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2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Fourth Message

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PAUL IN THE WILDERNESS: I AM WELL CONTENT WITH WEAKNESSES

SERIES: WHEN LIFE IS A WILDERNESS

One of the literary treats I shared with a group of men this year was reading through the book, *A Burning and Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley*. The book is an anthology about the great men of the English revival and the works they produced. One of the most interesting characters in the selection was the poet, Christopher Smart, a remarkable genius of English poetry. His poem, "The Song to David," is a work of beauty and form. Robert Browning and Dante Gabrielle Rossetti called it one of the masterpieces of English literature.

As I read the short selection of his works in this book I found my heart moved by his tenderness and compassion, and by his marvelous poetic gift. I wondered, "Where did this man learn to write like this?" His biography answered my question. Christopher Smart learned to write while he was in the wilderness of an insane asylum. He was an outstanding scholar in his early years, and although he graduated from Cambridge University, he was never fully able to tap his powers. He became, in a sense, a hack writer, selling works to popular journals that never paid much. He drank to excess; he got in trouble with bad debts.

In 1752, he fell in love with a beautiful Catholic girl named Anna Maria. They married and had two daughters. But financial mismanagement forced him to send his wife and children to live with their sister in Ireland. He became very ill, and as he was laying on his bed, separated from his family, wrestling with his alcoholism and his crippling debts, he came to terms with his own depravity. The light of Jesus Christ dawned on his soul. Miraculously, he was healed. In response, he wrote "Hymn to the Supreme Being." He patterned the hymn after Hezekiah's experience, when Hezekiah was told by the prophet that he would die, and he prayed and was healed. He wrote, "Hezekiah was righteous and received grace. I was wicked and received grace."

Christopher Smart's life took on a whole new purpose. He began reading the Bible, especially the New Testament. In 1 Thessalonians, he read the apostle Paul's exhortation that Christians everywhere should pray without ceasing. He took Paul at his word, and everywhere he went in London he lifted up his hands to pray in public, confessing God openly. That did not go over very well with the public. In fact, they thought he was a bit extreme and mad. Fearful for his daughter and granddaughters, his father-in-law had Christopher Smart committed to an insane asylum. The year was 1757. Conditions were horrible in those private institutions back then, but he spent six years in that place. And that was when he wrote his beautiful, tender and compassionate poems. In one series, his "Hymn for the Amusement of Children," he taught children to pray for their enemies as he prayed for his enemies in that insane asylum.

As I contemplated his life, I thought, What it is that commends people to us? It's not success. It's not credentials. It's not degrees. It's not money. It's not fame. No, it is none of these things. It is humility. When people are broken in spirit, then they learn that they are nothing and God is everything. When they learn that lesson, and then

share it with us, that commends them to us. That is the basis for ministry, I concluded.

The wilderness has been our theme during the past several weeks. We have looked at Israel and its wilderness experience. Next, we studied King David and his time in the wilderness. In the temptations we came face-to-face with Jesus Christ in the wilderness. Today we will look at the wilderness experience of the apostle Paul. The background for what he writes in 2 Corinthians 12 is that the church he planted in Corinth is in deep trouble. He himself planted the church by grace, in weakness, and afterwards false teachers, Judaizers, came in seeking to undermine his gospel and his authority as an apostle. They compared his leadership with theirs, using the sensuous standards of the age they were living in to say they were better than Paul.

First, they attacked his rhetorical powers. Their speech was better, they boasted. "We have the wisdom of the world," they said. "We're eloquent. Paul can write strong, forceful letters, but in person he is unimpressive and weak." Then they attacked his leadership. "We're far more charismatic. We can command larger fees than Paul. If he really was an apostle, why did he make tents? Why didn't you pay his salary?" they demanded. Finally, they attacked his spirituality. "We're far superior to Paul spiritually," they boasted. The basis for their claims of superiority was what they called "visions and revelations" which they claimed to have regularly. They paraded and boasted of these phenomena and asked, "Where are Paul's visions? He does talk about Damascus, but that was a long time ago. Hasn't he had any since then? Our revelations are far superior to his."

