



Catalog No. 756

Psalm 63

Second Message

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DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS: MY SOUL IS SATISFIED

SERIES: WHEN LIFE IS A WILDERNESS

In Deuteronomy 8, we saw that it was God's intention to give his people Israel a wonderful gift of a new land. This new inheritance was as rich as the Garden of Eden. Yet there was a danger involved in giving them the land too quickly. It would be easy for the people to say in their hearts that their own hands had produced this wealth and to forget God and pursue idols. Thus, in order to humble his people, God put them through a school to prepare them for entering the land.

Between Egypt, where they were redeemed, and the promised land Canaan, lay a vast terrifying wilderness. There, the people discovered that they could not cope and that they were vulnerable. There they were broken of their pride and learned that man does not live by bread alone. Bread alone cannot impart life to man's soul. Rather, man must feed upon God himself. After learning these lessons, when they came into the land and ate of its fruits, they could bless God with tears of appreciation for every good gift.

We want to continue this theme of the wilderness as we look at the experience of the Messianic king, the representative of Israel. This time the wilderness experience is different, for the king finds himself in the wilderness of his own making. What do we do when we are cast off in a wilderness in which we cannot cope when it is the result of our own ungodly choices? This was David's plight. It is one thing to be in circumstances that are beyond our control, such as sickness or even death, but what happens when the wilderness is of our own making?

So many of the wildernesses we face of divorce, rejection of a child or a parent, or unemployment are due to our own choices. When we are in this kind of wilderness, we often think we are unworthy to pursue God. We feel unable to worship, and uncertain about our position in Jesus Christ. If we are in this kind of wilderness, will the God who fed and loved Israel feed and love us? This is where David found himself in Psalm 63.

Most scholars believe the background to this Psalm is Absalom's rebellion in which David faced the rejection of his own son. This came after David committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband Uriah. In 2 Samuel 12:10-12, the prophet Nathan came to David and announced the judgment of God for his sin:

"Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife." Thus says the LORD, "Behold, I will rise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your companion, and he shall lie with your wives in broad daylight. Indeed you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." (2 Sam 12:10-12 NASB)

In the text we find that Absalom had already murdered his brother Amnon for raping his sister Tamar. When he was called back to Jerusalem, he was already on shaky terms with his father. In that con-

dition, he began to turn all the hearts of the people against his father, saying, "I can institute justice better than David." Then Absalom went to Hebron and publicly announced his rebellion and installed himself as king. Second Samuel 15:12 reads: "And the conspiracy was strong, for the people increased continually with Absalom."

Upon receiving news of the rebellion in Jerusalem, David fled for his life. As he left the royal city, Zadok the priest came to him with the ark of the covenant and all the Levites. In this act, he meant to say, "Even though there is a rebellion, you are still the Messianic king. Here is God's throne. God will fight the battle with you." But in 2 Samuel 15:25-28, David replied,

"Return the ark of God to the city. If I find favor with the sight of the LORD, then he will bring me back again, and show me both it and His habitation. But if He should say thus, 'I have no delight in you,' behold, here I am, let Him do to me as seems good to Him...I am going to wait at the fords of the wilderness until word comes from you to inform me." (2 Sam 15:25-28)

David was not certain he was still king, and he thought he might lose his office as Saul had. He did not know if he was going to be reinstated. Because of this, he would not accept the word of men encouraging him.

As his procession of retreat made its way up the Mount of Olives, people were weeping, and David covered his head in humiliation and went barefoot. To make matters worse, out came an old man named Shimei, a descendent from the household of Saul, who threw rocks at David and cursed him, saying,

"Get out, get out, you man of bloodshed, and worthless fellow! The LORD has returned upon you all the bloodshed of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. And behold, you are taken in your own evil, for you are a man of bloodshed!" (2 Sam 16:7-8)

One of David's right-hand men said, "Let me kill him! He is cursing the king!" David replied, "Behold, my son who came out from me seeks my life; how much more now this Benjamite: Let him alone and let him curse, for the LORD has told him. Perhaps the LORD will look on my affliction and return good to me instead of his cursing this day" (16:11-12). All the way up the hill, the old man continued to throw stones and curses at the king.

When Absalom finally came into the city, he deliberately wanted to make himself odious in the eyes of his father. Therefore, he pitched a tent on the roof of the king's palace, and he publicly had sex with all of David's concubines. This reminds me of what my generation did during the sexual revolution in the sixties. They made public and intensified all the sins their fathers had been perpetrating in secret. Thus, my generation said, "You have done this privately. We are going to expose it." How would you like your private sins magnified ten times and done in public?

What could David say? He had no platform to speak to his son without appearing hypocritical. There David sat in his brokenness, dejected. How would you have felt in his place—unworthy to pursue God, unable to worship, uncertain about your position? That is where David was.

Will God meet us when the wilderness is the result of our own ungodly choices? The answer is yes! Look at what David says in the first four verses of Psalm 63.

