

“The Way of the Gospel”
II Corinthians 12:7–10
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I am going to do a study on II Corinthians 12 which came to mind when I was discussing with my wife dealing with weakness in which we have been through some challenges lately. After our discussion the Lord directed me to this passage which is a remarkable testimony of the Apostle Paul when he was undergoing some trials and tribulations. So let's look at this passage from II Corinthians 12:1–10 which says *[1] I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. [2] I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. [3] And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— [4] and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. [5] On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— [6] though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. [7] So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. [8] Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. [9] But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. [10] For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Herein ends the reading of God's Word and may He continue to bless us as we study it together.

I want to begin by using an event in the sporting world. There is a very good baseball player named Bill Buckner. He died this past week of Lewy body dementia. He was 69 years old and was a very talented first baseman and left fielder for five teams when he played between the years of 1969 and 1990. He played the most prominently for the Chicago Cubs and the Boston Red Sox. In 1980 he won the national league batting title. In 1981 he hit the most number of doubles of any other player in major league baseball. In 1985 he achieved the second highest number of assists in all of baseball. He was just a really good baseball player. His career however is known for only one play.

Sadly, in the 1986 World Series the Boston Red Sox were playing the heavily favored New York Mets. That game went into extra innings for the teams were tied. Mookie Wilson of the Mets hit a soft grounder to the first baseman, Bill Buckner and sadly because he rushed the play the ball went right between his legs into left field. That error led the Mets player on third base to score and they won that sixth game which led to their momentum to when the seventh game for the title. One sports writer said ‘it remains one of the most remarkable plays in baseball history, long considered part of the curse on the Boston Red Sox that kept them from winning the series and led to years of fan anger and public mockery.’ Buckner became the scape goat for a frustrated fan base. He began receiving death threats. He was heckled and booed by some of his hometown fans for many years. Sadly, Buckner's career was pretty much identified with that and he had to deal with the humiliation the rest of his life.

In this study we'll be talking about someone else who was very talented and influential and who had himself to deal with humiliations and weaknesses throughout his career. Yet he did it not sadly, but gladly. It's an amazing story. How do you handle weaknesses, adversities, trials and persecutions? I know that some reading this are in desperate situations or about ready to break or just weary and tired of carrying some of the fallout from your past life. This can be very difficult and in this case we find the Apostle Paul speaking about his weaknesses in an interesting context.

In II Corinthians 12 Paul talks about this astounding experience that shook him so much that he describes it in the third person. He had the opportunity to see revelations directly from heaven or even visiting heaven because he wasn't sure if he went there bodily or saw it in a vision, but it was life changing. He says he was caught up in the third heaven and in his cosmology of that day the first heaven was considered the sky that we see around us. The second heaven was considered outer space where the stars are and the third heaven was actually in paradise. One commentator said this is the blissful abode within the very courts of heaven itself. That's where Paul went and he said he learned things that he was not permitted to tell.

As a side note, when you hear of people today who go to heaven where they have some kind of near death experience, they never say they can't speak about what happens for they blab about it a lot. I've always wondered what the difference is but that's a whole different sermon and we won't go there in this one. But Paul was convinced he couldn't say anything for the weight of the knowledge was too profound.

As a result Paul had great potential for conceit therefore he was by permission from God through Satan a thorn in the flesh. It was an affliction of some sort. This was not a punishment for something. It was much more of a discipleship and what we might identify and spoken of in Hebrews 12:10 which says *[10] For they (earthly fathers) disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness.* So Paul was not being scolded nor was it identifiable. It's not something we know.

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes has a wonderful commentary on II Corinthians and in this commentary he lists 23 options that this affliction might be. Over the centuries many commentators have come up with their idea of what Paul was actually struggling with. One of them thought it was ear aches or headaches. Augustine thought it was outward persecutions. Some of the early church fathers thought it was temptations of the flesh. Others believed it was eye problems or epilepsy. William Ramsey a couple of centuries ago thought it was reoccurring malarial fever. Some thought it was hysteria, hypochondria, gall stones, gout, rheumatism, sciatica, gastritis, and the list goes on. In other words, we don't know what his thorn in the flesh was.

If you ever hear a Christian teacher say dogmatically that Paul was struggling with a certain affliction you can smile because he doesn't know either. Great minds have struggled with this and debated it but many have come to the conclusion that we just really don't know what Paul was struggling with. I don't think the New Testament intends for us to understand and that's okay but Paul didn't take this lying down.

