STRENGTH MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS

 A Study of 2nd Corinthians

Last Week:

**2nd Corinthians 11:3-4** **“**But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”

Eve’s sin was not just eating fruit, she doubted the words that God spoke to her and Adam, and believed the deceitful words of the serpent instead. I was because it was *“desirable for gaining wisdom”,* and she had desire to gain knowledge, over her obedience to trust in God.

CHAPTER TWELVE

**2nd Corinthians 12:1 “**I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord.”

Paul continues the topic of “Boasting” that we saw in 2nd Corinthians 7,9,10,11, and now here in 12. He quotes Jeremiah 9:24 in both 1st and 2nd Corinthians saying, “*Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”*

*‘Boasting in the Lord’* is actually boasting *of* the Lord. Rejoicing in His greatness, His faithfulness, and power which is made perfect on our weakness.

Then Paul talks mysteriously about “a man” who had a supernatural encounter with the Lord 14 years ago. Scholars agree however, that the man he is talking about is himself! He did this to try to humbly deflect attention off of himself, so as not to boast. Have you ever done that? : ) *[quickly: Garth Brooks is famous for that.]*

**2nd Corinthians 12:2-7a “**I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. **3**And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— **4**was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. **5**I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.

**6**Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, **7**or because of these surpassingly great revelations.”

Paul’s third heaven revelation is truly stunning. It causes us to stop and realize that God can do anything He wants to us and through us. This is proven throughout scripture by miracle after miracle, and supernatural occurrences in every book of the Bible. Here we see Paul, either in the body, or out-of-body taken up to what he calls “The Third Heaven” into Paradise. While he was there heard *“inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell???”*

What is the third heaven?, where did he go”, and what is this all about?

The Bible uses the word “Heaven” or “heavens” in both the Old and New Testaments, Hebrew: “*Shamah” or “Shamayim”* or Greek: “*Ouranos” or* “*Paradeisō”.*

These words are used to describe these three realms;

* The sky/atmosphere,
* Outer Space,
* or God’s dwelling place on High.

Paul says that “he” was *“caught up”* to the “Third heaven” or “Paradise”.

**The Three Realms of Heaven;**

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1. **The First Heaven (The sky/atmosphere)**

*Psalm 104:12 “By them the birds of the heavens have their home.” (and other scriptures)*

1. **The Second Heaven – (Outer Space)**

*Psalm 8:3 “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained.” (and other scriptures)*

1. **The Third Heaven – (God’s dwelling place on High)**

*Matt. 6:9 “Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.”*

*Rev.11:19 “Then the temple of God was opened in heaven.” (and other scriptures)*

This is certainly one of those areas of scripture that is very unusual and hard to explain. It’s sometimes hard to understand how someone can go up to heaven, either in the body or out of the body and come back to tell about it*. (It’s possible this took place when he was stoned and left for dead in Lystra in Acts 14.)*

The truth is that the Bible is filled with “*Supernatural Occurrences”* that defy our “practical perceptions”, and “conceptual confines”. We cannot approach the writings of scripture merely through the lens of ‘skeptical science’, instead of ‘childlike faith’, or we will miss the truth of God’s Word, and deny His power.

Think about all the many *seemingly impossible* miraculous events that took place in the Bible; Moses Parting of the Red Sea, Balaam’s Talking Donkey, Jonah swallowed by a big fish, Elisha’s Floating Axe Head, Paul’s handkerchiefs and aprons healing the sick, Jesus changing water into wine, walking on water, healing many people from incurable conditions, raising Himself and several others from the dead, and many many more!

This experience that Paul claims to have had, seems small compared to some of these.

[I have a friend, Sid Roth, who is a popular TV Host who has a show called “It’s Supernatural”. He has millions of viewers all over the world, and for many years has been seeking out, and interviewing people who have had miraculous experiences that they wish to tell about (I was privileged to be on his show last year).

