

# Answering the Fool, Part 4

2 Corinthians 11:30–12:10

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## Introduction

Well we return again this morning to our study of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, so turn with me in your Bibles to the end of 2 Corinthians chapter 11. We find ourselves in the section of this letter which biblical scholarship has named, "The Fool's Speech." It runs from chapter 11 verse 21 through to chapter 12 verse 10. And it's called "The Fool's Speech" because the Apostle Paul has decided to speak *foolishly*. He's decided that the desperate situation in Corinth has required him to take extreme measures—even resorting to speaking like a fool.

Well, what *was* that desperate situation in Corinth? It was the fact that the Corinthians had become infatuated with fools! False teachers from Jerusalem had invaded the church in Corinth, and they began peddling the heresy of Judaizing legalism—that sinners were made right with God by faith in Christ *plus* one's own good works. But not only were they legalists; they were *triumphalists*. They were the original health, wealth, and prosperity preachers. They taught that the real Christian life and the genuine Christian ministry are to be marked by victory and success and triumph. Suffering, and difficulty, and trials, and persecution could only mean that God was punishing you for some disobedience or a lack of faith. No: Jesus, the conquering King, has made us more than conquerors! And so we should expect blessing and favor and even fanfare in the world!

And so these triumphalists came to Corinth and they boasted about their ministerial accomplishments. And at the same time they maligned the Apostle Paul for suffering so severely—even accusing *him* of being a false teacher because of all the opposition he faces. If he were a genuine apostle, he'd be like them, with their polished oratory and flowery rhetoric, their large crowds and high speaking fees, and their super-spiritual heavenly visions and revelations! And the Corinthians totally fall for it. They like the idea of fleshly triumphalism. They like the idea of a Christianity that's easy, that's comfortable, that's free from persecution and conflict with the world and marked instead by pomp and circumstance. And so they lose confidence in the Apostle Paul, who's so beset with weakness and suffering, and they become enamored with the outward flashiness of boastful false religion.

And so Paul decides that if he's going to bring the Corinthians to their senses and win them back to faithfulness, he's going to have to answer a fool according to his folly, lest his dear spiritual children be swallowed up by their folly. And if the Corinthians are smitten by triumphalistic boasting—even though he recognizes how unbelievably foolish it is to boast in himself—Paul realizes that he's going to have to engage in some foolish boasting to knock some sense back into them and shake them from their foolish stupor. And so he says in chapter 11 verse 1: "I wish that you would bear with me in a little *foolishness*." In verse 16 he says, "Receive me even as *foolish*, so that I also may *boast* a little." Since, verse 18, "many boast according to the flesh," and, verse 19, since the Corinthians "tolerate the foolish gladly," Paul, verse 17, is going to

speak “not as the Lord would, but as in *foolishness*, in this confidence of boasting.” And so as he begins the fool’s speech, he says in verse 21: “I speak in *foolishness*.”

And we’ve worked our way through verses 16 to 29 over a series of three sermons, first just to explain the meaning of the passage, and then two following sermons to highlight several lessons the text had to teach us. As we move to the second half of the Fool’s Speech, from chapter 11 verse 30 to chapter 12 verse 10, I’m going to take the same approach. I want to spend some time just explaining the passage as a unit, and then we’ll observe several lessons we can learn from this text. And I think we’ll find this half of the Fool’s Speech just as rich as the first half.

Let’s go ahead and read our text at the outset. 2 Corinthians chapter 11, starting in verse 30. “If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. <sup>31</sup>The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. <sup>32</sup>In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, <sup>33</sup>and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands. <sup>12:1</sup>Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—<sup>4</sup>was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. <sup>5</sup>On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup>For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me. <sup>7</sup>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, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! <sup>8</sup>Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. <sup>9</sup>And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. <sup>10</sup>Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

In the first half of the Fool’s Speech, Paul focused his foolish boasting upon the numerous trials he experienced in his ministerial labors. He turns on its head the false apostles’ practice of boasting in their strengths and successes by boasting in his weaknesses and sufferings. Now, in verses 30 and 31 he transitions, and offers **two specific illustrations of his weakness**: his humiliating escape from Damascus and his incapacitating receipt of his thorn in the flesh. But he presents these two illustrations of his weakness in **three scenes** of his personal experience. In between the escape from Damascus and the receipt of his thorn, he recounts the time he was personally raptured up into the very presence of the Lord in heaven. That heavenly vision explains the context and the reason for the thorn.

