think of when Jesus tells the thief on the cross who recognizes him as the Christ, “today you will be with me in Paradise.” So Paul here is speaking of going into the very presence of God. This shows the power of his vision: the Corinthians would have taken this extremely seriously. This is the epitome of visions, the trump card that beats all other visions. No one can top this.

But despite the power of this vision, Paul doesn’t give much detail as to what happened. He stress that this vision of his is **personal** in nature. Twice he repeats that he does not know whether his actual body was taken up, or just his soul. The Corinthians, in their greek culture, would have loved to argue about the nature of visions, whether the soul can be separated from the body in something like this, or not. But Paul doesn’t give them that. For emphasis, twice he reminds them that this is not the point of the vision. Only God knows what really was going on. This vision is between Paul and God, which is reinforced in **verse 4**. Whatever words and knowledge that was revealed to Paul in this incredible vision was for his benefit only. It’s personal, likely some sort of vision of the future that God gifted him with to sustain him through all his unique sufferings and hardships and ministry.

Notice first the curious third person, “I know a man”. Clearly, as we see in verse 7 when he changes the tense, Paul is talking about himself. Why would he use first person? I believe his primary reasoning is to show emphasis of where his boasting is. We see this in **verse 5**. Paul is so careful to show the Corinthians that he is not using this experience as a resume builder that he treats it as something completely foreign to himself. “On behalf of this man”, that is, Paul fourteen years ago, Paul can boast. It is truly incredible the vision he had. But does his past and personal experience with God give him ammo for boasting in the present? No, not at all!

Here the contrast between Paul and the false super apostles is again crystal clear. Paul has the ultimate trump card, the vision to rule all other visions, these words from God. Surely this validates his ministry, surely this is where his power comes from! After all, he tells us in **verse 6**, if he wanted to spill the beans about his vision and boast in it as his power for ministry, he could, he wouldn’t be lying. But Paul makes no claim to say that this vision is where his power comes from. Why? Because he knows what matters is not his ecstatic, supernatural experience, but rather his words and actions and example. He doesn’t want the Corinthians to believe him and his gospel



because it promises supernatural experiences or phenomena, or because he is some powerful prophet who cannot be questioned. No, Paul calls to mind the normal ways of judging the validity of his ministry. Don't focus on the uniqueness of my experience but of the faithfulness of my life.

What do we learn from all this? We learn that the power of the Christian is not built on unique experience. Yes, God may give us particular revelations, particular gifts, particular supernatural experiences, particular situations where he shows his power. But these are more for personal encouragement than anything else. They don't validate our ministry, they are supplemental, not vital.

So often we envy those who seem to be so "in tune" with God. It seems like every other day they "hear a word" from God or have some spiritual breakthrough. We say that they are "on fire" for God. We long for those experiences with God that we had in the past, maybe when we were a young Christian. We want our Christian story to be mountaintop to mountaintop. And when the valley comes, our main goal is to get out. I've been here, saddled with the pressure of feeling far from God and believing that the only way back to intimacy with him is through some sort of ecstatic, emotional, experience, some sort of "revelation" or "vision" even. And make no mistake, sometimes we have those experiences. But the longer I am in Christ, the more I realize that those experiences *are* special, *are* personal. The mountaintop is not where the sustaining power comes from.

I'm reminded of the story of the mount of transfiguration, when Jesus takes up Peter, James and John to the top of a mountain and they experience this radical vision of Jesus' true glory. They also see Moses and Elijah there, the two great prophets who speak of Jesus. AND what does Peter do? He tells Jesus, "let's stay up here, build some tents". He has just seen Jesus' true glory face to face, and he suggests staying for a while! He feels good, powerful, full of faith. I love how Luke describes Peter's suggestion. It says "he didn't know what he was saying". Peter is wrong: they aren't meant to stay on the mountaintop. As soon as the glory is seen, it's gone again, and what happens? The text tells us that Peter and James and John tell no one of what happened there. It's this personal experience of glory, this one time event. They go back to normal life with Jesus, and maybe they are a little dismayed. They want the mountaintop glory! But they have confused the specific power of God with the sustaining power of God. What they really need is daily, normal, life with Jesus. They need the teaching, the example. They need to suffer with him, to go hungry with him, to feel his embrace after a long day. That is sustaining power.

And so it is with us. As the super-apostles bragged about their supernatural visions, Paul knew that chasing experiences would never sustain the Corinthians. And it can't sustain us. Our memoirs are not full of page after page of jaw dropping experiences. God may gift you with one of those. I'm not saying that they are not from God, or can be useful or encouraging. But Christ's power is not made perfect in our visions and dreams. Your sharpest tool for glorifying God is not the power of your personal revelations. In fact, for most of us, it's just the opposite.



