

Answering the Fool, Part 5

2 Corinthians 11:30–12:10

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Introduction

Well we return again to our study of 2 Corinthians, so please turn there with me in your Bibles. Once again, we're working our way through what is called "The Fool's Speech" of 2 Corinthians 11:21 to 12:10. The Apostle Paul has decided that, because the Corinthians had become infatuated with the foolish boasting of the triumphalist false apostles, he was going to don the mask of a fool and do a little boasting of his own. He reasons that if the Corinthians were enamored with fools, he'd become like a fool in order to win back their affection and allegiance for him, and for the one, true, biblical Gospel that he preached. And so Paul is going to answer a fool according to his folly, lest that folly ensnare the hearts of his dear spiritual children and drag them to judgment.

And Paul warns us that he's about to speak in foolishness, as he adopts the language of fools and boasts about his ministry. At the outset, in chapter 11 verse 1, he says, "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 spent three sermons working through verses 16 to 29—one sermon to explain the meaning of that first half of The Fool's Speech, and then two following sermons to draw out several lines of application, highlighting numerous lessons we learn from what Paul writes for us in this text. Last week, we turned to the second half of The Fool's Speech, chapter 11 verse 30 to chapter 12 verse 10. And I mentioned that I was going to take the same approach. Last week, we walked our way through that text, ensuring that we understood the meaning of Paul's account of several of his personal experiences. This week, I hope to make some particular application of this text to our lives.

Now, in the first half of The Fool's Speech, Paul turned the false apostles' foolish boasting on its head; instead of bragging about his strengths and successes, like they did, he boasted in his sufferings and his weaknesses. His entire ministry was marked by one trial after another. Now, as he comes to the second half, he turns to give **two specific illustrations of his weakness** to really demonstrate the absurdity of boasting in oneself. And he presents those two illustrations of his

weakness by giving accounts of **three personal experiences**. And I want to review those just briefly.

Review I: An Embarrassing Descent (11:30–33)

That **first experience** illustrating Paul’s weakness that he narrates for us was what I called: **an embarrassing descent**. And we saw that in the final four verses of chapter 11. Starting in verse 30, Paul writes, “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.” “I’d much rather not boast at all, but if I *have* to boast, I’m not going to boast in my strengths, like these phonies do. I’m not going to speak of what might magnify my own glory. No, if you force me to boast, I’ll boast only of what pertains to my weakness. Only what magnifies my insufficiency, so I can put the all-sufficient power of God on display.” He gives this solemn oath of truthfulness in verse 31—an oath you’d expect to come before a fanciful tale of personal magnificence. But what follows is nothing of the sort; just a routine recollection of a personal embarrassment! Paul continues to mock the foolishness of boasting in one’s accomplishments.

And he tells this story of the time the governor under the King of Nabatean Arabia conspired with the Jews in Damascus to hunt Paul down at the city gates, and how he snuck away, hiding in a basket used to transport dead fish, as his disciples lowered him out the window! The Roman military gave an award of valor to the soldier who was the first to scale the enemy wall. Paul says, “I wasn’t the first soldier *up*; I was the first one *down*.” Saul of Tarsus! The august young Pharisee who led persecutions of these anti-Law idolaters—the one who set out for Damascus to persecute Christians—now has to *retreat* from Damascus as a persecuted Christian!

Review II: An Exhilarating Ascent (12:1–6)

Well, after this embarrassing descent, Paul narrates a **second experience** for us. And while the embarrassing descent was a clear illustration of his weakness, this **second scene** could be mistaken for an illustration of strength. But the only reason Paul speaks of it here is to give the context for another illustration of weakness that comes later. And that **second scene** is what I called **an exhilarating ascent**, which we read about in chapter 12, verses 1 to 6.

He begins by talking himself into boasting further. He says in verse 1, “Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.” And he goes

on to visions and revelations because the false apostles claimed such ecstatic revelatory experiences were evidence of their spiritual superiority. So Paul recounts his experience of being raptured into heaven itself. He says, verse 2: “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.” Boasting like this is so disgusting and distasteful to him that he talks about this experience in the third person. He fabricates a person so he can distance himself from the folly of boasting.