I. God, My Desire (63:1-4)

**O God, Thou art my God; I shall seek Thee early;
My soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee,
In a dry and weary land where there is no water.
Thus I have beheld Thee in the sanctuary,
To see Thy power and Thy glory.
Because Thy loyal-love is better than life,
My lips will praise Thee.
So I will bless Thee as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands in Thy name.**

In this text David puts himself in a wilderness. There he discovers that instead of being abandoned by God he finds his life being renewed spiritually. First he renews his commitment to God, saying, “O God, you are my God!” God is all he has! When he left the city, he shed all of his defenses. He abandoned the royal city and the palace. He had even separated himself from the sanctuary, the priesthood, and the ark of the covenant. In the midst of his humiliation, he is not even sure he is a king anymore, but he says, “God you are all I have.”

Sometimes what keeps us from being renewed in the wilderness is that we do not leave everything behind. We take with us our motor-home and all our props that we had in the city. But we do not get renewed. We do not find God plus nothing. David shed all of his props. If you are going to be reinstated, God must do it.

Second, David finds a renewed appetite for God. His appetite for God is sharpened and deepened by his experience. He says, “I seek you early. My soul thirsts for You. My flesh yearns for you as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” The first thing in the morning when he gets up, David wants God.

Israel is an interesting country. Due west from the top of the Mount of Olives, the land drops sharply into a deep ravine into the Garden of Gethsemane and rises again to the plateau of the beautiful city Jerusalem, the pearl of the world. To the east, the land drops off immediately into a barren wasteland. In other words, Jerusalem is one step away from the wilderness. When David was cast out into that wilderness, all he saw was a land that was desolate, sunburnt, and arid. As he gazed into it the land reflected back and magnified the condition of his own soul. He is parched. He is weary. He is languishing. He does not want water, he wants the fountain of living waters. It intrigues me that when God puts us in a wilderness he uses physical circumstances to intensify our pain, not to numb it, in order to sharpen our appetite for God himself.

The God that David seeks he remembers from the past: “Thus, I beheld you in the sanctuary, to see your power and your glory. Because your loyal-love is better than life, my lips will praise you.” Even though David is now away from the sanctuary, I am sure he remembers travelling throughout the promised land with the ark of the covenant and seeing God come through that throne to defeat Goliath, to subdue the Philistines, to show his power for salvation,

to establish his rule in Jerusalem, and to manifest his glory in the sacrifices. The Shekinah glory was in the tabernacle that travelled with the king’s armies.

Now David is separated from all of that. All he has with him to worship God is his memory. He has nothing else to aid him. But he says, “Because your loyal-love is better than life itself, because you are a God who makes commitments especially to the king, I know that you are not just committed to that sanctuary. You are committed to the lowly king even when he sins. You will leave the sanctuary to come and travel with me in the wilderness and make yourself known to me.” That is the kind of God we serve. David declares, “When you show me your loyal-love, it tastes better than life itself.”

Because he knows this about God, he renews his commitment to worship even in the wilderness through his memories. He says, “I will use my lips to praise and bless you. Then I will lift up my hands in your name.” The last image is a picture of absolute dependence. He is saying, “If God does not grace me, there will be no life.” David had no inhibitions in the wilderness.

Finding himself cast out, he renews his commitment to God, his appetite for God, and his desire to worship him.

The reason we do not enter into this experience is that we take our motor-homes into the wilderness with us. We need to go naked and vulnerable so we can say, “God, you are my God. If I am to be saved, you must do it.” Here is David being renewed personally. Now that he is renewed, will God feed him? Will he prepare him a feast in his wilderness even though he created it himself? Look at what he says in verses 5-8.

II. God, My Feast (63:5-8)

**My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness.
And my mouth offers praises with joyful lips;
When I remember Thee on my bed.
I meditate on Thee in the night watches.
For Thou has been my help,
And in the shadow of Thy wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings after Thee;
Thy right hand upholds me.**

One of the lessons I have learned about daughters is that when they get to be adolescents it is difficult to teach them good eating habits. It seems adolescents are always eating the wrong foods at the wrong times. Therefore, when dinner is ready, no matter how balanced it is, they are not hungry, and they only spend about 38 seconds at the dinner table before they are off again. Spiritually, the same is true of all of us. Before God can give us a feast, we must prepare ourselves. If we have been feeding on idolatrous diversions, we will not be hungry and we will miss the feast.

David prepared himself for the feast to come. In verse 6, he says, “I remembered you on my bed. I meditate on you in the night watches, for you have been my help.” In the wilderness, David is in fear for his very life. He cannot go to sleep. He must stay awake for the night watch.

During the night, there is a slow progression of hours when things do not change. David uses that time to focus on the Lord. The wilderness has given him a new lens to magnify his ability to focus on who God is. It always amazes me to be with people in the midst of their grief and suffering. I was with a couple this week whose newborn son was in the hospital fighting for his life. For them, every

Scripture verse was magnified for it had a new focus in this wilderness. The same is true during the night watches.

With that new lens David remembers God. This is no passing remembrance. The word means “entering in” to everything God has done for him. I am sure David remembered when God by grace defeated Goliath, the Philistines and the Jebusites. As he rehearsed these events in his mind, he entered into them again with God.