Paul did three things when this came upon him. He prayed persistently three times. He prayed passionately for he pleaded for it to be done away with. Thirdly, he prayed specifically that this would be taken away. God answered just as He had answered Jesus Christ in the garden of Gethsemane, for He said 'no.' God actually answered in a stunningly, glorious way so much so that the Apostle Paul would accept this affliction, this weakness, gladly. Paul reflected on

God's response when He said *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

The commentator Hughes says Paul's response was full of existential remiss for he commits himself to it without regret or reservation and enthusiastic willingness for the will of God whatever it may entail and this is the mark of genuine faith. It is very important that we see how Paul responded to this. We can say that we get this response of God to Paul's affliction where we get that we're weak, God is strong, we need help and He supplies help through various means, but will you boast about your weaknesses? Are you content with your weaknesses? When I am weak then I am strong? A psychological counselor may say to Paul, 'You're living in denial. You're out of touch with reality.' Sometimes we might think that too when we look at the debris in our life and see the struggles we've had.

As Paul reflects on how God responds he says *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. [10] For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* How are we to be contented when we don't feel the power of Christ or when we don't see Him working through us? All we see are our weaknesses, illnesses, broken relationships, adversity, loneliness, betrayal, losses or persecutions. Sometimes we feel pretty miserable.

It helps to notice a couple of things here. Paul doesn't say when he is weak he does strong things or he feels strong. If anything when I'm weak I'm tired, I'm weak, I feel vulnerable and I want it to end. Paul says it is better when I am weak for then I am strong. It's a profound statement and it's worth looking at for it seems that in times of weakness we are met with a fork in the road. In the midst of difficulty we can either take the way of pride or the way of humility. God was stirring Paul away from the path of pride because he knew the temptation it would be to be conceited – to be elated in a negative sense.

What does pride look like? We might say that when you're prideful that you're haughty or boasting or arrogant or narcissistic and those are all true but pride is far more subtle than that. I want to point out three things about pride. First there is the pride of knowledge. That is what Paul was especially concerned about for he had just been given these great revelations and it's easy for that to go to our heads because we're the smartest and we know more than everyone else. So that must mean we're superior.

C. S. Lewis back in the 1940s spoke of a chronological snobbery which he says afflicts our society and causes us to think newer is always better where later generations are always superior to earlier generations and that those with more knowledge are better than those who don't have the knowledge. There is nothing wrong with knowledge but if we manage it in the wrong way it can be very destructive.

We see people obsessed with knowledge everywhere in our society as they are gaining knowledge. We have cell phones, computers, the media and have the ability at our fingertips to gather all kinds of facts yet by far most of it is mostly nonsense. Yet as we learn and learn we can get the big head so to speak and think we really are something because we have our finger on all this information, when in fact it really doesn't mean anything, just that we have this information. It can make us feel prideful.

Sometimes this can happen with pastors. We have can the most number of books in our library and think we have more knowledge. Paul was aware of the danger. Paul wrote in I Corinthians 8:1–2, *[1] Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. [2] Anyone who claims to know something*

does not yet have the necessary knowledge. Paul knew that an abundance of knowledge could lead to pride when actually an abundance of knowledge ought to make us more and more humble, because the more we know the more we know what we don't know.

I remember how excited I was to go to seminary because I grew up in an environment where I didn't have a lot of access to theological training. I remember relishing the idea of studying under bigger minds than me and getting all that instruction. One of the oddities I noticed is that when I went to seminary I had many questions and when I finished seminary I had many more questions and many of those have never been answered to this day. Yet sometimes we think if we have more knowledge we will have more understanding and we are superior but in fact we remember humans have a lot of knowledge yet it's in the drop of a bucket compared to what God has and we should be humbled.

When we try to see the stars at night we should remember that God knows it all for He made it all and He named them all. When I think of what the future holds for me I wonder what my future will be like. Will I live here or there? How long will I live? Then I remember Psalm 139:16 which says *[16] Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.* I realize that every one of the hairs on my head are numbered by our God of infinite knowledge. All the knowledge we have and yet to have, ought to humble us to realize we know very little compared to what God truly knows. We know a lot and much more than our ancestors but we're just a drop in the bucket compared to our heavenly Father and that's the pride of knowledge that Paul was acutely aware of.

