

Delighting in Weakness

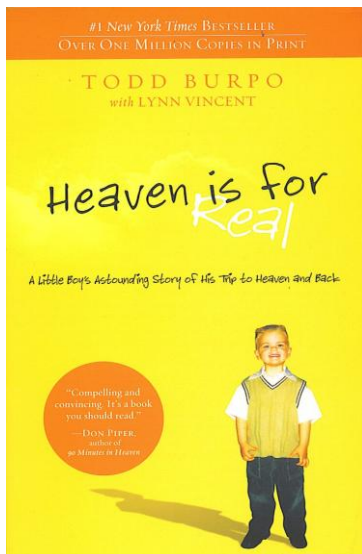
2 Corinthians 12:1-10

PART TWO



I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴ was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.

⁷ To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.



It's not often that a Christian book sits at the very top of the *New York Times* Best-seller list. This one was written by an evangelical pastor and it's titled, *Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*. The title tells the story. The author's son's heart stopped for about twenty minutes when he was four years old. Over the next several years, the son told little snippets of what he saw when he claims to have been in heaven and then the dad compiled it into this book. It was released last Fall and has already sold millions of copies. Did little Colton actually go to Heaven? Did he, as he claims, see John the Baptist and his sister who died in a miscarriage? Most books that recount near death experiences are full of heretical garbage. "I died and I was walking through a tunnel toward a bright light and it was very peaceful. One

verse from the previous chapter will dispel most of those stories. *And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light* (2 Corinthians 11:14). Most people who see bright lights in a peaceful setting are either hallucinating to they are seeing Satan masquerading as an angel of light. I am told this book is basically harmless but speaking personally, I don't put any stock in these stories, even if they are written by an evangelical pastor.

But I do put stock in stories like the one Paul recounts for us here. Paul was caught up to paradise and the third heaven. Did Paul actually travel to Heaven? Even he was not sure. Two times he admits that he is not certain whether he actually traveled to heaven or if it was a vision of heaven—whether it was in the body or apart from the body. Only God knows. But we can be sure that the experience was so real for him that he very well could have gone to heaven and come back. Had it not been so real, he would have known for sure that it was only a vision. But unlike this book and countless others, Paul kept quiet about his experience. In fact, not only did he not talk about it, he was not allowed to talk about the details. Verse four is very clear: *He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell*. Furthermore, Not only was he not rewarded by making millions of dollars from book sales describing this event, the revelation that was given to him had an enormous price tag associated with it.

⁷ *To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me*. One commentator described it this way: “The vision of heaven rouses adversaries from hell.”¹ Paul traded paradise for a pricking pain. Paul traded heaven for harmful thorn in his flesh. If he had been given the option of one for the other, do you think he would have chosen the same way God chose for him? If it had been up to him, do you think he would have traded paradise for a pricking pain?

There are two basic types of discipline the Lord uses to grow our faith and both can be seen in the well know verse, 2 Timothy 3:16-17. *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,*¹⁷ *so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*. In this passage we see formative discipline—teaching and training in righteousness and we see corrective discipline—rebuking and correcting. Every believer absolutely needs both of these. We need to be instructed and trained in the ways and commands of God, as Jesus said in Matthew 28—teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. But because we are so hard headed and are still living in a fallen world, we also need corrective discipline. We need to be simultaneously taught and corrected, trained and rebuked. These go hand in hand with one another.

Ryan has been working on his basketball shot and as he does, he knows that he wants his arm, elbow and hand to move in a certain arc. He doesn't want certain kinds of movements so he corrects those and he does want certain movements so he tries to reinforce the good ones. This is the Christian life—training and correcting and the two types of discipline—formative and corrective. But this passage adds a third type of discipline from the Lord—preventative. Paul wrote, *To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me*. The Lord knew that the revelation and vision that Paul experienced would cause pride to arise within Paul so the thorn in his flesh was given to him *before* the pride could develop. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. If you struggle with pride, as we all do, God must humble our pride.

