Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Paul's Humility on Display
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 11:30-12:4
Code: 47-81

Well, we have been studying the New Testament, of course, for many years and we have been discussing the book of 2 Corinthians, it seems like, for many years. And we're still in 2 Corinthians chapter 11, I would just encourage you to take your Bible, or one that's handy there in the pew, and turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 11.

What we do, for those of you who are guests with us, is we kind of go through the Scripture just paragraph by paragraph and let God speak to us in this time His own Word. The Bible is the Word of God, it is without error, it is authoritative in our lives and we have learned to love and to trust and to submit and obey God's Word with the greatest amount of joy because it brings such profound blessing on our lives.

Some of the Scripture, of course, is intensely doctrinal. It deals with great sweeping issues like the nature and character of God and of Christ and redemption and the work of the cross and the resurrection and great theological themes such as we'll be dealing with tonight. Some of the Scripture, on the other hand, is...is narrative, it's sort of anecdotal, it has to do more with practical matters of life and how we conduct ourselves and how we live and how we deal with the issues of life and the issues of ministry. And 2 Corinthians falls into that latter general category. It is a letter that is not...it's written by the apostle Paul, the great apostle who wrote thirteen books of the New Testament, it's written by the apostle Paul, it doesn't have doctrinal issues in it, it's a relatively long book, as Paul's letter go, having 13 chapters. But really there isn't any part of it that is dealing with great doctrines or great profound truths about the nature of God or the character of redemption. With the exception of a brief section in chapter 5, it's pretty much practical. It gives us tremendous insights into how a very godly man conducted himself in the face of tremendous opposition and hostility. And it had come to the place in writing to the Corinthian church, to which this epistle was sent, it had come to the place where Paul was being forced to defend himself. He had been the founder of the church. Of course he had been their beloved teacher, he had spent nearly two years there getting things started. He had written them three letters in the past, one of them is in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians, there were two other letters that are not included in the New Testament, no inspired letters, but nonetheless personal and important letters. This is the fourth letter written to them. They had a wonderful relationship, he was their pastor, their teacher, their trainer. He was the one God used to bring them to an understanding of salvation. He was the one who had formulated all the

foundational truth in that church.

But once he had left, some false teachers had come. And, of course, we know false teachers are ubiquitous in the world, they are everywhere all the time because Satan is the great liar and the father of lies and he works against God by propagating lies through false teachers. And as happened so often in Paul's ministry, false teachers came sweeping in and they begin to represent themselves as the true teachers, the ones who really represented God, the ones who really preach the truth and that Paul was a fake and a fraud and a liar. He was therefore forced into doing something he really didn't like to do. He was forced into having to compare himself to them. He was forced into having to reassert his credentials and to prove again to the Corinthians that he, in fact, was the true messenger of God and they were not. And that's what we find him doing here in the eleventh chapter.

And there is a sense in which this is just a piece of history and you might ask, "Well, what value does it have for us? I understand the situation, the Corinthians were being assaulted by false teachers teaching lies that would turn people away from God, away from Christ, away from the truth and Paul was the teacher of truth, the true apostle of Christ, and he...he was the one they needed to listen to, they needed to trust, they needed to hear because he brought to them the true Word of God, I understand that. But what does that have to do with us?"

Well it has everything to do with us in the sense that Satan's tactics aren't any different today than they were then. And we still today have to trust the apostle Paul because we still sit at his feet as our teacher, not through his speaking, of course, because he's long with the Lord, but through his writing. It's important that we trust the apostle Paul. It's important that we understand the character of this man who is behind these thirteen letters, thirteen inspired letters of the New Testament which are so precious to us because they are the Word of God to us, upon which we are still very dependent. And beyond that, what we see in Paul's life as he deals with these issues is a model of Christian character, the man was the noblest of Christians and we learn so much from him.

In this particular section of chapter 11 and chapter 12, he is forced to show himself superior to the false teachers. He has been pushed into this, he doesn't like this. In fact, he gave almost a chapter-long series of disclaimers saying how foolish, how finite this whole enterprise was of having to defend himself. He didn't like it. He didn't like to speak of himself in superlative terms. He didn't like to boast himself. He was a humble man. He didn't like to compare himself with others. He didn't like to have to show his superiority. But he had been forced to do it. They were claiming to be superior, he had to reassert the truth.