Paul was also aware of the pride of false identity. It is a term used by Tim Keller as a habit of identifying with our blessings so much that we forget that they are undeserved gifts. They are just blessings. Rather than take our identity from pride like when we think that job defines who we are or rather than enjoying our children we take their successes as a way of defining how successful we are. Perhaps you define yourself by your accomplishments when the only way we need to define ourselves is by our relationship with Christ. He is our identity. My identity should not be in my successes or failures or health or wealth or job or how much I have, etc. So when others have more than I have that's okay because I'm in Christ. I should not be comparing myself with others because I'm in Christ.

That is what we see from Galatians 2:19–20 which says *[19] For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; [20] and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* What a freeing thing it is to know that I am Christ's and He is mine, I have a home in heaven and therefore I don't need to be entangled with a false identity while I'm here. This leads to another temptation.

The third is the pride of life, meaning the outward life rather than the inward life. I am so tempted to critique my life by what is on the outside, what other people see and I don't pay enough attention to the inner life where I really live. It's easy as a Christian before my family and friends to just do the Christian stuff on the outside knowing it might be a far different reality on the inside.

Tim Keller gives an interesting illustration from the life of Judas Iscariot. Judas was the Disciple that betrayed Jesus. In John 13 Jesus told His Disciples at that first Lord's Supper that one of them would betray Him. He identified that person by taking a piece of bread and giving it to Judas who then got up and left. What is interesting is that the other Disciples were clueless. They saw the outer life and had no idea what was going on. They really didn't know there was a

problem with Judas. You might think they would have known and said ‘Oh Judas got the piece of bread. I remember that when we were sent out to cast out demons his demons didn’t come out very quickly.’ Or maybe when they prayed for healing the one he prayed for didn’t get well. But that wasn’t them. They had no idea because Judas had done the same miracles they had and heard the same teachings that they had. Judas in many ways even though there were some bumps in the road, responded the way they did, yet on the inside Judas was an empty shell.

The church is filled with people who are empty shells. They are like Christians for they will come to church, sing the hymns and do things that other Christians do but on the inside there is no life, no Christ. That is when we are sometimes so preoccupied with the outer life that we don’t pay proper attention to the inner life. Am I daily cultivating my inner life with Christ or am I empty life Judas? It is a very dangerous place to be. It is a very vulnerable place to be.

The Apostle Paul could have boasted with pride thinking he was better than everyone else but if so, when afflictions came he would have been buried in anger, bitterness, resentment and despair but that was not where he was. He chose the way of humility and it’s a remarkable picture to see the way of humility in Christ for the Gospel frees us and empowers us humbly to reject thinking first of ourselves but to first think of Christ. Because it is God who has placed me where I am, given me the life I have, allows me to make decisions and experience blessings plus failures. He allows me to have strengths but also weaknesses, to enjoy times of good health and then as the calendar begins to flip by to realize that good health won’t continue forever.

God says in James 1:2–4, [2] *My brothers and sisters, **whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy,** [3] because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; [4] and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.* Paul’s version of James in II Corinthians 12:9b which says [9b] *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.* In choosing the way of humility I learn a couple of astonishing truths.

One truth is that my weakness becomes the arena of Satan’s defeat. We see this in II Corinthians 12:7. Weakness may have been for Paul a messenger of Satan but by God’s grace it accomplished what Satan never would have wanted. John Piper writing on this text says ‘God uses demons to undo the design of the father of demons. He uses Satan to defeat Satan.’ And we get to watch it from the front row. It’s a remarkable thing.

We see it in Job. In Job 1 God invited Satan to consider His servant Job who was righteous. What did Satan do? Satan afflicted Job where he lost all his children, his livelihood and ultimately he lost his health. Job entered a period of great suffering, weakness and affliction due to all this yet Job says in Job 13:15a, speaking about God, [15a] *Though he slay me, I will hope in him.* I can just hear Satan saying ‘that wasn’t part of the plan, you’re supposed to be angry, depressed and bitter’ but Job still looks to the Lord, Maker of heaven and earth and all that is in it.