But he says this “man in Christ,” who is really Paul himself, was “caught up to the third heaven,” verse 2, that is, “into Paradise,” as verse 4 says. He was literally snatched away up to heaven, into the glorious paradise of the immediate presence of God Himself. And this experience was indescribably glorious. He says in verse 4: I “was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.” It was so wonderful, so transcendent, so marvelous, that it could not be adequately expressed in human language. The loveliness and beauty of heaven was inexpressible.

But, verse 5, he only wants to boast in his weakness. Not because he has nothing to boast about, verse 6. If he wanted to, there were plenty of accolades and accomplishments on his ministerial resume—things he could list without embellishing or fudging on the truth! “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.” He wanted *no* part of being revered on the basis of unverifiable spiritual experiences. All that mattered was what one could see in him and hear from him. His life and his doctrine: that was it.

Review III: A Debilitating Nuisance (12:7–10)

Then we came to verses 7 to 10, where we discover that Paul shared this exhilarating ascent only as a prelude to another of his weaknesses, perhaps the greatest weakness of his life: his thorn in the flesh. The **third experience** that Paul recounts—a **second illustration** of his weakness—is what I called **a debilitating nuisance**. He says in verse 7, “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!” Such glorious privileges tempted Paul to become prideful. Even a man as sanctified as the Apostle Paul needed to stand on guard against the temptation to become arrogant, to glory in his privileges, to think himself spiritually superior, and to exalt himself. And so in order to keep him humble—and thereby to keep him useful for ministry—the Lord God afflicted His servant with this thorn in the flesh, to remind him of his fallenness, his weakness, and his utter dependence upon divine mercy.

And we mentioned that many proposals have been offered concerning the identity of Paul's thorn, but that no one can really be certain as to what exactly the thorn was. It may have referred to a debilitating bodily ailment, a demonically-inspired false teacher, or something else. We can't be sure. But one thing we do know is that it was so severe that Paul described it as a torment. And it was such a torment that, verse 8, "I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me." But the Lord answered no to that prayer. Verse 9: "And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'" Rather than change his circumstances, Jesus gave Paul the grace that would change *him*. Paul wouldn't be delivered from his trials, but he would be equipped to endure his trials as a testimony that the presence of Christ is sweeter than the absence of suffering.

You see, faithful, apostolic ministry was not health, wealth, and prosperity. It was not freedom from conflict. It was not victory and comfort and strength. It was weakness! It was faithful endurance of hardship, so that the minister gets none of the glory and so that Christ gets all of the glory. And if that was true, Paul was delighted with weakness. Verse 9: "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."

Well, I trust that our exposition last week paired with that brief review has combined to be a sufficient explanation of the meaning of this text. Our task this morning is to draw several lines of application from this text so as to experience the benefit of this text as it bears directly on our lives. And all together, I've observed no fewer than **seven lessons** this text has to teach us concerning various aspects of our lives as we follow Jesus. And, unsurprisingly, we won't get through all seven this morning. We'll see if we can work our way through the first **three** of those **lessons** today, and we'll save the rest for our next time together.

I. Pride and Humility

The **first lesson** this text has to teach us is a **lesson** concerning **pride and humility**. And our text teaches us this lesson in a number of ways. In the first place, this passage teaches us about the detestable wickedness of pride. In verses 2 to 4, Paul narrates his exhilarating ascent into heaven, where he hears things inexpressibly glorious—so wonderful that if they *could* be put into words he wouldn't be allowed to speak them to such a wicked and perverse generation. And he tells us in verse 7 that that revelation, and others like it, were so surpassingly magnificent, that he was tempted to become prideful. And because the temptation to exalt himself was so real, the Lord followed Paul's exhilarating ascent with a debilitating nuisance: with what Paul calls "a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me."

“Torment” is the verb *kolaphizo*. Literally, it means “to strike with the fist” (BDAG). The NASB translates the word that way in Matthew 26:67 and Mark 14:65, where it describes the scene at the trial of Jesus where the members of the Sanhedrin “spat in His face and beat Him with their fists.” In 1 Corinthians 4:11 it’s translated “roughly treated.” In 1 Peter 2:20 it’s “harshly treated.” This was the torment of Paul’s thorn. And this torment was so severe that, verse 8, Paul that he “implored the Lord three times that it might leave” him.