And as he does it, it's a most remarkable insight. Here is a man forced to boast. And in so doing he manifests such amazing humility that this may be one of the greatest illustrations of humility in all of

Scripture. It's easy to be humble when you're a nobody. It's easy to be humble when you're inferior. It's very challenging to be humble when you're somebody uniquely called by God, uniquely gifted and when you have been exalted as THE apostle of Jesus Christ. It's unique to be able to boast about your superiority in such a way as to manifest the noblest of all virtues, which is humility. And that's what he does. So we're learning a lot about humility as well as learning about dealing with false apostles and the conflict between lies and the truth.

So let's go back to chapter 11. And let me just pick it up at verse 23 with just a brief reference. Here we find Paul sort of thrust into having to compare himself with false teachers. So he starts out, "Are they servants of Christ?" And just saying that bothered him, so he added parenthetically, "I speak as if insane." It is insanity to even think of them as servants of Christ, after all false apostles, it says in Scripture, represent Satan. Over in verse 13 of chapter 11 they are called false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. Verse 14, they're like Satan who disguises himself as a an angel of light. So they really are servants of Satan, they're servants of the darkness, they're servants of lies. And so when he says, "Are they servants of Christ?" he has to say it by way of comparison, he has to add, "This is insanity to even speak like that, but for the sake of argument, are they servants of Christ? I more so." And then he says, "In far more...in far more..." and so he goes on all the way down to chapter 12 verse 13 to speak about his superiority to the false apostles. He is superior to them.

Now this is a remarkable passage, as I showed you, because as he force...as he is forced to boast about his superiority, he never ever gives away his humility. It is very remarkable. And you would assume, I mean it's just a sort of basic assumption, you would assume that if a man was going to demonstrate his superiority, he'd pick all of the highlights of his life. He would pick the highlights of his youth, the highlights of his educational experience, the highlights of his accomplishments and achievements and he would get a stack of corresponding letters from people who would commend him for whatever great influences and achievements he had made within the purview of their experience. That's how it's mostly done. In fact, I was talking to somebody the other day who was saying to me, "You know, I would like you to give me a list of all your accomplishments." My response to that is, "I really don't think you want a list of all my accomplishments, I'd like to be a little more selective than that." But even a list of all of my good accomplishments was asked for and I found myself sort of struck by the fact that here I am in this passage and Paul is about to boast about his life and how am I going to do that in the way that Paul did it if I give the typical approach to this, which is all your educational stuff and all the things you've done, the books you've written, the places you've gone and famous people you've met and blah-blah, blah-blah.

So I found myself wanting to learn from the apostle Paul and emulate this marvelous man. When Paul is given the opportunity to show his credentials, here's what he gives. Number one, first he starts with his experience of suffering...his experience of suffering. He could have said, "Well, you know, I was raised in a Gentile environment, I'm multi-lingual. I am a Jew, I am a Pharisee, was a Pharisee, I

know the law of Israel forwards and backwards. I sat at the feet of Gamaliel, the leading Jewish teacher. I am a student of theology. I have been profoundly and well trained, etc., etc., etc. I'm a man of the world. I've lived in the Gentile community. I've lived in the Jewish community. I was a man of...with great authority. I had the authority of the Jewish establishment to go about and persecute people who named the name of Jesus Christ. I carried papers from the authorities. I am a..." He doesn't talk about any of those notable features of life that we would tend to lean on. He starts out with his experience of suffering.

Here he goes in verse 23. "Are they servants of Christ? I far more." Why? "Far more labors, far more imprisonments. Beaten times without number. Often in danger of death. Five times received 39 lashes. Three times beaten with rods. Once stoned. Three times shipwrecked. A night and a day floating in the ocean, is what he mans, after a shipwreck. Frequent journeys and dangers from rivers, robbers, countrymen, Gentiles, in the city, in the wilderness, on the sea among false brethren." Verse 27, "Labor, hardship, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, without food, cold, exposure." This is his curriculum vitae, this is his CV, his experience of suffering. And I remind you that the truest indication of a man of God is his suffering inevitably because if he is a man of God and he proclaims the truth, he will elevate the hostility of the kingdom of darkness and he will experience persecution and difficulty. And that's exactly what Paul is saying.