Then he says, “After I remember you being my help, I meditate.” This is a piece of vocabulary that does not exist in Silicon Valley! I find it very difficult to meditate here. To meditate means to take a text that has been memorized in our heart and rehearse it audibly over and over again to milk it of its meaning. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “In solitude the soul develops senses we seldom know about in every day life.” It is difficult for me to sit still for any length of time. During the last weeks of my wife’s father’s life, she spent hours waiting at the hospital. When I visited, I could only sit still for five minutes before I became restless and wanted to move. David is not that way. On his night watches, he rehearses who God is and meditates on his beauty and majesty.

When we were in Eastern Europe last year we saw this characteristic in all the Christians because of their intense suffering. My friend Bill Kiefer described their prayers in his journal:

At each meal and before and after each teaching, one of the group would be asked to pray. As each one prayed there first issued a profusion of words followed by a more and more intense prayer sometimes accompanied by weeping. (They wept because they understood the depth of their sin and the greatness of God’s grace.) One day out in the woods we observed them during a prayer time praying privately. We could see lonely figures standing like sentinels against the sky speaking with God. Each one was totally focused, not moving from that position for an hour or more, even as the winds and rain began to spring forth. How humbled I felt in their presence.

That is David. He made preparation for God’s banquet. After he had done this, God fed him with divine delicacies. He says, “My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fat, and my mouth offers praises with joyful lips...In the shadow of Thy wings I sing for joy. My soul clings after Thee; Thy right hand upholds me.” Here is David hidden, clinging, eating, and singing to God.

If you look closely at this text, you will discover something interesting. David is under the wings of God. In other words, he has left the earthly temple where as king he led Israel in their corporate worship, and he has entered into the heavenly reality. As king, he never entered the inner sanctuaries of the tabernacle. He was only allowed in the outer court where he stood by the altar. Only the priests could go inside to see the candelabra that would illuminate the eye and the incense to be smelled by the nose and the shew bread to be experienced by the mouth. And only once a year would the high priest enter into the Holy of Holies to see the ark and the wings of the cherubim touching. This was the throne of God where the priest could see the blood on the mercy seat and commune with God himself.

But through his brokenness and through his memory, David enters not an earthly tabernacle, but the heavenly one. In his wilderness, he is transported not into the outer court or the holy place. He is in the Holy of Holies underneath the throne of God! Do you see that? He is under the wings of God.

In the cool of this protection, he writes this song. Here he finds the love relationship so intense, he can only use the terms that are used in Genesis to speak of the relationship between a man and his wife. He says, “My soul clings after you.” That is the term “cleave” from Genesis 2. After chasing God, he turns around and says, “Your right hand is upholding me.” He realizes that God is giving him the very strength he needs to pursue him. What a relationship! This is intimacy! Then he says, “All I can do in response to this satisfying feast of life is to give a shout and cry out in song.” Thus, underneath the wings of the Holy of Holies, he composed Psalm 63, and we still sing it 3,000 years later. Singing is such an important aspect of entering into the presence of God.

Can God prepare a feast in the wilderness? Yes! Does our sin disqualify us from entering into that feast? No! No sin will keep us from having intimacy with him if we repent. But we can miss out if in our night watches we numb our pain with diversions instead of focusing in on the Lord and remembering him. Though the diversions may numb the pain and take away the depth of the tragedy, they shut the windows of heaven so that we cannot enter into the Holy of Holies.

Our first exhortation is to go into the wilderness in our nakedness and vulnerability. Then we are to prepare ourselves for a feast. We are to focus and to meditate on God. Then God will feed us and be our desire. Now David sees that God is his defense. Look at verses 9-11 in which he receives a vision of justice.

III. God, My Defense: Vision of Justice (63:9-11)

**But those who seek my life, to destroy it,
Will go into the depths of the earth;
They will be delivered over to the power of the sword;
They will be a prey for foxes.
But the king will rejoice in God;
Everyone who swears by Him will glory.
For the mouths of those who speak lies will be stopped.**

Whenever men and women are hurting and are in a wilderness in Scripture, they cannot immediately deal with their problems from which they are running. God in his grace always first increases their physical appetite. Then he feeds them a meal. After being fed, then they can see life. This was true of Elijah. The same was true of Jonah. Jesus even fed Peter a meal before they talked.

This is what happens here. The vision comes after David’s worship. He says, “Now that I am in the Holy of Holies, I can see!” David is transported to the end of the age, for in the heavenly temple time is no longer an issue. He is transported into the age to come and directly to the place of verdict where God announces his judgment. David says, “It is all clear now. I see the end of the enemies of the king. They will be like the sons of Korah who rebelled against Moses. The earth opened up and swallowed them. They will go to the lowest places on the earth.”

Then he adds, “God will use their own devices against them to do it.” Absalom took up the sword; he will die by the sword. In his justice, God will use the means of the enemies against them, and their inheritance will be the place of jackals. In the Ancient Near East, there was no greater curse than for a dead person to be left exposed to the jackals, the final scavengers of life. The jackals always got the leftovers after the big animals had had their fill; they would finish you off. David is saying the people who oppose the Lord’s anointed will be treated like the dung of the earth.