Can you hear the overtones of Gethsemane? Jesus also implored His Father three times, that the cup wrath would pass from Him. And Paul’s talk of imploring the Lord in the midst of torment is reminiscent of Luke 22:44: “And being in *agony* He was *praying very fervently*, and His sweat became like drops of blood.” The Lord Jesus, who knew what it meant to earnestly pray for the removal of torment, nevertheless sent this tormenting thorn, through the agency of Satan himself, to His dear servant. If our Father, who loves us, who is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, is willing to send a messenger of Satan to torment the choicest of His servants, despite persistent, desperate, faith-filled, prayer, in order to keep them from exalting themselves, how wicked and detestable must the sin of self-exaltation be! Presumptive arrogance, a sense of spiritual superiority, pride in oneself—no matter how well-cloaked in Christian clichés and humblebrags—are so dangerous, so destructive, so harmful to the spiritual fiber of God’s people and to the health of Christ’s Church, that God is willing to send a debilitating weakness into the lives of His people to purify us from it.

John Calvin, quoting Augustine, put it this way. He said, “Now let all the pious take notice as to this, that they may see how dangerous a thing the ‘poison of pride’ is, . . . inasmuch as it ‘cannot be cured except by poison’” (375). So often, the poison of pride can only be cured by the poison of affliction. Pride is spiritual cancer. Some of you know what it is to do battle with cancer. And if not personally, many more of you have had a loved one afflicted with that horrible disease. And in so many cases, the prescribed treatment for cancer is chemotherapy, which is the introduction of toxic poisons designed to kill the cancerous cells in the body. And unfortunately, chemo also kills healthy cells. Under the care of a qualified physician, we willingly inject our bodies with the poison of chemotherapy to destroy the devastating disease of cancer.

Well, while cancer can ravage the body, pride ravages the soul. Pride is the rot of the human soul. It is the most malignant of spiritual tumors, which, if left untreated, will metastasize, and will permeate our spiritual circulatory system until no part of us is left untouched by its corruption. Every sin that you can think of can be traced back to the evil of pride, because every sin is a fundamental declaration of our own autonomy and independence from God and His Word. Every time we sin, we say, “No, God! I know this is what Your Word says, but I know better!” What is that but pride? It was pride that lay at the root of the disobedience of our first parents, that plunged humanity under the curse of sin. They had heard the commandment clearly, but decided that *they* would be lords of their own lives. Other sins are closely associated with

evil deeds—covetousness and theft, lust and adultery, hatred and murder. But pride tempts us when we've done things *right*.

Friends, pride is an evil, wicked, tenacious cancer! And our Great Physician will take the most extreme measures—even sending the severest of afflictions—to eradicate it from our hearts. In Psalm 78:34, Asaph says of God's dealings with Israel, "When He killed them, then they sought Him, and returned and searched diligently for God." In Psalm 119:71, the psalmist says, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes." In both of these instances—whether Israel as a whole or the psalmist in particular—we see that God brings affliction upon His people in order to humble them, so that they might be freshly affected with their powerlessness and frailty, and would seek all their dependence in their Heavenly Father. You see, the fires of divinely-ordered affliction burn away the dross of pride and self-confidence (MacArthur, 405).

What does that mean, then? It means, number one, rise up with all your might against the first discernible actings of the sin of pride. Stand guard at the city gate of your soul! Keep watch over your heart! And the moment you discern any inflated spirit, any exaltation of self, any self-congratulation or self-satisfaction, draw the sword of the Spirit from its sheath and sever that prideful attitude at its root. Wield that sword! Proverbs 16:18: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling." Proverbs 29:23: "A man's pride will bring him low." Isaiah 66:1: "Thus says Yahweh, 'Heaven is My throne and earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being!'" God's saying, "You've got nothing to be proud of! I am the source of all good things!" And then verse 2: "But to this one I will look." This magnificent, all-sufficient storehouse of blessings looks upon a certain kind of person with His favor. Who's that? "To him who is *humble* and *contrite of spirit*, and who *trembles* at My word." 1 Peter 5:5 "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." GraceLife, settle it in your heart today: you need to go to *war* with the pride in your heart!

