

2 Corinthians 12

January 1, 2024

I want to tell you, I think that this message today is really going to be a help to many of you. Last week we saw the great event that changed Paul's life. That's what we've been focusing on in Chapter 12, his experience being taken up to the third Heaven where, as we saw last week, God showed him the abundance of revelations.

You read that, and you've heard about that all your life, and many people wonder what he was shown. We learned last week that obviously, I'm sure God showed him a lot of things, but the main thing that Paul came away with was understanding the concept of the church age. Because he is the apostle to the church. He's the one that's going to carry the message to the church, and so God showed him that final piece of the puzzle.

I know how, and I just have a glimpse of it, how dumb I am about it, but I remember when I first saw how the Bible in its majesty lays itself out in a human, depraved form, as best as we could do it. I remember how excited I got when I began to see how the pieces of the puzzle really go together. I can only imagine what Paul must have seen and felt because God not only showed him the church, but he was a scholar, as we said last week, in the Old Testament. He thoroughly understood everything about the nation of Israel and the law of Moses and the prophets, but he didn't have that peace that God now gave him.

It's a lot like you and I when you get through the Bible and you get into the Word of God and suddenly God puts all the pieces in place for you. You remember last week I built that message around the lives of two men in the New Testament that I think are vital for us to understand. I think they represent the composite of what our lives ought to be.

We talked about, first of all, John, how he was the greatest apostle that wrote one of the greatest books of the Bible, five of the books of the Bible that match up to the five wisdom books we talked about on Thursday night, and how he showed us how to get the heart of God. Then I showed you Paul. We came back to him and we talked about how that Paul got the mind of God.

Both of these men were shown something that up to this point in time, no one on planet earth had ever seen, had ever experienced, or ever understood. For me, these two men show us, by what God did in their lives through the relationship with Him, simply what God wants to do with us in our relationship with Him. God wants you to come to the place in your life where you get the heartbeat of God. That you understand what God's plan is. That you understand what God is doing. And then getting God's mind. That's what Paul got. And God's mind is understanding where you fit into it.

I think, as I told you last week, it was an exciting thing that it changed Paul's life the day he saw the visions of revelation, and God showed him all that God was going to do. But I think the final thing that really sealed it for Paul will be the same thing that will seal it for you: God allowed Paul to see himself in that plan. What is life for a Christian without invoking the plan of God into our life? It takes getting God's heart and it takes getting God's mind.

I. The Humility of the Minister

Today I want to develop the theme of this chapter as we come through it again. I told you last week that the theme of this chapter and every chapter in the book of 1 Corinthians and the book of 2 Corinthians, each chapter has a specific theme of ministry. I told you that when we get into Chapter 12, we see the humility of the minister.

This is very important, because if you ever get to the place in your life where you really give God everything, and some of you will, if you ever get to that place in your life, or maybe I should say when you do get to that place in your life, because some of you will, you're going to need this because you're going to see that these situations will come along with God's power of using you in your life. I think it's very important for us to look at today to understand and try to get a handle on it today.

I see this aspect in so many of your lives, how God is, where He's brought you from, what He's doing with you. I watch probably in a way that you don't see how God develops you through the circumstances and the situation that you go through. I want to talk today, and I'm going to tell you again, this is going to help a lot of you today. I really believe that, and it's very important for you to see this today.

Now, I want to begin reading in Chapter 12, and we'll read what we read last week, so it makes sense, and we'll pick it up. I think it's in verse 7 as we come down through it, but I'm going to read the first 11 verses anyhow.

2 Corinthians 12:1-11

It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.

And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;)

How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me.

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me: for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing.

Now Father, we thank you for this last couple of weeks that we've had here, where we've been able to take a real good practical look at some things for our own lives. Lord, I understand that in pastoring and teaching the Bible and preaching, there's times you've got to preach to people, there's times you've got to lay out doctrinal things, and then there's times you've got to come back and deal with the practical, the everyday life things.

Lord, there's so many good people here today that in my heart I believe that they want to do what God wants them to do. I believe that they've come here because they want to learn, they want to grow, that they believe that this is God's church, that it teaches God's Word, and that they'll know that it'll change their life because it is God's Word.

So I pray Father that along with that, Lord, there's some things that they're going to have to face, that they're going to have to deal with. Help them understand that better today as we look at probably the greatest Christian that ever lived, who when he got his name changed from Saul to Paul and God began to do the work in his life, these things came into his life. Help us to make the application to our own life today of what we're going through. We'll thank you and praise in Jesus' name for a sake we ask it. Amen.

II. Understanding Suffering and Success

Now verses 7 through 11 show us a great concept for all of us, and I think it's something that everybody needs to learn. These verses show us and help us understand why for so many of you who are trying to do what's right, for so many of you who have really decided in your life that you're going to serve God, you're going to be everything that God wants you to be, and you're going to try to give the rest of your life to God and raise your family the right way, do the right things with your family, follow the Bible with your family.

This message today is going to help you understand that when you decide to do that, as many of you are, why are you still plagued in dealing with the issues that you have to deal with? Why are we still struggling with things once we decide to do what's right? The idea would be in most people's minds that the moment you decide you're going to serve God, then God puts a hedge about you and nobody can bother you anymore. That would be nice if it worked that way.

In the shallow, lame Christianity that we live in, most Christians fold up like an old broken accordion simply because they don't understand these principles. You're better than this, all of you are. You're better than that. I want you to listen today, and I want you to leave here today with, maybe you won't grasp it all, but I want you to leave here today with a little better

understanding of why when you try to do everything that you know to be right, when you try to give God everything that He wants, why you still have troubles, issues, trials and tribulations. Many of you do, probably all of you do, but you're going to understand a little better when we're done today.

