

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

At the end of the Apostle Paul's life here are a few of his last words. I am deeply moved by these words. *"The time of my departure is near. For I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day"* (2 Tim 4:6b-8a). After God saved Paul, his entire aim in life was to win as many people as possible to the Christian faith and to establish churches wherever he went. **1. Win people to Christ and establish churches, is exactly what motivated Paul for the rest of his life.** Paul wanted to see every church strong and healthy. It grieved Paul deeply when there were church divisions, when people refused to work together and cooperate one with another, getting all bent out of shape when they did not get their own way.

2. The church at Corinth was constantly on Paul's heart. In his second letter to the Corinthian church he writes, *"²⁰For I am afraid that when I come I won't like what I find, and you won't like my response. I am afraid that I will find quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorderly behavior. ²¹Yes, I am afraid that when I come again, God will humble me in your presence. And I will be grieved because many of you have not given up your old sins. You have not repented of your impurity, sexual immorality, and eagerness for lustful pleasure"* (2 Corinthians 12:20-21(NLT)). I read these verses because you sense in them the heart of Paul, God's holy love for the Corinthian church. Yes, winning people to Christ and building up the church is what Paul lived for until he breathed his last.

The passage we are looking at today is 2 Cor 12:2-10. I begin with this personal story. I was invited to be a groomsman in a wedding that I will never forget. My good friend's parents were full time missionaries in Africa. When I met them, they had served the Lord faithfully for over 50 years, 40 of them on the mission field and were heading right back after the wedding.

Please hear what I am about to say. The first moment I laid my eyes on Steve's parents my eyes welled up with tears. You could see on their faces the hardships they had endured for over 40 years on the mission field. Yes, their ministry had born fruit and would continue to do so, but Steve's parents had truly suffered in ways that you and I will never come close too. The pain in their eyes was unbearable for me to look at. And yet, their smiles were radiant because the Lord Jesus had helped them overcome the obstacles that were constantly before them. I felt like I was in the presence of the holy just being in the same room as Steve's Mom and Dad. My instant thought was, "these people have truly suffered for the sake of Christ, and they have remained faithful to Jesus every step of the way." They were so glad to be at their son's wedding and they were also looking forward to returning to the mission field as long as God gave them breath. I am in total awe of God's people who suffer for Christ, never whine or complain about it, and grow more and more every day in Christlikeness. It was a privilege to meet Steve's parents. I spent as much time with his parents as I possibly could on that weekend wedding. Their faithfulness to Jesus, their desire to win as many souls to Christ as possible, and their work at building up the church was overwhelming to me.

3. Paul felt deep within his bones a love straight from God for the church at Corinth. The problem was there were people at the church of Corinth who did not agree with Paul, did not like Paul, and did their best to undermine Paul's teaching and apostolic authority. Paul was forced to defend himself, his apostleship, and why he had the right to say the things that he did. Listen to Paul as he describes the human price he paid to win people to Christ and build up the church. I want to read this for this very reason. You and I may think we have room to complain or grow discouraged in serving Christ but compared to Paul, we do not have a leg to stand on. Listen as Paul describes what was done to him. **2 Corinthians 11:23b-33(NIV)** ^{23/} *have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.* ²⁴*Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes*

minus one. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? ³⁰If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. ³²In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. ³³But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

One person I highly respect once said, “God never uses anyone greatly until he tests him deeply” (A W Tozer).