Their criticisms of Paul were so effective that they turned the Corinthians against him. When he went back to Corinth, they would not even let him preach in the church he had founded. The apostle is so grieved by this outcome that he does something out of character: he boasts about a vision that he had. "If you want visions, then I'll give you one," says Paul. The apostle did have visions but he never spoke about them. He didn't see any profit in them. But now he is forced to tell about a vision. Then he appraises it, and shares the consequences of this vision, which was his own worldliness.

I. A Vision of Paradise

Let us look, then, at Paul's account of his vision. 2 Corinthians 12:1-4:

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. (2 Cor 12:1-4 NASB)

"Boasting is not profitable, but in this case it is necessary," says Paul. "Because of the danger you are in, I must do it. If you want a vision for a credential, let me give you one." Notice that Paul refers to

himself in the third person. In Hebrew narratives, authors never give the conclusion to the story until they first grab your attention. Hebrew reveals the details slowly, captures your imagination, pulling you into the story, and then surprises you with the conclusion. That's what Paul does here. He begins by telling us about an anonymous man, and then gives details: 14 years ago, the things that he saw, etc. At the end he will reveal the identity of the man.

Paul had this vision sometime around A.D. 40, during the silent decade of his life when he was ministering in his own home territory, probably around the time he received the beatings and floggings by the Jews, described in chapter 11. This man was caught up into the third heaven, up into Paradise, says Paul. In intertestamental literature, the Jews imagined that heaven had various levels, varying in number from three to as many as ten. But the highest level was called Paradise, the reason being that they saw the real new heavens and new earth as a restoration of the Garden of Eden. Just as Israel had a promise of the new Eden, and a vision of it, Paul had the vision of the ultimate Eden, the new heaven and the new earth.

And he was at the highest place, where a man gets closest to God, underneath the throne in the Holy of Holies. He was not certain what his state was. "I don't know if I was in my body or outside it. I could have been like Enoch, where the prophet was translated body and all, or caught up in spirit only." It doesn't matter. What was important was that he received revelations outside of all our normal spiritual experiences. He was in heaven. He says, "I heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak." And the reason he could not put his experience in words is not because we are not intelligent enough to understand, but because we lack the experiential parameters to comprehend his experiences.

One scholar, D.A. Carson, illustrates the difficulty which Paul had this way: Supposing you were going to New Guinea, and you wanted to describe electricity to a Stone Age people, how would you do it? All you would have at your command is metaphors:

You might proceed by saying that electricity is something like a powerful, invisible spirit that runs faster than the wind along hard things like vines. These hard things, unlike vines, are made by men, and are often strung up on tree trunks with their branches lopped off. The electricity is made at one end of these 'vines,' and the vines carry electricity to all the houses. When it gets inside, it gets into some other things that man makes. One of these things looks like a little box; then electricity gets inside of it, the top heats up like fire, and the cooking can be done indoors and without smoke. Then electricity gets inside other things that man makes—small, round things—they fill the house with light, as if they were little suns.

He goes on to say that we haven't yet begun to tell them about the age of electricity. We haven't ventured into batteries, motors, moving staircases, electric clocks, thermostats, refrigerators, pocket calculators, or computers. The problem is their limited experience. It has nothing to do with intelligence.

And so it is with Paul's vision of heaven. "If you're in doubt that there's a heaven, somebody was there. He saw it and heard it. But what he saw and heard cannot be put in words." Read the Old Testament prophets, or even John in Revelation, as they try to describe the messianic age and the age to come. The only vehicle they have in our language is metaphors. It is not possible to describe these scenes any other way.

One of my favorite texts about the new age to come is Amos 9, where the prophet attempts to describe the fertility of the new earth: "Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord, "when the plowmen will overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed;

when the mountains will drip sweet wine, and all the hills will be dissolved." The prophet is trying to help us visualize the new heavens and the new earth. The earth is so fertile, he says, that at harvest time the grapes are so big, the mountains drip wine. The harvester can't get the grapes off the vine fast enough before the plowman arrives, ready to begin the new season of growth. We know that in heaven there will be neither plowman nor grapes, but here the author must resort to metaphorical language to make his point. And so it is with Paul: "The words I heard were inexpressible," says the apostle.