David goes on to say, “I not only see their end, I see my own.” Remember he was not sure if he was going to be a king anymore. Many of us get ourselves into that position. When we make ungodly choices, we wonder if we will ever be a husband again or a father, wife, son or worker. The answer is yes. God is going to reinstate this king by grace. When it happens, the king will rejoice in God and all will be made to follow that king.

I think David saw an even greater vision at this moment. He says, “All who swear on Him will glory. The mouths of those who speak lies will be stopped.” He saw into the future to a greater King who would come from him—the ultimate Messiah, Jesus, the Anointed One. All who swear by that one and by the God of that one will glory, but those who speak lies will be stopped. The lie is denying that God’s rule comes through his anointed Messiah. This is the greatest denial of reality in life. On that day of judgment, that mouth will be closed because of what God has done in Jesus Christ. What a vision!

Notice the Psalm did not begin with this vision. David had to go through the entire process to get to this point. Then what does David do? Nothing! He does not have to reinstate himself. He does not have to quell the rebellion. He does nothing.

What does God do in the wilderness of our own making? First, he wants us to be renewed spiritually. He does this by enlarging our appetite for him and him alone. The exhortation is to go out into the wilderness without our props. We are to be vulnerable. Second, he wants to feed us a feast we never knew in the city. The exhortation is to not defile our appetite with the diversions of idols. We are to focus on God alone, and we are to use the night watches to meditate upon him. If we will do that, then we will see with our eyes. The vision of justice of the age to come will be so clear that we can return to the city and do absolutely nothing in our own cause.

Many of us have experienced what David has been through. There is nothing more painful than rejection, especially by someone you love. At times, I am sure you have shared Christ with people and have been rejected. At other times you have been vulnerable and shared yourself only to have someone walk out on you. I wrote this poem in the midst of one of those experiences, and I want to share it with you as a prayer. I have entitled it *That Strange Gate*:

Why is it now, my soul is moved
To taste of Thy gracious love,
When all before it seemed cold and dead,
Though my eye could see so much,
Of Thy glorious grace.

Yes, now my soul drinks deeply,
The river is lively and flowing.
It tastes sweet.

But the gateway is the ache,
of rejection,
of appearing foolish,
of knowing one can’t convince.

My lips wax not eloquent, but slippery,
My heart knows little of boldness,
It caves in to timidity,
My lips are silent,
But my eyes see You, Your hand by mine.

O that You would keep me in such sweet place,
Under your wings—
To know my broken ways,
This is true joy.

Don’t let me go,
Pursue me deeper still.
Then I shall tell of your gracious love to the saints,
Especially those who hold you dear,
Those simple ones, whom I love.

O to be swallowed up in Thee!

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Luke 4:1-15

Third Message

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JESUS IN THE WILDERNESS: CONFRONTING THE EVIL ONE

SERIES: WHEN LIFE IS A WILDERNESS

A group of our college students returned last week from a trip to Israel. They met some fascinating individuals during their travels in the Holy Land. They were introduced to Yigdol Yadin, the famous archaeologist who has excavated Tel Dan. He gave them a personal tour of his work at that site. Our college pastor, Doug Goins, who led the group, said that the highlight of the trip, however, was not the cities and the archaeological sites but the time they spent in the wilderness of Sinai and their ascent to Mt. Horeb. They were impressed by Cairo, with its minarets and its hustle and bustle. They visited Luxor, the religious capital of the Pharaohs, who put their entire Gross National Product into their tombs in a futile effort to evade death. But against the stark backdrop of the wilderness, with its nights of absolute darkness, and stars so bright they could almost be touched, they began to visualize the glory of God as it was revealed to Moses on Mt. Horeb. The wilderness exposed the sensuous nature of the Egyptian idolatry, unmasking it for what it was. The wilderness has a way of doing that. It gives you a clear focus on the nature of evil.

Unmasking evil is the theme for our study this morning. In this series of messages we have looked at Israel in the wilderness; a nation newborn, brought through the flood waters of the Red Sea and put in a place of testing by God where she could not cope. There in the wilderness, Israel discovered a world upside-down: she drank from water which sprang from a rock rather than fall from heaven; she ate bread that fell from heaven rather than come up from the earth. Then we observed King David in a wilderness of his own making. Would God abandon his king who had sinned? No. David repented, and naked and vulnerable, he found God. Today we come to Jesus' time in the wilderness. There he meets the evil one, in what we could call a scene from the Garden of Eden revisited. Adam failed his test in the Garden, but this second Adam will confront the devil in the wilderness and emerge triumphant and victorious.

