

Delighting in Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:1-10



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.

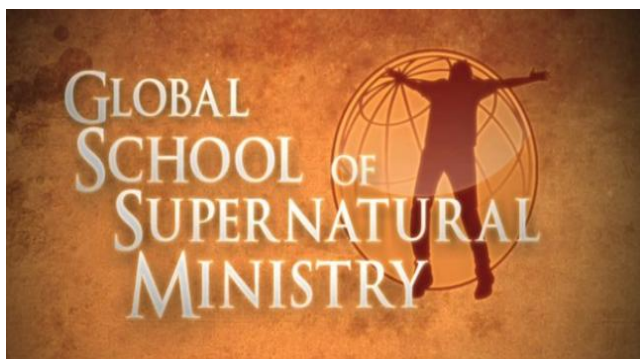
⁷ To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made 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.

(Start with [video of Harold Camping](#) making predictions of the rapture on May 16 and May 20, followed by an attempted interview on May 23.)

In May of 1998, Harold Camping was removed from his position as Sunday School teacher because he was influencing so many people with his false and bizarre teaching. Later Camping wrote that May 21 was the date the Holy Spirit left the church and that all true Christians must leave the church or suffer condemnation. People who knew him back then surmise that this is the real reason why Camping chose May 21 as the date of the rapture—not because of his strange teaching, numerology and mysticism, but because he was and probably is still deeply embittered from the discipline of having been removed as Sunday School teacher.¹ When you watch the second half of this video, you can almost start to feel sympathy for Camping. He appears to be genuinely distraught. If you noticed, he started to say, “I’ve got to live with this” but then quickly changed it to “I’ve got to think it out, so no interviews.” This time of distress could have been the very thing which brought him to repentance, but instead he hardened his heart and

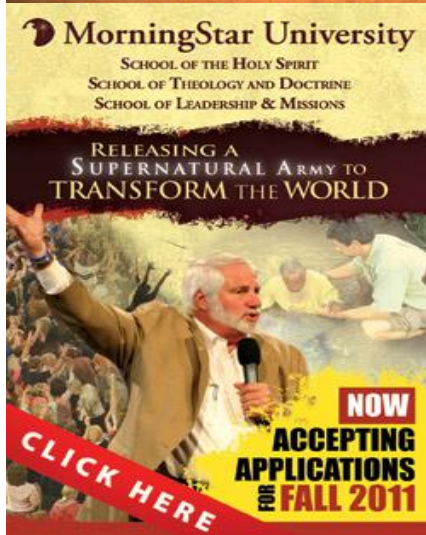
offered a ridiculous explanation and refused to waver from his earlier prediction. Either later that day or the next, he said, "On May 21, "God brought Judgment Day to the whole world. The whole world is on Judgment Day. It will continue to Oct. 21, 2011 and at that time the whole world will be destroyed."²

So what does this debacle with Camping and the rapture have to do with the passage we read? It has to do with Christians who continually seek out new experiences and who are attracted to esoteric and mystical beliefs. For whatever reason, Camping was not satisfied with the Scripture. He was not content to dig into the Word to discover what the Bible actually says and then encourage other believers to follow what it says. Such an experience was too mundane and reserved for simpletons. Instead, he had to devise complicated formulas and bizarre interpretations to satisfy his twisted compulsion to find something in the Bible that no one else has ever seen before. One follower said of Camping, "I am not smart enough to figure out the timeline but I have absolute faith in him." I don't think for a moment that anyone else in this room would ever do what Camping did nor would you follow a man like him. Am I right? (Please give me some reassurance!) But there are endless other ways that believers seek out experiences and new fangled ideas instead of being content with what God has given us in the Scriptures.



Let me offer a few examples. I found all of these from a single website. First we have the "Global School of Supernatural Ministry." I didn't take time to investigate the details of each of these, but you can get a good idea of the content just from the titles themselves.

Next we have the "Prophetic Intensive." Unfortunately, it looks like we already missed this one. ☺



Example number three is the MorningStar University which promises to release "a supernatural army to transform the world." This one is coming up in the Fall so we haven't missed it. I wonder if my credits from this university would

transfer to a real university? ☺

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Finally, this group has a training course in how to do perform miracles. Why should you be satisfied with mundane spiritual gifts like evangelism and service and mercy and teaching when you can do miracles? The course promises that it will be "a hands on, experience driven program for the hungry." One of the thing all of these courses in prophecy and miracles have in common is that they are not free. They all come at a cost.

