

ZOOM

"SOMETHING TO BRAG ABOUT" 2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-10

This Week's Core Competency

Humility – I choose to esteem others above myself. Philippians 2:3-4, *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

The *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* offers an interesting definition and commentary on humility: "A condition of lowliness or affliction in which one experiences a loss of power and prestige. Outside of biblical faith, humility in this sense would not usually be considered a virtue. Within the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition, however, humility is considered the proper attitude of people toward their Creator. Humility is a grateful and spontaneous awareness that life is a gift, and it is manifested as an ungrudging and unhypocritical acknowledgment of absolute dependence upon God" (*Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Humility").

Make special note of the fact that humility is not something that this world holds dear. Instead, it is absolutely contrary to what is typically ingrained in us from childhood, in essence, to get ahead is to win and to put others first is to lose. Such a notion is not a distinctly American way of thinking; rather it seems to be a part of the DNA of every human being since Cain and Abel. The opposite of humility is pride and it astounds me how little

For God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

– James 4:6

pride is dealt with in our lives. Often, we seem content to allow pride to be that skeleton in the closet that is allowed to survive. It is a "respectable sin" simply because it is not terribly ugly. Nevertheless, it was the very sin for which Satan was cast out of heaven (Isa 14:12-14). So for the Christian, the cultivation of humility must be of utmost priority. Perhaps this was what was in Paul's mind when he penned the words in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10.

It seems clear that the Corinthians valued strength, credentials, and experience rather than weakness and humility. It appears that through a significant portion of the letter, Paul is answering this attitude in an attempt to change their way of thinking. So it comes as no surprise that we see Paul promoting the idea that weakness is strength for the Christian. Weakness, however, is the very thing from which we flee, whether consciously or unconsciously, and the Corinthians were no different. It is interesting, however, that putting others first (and thus weakening "our situation") is simply to underscore the reality that we are weak and in need of God's help. Our feeble efforts to prove ourselves are simply that- feeble. Furthermore, any attempt to raise ourselves up will inevitably result in God humbling us and often to our own humiliation and shame, "*For God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble*" (Jas 4:6).

The question then surfaces: how are we to be humble? One pastor friend told me, "The thing about humility is that you can't ever say you have attained it or that you are humble, because in the moment you do, you cease to be humble, if indeed you were to begin with!" It is a truly difficult virtue

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to cultivate, but given the fact that it was such an important quality of Christ, we his followers must cultivate it as well. Not only this, but the Old Testament and the New Testament are filled with the blessings that come from a humble life and the punishment that results from a pride-filled life. Make no mistake about it, to walk humbly with God and men is not only a good thing, but will be essential in unlocking another level in your walk with God and spiritual development. It might possibly be the difference between mature Christians and immature ones.

How are we to walk humbly with God? Well, I like the advice of John Piper: For one, ask others to pray for you and pray for yourself. Prayer-pleading with God for humility-really is crucial. Secondly, recognize who you are. The truth is that we are sinners. We were and are sinners. If we aren't amazed by God's grace to us, we will be a finger-pointing people. A third thing, ask people around you to be honest and tell you when you're blowing it, whether in little ways or big ways. Finally, recognize that everything you do, you do in the strength that God supplies.

(John Piper, "How Do You Remain Humble?" www.desiringgod.org/interviews/how-do-you-remain-humble, April 30, 2008)

day 1 ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

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.

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Circle "boasting" in v. 1.
- * Circle "a man" in v. 2.
- * Bracket "fourteen years ago" in v. 2.
- * Circle "third heaven" in v. 2.
- * Circle "inexpressible things" in v. 4.
- * Box "but" indicating *contrast* in vv. 5, 9.
- * Bracket "thorn in my flesh" in v. 7.
- * Highlight v. 9.
- * Circle "weakness" in v. 9.
- * Box "for" indicating *reason* in v. 10.

day **2**

EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. If boasting was not profitable, why was Paul boasting? (Cf., 11:16-33)
2. Why does Paul speak of himself in the *third person* [a man, this man, he] all of a sudden?
3. What were the circumstances of Paul's life 14 years earlier?
4. Why does Paul mention what he is not permitted to talk about?
5. Paul boasts about his weaknesses. What does that mean and why would Paul do it?
6. Identify Paul's thorn in the flesh and who gave it.
7. How do you define God's grace, and how is it sufficient amidst trials?
8. Paul says that when one is weak in Christ, he is strong. What are some ways that believers can be weak?
9. **Discussion:** Talk about how we can receive more of God's grace.

day 3 **EXAMINE** – an explanation of the message to better understand the meaning of the passage.