The Thorn in the Flesh

We begin to see just how this plays out in Paul's example of his life. Remember, this vision that he had was truly unlike any other. Very few people in Scripture are documented to see what Paul saw, the very throne room of God. But look what happens in **verse 7**. Paul knows that if he was left to his own devices, he would be tempted to boast in his supernatural experiences. He would be tempted to think that his power for ministry is found in the "surpassing greatness" of personal revelations and visions. But notice what happens here: God doesn't allow that. Look carefully, Paul says God *gave* him a thorn in the flesh.

The word for "thorn" here can also mean a sharp stick or a stake. So Paul is saying that this thorn, the thing that keeps nagging him, staking him to the ground, hindering him, is given by God. This does not mean that Paul's thorn is God's direct work, because we also see it described as a "messenger of Satan". What this means is that Paul recognizes that ultimately, God is in control. He is allowing this Satanic thorn to press onto Paul, this particular trial. He has purpose behind it, to keep Paul from being conceited.

It's unclear exactly what this "thorn" may be. In fact, it's better that we don't know, because it allows us to apply it directly to our situation. A thorn in the flesh can be anything that is nagging you: physically, spiritually, emotionally, something that you can't seem to shake. It may be the certain personality trait that always seems to get in the way, or that thing about how you were made that you wonder: "Is this a mistake?" It's that particular suffering that you feel has driven you into the ground like a stake. I think about men and women in our congregation who suffer from physical disabilities of some kind, whether that is due to chronic illness or something genetic. Oftentimes we wonder: what is the purpose of all this apparent weakness? Is God making a mistake? Why do limitations still exist in the body of Christ? And maybe our solution is prayer for miracles. We want to see healing from illness and sickness and disability, or we want to see depression and mental illness cease in our body. So we pray. And that's a noble thing. Paul does the same, we see in **verse 8**.

Pleading with God is part of the Christian life, it's how we wrestle with the reality of suffering and pain. We bring it to him. But Paul is also very clear that in bringing his suffering to God, God is not silent. Here is an experience that is free to share. In his "throne room" experience he received words that he could not repeat, lest they make Paul conceited, but there is no fear of that here. What does God say that Paul's thorn is there for? We see this answer in **verse 9**.



The Sufficiency of God's Grace and Perfection of Christ's Power

If the power of the Christian testimony and the Christian life is not found primarily in the mountaintop experience, then where is it found? If God does not answer our prayers, if we are left with sufferings and thorns, what for? Well here we find the answer.

Our weakness is to show the sufficiency of Grace. The parts about us that seem the most humiliating, the sufferings we can't seem to shake, these are the part of us that highlight God's grace. This is a stunning reversal of the Corinthian culture, who worshiped health and success and self sufficiency. But Paul's thorn, his weakness, showcases the gospel of grace more than anything else ever could. What does this mean? It means we need our brothers and sisters of weakness, because they are the best preachers of God's sufficient grace. It means that if our response to weakness is to buckle up and bear it, we have effectively nullified our gospel witness. It means that even this week, barricaded in by a virus we cannot control, we are able to preach the sufficiency of God's grace. Do we need our freedom, our autonomy, to thrive in this life? Do we need perfect health for our joy? Do we need stability and normalcy? Because when it is all stripped away, your life will show exactly where your sufficiency comes from.

Our weakness perfects the Power of Christ in us. Here is the theme of 2 Corinthians in one statement. Not only does this book show us that we can worship God through our weakness, and that our weakness is preparing us for eternal glory, it shows us that our weakness is the power for today. As we rely on God's sufficient grace, the power of Christ is being perfected in us moment by moment. Instead of believing we must go from mountaintop to mountaintop, we must trust when God takes us valley to valley, he is perfecting his power through us. In this way, our thorns in the flesh are *essential* components to living a supernaturally charged life. Our weakness is the key to unlocking spiritual power.

Look how this plays out in the last part of **verse 9**. Notice the language here, "so the power of Christ may *rest*" upon me. It's the same language used for when God tabernacled with his people in the wilderness, and it's the same language that the apostle John uses in his gospel to say that Jesus Christ the incarnate word came and "dwelt" with us. Literally it means he "pitched his tent" with us, tabernacled with us. Paul calls on this powerful language to show us that when we embrace our weakness as our boast, the power of Christ in the Holy Spirit *rests* on us, tabernacles with us, pitches his tent with us. We are most powerful when we are weak.

This is a natural supernaturality. It doesn't come just in the high moments, it flows through you every day as you wake up in utter need of grace from the moment your head leaves the pillow. The Christian lives always in complete dependence on the sufficiency of Grace and the power of the Holy Spirit.