So as we unfold this text this morning, aiming to carefully understand its meaning, we’re going to view these **two illustrations of Paul’s weakness** in the **three successive scenes** through which he presents them.

## I. An Embarrassing Descent (11:30–33)

The **first scene** is also the **first illustration of Paul’s weakness** that we get from this text. And that is, number one, **an embarrassing descent**. And we see that in chapter 11, verses 30 to 33. Paul says, “If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.”

He begins by reiterating his distaste for boasting in the way that he’s doing. He says, “If I *have* to boast.” The triumphalist false apostles couldn’t wait to boast. In a real sense, they couldn’t *stop* boasting without some sort of external constraint. Paul, on the other hand, has to be constrained to boast. He wouldn’t do it unless he was forced to do it. And he feels forced to do it, as we said, because extreme measures must be taken to rescue the Corinthians from their infatuation with triumphalism.

But it’s a lesson to us to behold the contrast between true and false teachers—between genuine servants of Christ and those who only masquerade as such. The phonies can’t wait to boast about themselves and their accomplishments; they can’t stifle their desire to be made much of and admired and exalted by those they’ve made into their underlings. But genuine servants of Christ and His Church have to be forced and constrained and shut up to boasting, because they’re so consumed with the glory of Christ, and exalting Christ, that they can’t stand to detract from His glory by exalting themselves.

But if Paul has to boast, he says, he’ll boast only of what pertains to his weakness. He’s going to boast about things that magnify his own insufficiency, so that he can magnify the omnipotent power and all-sufficiency of God who meets his every need. The cry of every genuine servant of Christ’s heart is, “He must increase, and I must decrease!” And so even if Paul is forced to boast, he won’t allow himself to be forced to boast of his strengths—of those things that magnify his own glory. If he has to boast, he’ll boast only of what magnifies his weakness.

And what magnifies his weakness is this **embarrassing descent**. But before he gets to the details, he prefaces the experience he’s about to recount with a solemn oath that he is telling the truth. Verse 31: “The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.” That’s a serious oath! Paul invokes the name of the eternally-blesséd God to assure the Corinthians of the truthfulness of the following account! But it seems strange, doesn’t it, that such a weighty and forceful declaration would be given for such a routine recollection of a personal embarrassment. After seeing an oath like that, you would expect what follows to be a magnificent accomplishment, or some other-worldly experience of divine power, sort of like the story he’s going to tell in verses 1 to 6. So why does this oath come here? The answer is that Paul is still trolling the false apostles! He’s still mocking the Corinthians by parodying the kind of boasting that they’re infatuated with. He uses the same formula as their boasts, but then boasts in his weakness.

Well, let’s get to it, then. Verses 32 and 33: “In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket

through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.” So this event takes place in Damascus, which Acts chapter 9 tells us was where Paul was traveling when he was converted. Turn to Acts 9. Verse 3 tells us that it was as “he was approaching Damascus” that the Lord Jesus appeared to him in a flash of light, knocked him to the ground, blinded him, and opened the eyes of his heart and granted him salvation. After three days, he received his sight back, received the Holy Spirit, and was baptized, Acts 9:19 says, “Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues.” Now, from Galatians 1:17, we learn that from Damascus, Paul didn’t go to Jerusalem to confer with the other apostles, “but,” he says, “I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus.” He went away to Arabia.

Now, that’s significant because this “Aretas the king” who Paul mentions in verse 32, refers to Aretas IV, who ruled the desert kingdom of Nabataea, also known as Arabia, from 9 BC to AD 40 (Harris, 821). So Paul goes from Damascus to Nabatean Arabia, the domain of King Aretas IV. Luke speaks of Paul’s time there when he says in Acts 9:23, “When many days had elapsed.” So, after a while spent in Nabatean Arabia, Acts 9:23, “the Jews plotted together to do away with him.” Apparently, the Jews of Damascus conspired with the ethnarch under Aretas. Now, an ethnarch was just like a governor over a particular ethnic community in a kingdom. So the ethnarch would have represented the Nabateans in Damascus, on behalf of King Aretas. Apparently, Paul made as many enemies in Nabataea as he did in Damascus because of his Gospel preaching. And so Aretas as well as the Jews were interested in eliminating him.

