

“The Christian’s Mysterious Power”

II Corinthians 12: 7-10

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June 27, 2023

Sunday Morning Sermon

#42290

Only one word I should add to that introduction is that I am the interim president of the Gospel Coalition. I told the Board, “Can’t you find somebody qualified to take this job?” And so we’ll be trying to get the Gospel Coalition a qualified president one of these days soon. We appreciate your prayers for us. It is a great honor, again, to be with this great congregation, especially during this special season in your life, and you know that those of us in Memphis, Tennessee, who love you and care for you, and Alison and myself in particular, we want you to know that we think of you very often and we pray for you often in these special days.

And I thought it’d be good for us to look at the life of the Apostle Paul as he follows Jesus, because that’s exactly what we want to do in every stage of life and every situation in life. And I’m going to ask you to take your Bibles and turn to II Corinthians chapter 12. And while you’re turning there, let me just say that I think it’s a good thing that Briarwood and many other churches will be thanking the Lord for our country as July 4th approaches, that we celebrate the wonderful things He has done over these almost 300 years of leading our country. We also pray for the great weaknesses that we see in our country. But you realize that as an American, you’ve been developed in certain ways. You live in a country that is the most powerful military presence in all of world history. You live in a country that has the most powerful economic engine, the greatest economy of any country in the history of the world, and we’re used to living in these centers of great power, and we value power, and we learn how to use power as Americans. We use it in business. We use it in personal relationships. And I’m all for the proper use of power, including military power. I don’t think we should be laying down our arms and inviting chaos to happen around the world. And I think we should enjoy the gift of the economy that we’ve been given and be sure that we share it with the poor and so on. But sometimes there’s a little bit of a disadvantage. And living in a privileged environment like we do in an environment that has great sources of power in it because it can negatively affect the way that we look at our own lives and especially our lives lived before the face of God. And I think we’ll see the Apostle Paul dealing with that phenomenon, even with the Corinthians.

Now, the Romans were not as powerful as the Americans, but they were the most powerful empire of their day, and people in the Roman Empire, and in the Greco-Roman culture very much valued power. It was an age of appreciation for power, much like ours, and especially individual power and individual assertion. It was considered a dishonor and a shame to be poor, and it was considered a thing worthy of your life to pursue wealth, because wealth led to power. That was in the Greco-Roman culture. And Corinth was probably at the epicenter of this aspiration for power and wealth and sexual pleasure as well. It was a relatively new city and had been rebuilt during the time of Julius Caesar, largely by freed slaves, “freedmen,” and they were very concerned about their own upward mobility and pretty soon they built a city that was shining like alabaster. It was kind of a combination of Las Vegas and New Orleans and everything else you could think of. It was kind of a wild and hairy city, but it was

a city of great prosperity and a city where people boasted of their individual accomplishments. And the Greek philosophers had taught them to do so because to boast of yourself was to help yourself reach another level of social strata. And you wanted to climb in culture, that was considered to be an honorable thing to do. So, everyone would boast about themselves, they would boast about their city, they would boast about the Roman Empire, they would boast about their leaders.

Well, the same thing that happens to us in this country where we are influenced by our culture. The same thing was happening in Corinth, the church there that Paul had planted, and he had spent 18 months ministering to these people. They too were heavily influenced by their culture, a culture of boasting and self-promotion, of individual freedom and license, and a culture of seeking wealth and power. And the way it affected them, among other things, was that they really appreciated some preachers who followed Paul after he left, came to Corinth, and they were dressed better than Paul. They were more handsome than Paul. They were trained in classical oratory. And they also manipulated the people to support them financially. So, in the people's minds, that made those people more important because they demanded money for what they did. Paul did it free, and they despised him for it. But these super apostles demanded remuneration and they actually spoke abusively to them and every once in a while, even struck them. I mean, it was amazing how abusive they were, but the people loved it because they thought, there's a man of power. These are super apostles.