This is all background to today’s text. Paul tells us of an amazing experience he had with God. It is not an experience he sought to have, it just happened. I honestly believe what Paul writes in this chapter is one of the main reasons he was able to stay faithful to Christ and endure serving Christ with great joy until God took him home. **4. God showed Paul the heaven that awaited him.** **5. All the suffering he experienced on earth will have been completely worth it because of the glory to come.**

2 Corinthians 12:2-4a(ESV) *²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—⁴and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.*

Paul does not want to appear as boasting so he speaks of himself in the third person. Paul does not know for sure how this happened but all of the sudden he found himself in the 3rd heaven. The Bible speaks of three heavens. The first heaven is what we can see with our eyes as we look from the earth up into the atmosphere, the skyline so to speak. The second heaven is what we call outer space, interplanetary and interstellar space. The third heaven is what we think of as the real heaven where God resides, presides, and is in sovereign control of the universe. It is the very Throne Room of God itself. Paul has no idea how he got there or even if he was still in his own body. All he knows for sure is he got caught up into paradise. And in paradise he felt things no human language can describe. He heard things in a language he understood but was told to keep to himself what he heard and not let it out in his ministry what he heard in heaven.

The revelations that Paul heard were so magnificent that God caused to be in Paul's life something that would keep him humble and from becoming conceited. **2 Corinthians**

12:7(ESV) *"⁷So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too conceited."* **6. The term thorn could even be translated as stake**

showing the intensity of the suffering that it caused Paul. We do not know what the thorn or stake in the flesh actually was. Some think it was a physical ailment that stuck with him for the rest of his life. Such things as migraines, disease of the eyes, malaria, epilepsy, gallstones, gout, rheumatism, intestinal disorder, or even a speech impediment. We do not know what it was. It may have been a relational thing. A very difficult person or persons, strong willed to the max, that made it their aim in life to keep needling Paul and criticizing the way he did his ministry. No matter what the thorn was, it caused Paul to suffer. **7. God purposely put it there so Paul would never gloat over the great revelations he received straight from God in heaven.** The thorn was a messenger of Satan always jabbing him, reminding him that he

was completely dependent on God for everything. 8. **The thorn rid Paul of any self-sufficiency that he had and humbled him to his core.**

Does God give every Christian a thorn in the side to keep us humble and dependent on the grace of God? I do not know for certain, but I do know the closer we want to walk with Jesus, the more Christlike we wish to become, God sends adversity our way to show us how completely dependent on God we truly are. He humbles us so we will draw nearer to Him. The Bible says, *“Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and He will pick you up.”*

Three times Paul pleads with God to take out the thorn in his side and get rid of it forever. I don't know who you are, but I can guess we may have a person in this congregation who has an intense painful situation or relationship that has caused you intense pain and it has gone on for years. It may be a physical ailment. It may be a difficult person under the influence off the demonic realm or just plain mean. It may be something that only you know about a private inner struggle that you have wrestled with for years. You have begged God to remove it and God has not answered in a way that you wish God would. I see Paul's insight here as the only answer.

Paul writes, “Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away” (12:8). Verse 9, *“But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* Another translation says, *“Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.”*

Friends, I have lived long enough to know that with all the letdowns in life, with all the disappointments, all of the trials, all of the losses, all of the excruciating pain that we have in our lives, 9. **God's grace has everything that we need and God's grace makes up for it all.** We find in God his super abundant grace, which is God's magnificent blessing/blessings, God's provision for our every need. The Lord is our Shepherd, he has everything that we need. The deeper the difficulty, the more the grace. We receive grace upon grace upon grace and it just keeps coming. We do not deserve His grace, but God gives it to us anyway. 10. **For every**

loss there is something to be gained by the grace of God. When you look back the person who hurt you the most, the situation that caused you the most pain, you can clearly see how God used it and brought into your life your deepest experience of the grace of God. God's power came and uplifted you at your weakest point. When you are weak is when God makes you the strongest. How great is our God. His power is perfected in weakness. **2 Corinthians 12:10(NLT)** *¹⁰That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

One person has defined grace as God's riches at Christ's expense. Grace, God's undeserved favor is free for us, but it cost Christ everything on the cross. God's grace saved Paul on the road to Damascus. When you want to win people to Christ and help make the church healthy in every way, that too is a work of God's grace in your life. God's grace is endless and one day will bring us home. Amen and Amen.