Some of the stories and testimonies of the guests seem preposterous; People seeing angels, experiencing miracles, being caught up like Paul was to heaven, etc. When I first began watching these shows, I was very skeptical, I found myself doubting, and reasoning away the claims of each of his guests. But then I was convicted by the Holy Spirit and felt Him saying;

 *“Do you really believe that if you’ve personally never seen something happen, or experienced it yourself then it’s invalid and non-existent? Are you willing to limit God to operating only in realms that you can explain or reason away? Do you believe that the same God of the Bible has stopped doing miracles and orchestrating supernatural events in the lives of His people? If so, you’ve reached a serious level of unbelief which could limit your ability to act in faith and see miracles in your own life.” ]*

It reminded me of when Jesus went back to His hometown of Nazareth where they did not believe in Him;

**Matt.13:58“**And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.”

The same goes for Spiritual Gifts and manifestations. Just because you have not seen them take place in your life (yet), it doesn’t mean they are not real.

Don’t try to limit God. He does what He wants, when He wants.

It’s important to always be learning and growing in the things of the Spirit.

The Saying goes: *“When you stop growing you start dying.”*

 We now come upon the passage that is the theme for our entire series. Paul admits his weakness, but also speaks about the proverbial “Thorn in the Flesh” to torment him and keeping him from becoming conceited;

**2nd Corinthians 12:7b-9a** “Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. **8**Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. **9**But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

[we will revisit this passage later, suffice to say, that Paul found a secret that he shares with us here. This is the source of his strength, and the process by which he regularly sees God’s power resting upon him. It is “weakness”, more specifically, *“God’s power being made perfect in his weakness.”*

**2nd Corinthians 12:9b-13** “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. **10**That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

In previous chapters he told the Corinthian church of the extensive list of suffering and hardships that he endured for the sake of the gospel, and particularly to cultivate this young church in Corinth whom he loves with fatherly affection. His suffering was so severe (starving, being stoned, left for dead, etc.), and hardships so difficult (Imprisonment, beatings, shipwrecks, etc.) that it is a miracle that he survived at all. He discovered a profound truth that speaks through the pages of this letter to the church in Corinth, into the word of God that we read to this day.

*“For when I am weak, then I am strong.”* You never know the full power of God, until you are so desperately weak, that He’s the only one who can save you. And when He does, you are filled with undeniable confidence that you can rely entirely on His strength, not your own.

It’s what he means when he tells the Ephesians, “Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of HIS might.” (Ephesians 6:10)

**2nd Corinthians 12:11-13 “**I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the “super-apostles,” even though I am nothing. **12**I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles. **13**How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!”

Just like last chapter, he compares himself to the “super-apostles” of whom he wants to make known that he is not “in the least inferior”. He also reminds them, just as he

did in the last chapter, they he worked among them free of charge, in fact he took support from other churches so he would not be a financial burden on them. He says facetiously, “Forgive me this wrong!”

Who are the “super-apostles”? Most likely the Apostles in Jerusalem who unlike him, were among those that walked with Jesus and knew him personally. These are those who are considered “highly esteemed pillars” that he was first commissioned by;

**Galatians 2:6,9** *“those who were held in high esteem—whatever they were makes no difference to me.”…”James, Cephas (Peter), and John, those esteemed as pillars,* *gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship.”*

Note: We do find a thread of ‘touchiness’ in some of Paul’s language about these “super-apostles” in both this letter, and the previous one.

Example, in 1st Corinthians he points out that he and Barnabas don’t have wives to travel with them, and they have to work for a living rather than being paid by the church.

**1st Corinthians 9:5-6**  “Have we no right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas? Or are Barnabas and I the only apostles who must work for a living?”

**continue:**

**2nd Corinthians 12:14-15“**Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. **15**So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?”

It's apparent in both letters to the Corinthian church that Paul loves them, however in this 2nd letter he is much more emotional and expressive in his sentiments. He truly loves this church as a father loves his children. He suffered for them, sacrificed for them, he gladly carries the weight of concern for their welfare every day. He asks them this honest but rhetorical question; “If I love you more, will you love me less?”

**2nd Corinthians 12:16-19“**Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery! **17**Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent to you? **18**I urged Titus to go to you and I sent “our brother” with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not walk in the same footsteps by the same Spirit?” **“**Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.”