This was not another course, but I was quite surprised to see this below the web banners for prophecy and miracles. This is an advertisement for some health product.: "Take control of your health with miraculous results." For only \$45 you get a 4 ounce bottle of oregano oil,



so you better hurry up and add it to your shopping cart before they are all gone! The only thing this is good for is making spaghetti sauce. I have two questions for the group who is selling this stuff. First, how can a health product bring about miraculous results? This product uses natural ingredients that I can grow in my garden so how can it be miraculous? Second, if you can teach me to do my own miracles, why would I need to buy this product that allegedly will perform a miracle on my health?

Admittedly I have chosen some extreme examples, though countless numbers of Christians flock to these kinds of things all of the time. They are extreme but you could not call them fringe. Again, most of us will not be taken in by this stuff, but many of us are attracted to special and unique experiences. These experiences can be put into different categories. Some are more supernatural like miracles and the like. Others fit into a category of mystical where the person seeks out an emotional experience. People like Camping are addicted to the esoteric, looking for hidden truths in numbers and letters. Supernatural, mystical, esoteric, experience-driven—all of these can be dangerous pathways to lead the believer astray.

In the passage we read, the apostle Paul had a supernatural, mystical, esoteric and experience-driven event happen to him. It was so wonderful that he wasn't sure if it was in the body or out of the body. He was caught up to paradise and the third heaven and while he was there—wherever "there" was, he heard "inexpressible things." This was a powerful experience that transcends all categories and was important and no doubt life changing for Paul. But we can learn a lot from looking more closely and this vision he experienced.

First of all, let's look at the details of what happened. It is not a simple thing to understand the details because even Paul seems to be unable to process what happened to him. As you read it, it almost sounds like an overly excited four year old running into the house telling about something that just happened to him . "Mommy, mommy, I was swinging on the swings and then I saw this

big dog running in the yard so I jumped onto the slide so he doesn't bite me and my friend Billy was yelling and crying cause he saw the dog too and I was yelling for you and daddy to help me but you didn't help me, and Billy was yelling some more and the dog was barking and running around and the neighbor lady was running in the yard and yelling at the dog and Billy fell off the swing and the dog was licking Billy and the lady got the dog and I was really scared and I don't wanna play on the swings anymore." When you hear a story like that it is hard to catch the details with all of the emotions running wild.

Now listen to this again and try to imagine you were hearing it for the first time.

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.*

You have to admit that it comes off sounding a bit discombobulated. Who was this man? What happened to him? Was he in the body or out of the body? Did he go to paradise or to the third heaven? Where is the third heaven anyway? Did he actually go there or just dream that he went there? Why can't he tell us what he heard? Is he boasting or is he not boasting? Did this happen to him or is he talking about someone else? Whew!

What we know for sure is that this event happened fourteen years prior to writing about it in this letter. We know that it was so powerful that Paul wasn't sure if it was a vision or if he was actually taken to this place. He obviously participated in this event but he felt somewhat like a spectator to it. We know that he heard inexpressible things. Paul does not tell us what he *saw* only that he *heard* things. It seems to have been more audio than video. We know that it was something that happened to him. He was a passive participant in what God did to him and for him. Finally, we know that whatever it was he heard, he was not permitted to tell anyone else.

Those are the basic facts not let me explain the significance of the facts. First, the overall importance of this vision was relatively small in Paul's ministry. It happened fourteen years prior to this letter and a full eight years prior to the founding of the church in Corinth. In those eight years of shared ministry with Corinth and in his previous three letters to them, Paul never mentioned this vision, nor did he mention any other vision. This event was not a key part of his ministry, it was not necessary for church planting and growth in Christ-likeness.

The only reason he shared it in this letter was because it was relevant to his defense against the false prophets. In verse six he explained, *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.* Paul could have said more. The false apostles were experts at bragging and boasting about their accomplishments and skill which no doubt also included stories of visions and the miraculous. In effect, Paul was saying, "I could boast and bury these false apostles with stories of visions. If they think they have some, I have more. If I shared these experiences, it would not be foolish of me. I would not be lying (the possible implication being that the false apostles are lying) but it would only build myself up and would not bring glory to the Lord or build you up."