You want to know whether I'm an apostle of the truth? Look at what I've suffered. You want to know whether I faithfully speak the Word of God? Look at the hostility I have generated. There's no way to come into Satan's world and the whole world lies in the lap of the evil one, John says, there's no way to come into this evil world, proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and the truth of God and not elevate satanic hostility and not have the system against you, which is in the hands of the evil one.

So his first credential was his experience of suffering. We've already studied that, just reviewing. The second credential, verses 28 and 29, was his experience of sympathy. And then he says, "Apart from such external things as the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches, who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense contern...concern?" A little footnote to point one, typically false prophets get rich. Typically successful false prophets get very comfortable. They don't live in a world of hostility and persecution, they live in a world of comfort and wealth and prosperity. Why? Because false prophets are part of the system, so therefore the system is not hostile to them. False prophets tend to flourish, be successful, draw huge crowds, be thought of as great men, hailed as heroes. True prophets, true men of God tend to suffer persecution, hostility, false accusation and sometimes even physical harm.

The second thing about false prophets is they're not sympathetic at all. They abuse people. They use people. They manipulate people. They take advantage of people. They take their money. They take their lives. They take their souls. They take anything they can get. Like the Jewish leaders who

devoured widows' houses, false prophets always take advantage of people. And the more helpless people are, and the more witless people are, the more he'll take advantage of them. Widows being sort of emblematic of the poorest of people and the most unprotected of people were the special prey and still are of false prophets. Today they do it differently, they get on television and they manipulate the minds of people who don't have much to give what they have to make them rich.

Paul was just the opposite. He had sympathy for people. The pressure that he felt was his love for the church. Anybody who was weak made him feel weak. Anybody who was led into sin made him feel pain. Here's the mark of a true man of God, sympathy. He felt deeply the burden of moral, spiritual and doctrinal issues among believers. He loved the church. In chapter 11 verse 2 he says, "I'm jealous for you with a godly jealousy." In chapter 12 verse 15, amazing statement, "I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls." In other words, if I have to give my life for you, I'll gladly do it. Chapter 13 he says it again in verses 9 and 10, "We rejoice when we ourselves are weak, but you are strong." If I had it my way I'll take the weakness and give you the strength, that's how much I care about you. Verse 29 where it says, "Who is led into sin without my intense contern...intense concern," in the Greek original, "intense concern" means to be set on fire. Paul's heart was literally set on fire with holy indignation against anybody who led another believer into sin. So he says the true marks of the messenger of Christ are his experience of suffering and his experience of sympathy.

Let me take you to a third one, enough of the review, a third one and this is most amazing, and I'm not sure I fully understand the background to this historically, but I'll do the best I can with it, his experience of subjugation, or submission. You would think that if Paul was some great man of God, some great preacher, some great prophet and the false apostles would think this, too, that he would have a great presence and a great persona, and an overpowering force to him, that he would not be as they said he was in chapter 10 verse 10, "Unimpressive and contemptible as a speaker." The false prophets' idea and the Greek idea was that a great orator and a great influencer and a great leader had an overpowering persona and a great presence and a tremendous ability with words to deal with people, to dominate people, to control people, to control his environment, to achieve whatever he wanted to achieve by the sheer force of his leadership. I was reading a book on leadership this week and the guy who was writing it basically said this, "All great leaders are great communicators, and noone is a great leader who is not a great communicator because you cannot lead unless you can control people's thinking by the influence of your teaching." And he's exactly right. All great leaders are great communicators. You cannot be a great leader unless you can articulate and ennoble people to what it is that you have to say. You empower them by your words. You encourage them by your words. You strengthen them by your words, by your ability to articulate the vision.

And so, the idea in the Greek world was you have some powerful, influential leader who is a great communicator and he comes in and he sort of overpowers the environment and sweeps people away. Here was this sort of little Jewish guy with all of his funny little foibles who had been beaten and battered and hammered all over the place and was scarred all over his body because of what he had endured and he comes in and he doesn't say anything about human wisdom and he doesn't talk the talk that they're used to and he gives really no deference to Greek oratory or rhetoric and he doesn't practice with rocks in his mouth like Demosthenes and he just comes and preaches Christ crucified and he's very unimpressive and his speech is contemptible and they mock him because he doesn't have any of this. You would think Paul would want to say, "Well I'm going to tell you how forceful I can be, I'm gong to tell you how powerful an influence I can be. I want to tell you...how I can walk into a situation and take control of that situation, take control of those people and begin to dominate that situation." But he doesn't.