“But,” says Acts 9:24, “their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.” And in Acts 9, the word “opening” there isn’t in the original. It just says, literally, they “let him down through *the wall*.” Our text says, “I was let down in a basket through a *window* in the wall.” But this is not a large rectangular opening enclosed by class. This is a *thuris*, in the Greek, which was more like the kind of narrow vertical opening you see in a castle or a dungeon. It’s just enough of an opening to let a little light in, to let some air in, and to let the people inside see outside (Harris, 823–24). This is a slat in the wall that Paul would have had to squeeze out of. Since his enemies were guarding the city gates, this was his only option for escape. And he was lowered out of this window down the length of the city wall in a basket attached to a rope. This would have been the kind of woven travel basket that was used to transport a catch of fish, for example. Not the most pleasant form of transportation! This is what Paul boasts in.

In ancient Rome, there was a military award of valor called the *corona muralis*. Literally, the “wall crown.” This award was given to the soldier who was the first one to scale the wall of an enemy fortification. If you could make it up the enemy’s wall first, the Romans would honor you with the “wall crown.” Paul says, “I wasn’t the first one *up* the wall! I was the first one *down* the wall!” “These false apostles are so strong and brave and heroic. They’re eager to show you all their medals of valor. Let me tell you about the time I had to sneak away in a basket through a wall so my enemies wouldn’t capture me!” It’s absolutely ridiculous! But that’s Paul’s point! Boasting like this is absurd! The limelight these triumphalists crave is worthless. So much so that he parodies this Roman military award.

What a contrast! This was Saul of Tarsus! This was the up-and-coming superstar of Judaism, the protégé of the rabbi Gamaliel, who set out for Damascus in the open light of day, with great pomp and circumstance, hunting these Christians whom he considered to be enemies of the Mosaic Law. Now, at the very beginning of his ministry as Paul the Apostle, he has to retreat from Damascus under the cover of night, hidden in a basket, no longer the hunter but the hunted. Carson puts it well. He says, “This toast of high rabbinic circles, this educated and sincere Pharisee, this man who had access to the highest officials in Jerusalem, slunk out of Damascus like a criminal, lowered like a catch of dead fish in a basket whose smelly cargo he had displaced” (127–28). Another commentator said, “The one who left for Damascus to persecute Christians left Damascus as a persecuted Christian” (Hafemann).

This is what Paul boasts in! This abject weakness is what he glories in! Because it’s this abject weakness that points entirely away from his own glory and that glorifies the all-sufficient power of God, who raises the dead (2 Cor 1:9), and who delivers His servants from so great a peril of death (2 Cor 1:10). Paul knows he’s not the fine china. He knows he’s just an earthen vessel, chapter 4 verse 7. He delights in being nothing more than the clay pot that carries the priceless treasure of the Gospel! Why? Because in that way, “the surpassing greatness of the power [is shown to] be of God and not from ourselves.”

## II. An Exhilarating Ascent (12:1–6)

Well, after this embarrassing descent, we come to a **second scene** in our passage this morning. First, there was an embarrassing descent. In verses 1 to 6 of chapter 12, we have **an exhilarating ascent**. Let’s read verses 1 to 6. “Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 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. 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. On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.”

Now, unlike the embarrassing descent, this **exhilarating ascent** isn’t an illustration of Paul’s weakness. In fact, it might be mistaken to be an illustration of Paul’s strength—fodder for the kind of boasting that would vie with the false apostles’ vaunted claims. But though this **second scene** isn’t an illustration of Paul’s weakness, it provides the context for the second illustration of weakness—his thorn—which we’ll eventually get to in the third scene of this text. To explain why he was given his thorn in the flesh, he needed to recount his personal rapture to heaven that had taken place 14 years earlier.