So, they were beginning to believe this about the Christian life, that it is a life of power. Paul had a lot of things he had to deal with, with the Corinthians. You know the story, it's too long to recount this morning. But as we come to II Corinthians, he's writing to a particular group of the church, not the whole church, but a particular group in the church that is still being co-opted by these power preachers, these boasters. And it was making the Corinthians themselves boasters.

What is Paul going to do? Well, it's interesting what he does. He takes their very category of boasting. He says, "Okay, you want me to boast?" because they criticized him, because he didn't boast. He didn't charge them anything. He was pretty ugly. And he was a simple preacher. He didn't use classical rhetorical forms or oratorical forms. He was very plain and simple in his speech. They despised him. So what did he do? You would think that he would come compete with those super apostles and try to clean himself up and stand a little taller and learn some classical oratory. He does just the opposite. He says, "You want me to boast? Okay, let me tell you how I'm going to boast. Do you know one time or actually five times in my life I got whipped 30, 40 times less one by the Jews. I was imprisoned three times." In other words, he starts to name everything the Greco-Roman people would have despised as signs of humiliation. He goes through all of this humiliation. And he says, "Let me boast about that. I got shipwrecked three times. I was at sea. Didn't know what I was going to do. And I've been beaten up by people. I've been thrown out of cities." He just goes and brags at the end of Chapter 11, and at the end of Chapter 11, he kind of hits the high point, or we should say the low point when he says, "Oh, you want me to boast? Well, let me tell you one of my greatest acts. I was preaching in the city, and of course, instead of having multitude of converts, they had to lift me over the wall in a basket to get away. So, you want me to boast? I'll boast." So, you see what Paul's doing? He says, "I'll show you how to boast. You boast of the things that make you weak instead of the things that make you strong."

Now, Paul couldn't avoid the fact that there was tremendous spiritual strength in his life, and he had had amazing experiences. But he shows us how he's going to deal with that. At the beginning of Chapter 12, right before our text, that begins with verse 7, he says to them, "Let me tell you about a man I know. This man 14 years ago had an amazing experience. He was taken to the third heaven. He was taken to paradise. And the things he saw and the things he heard are so spectacular, he couldn't even tell anybody about them. They were secret." Now, who is this man? Well, it's obvious who it is. If the man couldn't tell anybody about his experience, how does Paul know? Paul's the man. But he talks about this man in the third person because he doesn't want to boast even about his spiritual experiences. And he doesn't want them to boast about him. So, he says, "With these great spiritual experiences I had, let me tell you what the Lord did so that I couldn't even boast about that." And that brings us to our text today.

It's a very important element of the Christian life. If you're not a Christian this morning, this will give you a fair warning about what it means to come to Christ. There's a big price to be paid in this. You'll see it in the text. For those of us who are believers. Once again, we go back to the fundamentals of what it means to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Would you stand with me as we look at II Corinthians Chapter 12, beginning with verse 7 and reading through verse 10. Let us pray. Father, this is your word. It is infallible, it is authoritative, it's perfect, it's everything to us. It's life. Please speak life to our souls and renew us even as we wait before You, help us to take before You now all of our burdens and cast them upon You because You care for us. Speak, oh, Lord, for Your servants listen. Through Jesus Christ, Amen.

II Corinthians 12 verse 7, hear the Word of God. "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. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 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. 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."

"All flesh is like grass and all its glory is like the flower of the field. The grass withers and the flower fades. But the Word of our God stands forever." Amen. Please be seated.

This past week, I was praying with a woman who has stage four breast cancer and is kind of in a fight for her life. Talked with a man whose mother is dying and has Alzheimer's. He is trying to figure out how to take care of her. This past week, I conducted a funeral for a now widow and her two daughters, for a husband and father, a man who was a very fine physician in our city. This week, a friend of mine made it known that he's probably going to have to take Chapter seven bankruptcy. This week, I talked to a number of pastors. One of them is a man who's serving a very fine church and just some irrational hostility is being perpetrated in the church, even by leaders in the church. It just seems nothing less than demonic to me.