Look at verse 30, "If I have to boast I'll boast of what pertains to my weakness." Let's get back to the weakness again. "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me; and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and so escaped his hands." Isn't that an odd thing? I mean, why does he throw that strange incident in here?

Now remember what he's doing. He's trying to show himself superior to the false apostles. And he does it by talking about his suffering, which seems so contrary to what a normal approach would be, then talking about his sympathy, how everybody's pain makes him feel bad which typically is not the way leaders operate, they tend to be impervious to other people's pain. And now he, instead of showing his miracle power, tells a story about when he had to get lowered out of a window in a basket, which is a very embarrassing thing, sneaking out of town in a clandestine way in the middle of the night so that a bunch of pagans won't take his life. This is the very opposite of what you would expect out of anybody who is making a defense of his apostleship. The false apostles would have paraded themselves as invincible, strong, impressive, dominant. They could control their environment. They could take charge of people, even against their will. They were forceful. They subjugated everyone to themselves, took control of the people to achieve their goals.

Paul, I suppose, could have done that. He could have said, "Well, we've had some powerful things happen in my ministry," and he could have recited some of those powerful things. I suppose if he was living today, he...these false apostles were living today they'd be standing on platforms in civic auditoriums with 15,000 people blowing on them and watching them fall over. People yielding up today to that mindlessness. But Paul doesn't boast of his personal power. He doesn't boast of his spiritual impact, which was immense. He says, "Let's get back to the issue here, my weakness." And

then he says a strange thing, verse 31, "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever knows that I am not lying." He's about to say something for which he has to add this. Now you think he's going to go right to verse 2 of chapter 12 where he tells about going to heaven. That's amazing. He's the only person that in the New Testament went to heaven and came back. Now you would think he would say, "I'm going to tell you something so amazing, so astonishing, so astounding that I need the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who is blessed forever to affirm that I'm not lying." But he doesn't...but he doesn't use that with his trip to heaven, he uses it with this strange thing in verses 32 and 33. And what he is saying is, I'm going to call on God, the true and living God who is identified repeatedly in the New Testament as the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus. In other words, worshiping God is not enough, you're not worshiping the true God, you don't know the true God unless you have identified Him as the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus.

People say, "Well don't the Muslims worship the same God we do?" No...no they don't. "Don't the Mormons worship the same God we do?" No, because they do not believe that Jesus is of the same essence as God. The true God is the God who manifested Himself in Jesus Christ. The true God is the God who is sharing His very essence with His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. A Father and a Son even in a human realm share the same nature and so in the spiritual realm. That phrase "the God and Father of the Lord Jesus" appears numerous times in the New Testament. It appears in John 4, you see it. You see it in Romans 15:6; Ephesians 1:3, 1:17; 1 Peter 1:3; 2 John 3. It became a standard way to define God. In the Old Testament God was known as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, right? And that identified the God who had revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In the New Testament He's identified as the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is to say one with the incarnate Christ, that is to say something about who God is and also about who Jesus Christ is. He is of the same essence and nature as God, that's why He said, "If you've seen Me, you've seen the Father."

So in verse 30 he says, "Look, here's another disclaimer, if I have to boast I'm going to boast about what pertains to my weakness." I mean, that was very easy for him to do, he felt very comfortable talking about it. Back in chapter 1, just briefly, in verse 8 he talked about being afflicted and burdened excessively beyond strength. In chapter 2 and verse 12 he said, "There was a door open for him to preach the gospel in Troas," but verse 13, "he had no rest for his spirit." He was so troubled and so weak he couldn't even take an opportunity, he was so stirred up and so depressed. That's again an indication of his weakness. Chapter 3 verse 5 he says, "We're not adequate in ourselves to consider anything coming from ourselves." I can't produce anything of any spiritual quality myself. Chapter 4 verse 7, "We're afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, always carrying about the dying of Jesus." In other words, I live on the brink of death every day. You know, he just goes on like this, chapter 5 verse 1 he talks about the frail tent in which he lives. Chapter 6 verse 4 he talks about his hardships and endurance, inflictions, distress, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors. Chapter 7 he talks about his depression. Chapter 10 verse 17 he says, "If I'm going to boast I have to boast in

the Lord because I'm nobody." I mean, that's the way he goes through the whole book.