Because if you don't, your Father, the Great Physician, will send the chemotherapy of affliction to root out your cancerous pride. And that leads me to another observation. In the midst of suffering, don't be too quick to dismiss your afflictions as "mere" persecution. In Paul's case, he could be sure that many of his trials were indeed genuine persecutions for his faithfulness to his ministry calling. But that didn't mean that those trials weren't also designed to mortify pride and keep him entirely dependent on Christ. It's the same with our sufferings. Even those trials that we can identify as being unjustly perpetrated against us by the messengers of Satan are nevertheless sovereignly sent to us by God to accomplish His purposes in us. The next time you find yourself in the midst of a trial, especially in one you've faithfully prayed to be removed from you, consider whether the design of that trial is to keep you from exalting yourself—or, in some cases, to stop you from continuing to exalt yourself. Consider whether the Lord is afflicting

you that you might learn His statutes, whether the fires of this affliction are meant to burn away the dross of pride—or any other sin—in you.

What will that look like? When pride begins to be mortified in you, what noticeable change will that effect? Well, for one thing, you'll come to have Paul's attitude about the stupidity of boasting. And I'll only comment on this briefly, because we spent so much time on it in part two of this series on answering the fool. But it receives such an emphasis in this passage that we simply cannot pass it by in silence. And we see it throughout the passage. In verse 31 he introduces the account of his embarrassing escape from Damascus with an oath that he's telling the truth—something you'd expect before a boastful retelling of some great personal accomplishment. Then follows the story where, unlike Roman military heroes who were rewarded for being the first one *up* the enemy wall, he was the first one *down*, as he snuck away from his enemies under the cover of night, hidden away in a basket.

Paul makes fun of boasting, of calling attention to oneself, of glorying in one's own accomplishments. He recognizes that he's got nothing that he hasn't received as a gift of God's grace, 1 Corinthians 4:7; that all the glory for anything praiseworthy in his life is due entirely to Christ and not at all to himself. And so he recognizes that to boast in himself is utter foolishness, so much so that he's disgusted by the boasting he's forced to do. Chapter 11 verse 30: "If I have to boast." Chapter 12 verse 1: "Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable." And in verses 2 through 5 he invents a person because he can't stand the thought of speaking about himself in this way.

And I just want to exhort you again, friends, to cultivate this attitude in yourselves. Cultivate a distaste, an aversion, a disgust in boasting, in drawing attention to yourself, in magnifying your own accomplishments. We need to be so enamored with the glory of Jesus, that we instinctively run from opportunities to magnify our own glory. Because it is one or the other! We will delight either in Christ's glory or our own glory! John 5:44: Jesus says, "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?" You say, "Oh, Jesus, it's OK. I seek both!" No! No man can serve two masters. He will be devoted to one and despise the other. GraceLife, will you despise the glory of Jesus in favor of your own? Then give up boasting. Learn what it meant for Paul to say, "I am the chief of sinners" (1 Tim 1:15), "the scum of the world" (1 Cor 4:13), "not fit to be called an apostle" (1 Cor 15:9), "the very least of all the saints" (Eph 3:8). And believe it!

One more thought concerning this **lesson on pride and humility**. We've seen the evil of pride and the stupidity of boasting. Third, consider the loveliness of humility. See, Paul's distaste for boasting doesn't stem from having nothing to boast about. He says, in verse 6, "For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth." If he wanted to boast in his

ministerial accomplishments, 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 I can't help but marvel at this. For so many of us, that's not how that sentence gets written. For us, it's, "I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with *less* than he sees in me or hears from me! I work hard and expend effort so that no one will think *less* of me than my diligence warrants! I'm concerned that my labors won't be esteemed or praised or rewarded highly *enough*! That I'll be underappreciated! Undercompensated! Under-recognized!" Sure, there are things about me that are less than flattering, but I'll do what I can to cover those things up. I'm going to accentuate the positive. Put my best put forward. Put the game face on. Fake it till I make it. But for Paul, he refrains from speaking true things about himself, because he doesn't want people to think too *highly* of him! He's concerned not that he won't get his due, but that he'll be praised for something he's not due. He doesn't want his reputation to precede him. He wants people to evaluate him on the basis of what they see in him and hear from him. And that's it.

And I call that the loveliness of humility because it *is* lovely, isn't it? "I don't want people to get the idea that I'm better than I am. I just want them treat me on the basis of my life and my doctrine. That's it." Doesn't that make you want to spend time with Paul? Don't you want to hang out with someone like that? That kind of humility is lovely. It's attractive. It reflects the beauty of holiness. Pride, on the other hand, is not lovely; it's not attractive. Pride is ugly. It's unseemly. To the redeemed heart, pride is repulsive. Just as much as Paul's humility makes you want to spend time with him, pride in someone makes you want to run the other direction.