He must knock us down a few steps so we know again that he is God and we are not. God humbles the proud, but he also humbles the humble in a kind of prophylaxis, a preventative measure. He humbles us before the pride can set in, much like a vaccination is administered to us before the disease sets in.

Let me review the three types of discipline that the Lord uses with a verse for each one. You will see the one common denominator in all of these—trials and hardships.

Formative discipline—James 1:2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴ Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

The “trials of many kinds,” which could include just about anything, are meant to be formative in our lives. They are given to us to develop perseverance which will then lead to maturity and completeness. The Lord does teach us without using trials but difficulties can be excellent teachers.

Corrective Discipline—Hebrews 12:5-7

⁵ And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁶ because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”^a ⁷ Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons.

Some of our trials will be corrective in nature but when we are corrected, know that the reason is because God is treating us as sons and daughters. His corrective discipline is born out of love and fueled by love. This verse calls it “a word of encouragement.” We are to be encouraged by the fact that we are being treated as a special member of God’s family.

Preventative Discipline—2 Corinthians 12:7

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

You could make a case that what I am calling preventative discipline is actually a form of corrective discipline, but I think it deserves its own category. But the Lord’s preventative discipline for Paul was especially difficult. He described it as *a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me*. Though it has been debated for two thousand years, the nature of his “thorn” is not important. It does seem to have been something that stayed with him. The same word is used elsewhere in Scripture to describe being beaten by fists, as in when Jesus was beat in the face by the fists of the Roman soldiers. It was probably not enough to keep him from doing his job—at least most of the time—but it was with him in chronic, painful form. Whatever it was, it was a continual torment for him.

This is fascinating because he calls it a messenger of Satan. The word for messenger is also translated as angel. An angel is a messenger and a messenger is an angel. And what is another word for a Satanic angel? The Bible calls them demons. But hang on—didn’t we just learn two weeks ago that if we submit to God and resist the devil he will flee from us? Wasn’t this a sure and certain promise—“he *will* flee from you”? Yes, it was a sure and certain promise but there may be times that God allows Satan’s arrows to hit us in order to help us in some way. Isn’t this

what the entire book of Job is all about? Now we should be careful because Paul's experience may not necessarily be our experience. When God applies preventative discipline he may not use a "messenger of Satan" to do it. On the other hand, he may use a "messenger of Satan as a type of formative or corrective discipline. We simply do not know, but if God can use it for his glory and for our benefit, he will certainly do so.

Wouldn't it be nice if we always had a reason for the pains and trials we experience? Could it be that Paul's reason is always our starting reason? If pride is the mother of all sin and pride is sitting in the heart of every man, woman and child, waiting to rear its ugly head, then does it not make sense to root it out while it is still a bud and not full grown? How many of our trials might be preventative in nature to keep us from sin and failure? Isn't it so gracious of God to do this for us? We often describe how much Satan knows our weaknesses and how he attacks us at our weakest point, but God's knowledge of our weaknesses is infinite. He sees every possible choice we could make. He knows where pride can give birth to sin and he wants to prevent this from happening. We all know that the key to good health is good prevention but how much more so when God seeks to prevent our sins and failures. I get such amazing comfort from this thought.

Paul eventually was given the reason for the thorn in his flesh, but not at first. He did not have an answer. He did not have a reason for his suffering. Like Paul must have done, let's review the three types of discipline and our necessary response to each one.