There's two kinds of suffering in the Bible. Most people don't even know that. Most people have a tough time delineating which suffering they're going through. The Bible says that:

All ye that live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

There's a godly suffering for doing what's right. And then the second kind of suffering in the Bible is what I call suffering of stupidity: the bad choices we make in life. The things that we do that come back to haunt us in some cases, and we have to deal with it. We're all guilty of it; there's nobody that escapes that one. You're only hoping in life when you get to the end of the journey to Christ that you suffered more for Christ's sake than you did for the stupid things that we did in our lives. But I want to talk about the first one today.

You'll remember, and you'll learn this as you grow, people who suffer for stupidity's sake will always resent those who struggle for godliness and for Christ's sake. You want to remember that. That is so true.

This is yet another great piece of our puzzle on Paul's life. Years ago, I recognized very quickly how important Paul's life was for me. That if I was going to be whatever God wanted me to be, if I was ever going to do anything for God, that he was a great model, a great mind that I could look and understand. I wanted to know why he was what he was for God, and why I wasn't.

This is the key to this great chapter on staying humble in the midst of God's success. Churches today, and I'm not sure why it is this way, I guess I do know why it is this way, but in Christianity in churches today, you see this all the time. I've seen pastors, I've seen Christians, I've seen the mindset of churches, that we want people to see us as being successful in ministry. So we go around trying to convince everybody that God is here, and look at me, look at what we have. And it's all based on things.

I see it that it's just like the world many times. The world judges success on the things that you have. How many times do you drive down the street and see a bumper sticker, and it says, "The only difference between men and boys are the size of their toys," or something like that, or "He who dies with the most wins," something like that? How many times we've seen that? And that's the world's concept.

Churches are the same way, pastors are the same way, Christians are the same way. We think success is buildings. We think success is a \$100,000 sound system. We think success is an \$800 million building. We think that we're the air conditioning and comfortable pews, and we think that if we have a coffee shop, or a restaurant, or a health club, or services that when you go on Sunday, it's like walking into Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, and a service like that. We're being brainwashed that that's success, you see. We think the bigger it is, the louder it is, the brighter it is, and the more activity that it is, that that's really success.

We want that, because we want people to look at us, look at our churches, and look at my church, look at what we have here. We have 5,000 people in church every Sunday. I've had pastors, listen to them talk when they want to compare how many important people come to their church. Some talk about the politicians that have visited their church, and when they show up there, they make a big deal. "Well, we've got Senator so-and-so, or we've got Congressman this, or this and that." We talk about the very influential people. "We've got judges in our church. We've got lawyers in our church." I never met a lawyer, or a judge, or a politician that wasn't as crooked as a dog's hind leg. But we do that today because that's what we have been told and taught, not from the Bible, that that's success.

I remember when Jerry Falwell was at the top of his peak, the great competition between the churches. Jerry Falwell started the Moral Majority, which turned into being the Immoral Majority, but he started this movement of Christianity getting into government and vice versa, and he built one of the greatest political powerhouses that you ever saw in your life. He was on TV, he was on the radio, he was a national figure, and every church wanted to build a church just like his. Because we were thought, in our mindset, that when you get a huge church, when you get all of these great things, that that's really success.

I was preaching years ago at a place, I was telling somebody this story this week. Years ago I was preaching at a church, and the guy who preached before me was an evangelist, and I won't tell you who he was, but you'd know him. He was on before me, and he was up there preaching, and it was nothing but, "Look at me." It was nothing more than what he had done. He wanted to impress everybody, because there were a lot of pastors there, and obviously if you're an evangelist, you've got to eat, make a living off of the people you go preach to. So he's not going to miss an opportunity to tell all those pastors how great he is, and if you don't have me in your church, you're missing a blessing forever. He got up there and he talked about that the last church he preached in, that he had 900 decisions. All the pastors went, "Amen," and all that, and he went on and on and on and on.

So it was my turn to get up after he was done. I got up there, and I'll take a cheap shot at these guys anytime I can. I got up there, and there must have been 2,000 people there, and I get up there, and I said, "Well, I appreciate it, brother, and so-and-so's message." I said, "He had 900 decisions last week. That's great." I said, "I preached last week, and I had 1,500 decisions." I said, "When I was done, 1,500 people decided to go home." Decisions. "Look at me, what all that we're doing."

All this is man-made. It's really the hallmark of the Laodicean Church. We want to feel important. We want to look important. We want people to think that God's here, so we can be important. And yet, the truth of the matter is, where God is really at today, folks, most Christians are 100 miles around that spot. You want the book and the Bible on it? I gave it to you a couple of Thursday nights ago. It's the book of Esther. You want to find out where God is and where God isn't? Look at the book of Esther.

The truth of it is that God is in none of that. I love the illustration of the Old Testament that bears out what I preached to you on Sunday morning. You take that Old Testament tabernacle. That

Old Testament tabernacle was the seat of God in the Old Testament before they got into the land. It represents everything that God was. God dwelled on a mercy seat in the Holy of Holies. It was the place where the priests did all of the work for the people. We've talked about it many, many times. There were seven pieces of furniture in there that all are connected with God's holiness, with God's power, with the ministry that they did, and it is one of the greatest studies you'll ever find.

When you wanted to find God in the Old Testament before the law, you went to that tabernacle. But yet, if you were walking down the dusty roads of the Middle East looking for that tabernacle, you couldn't tell it from any other tent that was out there. There was no giant steeple on it. There was no searchlight that went up at night. There wasn't gold things all around it, and it wasn't all of the things. It just looked like any old tent that you saw anywhere in the Sinai Peninsula. It was made of goat skins and badger skins, and when you looked at that tabernacle from the outside, it just looked like some used army tent you would buy at Mickey's Surplus.