Then he refers to a second prohibition: "words, which a man is not permitted to speak." Notice Paul did not rush to his publisher and sign a book contract. The vision which he saw was not for the church's benefit, but for his own. That is worth thinking about, isn't it? God was preparing him to take his gospel to the Gentiles, to new territories. He would be flogged, beaten, shipwrecked, and in the end, beheaded. To encourage this saint, God caught him up in the third heaven to see the glory to come, all the things prepared for him that he might endure the suffering. Eschatology is not designed for the curious; it is to encourage us to endure our present suffering. That is why the book of Revelation was written, so that the saints would fix their hope completely on the grace to be brought to them in Jesus Christ and not lose heart.

"If you want to boast in visions," says Paul, "I had the ultimate. I saw the new heavens and the new earth. I was right underneath the throne of God. The sight was so magnificent words are inadequate to describe it, and I wasn't permitted to put it into words."

II. The Vision Appraised: No Credential

Next, Paul moves from the details of the vision to an appraisal of what he saw. Verses 5-6:

On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. For if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one may credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me. (12:5-6)

Here Paul comes to the surprise ending to the story: "I was that man who was caught up into heaven 14 years ago." But he refuses to use his experience as a credential to boost his reputation with the Corinthians. His reason is that visions and experiences are inaccessible claims. How can they be verified? That was the problem with the so-called visions of the Judaizers. They kept claiming they had visions and revelations but there was no way to verify their claims. They were coercing the leadership there. Has anyone ever said to you, "The Lord told me to do such-and-such"? What can you say in reply to such a claim? How did God communicate with you? Did he write you get a letter? How do you know it was the Lord? Such claims cannot be verified. So, says the apostle, "Even though I had this vision of which I wrote, that is no credential for me."

A second thing he fears is that if he shares the vision they might begin to think too highly of him. What a contrast to those who claim to have visions in our day! Paul knows his own heart. He is aware of the abominations he is capable of. That is why he will not share the vision—in case they think too highly of him as a result. His focus was on Christ alone and him crucified. Do you want my formula on this subject? Here it is: "Visions equal nothing"—let alone visions you haven't seen. Those equal less than nothing. "I'll boast in my weaknesses," says the apostle.

Recently I was involved in interviewing several candidates for the position of children's pastor. I observed that several of them tried to commend themselves to me and made reference to how they would

minister. Some tried to show that they were adequate to minister and had it all together, as we say. Then a handsome young man came in and began telling me about himself. His resume showed that he had experience in children's ministry, so I asked him how that had gone. "I was an utter failure," he said, with a twinkle in his eye. "It was a disaster." His honesty said more to me to commend him than anything the others had shared. This young man was realistic. He was boasting in his weakness. That is what Paul says he does.

If visions equal nothing, then, what is it that commends us? Here is what the apostle says: "I don't want anyone to credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me." Visions equal nothing. Character equals everything. What is of supreme importance is character. What you see someone doing and what you hear coming from his lips is what is important.

We have to go no further than the Old Testament to illustrate this point, to that wild character, Balaam, the Judas of the Old Testament. He had every visionary, ecstatic experience of the Living God that one would want to have. He went out to curse Israel against the Lord's orders. He was so morally blind that his donkey saw the glory of the Lord before him and warned him, "Don't go that way. You'll be killed." Finally, his eyes were opened and he prophesied. He was carried off into heaven to see the glory of Israel, the coming Messiah and his reign. But then he went right back and told the Moabite king to send idolatrous women into the camp of Israel to entice the nation to fornicate with them.

So much for visions. As far as character or credentials are concerned, visions equal nothing. Character equals everything.

Despite his inexpressible vision, then, Paul's appraisal is that it meant absolutely nothing in terms of how he could commend himself. If only the followers of the cult leaders on the East Coast back in the 1800's had followed his example! How many followers would they have today? Don't tell me about your visions, Joseph Smith. Let me see your home. Tell me about your reputation in the community. Visions come to nothing. It's not rapture, but character that commends us to others. That's the apostle's appraisal.