As I walked the streets of Madrid one day, I saw in one of the main squares a row of street artists. Each of them was surrounded by their works of art, and each was magnificent. But one caught my eye as he was painting the woman in front of him. The artist had just begun his painting, and to the untrained eye, he appeared to be intentionally destroying the canvas from the start. His dark lines seemed destined to ruin what would otherwise be a masterful work of art. The woman in front of him sat unaware, and I was tempted to tell her to run to save her the embarrassment of seeing the finished result. Nevertheless, I restrained myself and simply continued to watch while the artist continued to paint away as in a trance. His strokes were effortless and graceful. There was great ease in the way he moved and soon the colors were blended together, and as you might imagine, the painting began developing into a beautiful masterpiece right before my eyes. In less than 10 minutes, the artist had taken a blank canvas and turned it into a wonderful work of art. The strokes that I thought were mistakes had become the defining lines of the painting and held it together in beautiful harmony. In just a few minutes I had observed a principle that we often see at work in the Christian life; it is often the difficult and trying "dark lines" in our lives which God uses to define us and draw us near to him.

In this section of Paul's letter to the Corinthians we learn a lot more about Paul's life soon after conversion in addition to the challenges in his life. This section helps us to relate to the great apostle in a closer way as he opens up about his past and his struggles. We see the dark lines in Paul's life and we learn, as Paul did, that these are not something to be prayed, or wished away; rather these are to be embraced as God uses them to bring us to maturity and to develop a closer dependence on Him.

Up to this point, Paul has been defending his apostleship to the Corinthians because a vocal minority had been challenging Paul regarding this and slowly distracting others in the church. Paul wrote not only to refute the arguments of these naysayers but also to remove all doubt that he had the authority to be ministering among them as he had and that his words should be regarded as from the Lord.

Beginning in verse 1, Paul continues the theme that he began in the previous chapter of "boasting." Paul employs a sarcastic tone as he writes to underscore the disdain he has for this need to defend himself. But he quickly turns to the topic of visions

and revelations. "It seems likely that Paul's reasons for addressing visions were because Corinthians believed paranormal activity was an important part of apostleship" (Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, 558-59).

In verse 2, Paul begins to speak of a man who had visions. Commentators agree that Paul is not speaking of another man; rather he is speaking of himself in the third person. Why does Paul do this? "More than likely, he speaks of himself this way out of reluctance to speak of his larger-than-life experience" (Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on 2 Corinthians," 2017 ed., 116, www.soniclight.com). The events that Paul relates admittedly were ambiguous as to Paul's state. Paul makes it clear that he doesn't even know if he was taken to heaven physically or not. The point is that in fact he was. Not only this but we also know when the event took place—fourteen years prior to the writing of this letter, sometime in the years A.D. 42-44 before Paul's missionary journeys reported in Acts (David K. Lowery, "2 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, 582). In addition to his words about his bodily state, and the time it took place, Paul describes where it took place, namely that he was caught up to the third heaven.

We are not exactly sure where the third heaven is; however, scholars believe that in ancient times there was the belief in multiple heavens to describe the realms in which one could exist. The earth and its atmosphere are the first, space and the rest of the universe are the second, and the presence of God and his angels are the third. Whether or not Paul had this three-fold division of the heavens in mind or not, it is clear that he considered the third heaven as the highest heaven (see Bruce B. Barton and Grant R. Osborne, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, LABC, 448). In the presence of God, Paul was given a special and personal message which was for him alone and no doubt strengthened his resolve. It was his own personal seminary, and the teacher was none other than God himself. In Paul's day, as in our day, to speak of such an experience would have made Paul an instant sensation. He would have had a best seller on his hand with all the talk shows wanting a piece of him. But Paul considered all of that nothing and only wished to boast in his weakness. This is to say that Paul would not boast of what he had experienced; rather he would point to his weaknesses as they greater emphasized the work of God through him.