And so I exhort you to imitate Paul as Paul imitates Christ, here. Mortify pride, give up boasting, and put on the loveliness of humility. Not because you'll be more likeable, though that *is* a service to your brothers and sisters. But because the most effective servant of the Gospel of Christ crucified is *crucified* to the world and its applause. He does all he can to deflect attention away from himself and whatever grace-given successes God has seen fit to bless him with, and to fix attention on the glory of Jesus—the sufficiency of the sweetness of Christ to sustain him in the midst of weakness.

II. Experience and Evidence

Well, there was quite a bit there, in that **first lesson** on pride and humility. But there's a **second lesson** we can glean from this passage. And that is, number two, a lesson on **experience and evidence**. And this comes largely from Paul's account of his trip to heaven in verses 2 through 6. Verse 2 says that this revelation had taken place "fourteen years ago." Now, what's astounding about that is that there is no mention of this experience anywhere else in Paul's letters. From every indication, here in 2 Corinthians 12 is the first and only time he's spoken of this revelation

since it happened. And even here, he only speaks about it with great reluctance. If the Corinthians hadn't found themselves in this predicament, where their infatuation with the boastful, triumphalist false teachers had made it absolutely necessary for Paul to boast, it seems Paul wouldn't have spoken at all about this magnificent rapture up to the presence of God.

Now, think about that, given the situation in Corinth. Paul had locked horns with the false apostles in a battle for the souls of the Corinthians. He had written 1 Corinthians, made an unplanned visit to quell a rebellion, was rebuffed in front of the whole congregation, wrote the severe letter urging repentance, sent Titus to see how things were going, and now was writing 2 Corinthians preparing for a third visit. And here they are, boasting of everything they can think of: visions, revelations, and ecstatic mystical experiences included. They're assaulting Paul's apostolic legitimacy, calling him a phony because he lacks the flashiness and "favor" that these prosperity preachers exhibit. And the whole time he's got this personal rapture in his back pocket, and he says nothing about it!

What does that tell you about the Apostle Paul's estimation of visions and revelations as determiners of ministerial credibility? If these kinds of private spiritual experiences were of *any* consequence—if they were of any value in certifying the genuineness of a servant of Christ—would Paul not have mentioned this unspeakable vision for fourteen years? One commentator put it helpfully. He said, Paul was implying very clearly "that ecstatic experiences . . . were not to be publicized unnecessarily, and, as God-given privileges, added nothing to a person's standing or role in the church" (Harris, 837).

What a contrast to what we see in the contemporary Charismatic movement. Entire international ministries are built around the fraudulent notion that a "man of God" has been given some special insight into spiritual truth—not by the diligent study of Scripture and its effect in his life and teaching, but through some mystical experience which no one can repeat or verify. I said it last week: if the false apostles of the first century, or the health/wealth hucksters of the twenty-first century, were to genuinely experience something remotely close to what Paul describes in this text, they'd be shouting it from the rooftops, signing book deals and movie contracts, and sending out support letters asking you to invest in "the kingdom" through their ministry. I mean, there is actually a sub-genre of Christian literature today called "Heaven Tourism!" "90 Minutes in Heaven." "23 Minutes in Hell." "The Boy who Came Back from Heaven." "Heaven Is for Real." It's everywhere! And they always come up with the most asinine things to say. They get fitted with a halo and angelic wings. They saw the Holy Spirit and He looked "kind of blue." There's a hole in "outer heaven" that is a portal to hell, which the devil travels often. And then there are always a cadre of naïve evangelicals eager to sit at the feet of these "prophets."

But Paul said nothing! And even when he was forced to speak of it, he gave no details, but only told the story as a prelude to his own weakness! The point is clear: these kinds of unrepeatable,

unverifiable, mystical accounts of prophetic revelation are not a legitimate basis for evaluating the soundness or spirituality of a teacher or ministry. So what is? Again, verse 6: “I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he *sees in* me or *hears from* me.” The only standard by which a servant of Christ is to be evaluated or regarded is what can be observed in a face-to-face, life-on-life relationship. What one hears from Paul refers to his teaching, his doctrine. It doesn’t matter how many experiences you can testify to; what matters is whether your instruction of spiritual truth is consistent with the teaching of Scripture. And what one sees in Paul refers to the life of integrity, under the dominion of Christ by the Holy Spirit, that biblical doctrine produces. This is how you evaluate ministers and ministries—not on the basis of vaunted claims of impressive experiences, but on the basis of his life and his doctrine, which are accessible and observable in the nitty-gritty of day-to-day ministry alongside the saints.