Formative discipline

In formative discipline, the Lord wants us to learn something. The key word in James chapter one is perseverance so let's start there. As you know, Karen's step dad has been battling lung cancer for about one year now. We are not sure where either of them is at spiritually. Like so many, they claim to be Christians, but it has been quite exciting to watch Karen's mom develop perseverance through all of this. Karen has been sending Scriptures and books and videos and any possible kind of Christian resources that she thinks might be helpful for both, but it was only in the last few weeks that Karen hit upon something interesting. Karen emailed her mom and suggested that they each list something they are thankful for each and every day. They have kept this up for several weeks now and not only does her mom not show any signs of slowing down, the things she lists seem to get deeper and deeper. Last week Karen sent her the words to the hymn Because He Lives. In the past such things were basically ignored leaving us wondering what she thought of them but this time she commented on the beauty of the hymn. Her mom is definitely developing perseverance. When the cancer was first diagnosed, we would not have guessed that she would be doing as well as she is. We are praying that it is a true Godly perseverance that is either a fruit of a genuine faith or else seeds of a future faith to be born.

Therefore, our basic prayer/response with formative discipline is to ask, "Lord, what are you teaching me? What do you want me to learn?" It's not always going to be perseverance. It could be any number of things the Lord wants you to learn and he is specifically using the challenge before you as the number one teaching tool. But if we don't actively seek for an answer, it is not likely that we will learn anything. And what do you think happens then? The lesson is repeated all over again until we start to listen.

Since corrective discipline is meant to illuminate our sins and failures, then our prayer is one like Psalm 139.

²³ *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

²⁴ *See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

If you ask the Lord to reveal the sin in your life, don't you think he would be more than happy to give you an answer? It's possible that the hardship you are facing is related to corrective discipline. If you confess the sin, does that mean the Lord will take it away? That is difficult to say because natural consequences of our sin fit under this category. Some natural consequences of our sin are temporary, but some of them will never go away in this life. They remain as a steady teaching tool for the remainder of our days. It's important to understand that there is no condemnation for this but there is a consequence.

I can imagine that Paul came to the conclusion that his thorn in the flesh was not a corrective measure so he asked the Lord to remove it from him, and not just once. *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.* It would seem that since Paul was given this great glimpse into paradise that God would grant his request to remove the thorn from his flesh. If God had given him this great gift of a unspeakable revelation and vision, would he not also grant this simple request? After all, Paul did not even ask for the vision in the first place. He was a passive participant in the event. Nor did he ask for this thorn. He was a passive recipient to the thorn. This was not formative discipline nor was it corrective discipline. *To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh.* "Lord, please remove this thorn in my flesh. Lord, according to your great mercy, please relieve me from this thorn. My Father, as your son, I am begging you to take away this painful thorn that is tormenting me."

Request denied. Request denied. Request denied. The request was denied all three times but the prayer did not go unanswered. *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* No, Paul, the thorn must remain, but I will give you supernatural grace and incomparable power.

In his vision, Paul was told "inexpressible things, things [he was] not permitted to tell." Paul did not tell us what Jesus said to him in the vision but he did tell us what the Lord said to him in regard to the thorn in his flesh. *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* Why was Paul not permitted to tell us the content of the vision but he did tell us about the thorn in his flesh that was given to him because of the vision? The answer is because we don't need to know what was in the vision but we do need to know this part. Paul's weakness was a vehicle to carry the power of God. Without this weakness, the power of God would have been diminished in his life.

If you recall last week, I warned against seeking out supernatural experiences. If God grants them to you then you are blessed, but do not seek them out. But this is the kind of experience that we are to seek—grace and power, strength made perfect in weakness. This is why Paul said, *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

I have titled this two part series *Delighting in Weakness* and now we see why. First, let's make sure we understand what he means by weakness. Verse ten lays out the answer: *weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties*. Each of these things fit under the category of a weakness. Interestingly, at least half of this list is external. Insults and persecutions come from outside of us. These are things that are forced upon us. Now some of these can be avoided. You can only be persecuted if you have a strong faith. If you are living a lukewarm Christian life, you are safe from persecutions. No one will bother you if you don't try to tell them that Jesus is the only way to eternal life. No one will cause you trouble if you leave everyone alone and let them live their lives the way they want to. In fact, even Satan will probably leave you alone because you are not a threat to his purposes. Actually, a lukewarm Christian fits in perfectly with Satan's purpose. But even if you can avoid persecutions and perhaps the accompanying insults, you cannot avoid every other trial in life. Furthermore, a lukewarm Christian life is going to cause you much more trouble in the long run as you make bad choices, miss out on serving the Lord and will come under continual corrective discipline from the Lord.