Chapter 12 he talks about his weakness in verses 7 to 10. Chapter 13 verse 4 again about his weakness. So he says, if I'm going to boast I've got to go back to my weakness. In other words, the point is this, if this is a man of God he is going to be manifestly weak so that what you see coming out of this man has no other explanation than that it's God. There is no human explanation. And here in verse 31 he says, "I'm calling on the God who is the Father of the Lord Jesus who is blessed forever," that is to say He is worthy of eternal glory and blessing, I'm calling on Him to affirm that I'm not lying when I tell you I'm weak. Just the opposite of what you would expect him to say. I am not lying.

I'm sure the false prophets had repeatedly suggested that Paul was a liar, but he wasn't. And he's saying I'm going to call on the Lord, He knows I'm not lying when I tell you how really weak I am. Boy, he was setting himself in such stark contrast to these people. I see these people, these modern televangelists with their massive crowds and their fancy cars and their palatial mansions and their endless wardrobes and this great aura of power and all this money and all this success and the stuff that goes with it and I see that in stark contrast to the brokenness and the meekness and the weakness and the humility of the true servant of God.. And that's what Paul is showing us here.

And then he tells this interesting account. "God will verify that what I'm about to say is true. In Damascus," remember he was converted in Damascus, he was going there to kill Christians and he was going down the road to Damascus and the Lord blinded him out of heaven, fell down, landed in the dirt stone blind. And the Lord spoke to him. And then he went to the house of a man named Ananias and Ananias was the Lord's instrument to bring him to his senses and he came to faith in Jesus Christ and he was wonderfully converted. Remember that? And he was converted and told that he was going to be a messenger to the Gentiles. He was going to take the gospel to the Gentile world and he was going to suffer greatly. He was going to suffer more than any man I think in redemptive history ever suffered, except Jesus Christ Himself. He was going to suffer greatly.

And then the Lord took him, you remember in Acts chapter 9 it tells the story, and Galatians 1 and 2 kind of help to tell the story, the Lord after He converted him took him and sent him into Arabia...Nabatean Arabia it used to be called. He sent him into Nabatean Arabia, south of Damascus, somewhere between the Red Sea and the Euphrates River in the modern Arab world, that area. He sent him into Nabatean Arabia for three years. He didn't have any seminary education, didn't have any formal training, didn't have anybody with him. God sent him down there and the Lord Himself gave him His message. Remember he says that to the Galatians, "I didn't get my gospel from any man, no man gave me this gospel. The Lord set me apart, took me down and for three years he's down in Arabia and he's preaching the gospel all over Arabia. After three years he comes back to Damascus. And when he gets back to Damascus, according to the ninth chapter of Acts, he

starts to preach Christ. And the Jews who have a synagogue in Damascus are furious because he's preaching Christ as the Messiah, as the Savior, as the King of Israel. And so they're plotting his death.

Now in Damascus there's a colony of Arabs who have migrated up from Nabatean Arabia and they live in Damascus. Damascus would be the main city in that part of the world. And I've been in Damascus, it's an incredible place with an incredible history. It was the further...eastern most extension of the Roman Empire as well and it was a very formidable place. So Nabatean Arabians had migrated up, in fact there were so many of them there that the colony was large enough to have a governor and it says in verse 32, "In Damascus the ethnarch," that's the governor and he would have been the guy assigned to govern this Arab colony in Damascus. He was under Aretas the king. Aretas is a name rather...it's a title rather than a name. Aretas is like Pharaoh, or Caesar. It's a title of the king of Nabatean Arabia. So the king of Nabatean Arabia, a man called Aretas, appointed some governor to kind of lead the colony of Arabs up there and rule over them.