The beauty of what God was was not on the outside. The beauty of what God was, the glory of God, the majesty of God, the power of God was what was inside that tent. Not on the outside. I think when the Lord comes at the incarnation of Christ, God manifested in the flesh. He looked like any man that showed up on this planet. You didn't look at Him and think He was the Son of God. He didn't wear \$800 white robes. He didn't have a halo. He didn't have any red sneakers or shoes. He looked like any Jewish rabbi you would see at that time period in his life, until He spoke. In fact, and you need to get this, in both cases, what was God was not on the outside, but what was on the inside.

Now, some of you who are smarter than the average person are already, I can see your wheels turning. So I'll save you the question on Thursday night. You're saying, "Well, wait a minute, Bob. When they got into the land under Solomon, they did build an incredible temple that was overlaid with gold, where the majesty was." Thank you for that question. You're right. Because the picture is, in the 40 years wandering when it was just an old tent, it's a picture of you and I wandering in this world right now. And when Solomon built that temple, that's the picture of the Lord coming back in the millennial reign of Christ.

My point being this, don't build your millennial temple here in the church. Find a basement. Find an old antique mall someplace. Don't put a sign up unless you have to. Don't get a website that gives him any more information, but then the sermons that you want him to get clobbered with. Because at the end of the day, we're wandering. We're in our wilderness journey right now, and yes, as they were, we are in the wilderness of sin. And what's going to impress people is just not how you look on the outside, but what God's doing with you on the inside. That's how it works. It's exactly how it works.

What's the point if you have a hundred million dollar building, you have a hundred thousand dollar sound system, you have padded pews, beautiful carpet and decor, you got a gym, you got a restaurant, you got a coffee shop, you got a Starbucks for your latte, you got everything that you need, except you don't have a Bible. In the Laodicean church today, it's all for our glory. It's all for our success. We want people to look at us and think, "Wow, they're successful by what they

have." You're never successful by what you have, but you're successful by who you are. But people want that today.

A real Christian, a real pastor, a real minister, a real church won't care about how you look down here. You'll be focused on how you're going to look at the judgment seat of Christ when you stand up there. Having said all of that, here's the key to Paul's success. And for what you and I are going through, and I see so many of you struggling through, verse 7:

2 Corinthians 12:7

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

Now, that's not your wife, guys. Don't put that note in your Bible just yet.

III. The Thorn in the Flesh

There are three things that I want to simplify this today and look at that will help you put it together and help you see it. There's three little things. Three little things that will take me about four or five hours. Three little things.

1. Exalted above measure.
2. Thorn in the flesh.
3. The messenger of Satan.

I want you to learn some things today in an everyday, average, practical way that I think is going to help you.

Exalted Above Measure

Now, Paul says that he had a thorn in the flesh and an issue that God would not take away from him. We know that he, from his own words, he says that he had this because God didn't want him to get exalted above measure. Didn't want him to get puffed up. You've got to understand. Could you imagine how that could go to a guy's head?

I remember Jimmy Baker and Tammy Faye Baker. Remember them? The PTL Club? Pull the leg? They scammed millions and millions and millions of dollars from TV listeners. They were talking about the ministry and they were living unbelievably. They were living in a mansion that was bigger than most cities. They had everything. It was unbelievable what they had. And what happened was that, and I got to tell you, these guys are phony.

I remember Richard Roberts. Remember him, Oral Roberts' son? He got exposed by having all the money that they took. His doghouse was bigger than my house. And it was air conditioned. It was incredible what they had and what they did. And the reason why they get away with it, the reason why people will keep sending money in, because they got the mindset, "Wow, look what he's got. He must be successful with God," because that's the mindset. That's where it's at today.

It's exactly where it's at. Some of those guys had a walk-in closet that was bigger than your living room.

I remember his dad, Oral Roberts. Here's a great one. You probably don't even remember this. It's been a while ago, but he wanted \$8 million for the mission field. So what he did was lock himself up. He built this huge prayer tower about 200 feet in the air. He locked himself in his prayer tower, held himself captive, and said to all his TV listeners, "If you don't give me the \$8 million, God's going to kill me." He got the money, and more so. You know why? Because people looked at him as successful. People looked at him because of his \$800 suits and his lifestyle and everything, and people are so shallow today and so stupid today that they look at that and they actually think that success with God is what you got on the outside. He's the biggest phony that ever walked this planet.

You realize he's one of the greatest faith healers the world has ever seen, supposedly. We have dead people, and so he takes all the money that people get in and puts it into Oral Roberts University, which is a medical thing to train doctors. Now, what do you need a facility to train doctors for if you're the greatest healer on the planet? It never ever ceases to amaze me how stupid people are.

But so that wouldn't happen, God kept Paul humble, by the things that he went through. Because you can imagine how that could go to a guy's head. If these bozos who are zeros, and most of them are probably not even saved, if they are, they're so spiritually immature, it's unbelievable. If the things of this world can blow them up like that, what would have happened to Paul, or what could happen to Paul, or you and me, when God's power really does land on you? So in Paul's case, God said, "I'm going to fix that."

When you study the passage out, three times he says to God, "Take it away." He says three times, "Thrice, I ask God to take it away." And God said back, "Hey, look, Paul, just as I gave you the glory of the revelation through abundance, I am the same God that also gave you the thorn in the flesh." And at some point in this, we're going to see here in a minute, Paul stopped asking.

To me it's an incredible thing when you understand this biblical meaning. I don't know if you know it or not, but three in your Bible will always complete the thing. It really will. Over there in 2 Corinthians 13, Paul says, "This is the third time I'm coming to you, I'm done." It's over there in Titus 3:10 that the Lord says, "You know what, when you're dealing with a heretic, you talk to him three times, leave him alone." Paul was taken up to the third heaven. In the Old Testament and the New Testament, the second coming of Christ based on a New Testament timeline is called the third day and it's over.

I talked to you last week about the 12 apostles. Who were the inner three? Peter, James, and John, three. You want to talk about learning your Bible? I tell you all the time, you've got to get into a three. Past, present, and future. When John wrote the book of Revelation, he's taken to the second coming of Christ and God says, "Do three things. Write what you have seen, write what you see, and write what you're going to see."