And begins, once again, trying to talk himself into boasting. He says, “Boasting is *necessary*, though it is not profitable.” You can hear this internal conflict escaping Paul’s mind as he puts it into words. “Do I speak about this? It might give the impression that I’m something rather than nothing. I don’t want to get in the way of the glory of Jesus by exalting myself. But this is

necessary! Even though it's not profitable, the Corinthians have made it necessary. I've got to do this. I *will* go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I've got no other choice."

Why does he choose visions and revelations? Well, first, as I've said before: Paul is concerned to boast only of what pertains to his weakness, and the greatest weakness of his life—his thorn—is only given in response to this heavenly exaltation. But secondarily, I think Paul feels constrained to speak of visions and revelations because the false apostles claimed to have these kinds of ecstatic revelatory experiences, and touted them as evidence of their exalted spirituality. Remember, they were impersonating apostles of Christ, and since apostles were agents of revelation in this period in which the New Testament was being written, they knew they had to claim familiarity with the "signs of a true apostle," As Paul will call them in chapter 12 verse 12. The false apostles were likely to be often buttressing their arguments for their false teaching with claims of, "The Lord told me," or, "It was revealed to me in a vision." And the Corinthians would have said, "Oh, wow. Direct revelation. I don't get that as I do *my* daily devotions. Maybe these guys really do have something I don't have." And certainly, if anyone attempted to verify these exalted claims, the false apostles would have chastised them for "quenching the Spirit."

And as the conflict with Paul raged, they were likely to ask the Corinthians, "Can you trust Paul if he doesn't get this kind of revelation directly from Jesus?" And of course, Paul did get this kind of revelation, but because he knew that it's not profitable to speak of such unverifiable spiritual experiences, he rarely if ever made mention of them. In fact, we learn in verse 2 that it had been fourteen years since he had the amazing experience he narrates for us in this passage, and he's never made mention of it before. If such private ecstatic experiences were of any value or increased anyone's credibility as a servant of Christ, do you think Paul would have kept silent about this one for fourteen years? These triumphalists would have made that the *headline* of their ministry! "Heaven is For Real," by the Judaizing Triumphalists. Best seller at LifeWay Resources! And yet Paul hadn't said a word about it in 14 years. And he would have never spoken about it—even now—unless he was absolutely constrained to.

And even now that he does speak about it, he can't even bring himself to speak of it in the first person. He says, verse 2, "I know a man in Christ [who] was caught up to the third heaven." In verse 5, he distances himself even further from this whole scenario by directly contrasting himself with this "man in Christ." He says, "On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast." It almost makes you think that he's not talking about himself in these verses! But we know it's Paul for several reasons. First, one of the reasons Paul even tells this story is to show, however reluctant he is to do it, that he is not the least inferior to these super-apostles who boast in their own ecstatic spiritual experiences. Narrating the experience of someone else doesn't serve that end. But secondly, the main point of bringing up this story is to explain the reason for which Paul himself was given his thorn in the flesh. Verse 7 says, "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." Is Paul saying that he was so tempted to exalt himself because a guy he knew had these amazing visions? No. He got the thorn because he had the revelation. He just can't stomach boasting in his own spiritual experiences—he's so embarrassed and disgusted to boast this way—that he invents a person he can boast about!

So what happened to this “man in Christ”? Paul says, he was “caught up to the third heaven” in verse 2, and he was “caught up into Paradise,” verse 4. The verb “caught up” is repeated there. This is the Greek word *harpazo*, which is the same word that is used in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 to describe the rapture of the church. 1 Thessalonians 4:17 says, “Then we who are alive and remain will be *caught up* together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.” The same word is used in Acts 8:39, where Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch. It says, “When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord *snatched* Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him.” All of a sudden Philip finds himself dozens of miles away at Azotus. In this same way, Paul was snatched up into heaven. He experienced his own personal rapture! This was not a result of some sort of self-induced trance or personal mystical journeying. God actually snatched Paul up to heaven! Now, Paul’s not sure whether his body went with him or if it was just his spirit. He says, both in verse 2 and verse 3, “whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows.” He doesn’t know whether God took him like He took Enoch—body and all—or if He just snatched up his spirit and left his body behind. But one thing’s for sure: Paul actually went to heaven.