Well what happened was Paul's ministry down in Arabia had irritated the Arabians and the normal hostility and persecution that arises against the gospel arose there and it migrated up into Damascus. And so the Arabians somehow joined with the Jews. On the one hand in Acts 9 you've got the Jews plotting to kill him, and now you've got the Arabians involved. Aretas had assigned this ethnarch and his job, the Jews had given him the job, to guard the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me. The word was out, Paul's in town, we're going to get him. The Jews wanted him dead and the Arabs wanted to cooperate in the process. The Arabs were given the responsibility to guard the gates so that if he tried to get out of the city they would seize him and he would be executed.

He had just gotten launched into the ministry and already he's got the Jewish and Gentile world after him. This was just the beginning of how it would be throughout his life until one day he laid his head on a block in Rome and a Roman executioner chopped it off and he entered the presence of the Lord. From the beginning of his ministry to the end, this is all he ever knew...all he ever knew. And anybody in their right mind today who sat him down in our contemporary Christian environment would have said, "You know, Paul, you really need to change your method, you're just infuriating the whole world. I mean, there's got to be a soft-sell here that you could develop. You've...there's got to be some subtleties, Paul, everything can't be blatant." I mean, he wouldn't have known even what you were talking about. The capital, by the way, of Nabatean Arabia was a famous city which I visited and perhaps some of you have called Petra, which is an incredible place. So they were guarding the city, wanting to get Paul.

Now here's Paul, this apostle of Jesus Christ, this...this great powerful man on whom the Spirit of God has come with great power and how would we expect him to charge into that environment? We would expect maybe like...like Moses, he would go in and confront the magicians of Pharaoh and he

would do his work and his mighty deeds and we would think maybe the Lord would do some great miracle works like He had done in Egypt.

No, what happened in verse 33 was Paul was no match for any of them. The wall of Damascus was very wide, wide enough to drive a chariot on. And homes were built up on the top of the wall and some of them hung over the edge and had some windows which would just be an opening where some wooden doors could be opened or closed. And they figured out a scheme. They would get Paul up into one of those homes on the wall and they would put him in a basket. The word for basket here, *sargane*, is a robe basket, not just a reed basket or straw basket but a rope basket. You take rope and just wrap it into a basket form and somehow tie it all together. It would have to be pretty strong to hold a full-sized man. This is embarrassing. This is the great apostle Paul, this is the noblest of all Christians, this is a man infused with the Holy Spirit, this is a miracle-working Paul, this is the Paul who healed sick people, this is the Paul who cast out demons, this is the Paul God used to do mighty, mighty deeds, this is a Paul who shook a deadly snake off his hand, this is a Paul the angels visited when he's on a ship, this is the Paul who made a trip to heaven. He's no match for any of these people. So it was embarrassing. He said, "I just had to get let down in a basket through a window on the wall and I escaped his hands. He would have killed me, I had to get out of town."

I love that. He was unable to match the earthly power of his enemies. You know, don't be surprised by that. He was a man. He so humble. And when you look for the true man of God, look for humility, look for humility.

Well I've got to tell you the next section, we're going to end with this. I'm going to go a little long, not long long, just a little long. But you've got to know this. Verse 1 of chapter 12, let's go to the fourth principle and this is very quick because I can't add anything to this, folks. The fourth credential...his experience of the supernatural...his experience of the supernatural. This is incredible.

Now he is going to go beyond his weakness, listen to what he says. And here's another disclaimer, he just hates to do this, "Boasting is necessary," he says again, "I have to do this though it's not helpful...it's not helpful, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord." Let me stop you right there.

Let me tell you something, Paul said, "I've had visions and I've had revelations and I know these false apostles haven't. But you know something, folks? I'm only talking about these things because you've made it necessary for me to do this but it's not helpful."

Boy, I tell you, somebody ought to get a grip on that verse. Visions and revelations of the Lord which really happened to me are not helpful for me to talk about. That's what that "not profitable" means.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God," 2 Timothy 3:16, "and is profitable, but talking about visions and revelations is not profitable. It's not profitable to me to talk about them, I have had them. It is not profitable for me to talk about them because they tend to build my pride. They become temptations to pride. It's not profitable for me to talk about them to you because they can't help you because they were personal visions and revelations given to me. They can't help the church either." That's why when Paul left Ephesus in Acts 20, he commended them not to visions and revelations but to the Word of His grace which is able to build you up, right? This is what builds you up.