In 1 Samuel 3, when Samuel gets called by the Lord with Eli and he's sleeping at night and he hears that call of God, he goes to Eli the first time. Eli said, "I didn't call you, go back to sleep." Second time God speaks to him. He goes and says, "I didn't call you, go back to sleep." Ah, but the third time the Bible says, Eli perceived, "The Lord has spoken." Three in the Bible is incredible. Paul knew that.

You know what I love about Paul? We talked about this last Thursday night. The thing I love about Paul is he is by the book. I have never met a man. The thing that endeared me to him, and maybe it's where I got it, I don't know. But when I saw Paul and he does everything by the book, I mean he does. He doesn't deviate any way, shape or form. And that's one of the greatest lessons I ever learned from Paul as a minister. Paul does it by the book. He never steps outside the principles. And when he comes to this thing and he's got a question of taking this thing away and he asks three times that it doesn't happen, he knows it's not going to happen based on the biblical principles. He lives by the book.

I told you Thursday night when we talked about it a little bit how the old Navy guys and the old Marine Corps guys and the old lifers that spent 20, 30 years in, they're by the book men. You don't deviate from the book. There's the right way, the wrong way, and then the army way. And you don't deviate from it. You stay with the book. The book was written to maintain discipline, to maintain structure. It means organization. And they know that. And there's no greater place that you understand why God gave us the Bible to go by that Christianity needs that same kind of stability. That's why you got to go by the book. We don't have the liberty to do something the way we want to do it. We don't have the license to say, "Well, I know the Bible says do it this way, but I'm going to do it this way."

Paul is my hero in that. I've never watched him deviate from the book one time until the end of his life when he had such a burden and desire to go down to Jerusalem. But that's the only time I can find in all of his life and everything else when somebody asks him something, when he's attacked, when he has to write something, when he lays something out, when he teaches something and uses that analogy from the Old Testament, spinning it into the New Testament so we can get it, always by the book, by the principles.

I'll show you a great one. In Acts 9 Paul gets saved on the road to Damascus. In your Bible, in your chronology of the Bible, you're going to find that when he got saved, I know it's just Chapter 9, Chapter 10, Chapter 11, but when you look at it on the chronology of time, Paul disappears for about 11, 10, 12, 13 years maybe. And the last time you see him in Chapter 9 he shows up in Chapter 11 or 12 and that's about 10 or 12 years. Now we know where he was part of that time. He was in Arabia, Mount Sinai where Moses was. We know where he was and what God was doing with him, but he suddenly shows back up in the book of Acts and when he shows back up in the book of Acts he now understands the body mystery. He understands that he is the apostle to the Gentile and he understands now, listen to me, that his job is to start every New Testament church.

So what does he do? Does he walk into the church at Antioch and say, "Here I am, I know you've been waiting for me, I'm the apostle Paul and I'm here to take over because I'm going to now

establish all the churches. You got a good one going, but I'm going to make it better and I'm going to now, now that I'm here, I'm the apostle that chose to do this, so get out of my way and here's what we're going to do." Absolutely not. Paul goes by the book.

You see in that body mystery of Revelation God showed him the importance of the local church. God showed him and gave him the structure that the local church just like the nation of Israel was God's structure in the Old Testament in a physical sense, the church was now the structure in a spiritual sense and he showed Paul that. Paul came away understanding that everything had to run through the local church. The local church was God's body.

You know what he did? The chief of the apostles, you know what he did? The one who got the abundance of Revelation, you know what he did? The one that God showed, the mystery of the Revelation and God was going to use him to start every church. You know what he did? He went to a church, he submitted himself to that church and he never left that church until the leadership of that church called him out and said, "Paul and Barnabas, we're going to send you out." Did you ever see that? Paul understood the great principle about doing ministry. You don't go out, you get sent out.

Paul, who was the greatest Christian ever lived, who had the abundance of Revelation, who had every right to say, "I'm the guy, I'm going to show you how to do it." He submitted himself to that local church. He didn't move. He didn't go. He didn't plan anything. He waited because he knew that that's the way God works. And when God was ready and God's timing, he spoke to the body in that church. It wasn't Paul that went to the pastors and said, "I'm going out and do my missionary trips." It was the body that said to Paul, "We want you to go out and do missionary trips." He was by the book. He was by the book.

We started our church ten years ago. At that particular time I was going to New Hope Baptist Temple, which later turned into No Hope. And God had put in my heart to get back into ministry and start a church and God had burdened me about it. But I was a book man. I am a book man. And I told the Lord, "You know what? I'm not doing anything because it has to be by the book. Every New Testament church in the New Testament was started by another New Testament church." I said, "I ain't going anywhere. I want to do it. I will do it. But if you want me to do it, then it's up to you based on going by the book." And it was what? I don't know. Six months after that or sometime after that the pastor came to me and said, "You know what? You need to go start a church." I said, "I will if you'll come and send us out and you'll come and preach for my thing." And many, some of you were there. Not many of you anymore, but some of you were there that day when he came and preached. You know why? By the book. Paul was by the book. He was a book man.

When he saw that three times he asked and God didn't do anything, he's done with it. He's done with it now. You know why? Because he recognized he understood the principle involved by the book. It's not popular today, by the book. It's not practiced today, by the book. It's not preached today, but it's biblical and that's all I care about. Paul was by the book.

Thorn in the Flesh

Now let me say this about his thorn in the flesh. This thorn in the flesh has been an ongoing debate for centuries under what it was. But nothing like a Bible to clear up 1200 years of confusion. If you believe what you read and know how Paul was always using the Bible because he's by the book to talk in the New Testament terms and using those analogies then it's pretty clear that his thorn in the flesh had something to do with a problem with his eyes.