Apparently Titus and an unnamed brother visited them on a special mission from Paul, and spoke the very same things from the same Spirit so that they would know and affirm that the message from God is consistent. They too did not exploit the church but spoke as those in Christ for their strengthening.

**2nd Corinthians 12:20-21**end**20 “**For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. **21**I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.” <>

This issue from 1st Corinthians 5 of serious sexual sin in the church had been dealt with by Paul. However, he expresses concern here that they have note fully repented, and despite all his efforts, they are still indulging in both inward and outward “deeds of the flesh”. He is afraid that his boasting of them will have been in vain, and he will be both humbled and grieved at what he discovers when he returns to them. (He deals with this issue very strongly in the next chapter).

Go back to verse 7-10:

**2nd Corinthians 12:7-10** NKJV“**7**And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. **8**Concerning “this thing” I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. **9**And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in *my infirmities*, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. **10**Therefore *I take pleasure in infirmities*, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. *For when I am weak, then I am strong.”*

No one knows what the “thorn in the flesh”/”messenger of Satan” was that Paul was dealing with. It’s likely that it was an infirmity of some sort because he lists that twice in the next verses. Whatever it was, Paul was having a hard time praying it away. I would have thought that Paul was one of those powerful men of God whose every prayer is answered exactly according to his request. We see all throughout the book of Acts that he is a proven miracle worker; healing people, casting out evil spirits, and even raising the dead, yet here he prays a simple prayer for himself, and it does not get answered as he had hoped. Instead he hears from the Lord “my grace is sufficient”. Almost as if the answer to his prayer was just; *“oh, you’ll be fine, just deal with it”.*

Many of us have “thorns in our flesh” that burden us and weaken us physically or emotionally. Maybe a health condition, a mental condition, a sickness, or even a serious disease. We pray to the Lord for healing and deliverance but it does not seem to come in the time and manner we hope for. It can become discouraging and disheartening, even to the point where we are tempted to doubt God’s power in our lives. Is that you? Do you ever feel this way?

[Personal testimony]18 years ago I was diagnosed with a serious condition. My left hand and left foot just stopped working. I went to the doctor and explained that “I seem to have a slight case of “Rigor mortis”. He wasn’t amused and immediately sent me for thorough testing; CAT scan, spinal tap, and an MRI. I was told to make an appointment with a neurologist and when I did, he told me that I have Multiple Sclerosis.

I had no idea what that was, and he explained that I have lesions on my brain and spinal cord eating away at my nervous system. He explained that there is treatment for this and I need to take injections that could possibly slow the disease. I asked him how long I needed to take the shots for, he said *“…for the rest of your life…I know, it [stinks], but you have Multiple Sclerosis!”*

I was devastated, and after worrying and feeling sorry for myself, immediately got everyone I knew, including an army of Christian Power prayers to pray it away so I would be completely healed. This happened for weeks, months, years, and today…

…I still have Multiple Sclerosis, and still take an injection every other day.

The Lord did not take the thorn in my flesh away, I still have a weak left hand and leg, and the lesions still show up on my MRI’s, but you know what?

*HIS GRACE IS SUFFICIENT* in my life! I have no other symptoms and the progression of the disease is either very slow or stopped altogether. I am so grateful!

I have energy, stamina, vitality, and am not held down by MS! I am still able to do ALL that God has planned for me to accomplish!

It’s not from my own strength and physicality, but by God’s strength being made perfect in my weakness!

Each of us has weaknesses in our lives, they keep us humble, and cause us to rely heavily upon Him and not our own strength. But we must have faith that God can accomplish *everything* He has planned for us in spite of our weakness!

I often say that **“I am not yet Healed, but I am Held”!** - **“Held until I’m Healed”!**

Held by His power, held by His strength, held by His love, Held in His hands.

I believe that in my weakness, there is no better place to be than to be than held in the mighty hands of God because, His strength is made perfect in weakness, so “*When I am weak, then I am strong.* *How about you?*