Two things in Luke's gospel that precede these temptations, Jesus' baptism and his genealogy, are very significant. These introduce us to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Luke 3:21:

Now it came about when all the people were baptized, that Jesus also was baptized, and while he was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son, in thee I am well-pleased." (Luke 3:21-22 NASB)

I have always been puzzled as to why Jesus presented himself for baptism. John the Baptist, the last prophet, went into a wilderness to prepare the way of the King, and Jesus the King came to be baptized. The significance is this: Here, in the person of Jesus, is the new Israel. Just as the old Israel came to the floodwaters of the Jordan to be born, so this Messianic King is creating a new Israel, a new covenant people, bringing them to the floodwaters of the Jordan to repent. And at his baptism, the prophetic silence, which had lasted for 400 years, is broken by the voice of God himself announcing his King, "This is My Beloved Son. In Thee I am well-pleased."

Here, the Father links two very important texts of scripture, bringing them together to describe one man, Jesus. First, the text, "This is my Son," taken from Psalm 2, and then, "with he whom I am well-pleased," from Isaiah 42, the Servant oracles of Jesus. Some people think the words "Son of God" mean "God Junior." But in the Old Testament, that title was used of the King, the Messiah. Nathan said to David, "Out of your loins will come a line of boys who will be king. When they crown this king, I will adopt him into a father-son relationship." Every time a king was crowned he read Psalm 2, the psalm of coronation,

"I will surely recount the decree: The Lord said to me,

'Thou art my Son,

Today I have begotten Thee.

Ask of me, and I will surely give the nations as Thine inheritance,

And the ends of the earth as Thy possession.'" (Ps 2:7-8)

Every king was adopted as a son, therefore he was called the "son of God." And the weapon he was given to advance the kingdom was prayer—speech: "Ask of me," says the Father, "and I will give you the ends of the earth, not just Israel, the whole earth will be the possession of this king." So God the Father is saying, "Here is that Messiah, to him will go the whole inheritance, all the nations."

And how will this king bring justice to the nations.? God links it to the next text: "In thee I am well-pleased," from Isaiah 42:

"Behold, My servant whom I uphold;

My chosen one in whom My soul delights.

I have put my Spirit upon Him;

He will bring forth justice to the nations." (Isa 42:1)

So he links the king with the servant. And in the Servant oracles we know that this Servant accomplishes justice by dying for the transgressions of his own people. By means of a cross—this is how he is going to bring justice. This is announced right at Jesus' baptism, as John heard this voice, and saw with his eye the Spirit descending like a dove. This is very significant. What it is saying is not only is Jesus bringing about this new Israel, but this Israel will be a cosmic new creation—a new heavens and a new earth.

In the opening verses of Genesis, that part that talks about the new creation of the heavens and the earth, we read that the Spirit was there, hovering like an eagle, ready to go to work in his creative power. Then, following the flood, when Noah's ark comes through the flood waters, Noah sends out a dove but it cannot find rest so it returns. Now, at the baptism of Jesus, that dove finds a permanent place to rest. And the Spirit comes upon this One in full measure to bring about a whole new creation: a new heavens, a new earth, a whole new order through his rule. This will be done by the Spirit. So this Jesus is no mere prophet, no mere teacher. He is the King, the Servant who will create a new Israel, and that new Israel will redeem the whole world. That is the significance of the baptism of Jesus.

Then Luke gives the genealogy of Jesus. I find genealogies very interesting. My father-in-law was a historian and librarian who traced

the family roots. I discovered that my wife and I have the same roots that go back to Wales. He left us the history of the Lad-Lewis family, a genealogy written by Jesse Isaac Lewis to his brother in 1878. This genealogy says, “son of Jesse, the son of Daniel, the son of Isaac, the son of Moses, the son of three Jonathans, the son of Samuel, the son of John”—all the way back to 1690. But this genealogy of Jesus goes all the way back to God! It starts with Jesus, son of Joseph, Matthat, Levi, etc., and goes all the way back to “. . .the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.” Here is the significance of this: God called Abraham out from all the nations to create a new humanity, Israel, that would undo the sin of Adam. Not only is this Messianic King the new Israel, he is the second Adam who will create a new humanity to undo the sin of the first Adam. This is Jesus, the new Israel, the new Adam, the new humanity.

Then, following his baptism, having been filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit. To what degree are we being led by the Holy Spirit now? It is the Spirit who imparts eternal life to the soul. And eternal life does not mean just living forever. Eternal life is the life of the age to come—the new heavens and the new earth, that new age—the Spirit takes that new life and pumps it into your soul today. The Spirit is the dominant mark of this new humanity. So what I want to ask as we look at this text is, to what degree are you and I living in the Spirit in this new age? Let us ask this of ourselves as we contemplate these three temptations of Jesus, and how he responds to them.

The first four verses of the chapter introduces the first temptation.

I. Unmasking False Food: The Lust of the Flesh

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led about by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days; and when they had ended, he became hungry. And the devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’” (Luke 4:1-4)

The first temptation has to do with eating, bringing to mind the first sin in the Garden of Eden. Adam was given all the trees that were pleasant to the eye and good for food. God said to him, “Eat! Life is a banquet. Eat. Except one.” Then the devil came and focused on what was forbidden to Adam and Eve rather than what was freely available to them. “Eat from this one,” he suggested. “Would God withhold that from you? Be like God. Take for yourself. Feed yourself, and you’ll have life.” And Adam ate and he died.