When he wrote to the Galatians there in Galatians 4:13-15, listen to what he said:

Galatians 4:13-15

Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first.

And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.

Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me.

That's a guy with an eye problem. He said in Galatians 6:11 when he's writing to them, when he's getting down to the end of the thing he says:

Galatians 6:11

Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand.

Now somebody said, "Well that just means the volume of material." You're crazy. He's only got six chapters. That's not large. The large letters he's talking about is "hell, hello," because he can't see.

If that wasn't enough and Paul's always referring to the Old Testament to make the New Testament analogies, look at Joshua 23:13. You don't have to turn to it. I'll just tell you. Let's write it down and look up to it later. Now watch this:

Joshua 23:13

Know for a certainty that the Lord your God will no more drive out any of these nations from before you; but they shall be snares and traps unto you, and scourges in your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until ye perish from off this good land which the Lord your God hath given you.

Thorns in the eyes. So Paul takes that analogy based on what we know in Galatians and he says, "I got a thorn in the flesh." It was his eyes. I can't think of anything that would be worse for a preacher, worse for a teacher, worse for a pastor or an evangelist or a guy out doing the Lord's work and not to be able to see. So from the way Paul words his infirmity and the evidence of the book of Galatians and Joshua, it's pretty safe to say his thorn in the flesh was his eye, some kind of eye disease.

Now that's a great example of why when God really uses us we still have some issues in our lives. This is where we're going here. God allows them. He gave them to us to keep us from getting prideful about what he's doing with us, puffed up with our own experiences. As Paul said, "exalted above measure."

Years ago on the Jack Parr show, Jack Parr was the original late night host before you got these clowns on today. And Jack Parr was on for like 20, 30 years. And Jack Parr was a TV host and I was just a little guy and I remember that one night I stayed up with my mom. My mom used to watch it every night and they talked about the fact that coming on the show tonight and I was kind of tired, I wanted to go to bed. They'd come on like at 11 o'clock. But on the marquee in the front they talked about that they were going to, for the first time in the world, showcase the world's only talking dog. Well, I had to stay up for that.

And sure enough, I stayed up with my mom, and they brought this dog on. It was a cute little thing you ever saw about that big and it sat down there and the guy brought it over there and sat down next to Jack Parr and later Johnny Carson took over from Jack Parr and they were down there and they were talking back and forth about the dog and Jack said, "That dog could really talk," and he's making fun of things. He says, "Oh, I know. You ask him what's on a tree, he says bark. You ask him what's on top of a house, he goes roof." Like that? And the guy said, "Well, ask him." And Jack Parr looked at that dog and asked him a question and that dog answered him back just like that. That was incredible. I couldn't believe it. And for the next 20 minutes on that segment they just talked to that dog and that dog looked at him, looked at his head and just gave him every answer he wanted. That dog that night was like the first night Elvis Presley was on Ed Sullivan. It rocked the world. And I'll never forget, it was on the newspapers, on the radio, the world's only talking dog. Everybody thought it was a phony and it was a bonafide talking dog.

Well, there was a New York Times reporter that went to interview this guy and wanted to do a great story on it. So he walks over there and he goes in there and he meets the owner of the dog and the beautiful palace, the dog made millions of dollars, beautiful palace, sitting over there and he said, "Yeah, the pup's out back there, he's kind of relaxing, come on back." So they walked in through this big veranda, into this big deal and there was a beautiful big doghouse, looked like a mansion. And the dog come trotting out and the guy's talking to the guy about the dog and looking at the dog and about that time the dog just kind of starts scratching, and going crazy and scratching like that. And the guy that's doing the reporting, he says, "Dog got fleas." That dog is scratching, itching around and you know how dogs are rolling their back, and scratching and everything like that. And the guy, dog run, goes back over here and the guy says to the guy that owns the dog, he says, "I'm impressed with your dog. I'm impressed with all of this. But I got to ask you a question. How come you got a dog that's worth probably \$100 million who can talk and that dog has fleas?" Guy looked at the reporter and he says, "Oh, yeah, that's so he can talk," and he says, "Oh, I don't ever forget, he's the dog."

Now I made that story up. I know, it ruined your day. My point is this. You can do the best you want to do and try the best you can. God will leave some fleas on you just so you never forget who's the dog. That's what he did with Paul. What is he going to do with you? When you have all the things that God does for you and all those things, be sure you don't get yourself like the talking dog, you get those little itches because God leaves some fleas on you. And those fleas keep you from getting exalted above measure.

Listen, when you get to the place in your life where Paul was, you're going to have some issues. You're going to have people who hate you. You're going to have people who want to hurt you.

You're going to have people who will lie about you, people who will slander you. You will have medical issues, you'll have family issues, you'll have personal issues, you'll have family fleas, you'll have friends fleas, and you'll have work fleas. Listen, the devil never attacks you where you're at. The devil always wants to attack you where you're going. As long as you just stay where you're at, he'll never bother you the moment you decide to start doing something for God, he's going to attack you where you're at.

We see it in every great Christian down through history. I was thinking this week when I was putting this together of John Wycliffe, he lived all the way back in the 1300s. He wrote the first English translation that was the forerunner of our King James Bible. Roman Catholic Church hated him. They maligned him, they lied about him, they did everything to do. And I was always amazed in history that they never killed him because they killed everybody else. But for some reason God didn't let them get him. But boy, they hounded him and was after him and he had everybody on this planet who hated him all because he wanted to give the common man a Bible. He died of a natural death, but 31 years later the Roman Catholic Church was so enraged by this guy that they found out where he was buried, dug up his bones 31 years after he died and burned him at the stake. You know you got to hate somebody to do that? You know you got to have gone through some things in your life for somebody to wait for you and find you after you're dead for 31 years and then find out where you are and send the whole army down to get your body to burn you at the stake. Man.