He calls it “the third heaven,” in verse 2. To speak of the *third* heaven is to follow a version of Jewish cosmology that conceived the heavens as threefold. The first heaven was the heaven of the clouds, the heaven of the atmosphere—what we think of as “the sky.” In Genesis 1:20, God says, “Let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the *heavens*.” So this first heaven is where the birds fly. The second heaven was the heaven of the stars and planets—the *heavenly* bodies, as we call them. In Genesis 1:14, God says, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the *heavens* to separate the day from the night.” In Genesis 15:5, 22:17, 26:4, and elsewhere, when God speaks of the Abrahamic covenant promises, He says He will multiply Abraham’s descendants as the stars of *heaven*. So the second heaven is the heaven of space. The third heaven was the spiritual dwelling place of God, beyond the physical universe encompassed by the first two heavens. In Matthew 6:9, as the Lord Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, He addresses the Father as, “Our Father *who is in heaven*.” This is the third heaven. Paul was caught up into the immediate presence of God.

He also calls this place “Paradise” in verse 4. The word *paradise* originates in the Sanskrit language, and its most literal meaning is a park, or a garden. The same word is used in the Greek translation of Genesis 2:8 to describe Eden, the garden paradise the Lord had prepared as a suitable habitation for pre-fallen humanity. In Luke 23:43, Jesus tells the thief on the cross, “Today, you shall be with Me in *Paradise*.” In Revelation 2:7, Jesus says, “To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.” And so “Paradise” and “the third heaven” are two names for the same place: the dwelling place of God that is the blessed abode of all those whom the Lord saves. Commentator Philip Hughes writes of this Paradise: “Paradise, then, is not a shadowy waiting-room, but a blissful abode within the very courts of heaven itself. Its glory is that of the ultimate heavenly glory, namely, the glory of the presence of the Son of God (cf. Rev 7:9ff; 22:1ff). There, in the Paradise of God, the souls of the saints are at home with Christ, the last Adam. There they are beyond the reach of sin and suffering, without fear of being driven out, as happened in the first Paradise” (438).

This is where Paul was snatched away to! Who could describe the glory he saw there? Actually, Paul tells us: no one can describe it! He says in verse 4: I “was caught up into Paradise and heard

inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.” What he heard was so glorious, so magnificent, so transcendent, so sublime, that it could not be adequately expressed in human language. This glory, this loveliness, this beauty was inexpressible! And even if these words were expressible, Paul adds that he wouldn’t have been allowed to speak them even if it was possible. This was what no eye had seen, no ear had heard, and no heart had conceived this side of heaven.

And once again: we have to observe the contrast between Paul and the triumphalist charlatans in this regard. All they could do was go on and on about their mystical experiences that qualified them to be apostles. If they experienced anything like this revelation, they’d be sending their manuscript to the publishers: “Five Steps to Your Own Personal Rapture”! And yet Paul is silent! What a rebuke this text is to the excesses of the modern Charismatic movement! But more on that to come. This was brilliant on Paul’s part. If the false apostles had the same experience Paul had, they should have recognized that it contributed nothing to their spiritual standing or ministerial qualifications. If it did, Paul certainly would have spoken about this experience long ago. And, if they did speak about their visions and revelations, well then their experience couldn’t have been as glorious as Paul’s. His was so marvelous that it was ineffable! Inexpressible! Talking about their experiences only proved them to be spiritually inferior! This is a master stroke from the Apostle Paul, who is earnest to win back the allegiance of the Corinthians.

Someone asks, “Well, what good is a revelation like this if you’re not permitted to *say* anything about it?” Calvin gives a good answer. He says the revelation took place “for the sake of Paul himself, for one who had such arduous difficulties awaiting him, enough to break a thousand hearts, required to be strengthened by special means that he might not give way, but might preserve undaunted” (369–70). Carson says, “God’s purpose for Paul involved the apostle in staggering sufferings, formidable opposition, and quite incredible challenges; and so to fortify him for his service and sufferings, the God of all hope displayed to the apostle a little more of the glory to come than most of us perceive, so that it would serve as an anchor for his soul in the roughest weather” (141).