Last night my wife and I watched a movie that is somewhat of a memoir. It is called *A Hidden Life*, and it tells the story of Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian farmer who was imprisoned and executed in 1943 by the Nazis for refusing to swear allegiance to Hitler. Hanz refuses to give an oath to Hitler because he believes that it is his duty in Christ to not give in to evil. So he dies, leaving behind a wife and children to suffer, when a way out is right before him. As I watched this story, I half expected something miraculous to happen. Perhaps Hanz' defiance of evil would inspire others to come to faith. Perhaps he would be miraculously saved, and his memoir would tell us of all the lessons he learned. But this isn't what happened. There was no flash of glory for him in this life. Until this film, I had never heard of him. He shared a prison with Dietrich Boenhoffer, but he was just a farmer. We remember him now, but no one remembered him then. His death was nothing but madness, foolishness, weakness. But his story pulsates with unimaginable strength, a hidden strength lying just beneath the surface.

The title of the film, *A Hidden Life*, comes from a quote by the Victorian author George Eliot. In her novel *Middlemarch*, she says:

“The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

Paul's memoir was that of a hidden life. He went silently to his death without any supernatural display of strengths. His strength was hidden in unremarkable weakness.

Consider too how Jesus fits the memoir of the hidden life. He has every right to boast in his revelations and experience. He was the one there from the beginning, his words created the very stars and holds them in place even now. He has not just seen the throne room of God, he has existed with God in eternity as God, and even now sits at the right hand of the Father as the judge of the universe. When he came to Pilate, he did not argue for his life, he did not squirm or make bold proclamations of power. No one marveled at his death, no one praised him for his sacrifice then. His strength was hidden. And he too had a thorn in his side, a spear driven into his body where blood and water flowed for us. His stake was the thorns on his head and the nails in his body, but his thorn was also the sins of his people heaped on his back. In the Garden of Gethsemane, what did he do? Three times he pleaded with the Father, just as Paul does, “let this cup pass from me, but not my will, but yours.” Three times he asked God to remove this thorn, but what did God say to him? “My grace is sufficient through you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”. And so Jesus went up to that holy hill to die and bleed out for his people so that in doing so he might rise again from the grave and show his power over sin and death, releasing the Holy Spirit as our power source from here until eternity. So he calls out to his people “I am always with you, I will never leave you forsake you, when you are weakest and you feel dragged down by the thorns of life and suffering, there I am strongest in you. When you are weak and forgotten and unremarkable and hidden from the world, there you are hidden in me, there my strength is hidden in you.”



The good news for us is that though Christ and by the Spirit, God does not just dwell with those who are extra spiritual or special, he dwells in power with the weakest links, the anonymous and unknown, the quiet mother at home who is discipling her children, the student who is faithful to pray for the salvation of the lost, the father who cares for the wellbeing of his family without desiring the status of a different life. In perfectly ordinary people, his power shines brightest.

The sign of maturity in our body of believers will not be when we experience comfort and ease and growth and excitement. The sign of maturity for Grace Church will be when trials give way to the power of weakness. Listen to how the pastor and poet John Newton says it:

When faith and knowledge are in their infancy, the Lord helps this weakness by cordials and sisible comforts; but when they are advanced in growth he exercises and proves them by many changes and trials, and calls us to live more directly upon his power and promises in the face of all discouragements, to hope even against hope, and at times seems to deprive us of every subsidiary support, that we may lean only and entirely upon our beloved.

Friends, here is a strange paradox, that I hope has been drilled into our brains through this book. I pray it's a lesson you never ever forget. I pray, so often, that we can be a people who learn to lean only and entirely upon Christ and not settle for any other support.

So we end with Paul's example in **verse 10**. This could not be more applicable to us, church. How can we be "content" in a worldwide calamity? Because when we are weak, we open ourselves to the supernatural power of the Spirit to provide supernatural contentment. We rely on God not for the mountaintop experiences, but simply to make it through every day full up with the fruit of the Spirit in us.

I will admit, after our trials of last year, I prayed that maybe 2020 would be a year of comfort and security and normalcy. God didn't answer that prayer. For the first time since we've ever been Grace Church, we have cancelled our corporate gathering. That's not normal or secure. But what he has given us I believe we will see in time to be much better. He has given us an opportunity for supernatural contentment and supernatural peace and supernatural joy. For when we are weak, then we are strong. **The very part of you that is most humiliating may just be your greatest gift to glorify God. Your hidden, normal life, and your constant, remaining thorns... that is the power of Christ in you.**