The same ought to be said of us. We ought to evaluate servants of Christ on the basis of these criteria, and we ought to *be* evaluated as servants of Christ on the basis of these criteria. One commentator writes, “Whatever people may think of us and whatever authority we may gain as a result, let it be on the grounds of what they ‘see’ us do and ‘hear’ us say. Let it be on the basis of verifiable conduct and established character,” and not on the grounds of unverifiable experientialism (Storms, 212). May the work of the Word, the fruit of the Spirit, be our credentials of authenticity, and nothing else.

III. Prayer and Problems

Well, we’ve had a lesson on pride and humility, and on evidence and experience. A **third lesson** that we learn from this passage teaches us about **prayer and problems**. And for this we return to verses 7 and 8. In response to receiving his thorn, Paul says, verse 8: “Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.” And if we slow our minds down enough to meditate on what the Holy Spirit has given us in this word, we find rich treasure for our own consolation. In verse 8, I find evidence of both Christ’s deity and His humanity—and how His being the God-Man uniquely suits Him to minister all manner of comfort to us in our need.

First, note whom Paul implores. “Concerning this, I implored *the Lord*.” Paul directed His prayers immediately to the Lord Jesus Christ. You say, “How do we know ‘the Lord’ here refers to the Son and not the Father, or not the Three-in-One conceived generally?” Well, the response that Paul receives from Him in verse 9 is that “*My grace* is sufficient for you.” “*My grace*.” Whose grace? Well, in the final verse of the book, chapter 13 verse 14, which is Paul’s benediction upon the Corinthians, he ascribes grace peculiarly to Christ, while to the Father he ascribes love: “The *grace* of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.” And while we can’t make sharp divisions, remembering that any act of one Person of the Trinity is the act of all three, it’s worth noting that Paul seems to ascribe grace to the Son in a peculiar way. Besides that, Christ’s response in verse 9 also speaks of power: “for *power* is

perfected in weakness.” And at the end of the verse he calls that power “the power of *Christ*.” So, the Lord to whom Paul prays is the Lord Jesus.

And this, I say, is an indication of His deity. Why? Because prayer is in act of worship. The one you pray to is the one you worship. Isaiah 44:17 makes this connection, as the prophet mocks the idolaters who worship and pray to idols made of wood and stone. Isaiah 44:17 says, “He falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god!’” (ESV). You see the connection there: He *worships* it; he *prays* to it. Prayer is an act of worship. Prayer is a confession of powerlessness in oneself and a confession of trust in the power of the one prayed to. “Deliver me, *for* you are my god!” That’s just what God does: He delivers His faithful worshipers, who call on Him in a day of trouble, and thereby magnifies His power. And that’s just precisely what Psalm 50 verse 15 says, “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will *deliver* you, and you shall *glorify* Me” (ESV). In other words, you glorify as powerful and dependable and mighty the one you call upon in the day of trouble. You glorify the one you pray to, simply by virtue of being needy and trusting Him to be sufficient help in your need. And Paul says, “The One *I* call upon in the day of trouble is *Jesus of Nazareth*! The carpenter’s son! The *beaten* and *whipped* One! The *condemned* and *crucified* One! *He* is sufficient to meet my every need! *He* is the object of my worship! Because He is none other than Almighty God Himself!”

But then notice the next words: “Concerning this, I implored the Lord [Jesus] *three times*.” Now, whether this refers to three intense supplications repeated when Paul first received the thorn, or whether it refers to prayer on three separate occasions when the assaults of the thorn were especially severe, we can’t be certain. But what we *can* be certain of is that Paul is intentionally pointing us back to the Garden of Gethsemane. In the great trial of His own life, the Man Christ Jesus implored His Father three times, first: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me” (Matt 26:39). And there was silence. And then again: “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done” (Matt 26:42). And there was silence. And then a third time: “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me” (Luke 22:42). Silence once again. And Luke 22:44 says, “And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.” Certainly the Lord Jesus knew what it meant to implore the Lord three times in the midst of torment!