Paul says, “On behalf of *such* a man I will boast,” verse 5, “but on my *own* behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses.” And we’ve commented on this, but this is just Paul’s way of deflecting any kind of glory away from himself, even though he’s been driven to boast about his own experiences. But he lets the Corinthians know that he’s only interested in boasting in his weakness. This tells us that the point of this narrative is only to introduce one of the greatest weaknesses of his life: his thorn in the flesh (cf. Guthrie, 585).

But before he does, he adds one more qualification in verse 6. He says, “For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth.” You see, it’s not that he’s got nothing to boast about. If he wanted to start outlining his ministerial accomplishments, he wouldn’t be exposed as foolishly padding his own resume with spurious claims. He’d only be stating the facts. “But,” he says, “I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.” And this is just remarkable. Most of us spend our lives doing everything we can so that people won’t think less of us than we think we deserve. Paul took action so that no one would think more highly of him than he deserved! He wanted nobody to treat him

differently on the basis of unverifiable spiritual experiences. He wanted to be treated only on the basis of what people could see and hear from him. His life and his doctrine: these were the standards by which a servant of Christ is evaluated as genuine or spurious.

### III. A Debilitating Nuisance (12:7–10)

Well, we've observed these first two **scenes** of Paul's narrative here—the first an illustration of Paul's weakness, and the second a prelude to another illustration of Paul's weakness, to which we now turn. The first was an embarrassing descent; the second was an exhilarating ascent. We come now to the **third scene**, which I'm calling **a debilitating nuisance**. And we find that in verses 7 to 10. Follow along with me: "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, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Because this revelation, and others like it, were so glorious, so surpassingly great, Paul was tempted to become prideful. Even in a man as sanctified and as mature as the Apostle Paul, the temptation to pride and arrogance is a perennial danger. Such a unique privilege—to be snatched away to heaven, to hear things so wonderful that they can't even be expressed in human language—if not guarded against, can generate in the holiest of men a presumptive arrogance, a sense of spiritual superiority, a tendency to exalt oneself, he says in verse 7 (Harris, 853). And the Lord God considers such pride to be so dangerous, so destructive, so harmful to the spiritual condition of his servants and to the good of His Church, that, to keep Paul from exalting himself, He sent Paul a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of *Satan*, to *torment* him! And to torment him so severely that, he says, verse 8, that he "implored the Lord three times that it might leave" him! We'll have more to say about this next time, but consider how wicked a sin pride must be if our loving, compassionate, merciful heavenly Father is willing to send a messenger of Satan to torment His choicest servants—despite persistent, desperate, heartfelt prayer—in order to purify them from it.

So what was this thorn? This is a question that has invited the conjectures of many students of Scripture throughout the centuries. The commentators have proposed virtually every idea one can think of. They usually fall into three broad categories. The first category is that Paul's thorn was some sort of emotional anxiety. Some say it was the nagging guilt over the sins of his past life—the way he had so fervently persecuted the Church and blasphemed Christ's name would plague him almost until he couldn't bear it. Others say it was his "great sorrow and unceasing grief" over the unbelief of Israel, his kinsmen according to the flesh. But I find both of those suggestions unlikely, because Paul understood the sovereignty of God and the sufficiency of the cross better than anyone. Yes, the sins of his past life were grievous, but he had been crucified with Christ, and the man he was no longer lived, but Christ lived in him. The certificate of debt consisting of decrees against him had been nailed to the cross. More than anyone, Paul lived in the freedom of the forgiveness of sins. And though he did indeed grieve over the lostness of

Israel, he trusted in the sovereign election of God. More than anyone, he understood the right of the potter to make from one lump of clay a vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use.

A second category of thought is that Paul's thorn was some sort of opposition to his ministry, whether the general opposition that he faced all throughout his life, a particular, single opponent, or even the opposition in the conflict with Corinth specifically. In this case, the phrase "messenger of Satan"—which is *angelos satana*; literally, "an angel of Satan"—would be understood literally, since the false teacher would be energized by demonic power. That's a strength for this view, because everywhere else Paul uses the term *angelos* 13 other times in his letters, it refers to literal angels, and not merely messengers.

