



Service 02/12/2017
2 Corinthians 12:1 - 9

I want you to open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 12. We're continuing through the text. We come to an interesting section. Unfortunately it's probably going to raise more questions than I can possibly answer. It's in the context; remember this entire book, one agenda in the entire book, from the beginning to the end, is that he's defending his ministry because he's out of Corinth. He spent a year and a half there. The enemy's brought guys in behind him who have claimed to be apostles, as a matter of fact they kind of claimed, as he says, super apostles. We know what Paul doesn't. We're better speakers than Paul. We're better than Paul. And normally for a guy to defend himself that way is kind of petulant, but in his case he wrote 13 books in the New Testament. Out of 27 he wrote 13. If you want to say Hebrews is one, he wrote 14. But we're not going to say that because the guy grading my dissertation said it's Luke so in this church, it's Luke. So he wrote 13 books. These books are compiled probably by; I mean the gospels aren't even written until, the last gospels written at the end of the first century.

So the gospel, the New Testament, is being formed. The church doesn't have it in their hand so if they leave Paul's teaching they are in effect leaving the Bible. If we walk away from the scripture today, that's exactly what they're doing if they leave and turn away from Paul's teaching. It is critical. So it's no small thing in defending himself. Now obviously these guys come in and there are a couple things we know that they've said from chapter's 11 and 12. Number one; they've come in chapter 11 and said, "Hey man. We're being persecuted. And the fact that we're being persecuted proves that we have the truth." So Paul goes through this long thing in chapter 11 about his ship-wrecks and his beatings and all these things he goes through. And even he says, "I know I'm going crazy here." He said, "I don't know. Man I know I'm nuts, but I'm telling you, I've been persecuted way more than they have." Odd defense but that's where he's going.

Now he comes to chapter 12. Now there was a cult movement in this day that pretty much started pretty much about the time Paul is writing this book. And it was called gnosticism. It's from the Greek words *gnosis* for knowledge. But a group of people were saying, "Look. We know something Paul doesn't. We have the knowledge the church doesn't have. And it's special and if you want to really know what it is, you're going to have to join in with us." And so they created this little cult and so Paul, to counteract that, lays out chapter 12. Now it's an odd defense but it is what he does. And so that's the context that we're in in chapter 12. Now we're going to walk through this so I want you to listen to me carefully before we get into the text. Here's the deal. Remember last week I said the only hell those of us that are believers

know is here. The only heaven that lost people know is here. Now we're going to talk about and he's going to mention discipline today. Now a lot of believers struggle. They don't understand the distinction between punishment and discipline. Every Christian, you become a born-again believer, you're going to encounter discipline. Hebrews 12 says, as a matter of fact, that if you're not disciplined, you're not a child of God. So you're going to encounter discipline. But you will never encounter punishment. That was taken over at the cross. But if you say no to Jesus Christ you never encounter discipline because you're not His child. But when you die you encounter his punishment. That's a clear statement of scripture. And I know that's hard because we have all these people running around saying God loves you and He does love you so much that He put his son on the cross. But he won't ignore your ignoring of His son. So if I'm an unbeliever I'm never disciplined. I will endure an eternal punishment. As a Christian I will never face punishment. I will face discipline. That's the chapter that we're in.

Now walk with me. Hold your Bibles open and walk with me now. We're going to take part of chapter 12. We're going to take part of the section in two things. We're going to look at one, the last part of it next Sunday morning as far as God's power and its availability to you. But we're going to walk through this. Look in verse 1.

¹I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

In other words these guys are saying they've got it, let me tell you what I did.

²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I don't know, God knows. ³I do know that this man was caught up into paradise – whether in the body or out of the body, don't know, God knows – ⁴he heard things that cannot be told which man may not utter. ⁵On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except my weaknesses – ⁶though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears in me.