I think of Martin Luther, brought in the great reformation, wrote the German translation of the King James Bible, Martin Luther's translation 1400, 1500. I'm telling you what, there's a guy who all of his life was accused and yet he did some great things. He broke the back of the Roman Catholic Church, but to keep him from getting all puffed up about it, boy, he paid the price. They were after him, wanted to kill him, branded him a heretic. He had to go back there at the Diet of Worms and defend himself and it was incredible.

I think of the great missionaries like Robert Moffat, Adoniram Judson, William Carey and David Brainerd. They all did God's work. They all did tremendous things. These men were called the fathers of modern missions. These men did more to bring the Word of God around and bring it to a world that needed the Bible greater than anything that you ever saw in your life, but they all suffered. They all buried their wives on the mission field, sometimes multiple wives as they get another wife after the last one died for a helpmate. Many of them buried their children on the mission field. Many of them suffered great at the hands of the heathen. They all suffered great heartache.

I look at Billy Sunday, single-handedly brought in prohibition back in the 20s, how he could have been puffed up. He was the most hated guy in that period of time. I told you the story about Sinclair Lewis that did the movie, based on his life of being a phony evangelist. And all that is a drunkard and all the things that he tried to portray him at. It's incredible.

I think of J. Frank Norris. You wouldn't have a Bible in your lap today as a Baptist without J. Frank Norris. And yet most Baptists don't even know who he is, but you could go places in Texas and places in Missouri and places down south. Well, you mentioned his name. You better run for

the door. These men were great men, and they were men that God used mightily, but God left fleas on them. He left issues in their lives so that they would not get puffed up. They wouldn't get to the place where they got exalted above measure. "Look at me. Look what God's doing." And you can add your name to the list.

You see, this is why I tell you that it takes a special kind of person to not be a Christian today, but to do the ministry today and do it by the book. It's why it takes a special young lady or a special young man or a special mom and dad, because you can count on friends stabbing you in the back. You can count on your family turning against you for you doing right and what they'll never be able to do. You can count on physical pain, trials and issues that you have to contend with. Because when God begins to use you and God begins to multiply you and put the power of God on you, He's going to have a checks and balance system in your life, just like He did Paul.

This is some great stuff that answers why some of you go through what you go through. I know in our church there's people who suffer for stupidity. I understand that. It would be true of any church. But I also understand that there's some of you who are doing what the Bible says and doing what's right, and what you're going through is simply because God's leaving some fleas on you.

The Messenger of Satan

Now the third thing, verse 7, "the messenger of Satan to buffet you." Notice it didn't say the attack of Satan, no Satan will attack you. It didn't say the difficulties that you're going to have with Satan, though you'll have some difficulties. It didn't say your adversary to Satan, though he is your adversary, or the terrible war you're going to have with Satan, though you're in a battle. No, it says the messenger of Satan.

Now that's amazing in itself. I've told you this many, many times. God uses the devil as a messenger boy. I showed you that in the book of Job. I've told you how many times that God had a message for Job. He had some things that He wanted Job to learn. And in your life and my life there's things that God wants you and I to learn through our adversity. So what does He do? When you go back to Job and it was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord and Satan also came among them, it wasn't the devil who brought Job's name up. It was God who brought Job's name up. You know why? He had a message for Job and the devil was just a delivery boy. He's the messenger.

The devil cannot get you. The devil cannot hurt you. The devil can't do one thing in your life. The only thing that God uses the devil for in your life, send you telegrams, messages. And you know what happens? Because we don't understand that. We don't understand the adversity in our life. We got bought up in this thing that success and happiness is all the good things, all the prosperity of things, all those things. We don't look at the downside of what we call in our life as being successful. We lose sight of the fact that God has a message for us and He wants the devil to deliver it. And when He does, we get so caught up with the delivery boy ringing the doorbell on the front porch we never get the message.

IV. God's Grace is Sufficient

Now here's the message Paul got. Now we need to get it too. In verse 9, the message that God had for Paul was simply this: "Look Paul, I'm the same God who gave you the abundance of revelation and I am the same God who gave you this thorn in the flesh because my grace is sufficient." There it is. "My grace is sufficient."

Now I want to take a few minutes with this. I want to talk to you about the single greatest thing you'll ever do. Most of you won't be able to do this. But if you ever do this, you'll understand all across this country, all across Christianity, there's God's people who stumble over something and quit. They either give up going to church, they give up serving God. Every day they stumble over things. They stumble and stumble and stumble and stumble over things.

I want to talk to you today in this last segment about "my grace is sufficient," understanding that there's a message that God has for you and if you can ever get to the place in your life that you do what old Bob Jones Sr. said one time, he simply said this: "Blessed is the man who turned stumbling stones into stepping stones." Now that was worth coming here today for. How much better if those stumbling stones that the devil has thrown in your path that we trip over every day of our life, the little things that throw us off, that get us out of whack, how much greater once we understood that God's grace is sufficient and the same God that gave you the power to minister and to restart is the same God that gave you the fleas to keep you honest. Turning stumbling stones into stepping stones to get to the next level.

God told Paul and God tells us, He says, "My grace is sufficient for my strength is made perfect in weakness." Now he noticed he said perfect not sinless. We're not talking about sinless perfection. In fact if you're studying the Bible there's two kinds of perfecting for the believer.

4. The Bible says that the job of the church, the job of the pastor in Ephesians 4:11-12 is for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ. But within that general context there's two basic perfectings that you and I go through. The first one, 2 Timothy 3:16. It says: 2 Timothy 3:16

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. That perfecting there is perfecting you for the work of the ministry, furnishing you with everything that you need, letting you learn the Bible, giving you the experience that you get. That's the furnishing that you get in perfecting yourself for the ministry.