III. The Consequence of the Vision: A Thorn in the Flesh

Paul goes on to share what happened as a consequence of this vision. Verses 7-10:

And 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 buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from 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, 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. (12:7-10)

Here we see the history of Israel being repeated. Israel had a vision, the Promised Land, a good, rich land. But God said there was a danger inherent in their receiving that inheritance: they might become arrogant and say, "My own hand made this wealth." That is why they had to go through the wilderness. Paul saw the ultimate Promised Land—the new heavens and the new earth—and when he came back to earth, there was a danger of pride, pride that he would associate the vision with himself and become exalted as a result. After the revelation, and as a consequence to it, he was given a thorn in the flesh to

make him humble. We don't know what it was. Scholars have speculated on everything from epilepsy to depression, leprosy, malaria or eye disease. What it actually was is not important. But it was painful, according to Paul's own words.

This word "thorn" is used three times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. A study of it is very rewarding. The first time the word is used is in Numbers 33:55. God tells Israel,

"If you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall come about that those who you let remain, they will become pricks in your eyes and thorns in your side and they shall trouble you in the land in which you live."

Paul says the thorn was like a gaping wound in his side which never healed. It gave the enemy, Satan, or an angel of Satan, access to his person to buffet him. The word "buffet" is a weak translation. It literally means "to strike with a fist." Paul's hands are bound. He's defenseless and vulnerable. The enemy has open access to overwhelm him with moral temptation, insult or slander, much to his discomfort.

Twelve years ago, the two-year-old son of one of our pastors, Jack Crabtree, choked on an almond. He was without oxygen for 20 minutes and was rushed to the hospital. When I got there, Ray Stedman was already there. I will never forget Ray's expression. He covered his face with his hands and said, "I hate the devil!" The little boy died next day. At the memorial service his father didn't talk about the devil. He talked about God and God's sovereign love. As I listened, I wondered, "Which perspective is right? Does our worst pain come from the devil or from God?" The text says it's both. Paul regarded the thorn in his side as Satan himself, an enemy who hates us, who is vile, who wounds, insults and shames us. Therein lies the pain. But behind that Paul sees this was given to him. That is called in Greek grammar a "divine passive." God was behind it, so the apostle could make his appeal to God. This is where Paul sees the source of the thorn, so in his pain he prays to God, "Take it away."

Think about this for a moment. The thorn is so painful to the apostle that everything he says in 2 Corinthians 11 concerning his ill-treatment by the Jews—beatings, floggings, insults, persecutions, being misunderstood—he can handle. But he can't handle the thorn. How painful it must have been! As did the Lord Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he prayed three times that the cup would go away, so Paul prays three times, "Please take away the thorn." I believe he was encouraged to pray thus because he knew of the occasion of the second usage of this word in the Old Testament, in Ezekiel 28:24. There, God pronounces a judgment on Tyre and Sidon, saying,

"And there will be no more for the house of Israel a pricking briar or a painful thorn from any round about them who scorned them; then they will know that I am the Lord God."

I wonder if Paul read that and said, "Lord Jesus, you took away the thorn from Israel when you defeated Tyre and Sidon. I pray that you will do that also for me." He prayed three times, but the answer came back, "No. My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."

The third time the word is employed, in the book of Hosea, it is seen in a different light. Hosea writes about the nation Israel and her idolatry:

**"Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns.
And I will build a wall against her so she can't find her paths.
And she will pursue her lovers, but she will not overtake them.
And she will seek them, but will not find them.
Then she will say, 'I will go back to my first husband,
For it was better for me then than now!'" (Hos 2:6-7)**

Here, the metaphor is a thorn hedge which keeps an idolatrous people from pursuing their idols. The thorn, instead of destroying them, exhausts the power of the idol. It purges us of our sin and creates an appetite for God. That is Paul's answer from the Lord. "The thorn stays. My grace is perfected in weakness; it is sufficient for you."

Notice what this does not say. It does not say we are weak but then we receive grace and we become strong. It says we are perpetually weak so that in our weakness we perpetually cry out. And when we cry out the Spirit comes and then we are strong. This is where we are called to live always.

We all have moral weaknesses. I have mine. A year ago I was sitting right here in the front pew, struggling and discouraged. The pastor who was preaching said something which gave my wife an insight. She whispered to me, "Don't be discouraged about your weakness. Thank God for it because it gives you compassion for others." I will always have areas where my armor is weak and the enemy has access. It's like a gaping wound. He can enter in and vilify us. But then we can cry out to God, and that is when we become strong.