He says, "Look, you have forced me to talk about visions and revelations, it is not helpful. It is not helpful." In fact, the word means useless. It is useless. It's useless. Why? "It just messes with my pride, it was personal for me, it has no bearing on you. What has a bearing on you is the Word of God." Such extra biblical experience is not helpful to him or anybody else at this point. At the time it happened, God meant it for him. It's unnecessary to supplement the teaching of the Word. By the way, the only revelation we need in addition to Scripture is the revelation of Jesus Christ at His Second Coming. That's the only revelation we need. And nonetheless for the sake of his argument here, this is what he says, "I...I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord." Now all visions that he actually had would include a revelation, but not all revelations would be in the form of a vision. So he had visions and revelations. And I don't want to go through all of them, but you can read Acts 9, Acts 13, 16, 18, 20, 22, 23, 27 and he refers to visions and revelations and he had numerous ones, we don't have the time. Maybe in the net message I'll go into that. But he says, "Let me give you...let me give you the supreme of all the visions." And he had seen the Lord on the Damascus road, and he had seen the Lord come to him when he was in jail and he...and some incredible things when he was in Jerusalem and some incredible things were going to happen to that man, visions and revelations. But here's the one he chooses.

Verse 2, by the way, he received his gospel by revelation, too. Not in a vision form but by revelation. So God had directly spoken to him. God had given him visions and given him direct revelations. But he says in verse 2, "Let me pick the best one, I know a man," and there again is his humility, he...he...most people would say, "I went to heaven, folks, I went to heaven." He speaks in the third person, though, he says, "I know a man in Christ," that's a Christian who is in Christ, "I know a Christian who fourteen years ago..." What? You want to know something? He's just breaking 14 years of silence. Since he went to heaven he had never mentioned it for 14 years. It's not helpful. It's useless. What good is it for me to say to you, "I went to heaven." That doesn't help me, that just feeds my pride. That doesn't help you, it just makes you feel like you got left out. Well it doesn't help anybody. The man was so controlled and so humble that only these false teachers in Corinth to force him into saying something about a trip to heaven 14 years before that he had never spoken of since. Fourteen years of silence. That would have...if he wrote 2 Corinthians and he did about the end of 55 A.D. or the beginning of 56, it would put it in A.D. 41, 42 which would put it toward the end of the

silent years of his life spent in Tarsus, according to Acts 9, Acts 11. Seven years about after his conversion in Damascus, he's gone for three, he comes back about four years later. It would have been right before he was commissioned in Acts 13 with Barnabas to go preach the gospel when he was a pastor at the church at Antioch, just before he was launched into his ministry. The Lord gave him this trip to heaven just before he was launched into his ministry in Acts 13.

You say, "Well why did the Lord do that?" Well because he was going to suffer so much. He was going to suffer more than any man had ever suffered in the redemptive preaching. He was going to suffer more pain than anyone ever had suffered. You know what I believe? I believe to galvanize him and to steel him and to strengthen him for all that suffering, the Lord literally gave him a glimpse of the glory that was to come, otherwise he couldn't have endured it. When he said in Philippians 1:23, "Far better for me to depart and be with Christ," he knew what he was talking about, he had been there. And when he said in Romans 8:18 that the sufferings of this world are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall come, he knew exactly what he was talking about because he saw the glory that was to come when he went there. And I believe that when he said, "I'd like to stay with you, but far better to be with Christ," boy, he knew exactly why it was far better. He'd been there. And I believe that God did that for him because of the immensity of the man's suffering.

And so he says, "Fourteen years ago whether in the body, I don't know, or out of the body, I don't know." I was reading one commentator who said, "Now let's look a little more deeply into what he said there." How could you look more deeply into it, he didn't even know what he said? Well how can...how can you...what is the depth of that? I have no idea, he didn't know either. This is one passage where I'm comfortable with my own ignorance cause if Paul doesn't understand, I don't understand either. What he is saying is, "I don't know if it was a rapture in which my body and soul both went, or whether my body stayed here and my soul went there, I don't know...I don't know. God knows, I don't know." So even he couldn't explain the nature of a vision. He just says, "I was just...I was just caught up, *harpazan*[?] in the Greek. It's the same word for rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. It's a sudden snatching up. Fourteen years ago, he knew the time and he knew the reality of the event but he didn't know the nature of it. "All of a sudden I was in heaven and I don't know whether it was in my body and my soul together or whether it was just my soul and my body was down here. God knows, I don't know, but such a man was caught up to the third heaven." Third heaven is simply a Jewish way of expressing the abode of God. The first heaven is the atmospheric heaven, the air we breathe. The second heaven is the interplanetary or stellar heaven of celestial bodies, and that fills, as you well know, space. Beyond that is the third heaven where God lives. He says, "I went to where God was."