A third category says that Paul's thorn was some kind of physical malady, and just about every physical malady has been proposed as a possibility. One commentator lists fever, defective vision, and migraine headaches. Another summarizes the many proposals over the years: hysteria, hypochondria, gallstones, gout, rheumatism, sciatica, gastritis, leprosy, lice, deafness, some sort of dental infection, and neurasthenia all have been suggested as the identity of Paul's thorn. Now, the physical-malady position is not without merit. Paul famously told the Galatians, in Galatians 4:13, that "it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself." Then he says, "I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me." And so it seems plain that Paul's bodily illness was some sort of eye condition that might normally appear to be especially loathsome. Now, Paul doesn't specifically say that that eye condition was his thorn, but it's a possibility.

Ultimately, it's impossible to say with certainty precisely what the identity of Paul's thorn was. One commentator wrote that this "is another one of those questions which, on the evidence available, must remain unanswered." (Hughes, 442). Another said, "Paucity of data and the ambiguity of Paul's language have frustrated—and will always frustrate—all efforts to reach finality in this enigmatic question" (Harris, 857–58). I think the demonically-inspired false teacher and the physical illness are equally possible, and I might lean a bit more toward the physical illness side. But the reality is that God in His wisdom did not give that information to us in the Scriptures, and so we can never know with certainty.

But I'll tell you: I think it is exceptionally wise on God's part to have never revealed that detail. This text has been gloriously used to minister consolation and comfort to suffering saints throughout the centuries. I doubt there are many Christians at all—who have read this text and have experienced some difficulty in their lives—who haven't considered some trial, whether physical or emotional, whether visible or unseen, to be their 'thorn in the flesh,' which, even after earnest, persistent prayer, God has chosen not to remove. If we knew the precise identity of Paul's thorn, perhaps those believers wouldn't have felt as personally comforted in their trial, because their affliction wasn't Paul's affliction. But as it is, this experience has been a fountain of sweet comfort to dear believers in the face of a multitude of afflictions.

And it has taught them the great lesson of this text—indeed, the great lesson of this entire letter, verse 9: “And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’” That is, the glory of God’s abundant power is especially displayed and magnified in human weakness—that, rather than change our circumstances, the Lord Jesus is more concerned to change *us*, to sanctify us, to equip us with the divine grace to endure our trials so that we can make much of Him! So that we can display to the world that the presence of Christ is sweeter than the absence of suffering! And when you understand that—when you have tasted the sweetness of Christ’s consolation in the midst of the most debilitating suffering—when the storms of life come, you start to sound like Paul in verses 9 and 10: “Most *gladly*, therefore, I will rather *boast* about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. *Therefore* I am *well content* with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, *for Christ’s sake*; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

### Conclusion

And oh, there is so much more to say about that! There are so many more precious gems that are able to be mined out of this treasure trove of a text. And, I’ve said it before: if we were Puritans, we’d just move right on into application for another hour or two. But the preacher’s great struggle is that you can’t say everything every time. But his consolation is that there’s always next week! And so next week we’ll dig in to some of the applications this text has for us.

But before we go, I want to re-emphasize what I think is the main application from this entire section of 2 Corinthians, and really the entire letter as a whole. And that is: the faithful Christian life of ministry is a life of *weakness*. It is a life of disgrace in the eyes of the world, and, sadly, sometimes even in the eyes of those within the visible church. It is a life of suffering for the sake of Christ and for the cause of His Gospel in the world. It is not the life of dominion, and victory, and comfort, and fame, and ease, and applause, and admiration. This world is *not* our home! We are aliens and strangers in a foreign land, in a world that loves its own, in a world that has hated our Master.

GraceLife: Success in Christian ministry is *not* huge followings and beautiful buildings and large offerings and voluminous libraries and lavish celebrations and amazing conferences and perfect, well-dressed Christians with cute kids and problem-free lives! No! Success in Christian ministry is being so doggedly faithful to the Gospel—to the truth, to the Word of God, to Christ Himself—that when the most severe, earth-shattering, painful, uncomfortable, crippling suffering lies in the path of obedience to Jesus, that your joy in Him fuels you to endure it all, without wavering an inch! because His grace is sufficient! because His power is perfected in weakness! Success in the Christian life is becoming the slave of all, and then gladly boasting in weakness, because He is so satisfying to you that the presence of Christ is ten thousand times sweeter than the absence of suffering! Dear Christian, be well-content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake. For when you are weak, then you are strong, in Him.