5. But then the second one is found here in 2 Corinthians 12:9 where he says: 2 Corinthians 12:9

And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. So that's the, there's the infirmities that we go through through our own weakness. And God not taking away that thorn in the flesh that we through our weakness let God perfect his strength in our weakness. See, two perfectings.

When you look at Paul's attitude all about this, once he knows it's of God and God gave it to him to grow through and to be perfected he never asked again to have it taken away. That's perception. That's discernment. That's a man coming to a place where God puts the power on him

that God uses him and he has the issues that he has that drags him down, pulls him down and he asks God to take it away not once, not twice, but three times. And when God says the third time "my grace is sufficient" he figures it out and then he never asks God to take it again because now he knows that the sufferings and the infirmity and the thorn in the flesh is just as much as part of what God gave him and the power God gave him. Can you get there?

Now he understands how all this fits into his own life to balance him out. Now he says, verse 9, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me." There it is. He says in verse 10:

2 Corinthians 12:10

Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

Wow. The great truth that he understood here is in my life and in your life my dear friend God will be the strongest when you and I are at our weakest. It's hard to think of yourself as some great spiritual person, special person, spiritual person, godly person when people are trying to kill you as they were Paul. Every time you start looking in the mirror and thinking how many of you go out the front door and bullets start ricocheting over your head it takes you down a couple of notches right away. And when your friends turn on you or your family dumps you or you have to go through some issue medically and this or that and people hate you and you struggle with some kind of medical issue that just hangs on and hangs on and hangs on. Because when you are at your weakest God can work through you and be at your strongest.

I have been in this business for a while. I have seen pastors, I have seen Christians too who will stay squeaky clean and never have an issue because they design their ministries that other people or other pastors would always do their dirty work for them. That when you do they get clobbered but the guy stays Mr. Clean. I have seen evangelists who stay in that line of work because it is a no hassle. You go in, you preach your sugar stick message, you stir up all kinds of problems and you go on to the next place and the pastor has to clean them up. That is how it works.

Listen, trying to do the work in the ministry without the measure of messenger of Satan buffeting you will never, never, never make you the man or the woman God wants you to be. This never will. The same God who gives you the power and the glory, the same God who gives you the thorn in the flesh.

You take a guy who growing up has to fend for himself in everything in life versus somebody who has everything handed to him. You know the toughest guy you want to watch out for is the little guys who had to grow up all their life in a fight with somebody trying to bully them and they wouldn't let them be bullied. They are the guys you got to watch out for. The fact that they had to take a stand or get beat up, the fact that they fought for everything they have every day of their life, it made them strong and self-sustaining.

Now for us as Christians it works the same way in a spiritual sense. When you have something in your life that you can't whip, when you have something in your life that you take a stand on, some issue that you have to fight all the time, by fighting that thing all your life, God's strength is

perfected in you. It doesn't get perfected just because you do nice things. It gets perfected because the bad things happen and you stay the course through it. It makes you trust God more. It makes you learn more about how His grace is sufficient and how you'll get through because it will automatically bring you to the end of self and all you got left is Him.

Joshua was one of my favorite books. And as you know the book of Joshua deals with the wars that they went into the land. And I've heard preachers over the years talk about Joshua and they talk about the boring chapters in the Bible and they always list Joshua 12 as one of the boring chapters in the Bible. Because it does nothing but verse after verse after verse after verse for seemingly no purpose or no reason. It talks about, "Well they fought this nation, they fought this king, they fought these people." And it just goes on for an entirely long chapter talking about the battles they fought, the enemies they were up against and in the conflicts they went through. And I thought to myself years later when God showed me a few things in life how valuable that chapter was.

You ever see a soldier that's been around for a while, one whose left side of his chest looked like an Army Navy store? You know you can tell where a soldier's been or what he's done by the ribbons on his chest. If a guy just got out of basic, he hasn't got no unit patch he gets a little national defense medal he wears, one little pin he wears on there. But you take a guy that's been in eight or nine years, seen some stuff, been in some places, been in the fight. You can read where he's come from by the medals on his chest. You see that little blue thing on this side above his breast pocket that's a presidential unit citation. That means that his unit was cited by the president for some grave act of bravery at some point in history in a war.

You look at the ribbons on every one of those ribbons they'll tell you where he's been. You got one, a campaign, if he was in World War II you got campaign whether he was in the Pacific or whether he was in the European theater. You'll have stars on those ribbons that'll show you how many battle campaigns he was in. You'll see some of them have a bronze star and that bronze star basically in World War II anyhow they gave the bronze star out for many times just to get guys enough points to go home. But you see a guy with a bronze star medal with a V on it, a little V attachment that means something. That means he won that in combat. Sometimes you see it on a silver star. You got that little blue thing. They don't think they even do it anymore. That little blue field with a musket on it with a little wreath on it that's painted blue that's called a CIB, a combat infantry badge. That was the most coveted badge that any soldier could ever have if it was in the infantry. It meant that you were under fire in combat for like 60 days to earn that. You can read their chest. You can see what they've been, what they've done. You see those little oval jump wings on there. That means he went through parachute training school and he's qualified as a parachutist. You see the good conduct medal. You see his campaign ribbon bars, how many stars. You see a little arrowhead on one of those. That means he was part of an invasion. You can look at a guy's chest and know where he's been.

When I read back there in Joshua 12, I see the value of it. Christian, you ought to have some combat ribbons on your chest. When you get to the judgment seat of Christ, you won't have to get up and tell what you did or what you didn't do. Everybody just look at the CIB on your chest, the jump wings, the bronze star, the silver star, the DSC. They'll look at the Presidential Unit

Citation. They'll look at the battle combat fights you were in and the ribbons you wear on your chest spiritually. Some of you have been saved 5, 10, 15, 20 years and when you get up there, you'll be like somebody to the military. You won't even have a shoulder patch on.