Second, the Bible, not this vision was given as a model for personal experience and church ministry. You don't preach the gospel and make disciples by seeking and sharing private, mystical experiences. You do it this way...

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

We are instructed to study and apply the Word of God and only the Word of God.

Third and most relevant to you and me, we should never seek out these experiences. If this was not a model for ministry, then it is not something to be imitated or sought after. Paul was not in control of this vision. It was not a skill that he developed or a technique that he mastered. It was something that God did *to him*. We open up an enormous and dangerous can of worms if we seek after experience based events like this one.

But some of you might be thinking, "Wouldn't it be better if we did miracles and had visions more often. Don't you think unbelievers would be more attracted to our faith if they saw all of these things?" It is true that many of the prophets did miracles to confirm their ministry. Likewise, Jesus and all of the apostles did the same. However, these things are normative for the believer and there is no indication that we should be seeking them. I am not for a second implying that dreams and visions and the like do not happen, just that we should not seek after them.

Jesus did many miracles but he also understood their limited effectiveness, especially for evangelism. If you recall the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man was standing in hell and was having a conversation with Abraham.

²⁷ "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house,²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

²⁹ "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

³⁰ "'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

³¹ "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Jesus did many signs and miracles and the people still refused to believe. Then in this parable he claimed that even a resurrection from the dead would not convince an unbeliever. Jesus was probably referring to his own, future resurrection from the dead. Not only were many not convinced, but as we know, the Pharisees concocted a complicated lie in order to hide the truth. They denied the truth and then tried to keep others from knowing the truth. Also, what did Abraham say was sufficient for the unbeliever? *They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them*. In other words, Scripture alone was sufficient to show the truth and lead someone to salvation. A miracle like a resurrection would not do any good if the same person also rejects the plain meaning of the Bible.

Some might wonder if I am implying that all of this supernatural stuff is somehow sinful or evil? So far I have been using the basic ideas of the supernatural, the mystical, the esoteric and the experience-driven. Some of these categories overlap a bit, so let me be very careful and break

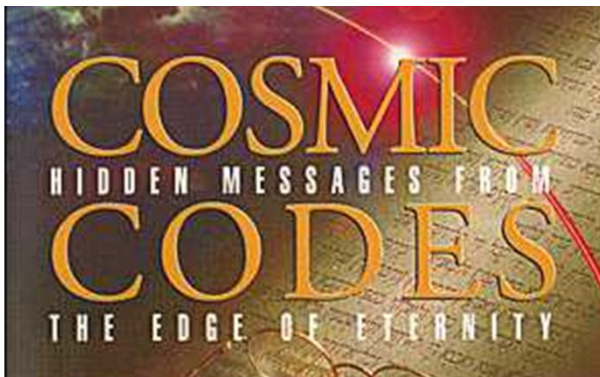
them down for you. First, what Harold Camping was caught up in could be called esoteric or mystical, and specifically he was delving deeply into numerology. An example of numerology is when you take the Hebrew alphabet and assign a number to each letter. Then you add up the numbers corresponding to the letters and get a sum. For example, in Hebrew, Daniel's name equals 95. Do you see the obvious significance of the number 95? Neither do I, because there isn't any. Numerology is about as reliable as astrology. With numerology as your method of interpretation, like a flexible astrology chart, you can make the Bible say whatever you want it to say.

Look what happens when we use numerology in the English language. You start with the basic number to letter equivalent. When you assign a number to each letter of my names, you get 29, 13 and 31. The sum of these 3 numbers is 73. Since both 7 and 3 are the numbers of perfection, the conclusion is that my name equals double perfection! (I know you have always thought this but now you know for certain!) ☺

1 - A, J, S	RICH ALLAN MAURER
2 - B, K, T	29 13 31
3 - C, L, U	
4 - D, M, V	29 + 13 + 31 = 73
5 - E, N, W	
6 - F, O, X	7 = NUMBER OF PERFECTION
7 - G, P, Y	
8 - H, Q, Z	3 = NUMBER OF PERFECTION
9 - I, R	