Now we find Jesus in a wilderness. Like Israel of old as she was led by the shekinah glory, so Christ is led by the Spirit. For forty days he has eaten nothing. The devil suggests, “Speak to this rock, and turn it into bread.” This is no arbitrary miracle he has chosen. The devil has been to seminary. When Moses was creating Israel in the wilderness, he spoke to a rock in obedience to God who had said, “Speak to a rock. Out of it will come water.” The devil had it backwards: it was water from a rock, and manna from heaven.

This temptation is not for Jesus to act out of his deity, although some commentators think that. This title, “Son of God,” had nothing to do with his deity. It was his title as Messianic King. What the devil is suggesting is, “If you are the new Messiah, the new Moses, if you are creating a new Israel, do what Moses did.” But what is the difference here? The text in Numbers says that Moses was directed, “Speak to the rock that water will gush forth that you can bring drink for the congregation.” The temptation Jesus is facing in the

wilderness is to feed himself, to use his office to feed his own appetite. But Jesus responds, “Man shall not live by bread alone.”

What he is saying is, the new humanity that is filled with the Spirit, that is fed by the life of the age to come, never uses its office to feed its own appetites. On the contrary, what it does, rather, is feed others; then God provides a feast in return. But if you look to and provide for your own appetites, you will end up alone and unsatisfied. Isn’t this true of the alcoholic, the drug addict, of anyone with a perversion or obsession? The more they feed their own appetites the less pleasure they experience—although their appetite increases. When you put off your appetites, however, and use the life of God to feed others he gives you a feast.

In the parallel account in Matthew, we read that when the temptations were over, the angels came and “ministered” to Jesus. That word is used in the New Testament for waiting on tables. When you eat by yourself, you cannot say you have truly feasted. It is an isolated and lonely experience. It is no feast unless there are many at the table. That is a feast to enjoy. God gives, that is the point. You may be thinking, “Well, this was just for Jesus. He lived to God, and God fed him.” But remember this is how Jesus wanted the disciples to live. At Shechem he sent them out to buy food. While he waited, a woman came to draw water from the well, but Jesus offered her living water. She left her water pot there at the well, forgetting her original need, and went back to the village to tell everyone that she had met the Messiah. Then the disciples returned and were told by Jesus, “I have food you know nothing about.” “Who fed him?” they asked themselves. God had fed him.

The miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 was not for the multitude, but to teach the disciples. They had been teaching them, and the crowd had grown hungry. The disciples said to Jesus, “Send them home, we’re hungry and tired.” But Jesus responded, “You feed them.” And they did so. The miracle, however, was not so much that 5,000 were fed, but that there were 12 baskets left over, one for each apostle to feast on.

This is very convicting. I remember the many times I made an illicit reach to feed my own appetite and I ended up isolated and bored. This is saying that in our new humanity, if we make an illicit grasp for anything—food, identity, sexuality, hunger for relationships, whatever—we will die in the wilderness. Use God’s life to feed others, postponing your own appetite, then God will feed you. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you,” said Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. As a gift of God, we might add. Think about this when you go to work tomorrow. Live the entire day serving others, not feeding your appetite, and God will feed you.

That is the first temptation. Jesus unmasks false food, and he unmasks the lust of the flesh.

The second temptation is set out in verses 5-8.

II. Unmasking Empty Success: The Lust of the Eyes

And he led him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to him, “I will give you all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore if you worship before me, it shall all be yours.” And Jesus answered and said to him, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’” (4:5-8)

Notice that each time Jesus responds to the temptation with a quotation from the book of Deuteronomy, the account of Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness. Here, in a moment of time, the devil

shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world and their glory. His first appeal was to the lust of the flesh, now he appeals to the lust of the eyes. Pointing to all of this glory, he says to Jesus, "It's yours if you worship me." But Jesus is the Messianic King, the Son of God. All he has to do is ask God and he will get these things as an inheritance; they are going to be his anyway. Why, then, is this a temptation?

The devil's suggestion is very subtle and powerful. This word for "a moment of time," *stigma*, is a rare word in Greek. It sounds very much like the common Greek word *stigma*, the word used for the lashings and the beatings that Jesus would receive before the cross. The word, "to be handed over," is the exact same Greek word as "Jesus will be handed over to evil men"—yea, even the devil himself, at the cross. In this temptation the devil is saying to Jesus, "You can have all the glory without the cross. There is no stigma, no being handed over, no punishment. You can have it all without the cross." But there is a problem: there is a price involved.

The same scene is portrayed in Genesis. When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, their son Cain murdered his brother. Then Cain, a murderer, built the first city, a beautiful, exciting, glorious place to live. But a closer look at the city reveals the voice of Lamech, Cain's descendant, boasting to his wives, "Adah and Zillah, Listen to my voice, you wives of Lamech, give heed to my speech, for I have killed a man for wounding me, and a boy for striking me; if Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold" (Gen 4:23-24) What is the point? A glorious city, yes, but at a terrible cost. It is built in arrogance, oppression, bloodshed and murder. If you are really seeking success, this text demonstrates that the devil can make you successful. It's his glory to give. He has that authority. But it will cost you—your home, your family, your integrity.