How many times did Christopher Smart pray in that insane asylum before he was delivered? How many times did he cry out, "O God, remove this thorn of my insane reputation"? And God delivered him supernaturally. In 1763, the English House of Commons conducted an inquiry into the brutality of the mental institutions. At the very time the chief proprietor was being questioned, an extremely bold London Christian merchant, John Sherat, marched into that insane asylum, right under the innkeeper's nose, and cut Christopher Smart free. They walked out together and Christopher Smart was told, "You're free! Go!"

But although he was free, his thorn was not removed. He continued to write poetry, but the public still believed he was a mad enthusiast and refused to buy his work. The result was that he was always in debt. Following his release from prison he wrote some of his most beautiful poetry. He composed two biblical oratorios and put the Psalms into meter so that the people could sing the entire Psalter. He put the parables of Jesus into verse so that children could memorize them in Sunday School. Then he set out to do a complete body of hymns to revitalize the dead Anglican church. Still, in that generation, no one cared a whit for Christopher Smart. And yet one writer says of him today,

When you read his writings you see a persistent note of humility, gratitude and adoration of God. Why, it characterized everything that Smart produced through all those terrible years. Destitute, hungry, deprived of family, unable to ward off the woes of debt no matter how late he burned the midnight oil or how prodigious his literary output, he sang always the new song of a redeemed soul, even from behind bars.

His thorn taught him humility, and that is what commends him to us today.

When I was a 19-year-old student I vacationed once on the island of Mykonos, in the Aegean Sea. I had been sharing Christ with a number of students who were travelling with me, and one evening walked outside to see a full moon over the sea. I was flooded with the presence of God. Nothing I've experienced since has come close. I've thought often about that and hoped someday God would give me another such taste. Yet I must say, after teaching this passage, what comes to mind is not so much that experience but the next event. As I started back toward the camp I came upon a student who had been in-

volved in a serious accident in Texas the previous year. He had driven a tractor rig over a gas line, which exploded. He suffered burns to 60 per cent of his body and had undergone some 16 major skin graft operations. I said to him, "Have you ever thought that Jesus Christ could heal you?" He looked me straight in the eye and said, "I wouldn't want him to heal me miraculously because the pain has taught me too much." I'll never forget that. That is God's perspective.

IV. Implications: How great is humility!

My friends, whom do you want to emulate? There are two roads. Do you want to be like the Judaizers, or do you want to be like Paul? Do you want to be like Balaam, or do you want to be like Christopher Smart? This area where we live, Silicon Valley, is rather like the Corinth of old. The same seductive charms are apparent all around us. Humility is scorned. But hard at work in the church today is a new movement of people who are claiming authority for themselves based on visions, not character—and on visions they probably haven't seen. But for the apostles Peter and Paul, there is one quality necessary for leadership: "Clothe yourselves in humility," says Peter.

Think of Paul's painful thorn. Don't think of his vision. Think of his painful thorn, the terrible wound in his side that caused him to have humility. Do you know what this is saying? Humility is not one thing among many, it's the only thing God wants. It's the main thing. Think of Paul's thorn. Think of Christ's thorn. That's the only crown he received on earth. If you want to pray for us as a group of leaders, pray that God will keep wounding us so as to keep us humble. That is the only commendation leaders must aspire to.

In closing, I will read one of Christopher Smart's hymns, "Humility," which he wrote for children. Let this be our prayer this morning.

Folly builds high upon the sands,
But lowly let my basis be;
Firm as a rock my hope shall stand,
Deep founded in humility.

Content, when threat'ning ills obtrude,
Sweet meek-ey'd patience, arm my soul;
And let a prudent fortitude
Teach me my passions to control.

My God, I long to know thee still,
To love, and fear, and trust thee more.
To live submissive to thy will,
And whilst I feel thy grace, adore.

My faith and love, obedient be!
Dear Saviour! teach me thy commands;
My ardent soul still follows thee
And trusts her int'rests in thy hands.

Let love and mercy, all divine,
Justice, descending from the skies,
Kindness and truth, my heart incline,
Still to forgive mine enemies.

Thus may I act the Christian part,
The social, human and divine,
While a wise zeal inspires my heart;
Then shall I know that heaven is mine.

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