That's just one week, and I know that your weeks have also had situations in them that are very deep and troublesome to you, and sometimes we as believers can't help but ask, "Lord, what are you up to? What's the strategy here? What's the meaning of it now? And what's the

endgame?” And in the midst of Paul's defense of his ministry and of his own approach to these troubles in life and his own approach to the meaning of it, it seems to me that we get the secret of the Christian life and in particular the secret, the mystery of the Christian's power in his life.

So, the Apostle in verse 7 and 8, first of all, is saying this to us, that God gives us thorns in the flesh for a particular purpose, to humble us, to keep us, as Paul says, from being conceited, or the word would be to be inflated, or to be exalted. So instead of being exalted by my historical spiritual experiences, instead of being inflated by them, or to think I'm something special because of it, Paul said, “God gave me a thorn in the flesh.”

It was from God. It's clear from the passive voice of the verb. He is speaking of a divine gift, just as God said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job?” It was a God suggestion. God doesn't create evil. He's too pure to look upon evil and he cannot tolerate wrong, says Habakkuk. He is not the source of evil, but He does control all of evil for His holy and good purposes, and He controls the evil that affects us, for our good and for His glory. And here He gives Paul a thorn in the flesh. You may say, “Well, I would have thought of anybody that had conquered the pride problem, Paul would have conquered it.” Paul says, “No, I didn't. I had to have divine help.” And here was the help he got, a very painful thorn in the flesh. Now, when we think of thorn, you probably think of the rosebush and how it pricks your hand when you try to cut the rose off. That's not this word. This word actually is better translated stake, S-T-A-K-E, like a wooden pole that's shaven off to have a point like a spear. And Paul is saying, “God gave me a spear in my side. He gave me a thorn, a stake that's very painful.” And you can see how painful it is because Paul pleads three times, “God, deliver me from this.”

Now, one would think if anybody has a good argument to be delivered from such a thorn, it would be the apostle Paul. Paul lived an amazing life. He's got to be one of your heroes. You've got to study this man, the greatest evangelist after Christ who ever lived, the greatest church planter in the history of the world. This man was phenomenal. If anyone had ground to stand on, you'd think it'd be the Apostle Paul. And he pleads with the Lord. And look, this man knows the Lord. Have you been to heaven? Well, he did. He went and came back. Have you had a personal conversation with the Lord, other than some who thought that He was speaking to you? I mean, you actually heard his voice? Paul heard it four times. Not just the road to Damascus. He had three other occasions when he had a personal conversation with Jesus Christ. So, Paul has a great relationship with Christ. He's lived a wonderful life up to this point in the mid-fifties. He has ground to stand on, “Lord, please set me free from this.” Furthermore, Paul has the most important work on the planet. He has the most important job on the planet right now, and this thorn in the flesh is impeding his ministry. And he has every ground to say, “Lord, set me free from this so the Word can go forth.” And the Lord says, “No.” And the Lord says no to you sometimes, too. And Paul gives us the reason for that. We'll see you in just a moment. And there's a reason in your life, too, that he says no to you, when for all the good reasons you can think of, you plead with him to set you free from a particular burden.

Now, scholars have debated for centuries about what this thorn was, thorn in the flesh. Then therefore, people think what may have been his eyes that never worked right after he was on the road to Damascus and went blind. Some think it was rheumatoid arthritis or gout. I mean,

there's a list of medical subjective thoughts that you can't believe. I mean, that make up a whole volume. Some, like Calvin, thought it was a spiritual struggle. It was a spiritual struggle in the flesh. And he asked the Lord to deliver him from this raging flesh problem he was dealing with. But I kind of like John MacArthur's speculation. I like it. I'm not as sure as John MacArthur is about it, but I think it makes good sense. MacArthur says, "If you look at the text, it says a thorn in the flesh and then it says a messenger from Satan." And he says, "That's epexegetical," in other words, the messenger from Satan is describing what the thorn is. And MacArthur says, "The word messenger is the Greek word *aggelos*, which means angel or messenger and that's always a sentient being, either a human being or an angel." And he says it's from Satan. So doesn't it make sense that it's a messenger or an angel from Satan we know to be demons? Furthermore, MacArthur suggests that these demons are inspiring the very super apostles that Paul has been talking about in chapters 10, 11, 12, and 13. Makes perfect sense to me. I'm just not real sure.