RICH ALLAN MAURER = DOUBLE PERFECTION

See how easy this is! This is the essence of how Camping arrived at a date of May 21. But Christians don't actually do this kind of thing, do they? There is a book called *Cosmic Codes—Hidden Messages from the Edge of Eternity*. The title alone could imply some kind of New Age



gobbly-gook. How do you think this author arrives at his hidden messages? He uses various kinds of numerology and other codes—a bunch of hocus pocus. The problem is that the author is a fairly well known evangelical Christian. If you look carefully, you can see a page of the Hebrew Bible in the background. A description on the author's webpage reads as follows: “[The author] explores the fascinating subject of hidden numerical codes and repetitive sequences in the Bible. The Heptadic Structure and Gemetria are

discussed” and “The Bible appears to be an integrated message system communicating to us from outside our time domain.” Say what?

But no discerning believer could ever follow this stuff, right? There have been people in our church over the years who have religiously followed the writings of this particular author.

Moreover, last year during one of our ordination councils, a pastor from Wisconsin talked about how much he was influenced by this esoteric stuff. He was actually teaching it to his youth group under the banner of apologetics. Needless to say, the council was very careful to make sure this pastor was aware of the dangerous fire he was playing with and he denounced it prior to his ordination.

John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard Movement was famous for asking a simple question when soon after his conversion. He had been reading the New Testament and asked his pastor, "When do you do the stuff?" So his pastor says, "What do you mean? What Stuff?" Wimber replied, "The miracles. The healings. You know, the stuff Jesus did." Some of us just want this kind of stuff to happen, to see more miracles and exciting "stuff" like that. You think to yourself, "But I just want to have a faith that is active and exciting. I don't want a dead and dry faith, I want a passionate faith where I feel the Lord's presence and great things happen all of the time." Me too! This stuff does happen but it does not mean we have to pursue miracles fantastic revelations from the Lord. Besides, the revelation that Paul received came at a great cost—the thorn in his flesh. We will look at that in depth next week. But let me tell you the kind of exciting stuff that does happen every day, and it is illustrated by the life of this man, Christopher Yuan.



Christopher³ was the ultimate prodigal son. His parents were converted after immigrating to the US to pursue graduate degrees. Christopher was raised in a loving Christian home but walked away from all of that while in dental school. He started using and then dealing drugs and immersed himself in the gay clubs in unabandoned promiscuity. He failed out of dental school two months before his graduation and soon after became a drug dealer supplying drugs in eleven states. Eventually he was arrested and sentenced to six

years in prison and not long after he was diagnosed with AIDS. One day Christopher was contemplating suicide when he noticed some scribbling on his bed bunk over his head. He opened a Bible, read the verse and a short while later was radically converted to Jesus Christ. He earned a degree at Moody Bible Institute, a Master's degree at Wheaton Graduate school and is pursuing a PhD from Bethel University. He currently teaches at Moody and has an international speaking ministry. How could Christopher experience such a turn around? Humanly speaking, he credits his conversion to the faithful and bold prayers of his parents who prayed that the Lord would do whatever it takes to bring him back to the Lord.

Christopher was converted by the Lord through the reading of Scripture. This kind of exciting stuff happens all of the time which is another reason why we need to be satisfied by the supernatural revelation in the Bible. And since this is true, does your life reflect any kind of discipline in reading and studying this supernatural revelation?

Rich Maurer
May 29, 2011

¹ <http://christopherjgordon.blogspot.com/2011/03/judgment-day-may-21-2011-harold-camping.html>

² <http://www.wnd.com/index.php?fa=PAGE.view&pageId=302681>. More comments from that same day: "On May 21, this last weekend, this is where the spiritual aspect of it really comes through. God again brought judgment on the world. We didn't see any difference but God brought Judgment Day to bear upon the whole world. The whole world is under Judgment Day and it will continue right up until Oct. 21, 2011 and by that time the whole world will be destroyed." And, "The Bible is a very spiritual book. There are a lot of things that are very factual, very factual, of course, but there are a lot of things that are very spiritual. How to know whether to look at it with a spiritual understanding or a factual understanding is hard to know," Camping said. "The fact is when we look at it more spiritually then we find that He did come."

³ <http://www.christopheryuan.com/main/index.html>