Well, that's a great chapter, remembering the battles and the victories and the defeats of your Christian life. What made Israel strong when they were out there strongest was the battles and the enemy they contended with and constantly fought and then God never took them away. When you go into Judges chapter, you'll see the battle. When you go into Judges 1, 2 and 3. Now keep in mind, they just came through the great book of Joshua. They fought all of those nations. They just listed it for you in Chapter 12. Now they're in the land. Now they've got it all. And look what God says in Judges 3:1:

Judges 3:1

Now these are the nations which the Lord left, to prove Israel by them, even as many of Israel as had not known all the wars of Canaan;

He said, "You know what? You need them all up and you've got the land. Now you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to send you some more nations because you're not getting out of this battle because the key to you being strong is you being weak and to keep you from being prideful and arrogant about the nation of Israel is the enemies that want to kill you." And it's true of you and me. That's why he leaves some of those things in your lives. That's why he'll leave some things in your life to prove you. That's why you won't get it to the place where you just get out of it all and you just never have any problems. That's why there will never be a time in your life on this side of heaven where you just get to the place where if you're really doing something for God, somebody doesn't hate you, somebody doesn't dislike you, somebody doesn't talk about you or tries to hurt you. And we went around and say, "Why, why, why?" So you'll be strong. Thank God that you are doing something enough that the devil wants to send some bullets your way. We whine about it.

Let me tell you, when Paul understood that the same God that gave him the revelation of the abundance of God, what he was doing is the same God that gave him the thorn in the flesh, he said, "All right, I'll take it." And he never asked again. Never asked again. And for you and for me, the struggle we go through as much as we would like God to take him away. They're the combat ribbons on your chest. The battles and the conflicts and the campaign that you fight your way through and you stay strong because you realize that in your weakest times when everybody's after you and everybody hates you and everybody's mad at you, God brought you through. And every time you got a face something else out there tomorrow you look down on the medals on those chests and see where you've been. It'll make you strong. It'll make you strong when you thought you were weak. It'll make you a combat vet spiritually and as far as ministry's concerned make you invaluable to me. Allowing yourself to see the experiences God gave you in everything in life.

V. The Metamorphosis of the Christian Life

Romans 8:28 personified. Blessed is the man who can turn stumbling stones into stepping stones to get to God's next level. We're all going to suffer in this life. Make sure your suffering is for the things of righteousness and not for the stupidity of bad choices. Always understanding and letting God perfect you through your adversity.

I watched a thing on the nature channel here a couple of weeks ago and the way God made things and does things is just absolutely incredible. And who would think that Bob Alexander would be interested in the metamorphosis of a butterfly? But I was captivated by it because it started out showing how that this butterfly, and I don't think of anything of God's creation as more beautiful than a butterfly. I mean I can watch them for hours out in the yard. They get yellow different colors and the designs on them and I mean they're so fragile you can't touch them because the dust will come off and then they can't do what they need to do. It's incredible. And when you watch those beautiful things flitting around and flying around they're absolutely, I sit there just amazed at the beauty of God's creation.

But you know what it didn't start that way. And when you watch that, when I watched that thing that day I couldn't believe it. I thought, "Boy, there's the Christian life right there." That butterfly starts out of some ugly old worm in a cocoon. And that cocoon traps it in there just like we're trapped in this old world. And as that cocoon begins, or that little worm begins to grow and begins to get to the place where it begins to go through the process of metamorphosis where it gets to the point where you know what it does? It has to break out of that cocoon. And it doesn't just wake up one morning and there isn't, God didn't put zippers in the cocoons. The cocoons I've examined I've never seen one anyhow.

There's that process of it growing. He struggles within that cocoon. The movement of trying to move and he knows it's time to break out. And he breaks out one piece at a time. Maybe a couple of legs here or a part of a wing here. And as he keeps moving into the process of him growing, it gets bigger and the cocoon is no longer going to hold him. But he struggles. He struggles. It's not an easy process. But one day, one day when that process is completed, he breaks open and out comes the most beautiful butterfly you've ever seen in your life.

This old cocoon of this world is holding us right now. But one of these days we're going to break free and we're going to be the most beautiful thing God ever created. But we've got to struggle to get out of it right now. Every day. And you don't break out all at one time. You grow through that process. It's a process. He says in Ephesians growing into Jesus Christ. You get one leg out here, one arm out here, shoulder out here and you struggle and you struggle. And that thing binds you and it's so tight and you want to be the free. You want to do what God's called you to do. But you're bound in that old cocoon. And as you grow and as you break out piece by piece, one day you're going to get out there and Jesus is going to come back and we're going to be everything he ever wanted us to be.

But right now it's a fight. Right now it's a struggle. And it's a struggle because God wants to balance it all out in your life and my life and he knows. He knows that if he took you and me and he put us out there and did everything that he wanted to do for us, we'd all be buying a big Greyhound bus, painting our picture on it and traveling around the world. He wants us to do the

job that he's called us to do. He wants to empower you to do it, but to balance that thing out so we don't get so big ahead and to keep us trusting God, he leaves the fleas on us. We stay in that cocoon and have to fight our way out.

God's doing some things in your lives, people. I see it. I wish he was doing it in everybody's life, but that's not my deal. He's doing it in many of your lives. And I'm telling you this, you're going to have to go through some things. There may be some medical things, there may be family things, there may be personal things. All you've got to determine is, is it because I'm doing some stupid stuff or because I'm doing what the Bible says? It's all you've got to be concerned about. When you're convinced that you're doing what God wants you to do and it's in the book and you're doing it by the book, then you never matter what anybody else thinks about it. You do what God called you to do. And then you take the adversity when it comes, you take the criticism when it comes, and you let it make you, perfect you, that God's grace is everything that you need. And you'll come away realizing at the end of the day that you're looking back, that all the time that you thought you were at your weakest is when you were at your strongest. And God will take you through and bring you home out of that cocoon to make you the beautiful thing that God wants us to be. Let's pray.