But it does make sense that Paul, wherever he went, preaching the gospel, and if you've observed public gospel preachers or teachers, you've noticed the same phenomenon wherever they go, they get pushback. They get some rational complaints or questions, and often they get irrational, hostile complaints and criticisms. Everywhere Paul when he got that, and so it makes sense to me that he would have continually been pleading, "Lord, deliver me from this. These people are holding me back. These false apostles and these critics are causing confusion in the church. It's harder to lead them, to pastor them, to teach them. Lord, three times, please deliver me just like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, three times pleaded that this cup would pass from Him." But God has determined that the thorns in our flesh are for His glory and for our good. And you can see in verse 9a, why God didn't answer Paul's prayer positively. He answered Paul's prayer. He answered it negatively. And look at 9a with me. Here's what God said to Paul. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

So this is the second major doctrine I want you to pick up from the text. The first one was in verses seven and eight. God gives us thorns to humble us. He wants us to be humble. He wants us to lay aside our conceit. He does not want us to promote ourselves like the Corinthians, to promote ourselves like those who believe the only doctrine that's relevant in our society today, is your individual freedom. He wants to push against that and teach Christians, we're quite different. And the Lord gives us thorns in the flesh that we will not be conceited. But secondly, God leaves our thorns in place to show us His grace and power.

So you want to know why you have these thorns in the flesh, even when you've prayed to be delivered from them? The first reason is he wants you to know grace from him. What's the connection? The connection is this. When you and I have a proper self-assessment, I think it was Ann Landers who said, "When you come home and your dog is doing backflips and barking with joy, don't think you're the greatest person in the world." We all by nature, tend to vaunt ourselves and look at the entire world as a theater for our personal pleasure and God is teaching us that the theater is for some other purpose, it's for His glory. And you will glorify him by having a proper self-assessment, which makes you then a very humble person. You don't have to imagine anything to be humble. No, just be real and you will be humble. Number one, you're a creature, not the creator. Number two, you're a sinful creature. And number three, you're only saved because you had nothing to do with it and someone had

grace and mercy upon you, and you didn't deserve it. For all three of those reasons, you should be very humble.

And when you have proper self-assessment, you know that you're helpless. You can do nothing on your own to save your biggest world problems. Then you know how much God loves you. Then you know that His love is very gracious. It's not just loving you because you loved him. It's not just like romantic love where it's mutual. And your love builds upon each other's love. No, this is a love that's unilateral. We love God because he first loved us. And we learn His grace when we learn how unworthy we are of it.

Secondly, Paul says, "Not only did he say to me, My grace is sufficient for you, but he went on to explain, My power is made perfect in your weakness." We think our power is made perfect in our power. Our power is perfected by more power, more influence, more money, more pleasure. And living in a privileged environment, of course, makes it much worse for us. In this case, we have the same problem the Corinthians had. We're influenced by the aspirations and ambitions of everyone around us, and we begin to distort the Christian life and the Christian power. Well, Paul is saying, "I had to learn this, that my spiritual power was not based upon my great experiences of going to the third heaven. My spiritual power was not based on my doctrinal purity. My spiritual power was certainly not based upon my good looks and great speaking ability, My spiritual power is based on my weakness and my knowledge that I need a Savior, I need a Lord, I need the power of the Holy Spirit in my life. My power, says God, is made perfect, brought to completion, fulfilled in human weakness." So Paul says, "That's why I boast of all my humiliations, because when I do, I'm surrendering my power and I'm claiming His power. And His power is infinitely greater than mine."

As Paul says earlier in this letter, "We have this treasure in jars of clay." So the treasure is Christ in us. We're the breakable, fragile clay. We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing power is not from us, but from Him. So Paul says, "This is what I had to learn, that the thorn that was inhibiting my ministry and bringing me great misery in life, that I prayed from which to be delivered, was not answered in the affirmative so that I would know God better by His grace and his power."