In verses 7-10 we learn that Paul's humility about

his revelations was helped along by a "messenger from Satan" or "a thorn in the flesh." We learn that this thorn tormented Paul to the point of agony. He begged God to remove it three times; however, God's reply was that his grace would see him through, and the thorn remained to keep Paul humble. So here's the million dollar question: What was the thorn? Well, let me tell you, no one knows! But here are the educated guesses: some believe it to be a physical illness or disability, perhaps poor eyesight, a speech impediment, or something of that sort. Early church fathers believed it to be a spiritual temptation. Others believe it was constant opposition to Paul and his teaching. The bottom line is that we don't know what it was, and scripture doesn't tell us. However, the point is not

what ailed Paul but rather, what aided Paul amidst his trials, namely the grace of God.

Though Paul begged to be free from this affliction, "God denied his request in order to provide him with something better" (Constable, 118). Paul expressed the principle that God taught him in this way: God's grace is sufficient, for his power is perfected in weakness. Christians are thus able to rejoice in every aspect of their lives. God gives us strengths and abilities that we might excel and give glory to God, but even more remarkable is when we are able to see the Almighty God working through us in our utter weakness. The dark lines on the canvas of our lives are fused into his perfect plan and we see the masterpiece of His plan perfected in and through us.

The Message of the Passage

Embrace your weaknesses rather than boasting of your strengths, in order to give the Spirit greater opportunity to work in and through you.

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you in his word.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James teaches in James 1:22. Reflect on 3 *living questions* to apply what you have learned this week.

- **Journal your answers to the following *living questions*:**

–How is God making himself known to you?

–How does God want to change you?

–How is God calling you to change your world?

notes **N** STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

v. 1 **boasting** Greek *kauchaomai* appears 5 times in various forms in vv 1-10. Interestingly, of the 30 times the word is used in the New Testament, 19 times it is used in 2 Corinthians, and 5 times it is used in 1 Corinthians. Paul has boasted in the two previous chapters and continues to boast here, given that it was a common practice in the day to boast of one's accomplishment so as to prove one's self. "But Paul's boasting will ultimately lead to God's glory, something his opponents do not set as their aim, in his estimation (10:12)" (Ralph P. Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary*, v. 40, *2 Corinthians*, 394-395). False apostles would often boast of their accolades and though Paul sees that as foolish talk, desperate times call for desperate measures (Martin, 395).

v. 2 **a man** There are several theories as to why Paul changed his perspective as of verse 2 and began speaking of himself in the third person. Some have asserted that Paul was trying to express the way he felt during the vision, as an observer of what was happening. Others understand this as a technique Paul used to distance himself from the boasting he felt he had to do (see Barton and Osborne, 448). Given Paul's tone and his obvious disdain for boasting about anything that might be viewed as his accolade, it would seem that the latter is the best choice for interpretation.

v. 2 **fourteen years ago** The time of fourteen years before the writing of this epistle (or at least before the writing of chaps. 10-13) places the period about A.D. 44 (see Martin, 399). We are not sure what was going on in Paul's life at that moment in time. This would have been after his conversion on the road to Damascus (c. A.D. 33-36). Some scholars place this at the time that Paul was in Antioch helping Barnabas (Acts 11:26). That said, there is nothing in Scripture other than this reference which alerts us to the fact that Paul was taken to heaven fourteen years prior to the writing of this letter.

v. 2 **third heaven** Greek *tritou ouranou*. "The location that Paul was caught up to namely 'the third heaven' probably the presence of God" (Constable, 116). Although in ancient times the belief in multiple heavens (anywhere from 3 to 7) was common, it is best to see the third heaven to which Paul is referring to as the highest of three realms. The first is the earth and its atmosphere, the second is outer space and the third is the presence of God (Martin, 396). In verse 4 Paul supplies a synonym as to where he was which helps to clarify his location. Paradise is a term often used to describe the presence of God (cf. Luke 23:43; Rev. 2:7). (These are the only three times the word Paradise is used in the New Testament.) To speak of going to the presence of God would have been a definitive answer to Paul's accusers.

v. 4 **inexpressible things** Paul stumps his readers to a certain extent in two ways: first, he does not tell them what he saw, rather his emphasis is on what he heard; second, he does not tell them what he heard! (He was not permitted to tell the Corinthians what he heard!) (see Barton and Osborne, 450). We therefore do not know what he heard. Paul wasn't being difficult; instead he explains that God did not allow him to say the message he received. Inexpressible words (*arreta rhemata*) could either be words that are not able to be translated (meaning there are not words to accurately express their meaning) or it could mean words that are not able to be shared because of their sacredness (BDAG, 109). While it might seem to say, "I had an experience, but I can't tell you about it," would not be very valuable; it was valuable for the Corinthians in that others had boasted of far less (see Martin, 406).