Think of the situation with Judas Iscariot. In Luke 22 we learn at that first Lord’s Supper when Jesus gave the bread to Judas it says in 22:3–6, [3] *Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve. [4] He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray him to them. [5] And they were glad, and agreed to give him money. [6] So he consented and sought an opportunity to betray him to them in the absence of a crowd.* Judas left to fulfil the conspiracy that was in the works to have Jesus arrested, tried, and hopefully destroyed for that was the plan of the religious leaders.

When Satan entered into Judas, Judas led into motion a process that would lead to Jesus’ arrest, a trial and ultimately a crucifixion but in that then came the resurrection where Jesus

broke the power of sin and death and provided a salvation for His people. It was a glorious event where both wickedness and good kissed, so to speak, and John Piper would write ‘the suicide of Judas was symbolically a suicide of Satan. Satan sealed his fate by entering Judas.’ It’s so true because it was a massive step towards Satan’s own destruction when he decided to enter Judas. So we see that our weaknesses become the arena of Satan’s defeat. Here God puts the father of all pride to work for Paul’s protection from pride.

It was also true with Jesus. In the death of Jesus Satan was disarmed and defeated. Satan is still causing problems and we need to be aware of him as believers but he was defeated at the cross and Satan helped the events come together so that the cross might be inactive. We see that Satan loses his greatest tool against you and me and that’s unforgiven sin. Satan loves to accuse us when we sin saying things like ‘you’re not worthy of God, you’re just a loser, you’ll never make it’ and Jesus comes through on the cross, forgives our sins and takes the ‘teeth’ out of Satan’s greatest tool against us.

Think of how Satan must have been pleased when that 18 year old girl named Joni Eareckson dove off an area misjudging the shallowness of the water and broke her neck in which she became paralyzed from the neck down. Satan thought he had gotten another Christian and was going to drag her family down, only to find she becomes one of the great Christian leaders especially in the area of disabilities. I have heard her speak a number of times and read several of her books. She is one of the most articulate defenses of understanding how to deal with tragedy, weakness and losses in our lives, all for God’s glory.

Think about how Satan must have thought when he took that crusty old politician who was guilty of crimes, thrown into prison and his name was Chuck Colson. Satan thought I’ve got this guy but Colson comes to Christ and begins to engage in prison ministry. Colson has a profound effect by the Holy Spirit as at least hundreds of thousands of prisoners have come to Christ and many others have been blessed through his ministry of apologetics. Satan loves to take out believers, crush them only to find that often their weaknesses become the arena of his own defeat.

A second observation on the way of humility is that my weaknesses become the credentials of God’s grace. Paul was looked down on in his day for he was a prominent teacher but he had a lot of opposition. He was stoned and beaten. He often would go to a town and great hostility would be shown against him, even by his own people. Many people thought he couldn’t be a prominent teacher because those tell the truth and have a life of ease and comfort and many love to come hear them. That wasn’t the case with the Apostle Paul and the skeptics used his experiences to show that he really didn’t have the credentials of ministry.

Paul would say ‘you are missing it for it is exactly those weaknesses, persecutions and difficulties that are my credentials of ministry’ because that’s how God works with His people. It proves that I am one of His and I represent Him. He boasted about what in his day made him look like a failure but those weaknesses were used by God to glorify God and therefore became a source of contentment and strength.

I’m sure many of you can testify that it was a time of weakness, hurt or pain when you first turned to the Lord Jesus Christ as you decided to turn from your sin and accepted Him as your Lord and Savior. It is something that we all need to do and for most of us it probably started in a time of weakness or difficulty. Jesus embraced us and we embraced Him and have had the privilege of following Him all of the rest of our days. My question is why do you think it starts that way? That’s a pattern that continues throughout our Christian life for as we are aware of weaknesses, failures and shortcomings we turn to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus says in Matthew 11:28 [28] *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden (weary, burdened), and I will give you rest.* He doesn't say 'come to Me those who have their act together.' This is the 'stuff' of powerful Christianity and makes a difference in the world, when my weakness becomes the credentials of God's grace. Paul writes in I Corinthians 1:28–31 [28] *God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, [29] so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. [30] And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, [31] so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."*

Do I anticipate that my weaknesses, failures, even persecution can become the stage of Christ's glory? John Piper says 'Paul's body and soul is the theater of Satan's shame and Christ's glory.' I may feel weak and helpless but does my contentment in the midst of that magnify His presence and power in my life, therefore in the end it's actually the weakness and difficulty that become the greatest source of assurance? Interestingly, in times where things are going really well people sometimes will think 'maybe I'm not a Christian or this really isn't true?' For it is those times of weakness when we reach out and God's presence is with us as God moves in to give wisdom, comfort or whatever the case may be that we say 'Jesus just may be in me.' He is my life and my salvation.