So when you have suffered great loss and it goes without saying Briarwood Presbyterian has suffered great loss. You lost the Barkers, you lost the Cheelys, you lost Harry. Where's our strength? I'll tell you where your strength is. And this thorn in the flesh will prove it to you. The power is from Him, and it always was.

So what do we learn from this? Well, so often in our culture, people try to exercise spiritual power in different ways. And we're subject to this. We're at least tempted. I know people who say that when we do international evangelism, we should do power evangelism, where our preaching is always attended by works of miracles and so on, Benny Hinn style. I'm saying, "Really? You think that you have to do the super apostle thing in order to promote the Gospel of Christ?" I think Paul is speaking otherwise. Some say, "You know, we really need to have some slick worship services. You know, no mistakes. Everything just perfect. Entertain the people. That's what they want. And the church will be filled." Some say, "You know, the way we've got to tackle this national problem is with our political involvement." I'm all for politics and I'm all for your being involved in politics. What I'm not for is your thinking or I'm thinking that the way in which we're going to advance the Kingdom of God and our spiritual life is through political intrigue. It'll never happen. You can try it, but it will never be

successful for the reasons Paul is stating. Some of our more professional business people would say, "You know, what the church has got to do is get better organized, we need a little strategic organizational management here. Look at these churches. They're just so poorly run. Good heavens. If you just do that, you'll find tremendous power." Some say, "Well, no, it's the need for academic sophistication. We need to be a little bit more academically sophisticated in the way we present things."

That reminds me of Frank Barker's history. Those of you who knew him well, you'll remember that when he came here during the summer to help this little group of people who wanted to maybe start a church while he was still in seminary, they wanted him to stay and become the pastor. And he said, "No, I've got a PhD planned and it's already funded. It's a free PhD and I'm going to do that." They said, "But we want you to be there!" "No, I'm going to go do the PhD." So Frank goes to one of the seminary professors, and the professor says, "So what do you want to do, Frank?" Frank says, "I want to do a PhD." And the Professor says, "So you want to be an academic?" And Frank said, "No, I'm planning to be a pastor." "Well, if you're planning to be a pastor, Frank, why do you think you need a PhD?" And Frank said, "Well, he said, the message I preach is really tough. I mean, I believe you need to you have to know Jesus to go to heaven. And I believe that if you don't know Jesus, you're going to hell. He said, I think if I had a Ph.D. after my name, that might go down a little easier with some folks." Here's what Frank's mentor told him. He said, "Frank, PhDs don't get people to heaven. The Word of God does." That's the reason Frank was here, that's the reason we're here because someone knew where the power is. The Word of God is the sword of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit applies the Word of God to people's hearts when it's shared. Prayer is God's means by which He advances the gospel around the world. You're back to meat and potatoes, ladies and gentlemen, the word and prayer are the power of the Holy Spirit. That's what it means in your personal life, your family life, your church life. This is the power of God. It's not what you do to gussy it up. It is He who brings the grace and the power.

Now, lastly, look with me at verses 9b and 10. We've learned that God gives us thorns to humble us, God leaves our thorns in place to show us His grace and power, in verses 9B and 10, we see that the thorns God gives us lead us to His praise. The thorns God gives us lead us to His praise. It's very interesting, isn't it? If you'll just follow the little history here of Paul with his sufferings from verse 7 to verse 10. In 7, he's bowed down with the weight of the world, praying, "God, please deliver me from this." When you get to verse 10, you see that he's actually boasting in the thorns in his flesh. He's boasting about his weaknesses. Look at the first part of verse 10. He says, "For the sake of Christ" ... I'm sorry...9B. "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." It is when we not only acknowledge, but we proclaim our weaknesses and our need of Christ that the power of Christ, the Word here is tabernacle, it's the same word that you get in John Chapter 1, "And the word became flesh and tabernacled among us." When we boast in our flesh, in our weaknesses, in our humiliations, the power of Christ tabernacles with us.