Notice that Paul did not merely accept all of these weaknesses and trials, but rather he delighted in them. He found joy in them. When taken together, what we have here is a life changing principle. With every problem that comes my way, with every trial and hardship, with every trial and problem, we have the opportunity to see the power of God displayed in my weaknesses. Let me give you another way of expressing what it means to delight in our weaknesses. To delight in our weaknesses means that every problem is an opportunity. Say that with me so you catch it in your mind. **Every problem is an opportunity.** For those who know Joel Osteen, that almost sounds like something he might say! But then again even false teachers get it right sometimes.

Let me show you how every problem can be an opportunity. First, every problem is an opportunity to display the power of God in our life. We have two basic responses to trials and difficulties—either we become excessively discouraged and give up or else we break into problem solving mode and figure out how we will solve the problem. Some people are easily overwhelmed and others have a take charge attitude but both are wrong. The people who get overwhelmed have a good understanding of their own weakness, which is good, but they don't have a proper view of God's strength. Those who have a take charge attitude often fail to see their own weakness. They depend on their own strength instead of God's strength. But what is required is to understand your own weakness as well as God's perfect strength. Every problem is an opportunity to see your own weakness and inability. Paul boasted in his weaknesses and delighted in his weaknesses, so this must be our starting point. If we are strong, then the power of God cannot be displayed. The way to strength is along a path of weakness. The grace of God is sufficient for us, but God's grace cannot be sufficient for a self-sufficient person.

Second, every problem is an opportunity to discover whether your trial is in response to formative or corrective discipline in your life. What does God want you to learn? What sin do you need to confess? Let me take a real life example and work through these principles. Let's say you are having difficulties with a fellow co-worker. It's a problem. It's a problem that affects you almost every day. Complaining about this problem has become second nature to you—like breathing. But this problem is also an opportunity—an opportunity to see the power of God displayed in your weakness. This is an opportunity for you to let go of your self-sufficiency and see the all-sufficient power of God's grace. This is an opportunity to practice peacemaking

principles found in Scripture. This is an opportunity for you to examine your heart to see if you are in any way contributing to the problem. It is an opportunity for you to help this person see their own weaknesses and bring peace to your workplace. This is an opportunity for you to learn patience and kindness and gentleness. Don't you want to look back on this problem of yours and a few months or years later say, "God did that!" Even if it doesn't resolve according to your liking you will know that God's power was at work in your weakness.

I had the opportunity to see the power of God displayed in weakness with our friends from Illinois that were here two weeks ago. Bob is a pastor and has been in a difficult situation with his church. He is burnt out. He is exhausted and unsure of the future. They have been on a three month sabbatical to rest and figure things out and at the very beginning of this rest he had an outbreak of shingles. I had no idea how painful shingles can be. He was prescribed narcotics to relieve the pain but had been surviving on handfuls of ibuprofen instead. Before they left, Karen and I gathered around them and prayed for them and I could barely get the prayer out through my tears. After praying, I told Bob how sorry I was that he had to have the pain of shingles on top of everything else. He looked at me with moist eyes and said, "I'm not sorry. This is a gift."

Here is a way to apply all of this. Today or sometime soon, take a piece of paper and write down a trial or hardship that you are facing. Then underneath, write the phrase, "This is an opportunity..." Finally, make a list of 6-7 things that are hidden opportunities within this trial. I did this myself last week and it immediately began to change my attitude and outlook toward these perceived "problems."

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¹ David Garland, p. 515.

^a Prov. 3:11,12