And this is why I say this text pictures Christ’s humanity alongside His deity. The Lord whom Paul implored, confident in His Almighty power to deliver, was none other than the Man Christ Jesus, the Mediator between God and Man, our Great High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, who, in the days of His flesh, says Hebrews 5:7, offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death. Paul doesn’t pray to an utterly unfeeling, totally transcendent, aloof deity, untouched by the weakness and infirmity of human existence, unacquainted with what it feels like to beg for relief in the midst of Satanic torment. No, he prays to his Great High Priest, who is not unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but

One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. One who has had to endure what we have now to endure. One who is *eager* to give mercy and grace to help in time of need. Philip Hughes says, “And we can imagine with what compassion his petitions were received by the Lord, who Himself had been so savagely buffeted by Satan” (450).

And this teaches us, dear friends: in the midst of trials, *go to your priest*. When you find yourself laboring under the thorns of temptations and afflictions, may it be the reflex of your heart, as it was for Paul, to fly to Christ in prayer. He is perfectly suited to your need. He is Almighty God, the receiver of prayers, and thus sufficient and powerful and able to deliver you. And He is the God-Man, of the same nature as us, acquainted with the weakness and frailty of humanity, able to mediate between God and men: For since He Himself was tempted in that which he has suffered, Hebrews 2:18, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted. Friends, in any and every affliction, may your first instinct be to run to your High Priest, who receives you to the throne of grace, who sympathizes with your struggle and gives bountifully out of His own compassion!

And friends: persist in such prayer! Neither Jesus nor Paul received an answer to their prayers after their first petition. Or even after their second petition. It was only after the third time that Paul implored the Lord to remove the thorn that he received an answer. This only reinforces Christ’s own lesson to His disciples, that we must persevere faithfully and trustingly in our supplications to the Lord in the midst of our trials. We can’t be like the disciples who couldn’t watch and pray for an hour without fainting. We must be like the importunate widow, who will wear the judge out before relenting in her cries for help. And what does Jesus say? “Will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?” There *will* come an answer. Now, the answer that comes might be, “No.” It was that way for Paul. The Lord did not remove his thorn. But, as we said, He did better than change Paul’s circumstances; He changed *Paul*, by supplying him with the grace to endure his thorn in weakness in a way that glorified Christ’s strength.

Conclusion

So, brothers and sisters, heed these lessons. Concerning **pride and humility**: recognize that pride is evil, that boasting is stupid, and that humility is lovely. Concerning **experience and evidence**: recognize that genuine spirituality is never certified by unverifiable reports of personal experiences, but only by our life and our doctrine, observed, tested, and tried in the context of open communion with the saints. And concerning **prayer and problems**: may it be the reflex of your heart to fly to Christ in the midst of temptations and afflictions, for in Him we have an Almighty God, able to save, and a compassionate High Priest, able to sympathize.

And just a word, before we close, to those here this morning who yet remain outside of Christ. Dear sinner, as long as you remain destitute of a saving knowledge of Christ, you *have* no such Great High Priest to sympathize with your weaknesses. All the strength and comfort that the children of God receive from their merciful and faithful High Priest lies entirely beyond your grasp. The only thing you may expect from the Lord Jesus Christ is swift judgment executed in accord with the principles of strict justice. And because you remain outside of Christ, devoid of a saving union to Him by faith, you remain in Adam. You remain in your sins. You remain under the guilt and penalty of having broken the law of the Holy God of the universe. All you can expect from Him is eternal punishment.

But dear friend, things don't have to stay that way! This merciful and faithful High Priest stands ready to receive you! To this day, He occupies your human flesh! ever and always the *God-Man*, in a full human nature, presenting before the throne of His Father the wounds of His cross—wounds by which He made atonement for sinners just like you, by receiving in Himself the full exercise of His Father's wrath in the place of His people. This Great High Priest bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors. And now He lives to forever and ever make intercession for them, to be their compassionate high priest, graciously dispensing mercy and grace to help in times of need. Dear sinner, come to Christ! Own your guilt before a holy God. Despair of any effort to save yourself. And run to this Great High Priest who has accomplished salvation in full, by His life, death, and resurrection. Rest all your hope for acceptance with God in the doing and the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ. Trust in Him alone for righteousness and for forgiveness, and you shall have Him.