Barnes' Notes gives us from God's perspective 'the strength which I impart to My people is more commonly and completely manifested when My people feel that they are weak. It is not imparted to those who feel that they are strong and who do not realize their need of Divine aid.

Can you imagine the situation with Bill Buckner, the baseball player I mentioned at the beginning of this study? Since he recently died I was reading some of the accounts through the media on the internet and virtually every article I read headlined his obituary recounting the humiliation of that game where he let that ball get away and the other team won. Almost every article featured that picture of his humiliation yet I think the Apostle Paul would have smiled at that kind of thing. Buckner was a believer and his wife said this week after he died 'Bill fought with courage and grit as he did all things in life. Our hearts are broken but we are at peace knowing that he is in the arms of his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.'

The Buckner's had moved to get away from all the tribulation and humiliation to Boise, Idaho where he lived for many years. Ken Lewis, the director of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes there, said 'Buckner and his wife had been involved with FCA for 20 years. They would help get people to our bowl breakfast whether it was through sponsorships and just trying to get people to attend. Bill helped out at our FCA camps. You can imagine a middle schooler or high schooler getting some batting practice from Bill Buckner and he loved to do those kinds of things. You would never meet a nicer man than Bill. He and his wife would open up their home to us for so many events and they were so gracious and loving.'

Another good friend of Bill's, Gary Van Tol who was the baseball coach at Boise State said 'Bill will be missed but his legacy will always be remembered. He was a devoted Christian and his strong faith was always present and he is now with his Savior.' Most other people would go through what Bill Buckner did and they would be angry saying 'I don't deserve this' and it might be they would shake their fist at God but not so with those who know Christ. God has used Bill in a remarkable way within the baseball community as a kind, gracious and godly man for the Gospel's sake.

I want to challenge you not to underestimate how God can use you on the stage of where you are right now. It's remarkable when weaknesses and God's strengths kiss. It's usually in

those times when we're down and having a difficult time that we shine the most brightly. I had a wonderful little experience of that this past week. My mom is 92 years old and lives in an assisted living home in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She has had a host of medical problems and her memory is beginning to flake some yet she doesn't have dementia or anything like that but we have decided that the time has come to bring her to Birmingham where we are.

My wife was talking to one of the ladies at this assisted living place and the lady said 'We're really going to miss Julia because she has been such a blessing here in the friends she has made and the example she has shown.' My mom is a pastor's wife. She loves the Lord Jesus and she is at a time in her life where the wheels are coming off and her health is giving way. She has plenty of reason to complain due to the aches and pains in her life yet it was such a blessing to her what this director of this assisted living place would say. Here is a Christian who is stuck in a place she doesn't want to be but she is a blessing there and that gives glory to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Wherever you are look for the opportunity for God to work supernaturally, maybe not to change your circumstances or heal that disease or change that relationship but for Him to use you in a supernatural way that you might never possibly have imagined. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, I know that many are struggling mightily with difficulties and heartache and sometimes it's because of what has been done to us or something we have done. Lord, I pray You would give us great patience as You work that we would not be quick to simply throw down the gauntlet and demand that You change our circumstances but that You will change us in our circumstances and it will work in us and through us for Your glory. This we ask in Jesus' Name, and for His sake, Amen.

Power Point

I. Paul's astounding experience....

Where?

Result? He was given a thorn....

1. It wasn't punishment.
2. It isn't identifiable.

So Paul prayed...

Persistently; Passionately; Specifically.

II. We can choose the way of pride or humility.

The Way of Pride...

A. Pride of knowledge;
I Corinthians 8:1-2

B. Pride of false identity;
Galatians 2:20

C. Pride of life.
Remember Judas.

The Way of Humility in Christ...

A. My weakness becomes the arena of Satan's defeat (7).

B. My weakness becomes the credentials of God's grace (8).

I Corinthians 1:28–31

III. Conclusion.

- Do I anticipate that my weakness, failures, even persecutions can become the stage of Christ's glory? (10)
- I may feel weak and helpless, but does my contentment magnify His presence and power in my life?
- It becomes a source of assurance for me.