You know the name Saint Francis of Assisi. He was a monk, but he was a great preacher. And during his years there were tremendous revivals throughout Italy and southern Europe. He traveled with a fellow monk who was kind of his aide de camp or his valet, I guess you could say, but a friend. And this friend, Masseo, was also used by Francis to keep Francis humble. So one time they're walking along the dirt road and Masseo says, he says to St. Francis,

“Francis,” he says, “Francis, I don't understand it.” Francis said, “You don't understand what?” And he said, “Everybody wants to listen to you. Everybody wants to hear you. Everybody wants to be with you, and there's... I can't understand why?” Here is Francis's answer to him. Francis bowed his head and worshipped the Lord, and he said, “As His most holy eyes have not found among sinners any smaller man, nor any more insufficient or more sinful, therefore, He has chosen me to accomplish the marvelous work which God has undertaken. He chose me because He can find no one more worthless.” I boast of my weaknesses because then the power of Christ tabernacles with me.

But notice now, verse 10, he says, “I not only boast”... this is not mechanical on Paul's part, it's become increasingly intuitive to him, he's learned it. And it's not just academic. It's something that's in his being now, he boasts, and then he says, “and I'm content. I'm therefore pleased. I'm delighted with my insults, my persecutions, my weaknesses.” Why? Look at the first three words in verse 10. “For the sake of Christ,” he says. That's five words, “For the sake of Christ.”

What does he mean for the sake of Christ? Ladies and gentlemen, this is the main point. I don't just humble myself because I want to experience God's grace and power. I do. That's not the main reason. The main reason you do it is for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. Why is it for His sake? Because brothers and sisters, what Jesus did was to surrender His great strength and power and to lay it aside that He might empower you. He did this by the cross.

Fleming Rutledge, a scholar and author, wrote a magnum opus on the crucifixion. I don't agree with everything she said in that book, but I agree with this. She said “In the Roman Empire there were probably 10,000 crucifixions. It was brutal, but it was common among the Romans.” And she asked, “Does anyone here know the name of any of those 9999 people, other people who are crucified? Nobody knows any of their names, which is the very point of crucifixion,” she says. “It is brutal and dehumanizing, and the very object of crucifixion is to remove someone's name from the annals of history. It's as though they didn't exist. They're a nothing.” But you remember One, because when they put Him in the tomb, He didn't stay but about three days and He came out by the power of the resurrection from God, and He laid aside all of His privileges and all of His great might that He may be raised up by the power of God so that He then has that power to raise you up and raise me up. And this is the reason when Paul first went to the Corinthians, he said, “I chose to know nothing among you but Jesus Christ and Him crucified so that you would know the power is not from man, but it's from God.” And the man who is preaching had to learn that himself. It is the cross of Christ. The crux of the matter.

This is the power of God through human weakness and what every human being is called to do and what every Christian has claimed that they've done it is to take up that cross and to duplicate that experience in our own period on this planet, to lay aside our power, to boast in our weakness so that His strength, His resurrection power is demonstrated through us, which gives Him the glory for what He did.

It's a massively weighty calling. Nothing in life is more important than this, and there are many distractions and temptations. But Paul says, “God has been good to me. He gave me a thorn in the flesh to keep me from denying the cross, to keep me down. And now I've stopped pleading and I now boast because of His grace and power in my life and because He's



demonstrating His own glory through my Christian life.” That's the invitation for everyone here. Come, come, deny yourself, take up His cross, follow him.

Let us pray. Father, It is with joy and gratitude that we bow our heads. Because even in the midst of suffering and grief and sorrow and pain, your purposes are ever clear before us because of your infallible word, which teaches us the meaning of every component of life, including our sufferings. So we now, with the Apostle Paul, in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ, would renounce the powers of this world and of the underworld, and we would seek Your power and grace alone in our lives, by which we then will glorify You. We would lay aside whatever glory we would seek for ourselves, that we may bring glory to You alone.

Now, Father, may Your grace and power rest upon these dear people. May they know You have tabernacled among them. May they take, oh Lord, all of the thorns in their flesh and turn back to you with boasting in Jesus Christ, for we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.