There is another cost involved, too. This word *stigma* ("a moment of time"), is used only once in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, in Isaiah 29:5. There, it is used of God's judgment that comes in a moment of time on those who become rich through their oppression of others. The point is this: If you want glory, and if you do things the devil's way, he will make you successful. But it will only be for a moment. "Everybody will be famous for 15 minutes," said Andy Warhol, speaking of modern man. If you compromise, the world will put you on stage. Ask Jessica Hahn.

Fame is a fleeting thing. Ask last year's Super Bowl winners. When that spectacle was held at Stanford Stadium a few years ago, there were so many television crews present from around the world it looked like they were covering the most important event in the history of mankind. I watched the game on television with my family and some friends. One friend left to go to the store to get something. The grocery clerk said to him, "What are you doing here, with the whole world watching history in the making on TV?" My friend asked him, "Really? Who won the Super Bowl last year?" "I don't know," the clerk replied. "That's why I'm working today!" Who won Wimbledon last year? Does it matter? Who were the Presidential Primary candidates last year? Do you care? How many Nobel Prize winners can you name? Fame is fleeting. The devil has authority to make whomever he will successful. But the glory is momentary. You must compromise in order to get it: You must worship him.

That is why we need to take Jesus' words quite literally: "Woe to you when all men speak well of you"—when you're successful, in other words. When we plan on doing things just because our methods work, because they are successful, we had better be careful. We may have switched our allegiances and begun worshiping the devil, doing things his way. If you do it God's way, however, what will happen to you is what happened to Jesus. He was delivered over to the

devil. He did not get a *stigma*, he got a *stigma*. He suffered. He was beaten. He was put on a cross. And on that cross God exhausted all the energy of sin and death on his own Son. And once it was spent, that energy was robbed of its power. The devil became powerless. Let us resolve to follow that road which our Savior trod and seek the true glory.

Our new humanity does not give into the lust of the flesh. It does not feed itself but feeds others, and then allows God to feed it. The new humanity rejects the lust of the eyes as vainglory, and instead chooses to suffer for the true glory.

This brings us to the third, and probably the most powerful temptation, in verses 9-12.

III. Unmasking False Authority: The Boastful Pride of Life

And he led him to Jerusalem and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down from here; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge concerning you to guard you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.' And Jesus answered and said to him, "It is said, 'You shall not test the Lord your God.'" (4:9-12)

Now the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, and there quotes Scripture to him. Some of the Jewish commentators said that when the Messiah came he would throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple and the angels would protect him. The historian, Josephus, wrote that the ravine below the temple was so deep the bottom could not be seen from the temple, let alone the 50 extra foot high pinnacle. Standing there would cause giddiness, he wrote. But this is where the devil places Jesus and says to him, "Throw yourself down. Prove to all of Israel that you're the Messiah. Use your power and they will follow you. Here is the promise of God, according to the text. You have his angels. You have his strength. Nothing will happen to you."

What does this temptation appeal to? The first temptation appeals to the appetite, the second to the eye. As we have pointed out, the third is even more powerful: It appeals to pride. "Use God's power and his promises to make you look good," is the devil's suggestion. Jesus responds, "It is written, 'You shall not test the Lord your God.'" The wilderness is a place where a man, not God, is tested. Never reverse the roles. That would be to say that God's heart is unfaithful and needs purifying.

Never test God. Do not try to make him come through to make you look good. How many Christian leaders raise money that way? What a tragedy this is. In counseling, I have found that what more and more people naively call faith is actually testing God. Here is what I tell them: God's curriculum for all of us is for him to do the unthinkable. Whatever you thought was unthinkable, that is what he does, because you have been testing, not trusting God. Many schemes begin that way, with good Christian intentions—a project, a relationship, and a leap of faith. You jump, and you cry out, "God catch me," but you may have to pick up your own bones because God sometimes allows the unthinkable to happen. He allows unemployment. He allows a company to go under. Occasionally he allows a marriage to fall apart, or something else which you consider unthinkable. By doing so he unmasks the evil of what appears to be faith, but which actually is a test of God so that you can look good.

You ask, "What is God's power for, then? How do we avail of all these promises? What is the purpose of angels?" Here is what it is for. It is right in the psalm that Satan quotes. But, good seminarian

that he is, he leaves out a verse, thus quoting scripture out of context. Psalm 91 says this:

**“For He will give his angels charge concerning you,
To guard you in all your ways.
They will bear you up in their hands,
Lest you strike your foot against a stone.
You will tread upon the lion and cobra,
The young lion and the serpent you will trample down.
Because he has loved Me, therefore I will deliver him. (Ps 91:11-14a)**

What is God’s power for? Why do we lay hold of his promises? God’s power is for those who love him to conquer evil. It is not to make ourselves a public display. It is to conquer evil in our own lives, to tread down the serpent in our hearts and in the community. That is what it’s for. This is exactly the way the apostle Paul describes the Spirit-filled life in Romans 8. Who are the ones being led of the Spirit? Is it those who are on stage? No, it is those who by the Spirit are putting to death the deeds of the flesh in their own bodies. That is the Spirit-filled life.