Wow! Then he repeats it in verse 3, "And I know how such a man whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know," just so we don't sit around and fuss and speculate, he repeats it. "God

knows." Are you content to leave it there? Just leave it there. I don't want to say anymore than he said. "I was caught up into paradise." Paradise equals heaven.

But let me tell you about paradise, just briefly. Paradise is a Sanscrit in Persian. You know what it means? A walled garden. Have you ever heard of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon? Gardens were big in the ancient world, still in some places of that middle eastern world are very important. But a garden was a very, very important part of that society and the king's garden was the greatest garden of all. In fact, the Persian word for paradise from which the Greek word comes is "walled garden." When a Persian king wanted to confer the greatest honor on an individual, he would make him officially a companion of his garden, which meant that that individual was honored to the degree that he had the right to walk in the royal garden with the king in intimate companionship. And that's the word Paul uses for heaven, to walk in God's garden with Him. I was caught up to God's garden which further defines the third heaven. The third heaven they would know to be the abode of God and paradise would indicate that he was able to walk in companionship with God while he was there. Wow, that's the nature of life in heaven. Remember what Jesus said to the thief on the cross, Luke 23:43? He said, "Remember me when You enter into Your Kingdom," the thief did, you know. And Jesus said, "Today you'll be with Me in...you'll walk with Me in the garden." Paradise is the same as heaven. In Revelation 2:7 it says the Tree of Life is in paradise. In Revelation 22:14 it says the Tree of Life is in heaven. So paradise and heaven are the same.

And then he says this, "And I heard inexpressible words." And people say, "What did he hear?" I don't know what he heard, nobody knows what he heard. That's why it's not helpful to talk about this. I heard inexpressible words. Literally, unspeakable words. What are unspeakable words? The only words I know are words that are spoken. Do you know unspeakable words? You know what he meant? It was a language that not anything like...not like anything on earth. In other words, he heard things that couldn't be communicated on earth. He understood it in the heavenly realm, but no earthly words existed to convey it. And even if he could, he says, I wouldn't be permitted to speak because the veil between earth and heaven hasn't been removed.

And so, he's so reluctant. In fact, this is...he didn't like to talk about this because it made him proud and that's why...go over to verse 7 for a minute...because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, because of his trip to heaven, the Lord had to give me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to buffet me to keep me from exalting myself.

You know, it's almost like, "You know, Lord, if I have to...I don't really need another trip to heaven if in order to equalize the deal You've got to send Satan after me. I just as soon not have the trip and then not have Satan." You know what I'm saying? I mean, all it did was elevate him to the point where the Lord had to drive a stake through his flesh to keep him humble. He hadn't even referred to it for 14 years cause it didn't help him and it couldn't help anybody else because it was...it was heavenly language that doesn't have earthly words. And the veil is not removed. This is a...this is the true

apostle, you see it in this incredible, humble boasting.

Well next time we're going to have to talk about that thorn in the flesh, aren't we? Let's bow in prayer.

Father, this has been such a rich and wonderful glimpse of this man. We thank You so much for the model that he is of humility, weakness made perfect in Your strength. We know later on in chapter 12 he says, "When I am weak then I am strong." We know that in his weakness Your strength was perfected. We know for us that when we come to the end of our resources and have no confidence in ourselves, we become useful to you. We thank You for the testimony of Paul. We thank You for the testimony to the fact that we don't need visions and we don't need revelations, they're not useful. They tend to puff up the people who imagine that they've had them and they have no real value for the church which is built up and helped only through the Word. Thank You again for Your word to us, Lord. Thank You for saving us in Christ. Thank You for giving us the truth to guide us as we walk in Him. We pray in His name. Amen.

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