v. 7 **thorn . . . flesh** The Greek word (*sarx*) can either be translated as one's physical body or it can be translated as the carnal self. "Thorn" can also be translated "stake" which was a term that was used in the New Testament to describe Israel's neighbors that tempted them or were a snare for Israel (see Barton and Osborne, 451). However, given that Paul does not describe in detail who or what it was that tormented him, we are left to draw an educated guess. Here are the options: First, Paul had a physical problem that he suffered, like a weak stomach or a disease, or a popular notion is that he had poor eyesight. If that is the case, then we know that it was a long-term physical affliction since he had asked three times for it to be removed. A second option is that it was a spiritual tormenter—perhaps demonic activity that sought to frustrate the work. A third option is that it was opposition to the work of the gospel in some of the places that he visited and that they were people who simply worked to frustrate Paul's ministry (see Constable, 117-18).

v. 9 **weakness** Weakness is not valued in this world by any culture; nevertheless it is an attribute of great value for Paul. It is interesting that the word weakness is translated as sickness or disease in other biblical contexts. Of the 14 times it is used in the same way that Paul uses it in this passage, 8 times he is speaking to the Corinthians. It is clear that Paul is speaking of limitations as of great value to make clear to the Corinthians that our limitations should always point us to the One who operates without limitations.

Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

There is an old story about a water-bearer who had two large pots that hung on the end of a long pole which he carried across his neck. One of the pots was perfect and the other one was cracked. Each day the man traveled to the stream, filled the buckets and returned to his master's house. Each day, however, he was only able to deliver one and a half buckets of water since water leaked out of the cracked pot. Filled with sadness that he couldn't perform his duty well, the cracked pot apologized to the man for being a failure. Surprised, the man told the pot to pay attention to the path when they traveled the road tomorrow. The next day, the pot noticed beautiful flowers lining one side of the path. The man said, "Did you notice the flowers were only on your side of the path? I planted seeds along the path and each day you water them as we head back home. When they bloom, I cut the flowers for my master's table. They bring him much joy." The pot saw his deficiency and thought he wasn't very useful. The man saw his flaw as an opportunity to be a blessing in another way. How like the Father! He turns our thorns and weaknesses into things that bring Him glory and show His grace and power!

What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse: Read 2Co 12:1-10

1. What does Paul say he will boast about in verse 5?
2. "But he said to me, 'My _____ is sufficient for you, for my _____ is made perfect in _____.'" (verse 9)

What Do You Think

1. What are some weaknesses you see in yourself?
2. How might God want to use those for His glory?

What R U Going To Do

Bethany Hamilton was a teenager when her left arm was bitten off by a shark while surfing. She went on to be a professional surfer and win many awards. Ask your parents to look up her story and read it to you.

Core Comp

Humility - I choose to make others more important than me.

Memory Verse

No memory verse this week.

KIDPIX COUPON

I memorized my verse _____, completed *Scrolls* _____, brought Bible _____, brought a friend _____.

Series Discipleship Challenge located in KidPix Store.

Child's name _____ Grade ____ Parent's signature _____

Earn 1 token by completing the PantegoKids Bible study and another token by reciting the memory verse.

Questions: Kids@pantego.org

30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity *2 Corinthians 13:14*

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace *Ephesians 2:8-9*

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God *Psalms 121:1-2*

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ *John 1:12*

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church *Ephesians 4:15-16*

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity *John 3:16*

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion *Psalms 82:3-4*

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity *John 14:1-4*

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship *Psalms 95:1-7*

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer *Psalms 66:16-20*

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study *Hebrews 4:12*

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness *Matthew 6:33*

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts *Romans 12:4-6*

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community *Acts 2:44-47*

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time *Colossians 3:17*

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith *Ephesians*

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life *Romans 12:1*

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy *John 15:11*

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace *Philippians 4:6-7*

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness *Proverbs 3:3-4*

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control *Titus 2:11-13*

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility *Philippians 2:3, 4*

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love *1 John 4:10-12*

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience *Proverbs 14:29*

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness *1 Thess. 5:15*

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness *Philippians 4:5*

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope *Hebrews 6:19-20*

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

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