Last week, Bob Roe, one of our elders, one of the godliest men I have ever known, announced his retirement from our board. He has been in poor health for the past 15 years. Ten years ago, when he had open-heart surgery, the doctors told him he had two years to live. This man has lived a life of purity and devotion to Jesus Christ. The dominant characteristic of his life has been putting to death the deeds of the flesh that his body might live. God has used him much in my life. Once, when I was college pastor, he unmasked evil in my own heart. Apple Computer had set up a scheme at Stanford University to sell computers cheaply to students, faculty and staff. I had a staff card, but not a paid staff position. But, I thought, Apple was trying to get their computers into the hands of Stanford graduates in the academic field. That’s me, I rationalized. I asked a student if he would get a computer for me, although the contract said that it was a non-transferable item. A man in my discipleship group challenged me, however, and told me I was compromising. I decided to think about it further.

While on vacation later that year—in the wilderness, as it were—I talked to Bob Roe and everything became clear. I shared all the details of this plan, and all of my intentions. He looked at me and said, “It’s not 100% clean. And if it’s not clean, it’s dirty. Don’t do it. You represent Jesus Christ on that campus. That reputation is worth more than any discount that you can get.” I was not left in much doubt about what I should do! When I got back home, I canceled the whole thing. At the end of our conversation, Bob said to me, “If you follow Jesus, God will give you a computer.” He was right. Three years later, God gave me a computer. And not just me, but each pastor on our staff received a computer, by grace, so that it became a feast to many, not just my making an illicit reach for myself. So, as I have often said since that time, “Praise be to Bob!”

There are temptations unmasked: The lust of the flesh; the lust of the eyes; and the boastful pride of life.

Having resisted these subtle temptations, you might imagine that Jesus, the new Adam, the new Israel, would enter Jerusalem and inaugurate the kingdom. But look at what the text says:

And when the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time. And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit; and news about him spread

through all the surrounding district. And he began teaching in their synagogues and was glorified by all. (4:13-15)

“Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit.” Our college team reported that the first sight they saw inside the Jaffa Gate in Jerusalem set the stage for what would happen later in that city: An Arab in full head-dress was engaged in a shouting match with an orthodox Jew. This scene was amplified as they listened to speakers from both sides tell their stories about their dreams for Jerusalem. They met with the press secretary for the Prime Minister of Israel. They met with the official spokesman to the former Prime Minister. These men are labeled the two biggest power brokers in Israel today. They claimed that Israel’s superior technology and superior army were the reason why the nation has survived. Then our group heard an Israeli freedom fighter, with a fine British accent, talk about terrorism. And then they heard from the other side of the megaphone. Arab spokesmen shared about the oppressed Palestinians. Their allegiance is to the PLO, they said, the only ones who can liberate them and exterminate Israel in the process. Following these interviews, the group went on to Galilee. Doug Goins said to me, “When we got to there, I discovered why Jesus brought in the kingdom in Galilee.”

Galilee in ancient times was totally disrupted by the Syrian invasion. It was a place of deep darkness and gloom, a place of despair. And it was an international community: Galilee of the Gentiles, it was called. That is the place Isaiah said this King would go—“to a people who were walking in darkness.” And they would “see a great light,” he said. This new humanity is available to people who are weak, who are not just Jews, to those who have no advantages; those who are in darkness and gloom and who want to be part of a new thing, a new order. This is where Jesus announced his kingdom.

Our text began with one voice announcing the Son; it ends with a multitude of voices proclaiming the glory of this One. Just as Moses came down the mountain, his face shining with glory, so now comes the second Moses. He teaches in the synagogues. He puts the word in the heart, and all glory in him. But this is not the momentary glory which the evil one offers. Neither is it the fading glory of Moses. It is the glory which the Spirit gives, and which changes hearts permanently.

Have you entered into this humanity? You may be in your own Galilee, in darkness, gloom and weakness. You think there is no hope for you, but I say to you, come to the headwaters of the Jordan River and be baptized. Let the flood of judgment come over you and you will enter into the new heavens and the new earth. God will give you his Spirit.

What is the question for those of us who have been baptized, who have identified with Jesus? Here it is: How much are we feeding on his life? I must confess I have a hard time preaching this text. Just yesterday morning I was thrilled about it, but all afternoon I was assailed by the enemy. All these temptations we have just read about came to me: I fed my own appetites. I struggled. I failed. Last night, while preparing to preach this morning, I thought, “I am not worthy to come.” But we have the Holy Spirit. Our Christianity is not based on performance. We may enter in at any moment.

Keep feeding on this new life of the age to come. Let God feed you. Let him give you an eye to penetrate past the false glory of the world to the real glory of the cross. That is when you will use his power to overcome evil.

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2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Fourth Message

Brian Morgan

July 23, 1989

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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