Now here's what he starts with. He says that fourteen years earlier he went to heaven. Now in case you're wondering, everybody's always arguing, what's the third heaven? He mentions the word paradise in this section. Remember when Jesus is on the cross and the one thief repents and he says, "Remember me when you come into the kingdom." And Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus went home Friday afternoon at three o'clock. So this guy, Paul went to Jesus' home. He went where God is. Now he says, "I don't have any idea how I got there. Maybe he took me physically. Maybe it was just kind of a trance. I don't know how I got there, but I do know that 14 years ago I went to heaven and I saw things that I can't speak about." Is that what he says? Is it? No. He says, "I saw things," What does he say? No man can utter. Nobody. Now I'll be real gentle here. Real nice. Got my smile on. I understand that Christianity is hard. For example 2 Corinthians 5, remember way back there Paul said when we go to a funeral and we go to the graveside and we put the body in the ground, he says, "That body, if the spirit and soul are gone from the body, they're with the Lord and the body no longer contains them." And then he says this statement in 2 Corinthians 5. We walk by faith not by

sight. So what he says is you're never going to go to a funeral and see that guy go. You're never going to see where they are. You have to, by faith, believe what God has told you about your redemption in Jesus Christ and your destiny when you die. You've got to believe that. There's nowhere else to that. But I understand, right, when we read a book that seems to confirm these statements and it just seems overwhelmingly, it's got to be true. I mean you read a book and little Bob's five years old and he went to heaven and he saw Uncle Jimmy because Uncle Jimmy had a fly rod in his left hand and a rifle in his right. And he had a blue Duke hat on. Which tells you something about Uncle Jimmy. So he's got a blue Duke hat on and he's got a unique beard. And this little guy comes out of surgery and looks at his mom and dad and says, "I saw Uncle Jimmy." And he describes him and that's really amazing to them because little Bob, Uncle Jimmy died before little Bob was born. And all these details come out and they're just mesmerized and pretty soon they write a book about what little Bob saw about Uncle Jimmy. And pretty soon people who, I get it, want 2 Corinthians 5 confirmed; absent from the body, present with the Lord. We now know it's true because little Bob saw Uncle Jimmy in the Duke hat.

Now here's what we're going to do in this church. We're going to believe what the Bible says; not what little Bob says. OK. That's where we're going. Now I love you. OK. I love you. Don't email me and ask me about little Bob's book. "Brother Christ I read this great book this week and little Bob was there. He saw Uncle Jimmy." Little Bob is lying. We know this because I told you. I was on the resolutions committee in the convention a couple three years ago. When you're on that committee you spend three days, 10 hours a day, in a room alone, seven or eight of you. And you draft these resolutions. Everybody's given a resolution and they give you the form and you draft the argument for the resolution. I was given the idea of these books where little kids go to heaven, see something, come back and everybody's going nuts over the book. So I wrote a resolution based on this passage that said no. Now those three days are misery. Because number one you're in three days lockdown and inevitably when you start going over the resolution, that's what you do, we write it, we go back and forth over it, and the real issue with mine was did it say Paul couldn't say anything or did it say no man could say anything. And it says no man can say anything and the problem with those three days is at some point there's some guy in there that is a grammarian. And he likes to spend hours arguing about colons and semi-colons and I'm just going to share my heart here. They shouldn't be alive. Those kind of people should not be here. God should just take them home. And they can worry about a semi-colon up there. So I presented it to the convention, read it in the record, everybody went unanimous. After we did the resolution, the convention voted for it, Lifeway, the Southern Baptist bookstore is still selling little Bob's book. They don't stop until finally little Bob comes out, he's now like 32 or 33, and little Bob says, "Oh I made it all up." And so all these people, now their faith is wrecked, and your faith is wrecked because you put it in a book by Bob instead of a Bible by the Holy Spirit. It's here. He went there he wasn't allowed to say anything. Nobody's allowed to say anything. Well how did little Bob know those things? What did he say in the previous chapter? Demons masquerade as angels of light. When you step away from the scripture you open yourself up to non-spiritual direction. You stay here.

Now so he went to heaven, came back, can't say anything about it. There is gold in heaven though. I do know that. Because Paul said, and I'm sure he was talking about it. It's the one thing he said about this. He said, "I finished the course." So and I think he was talking, it's the

only thing he was allowed to utter. You wouldn't know that if you can't read the Greek so you're going to have to trust me.

So now here's what happens to him. Now he's making this argument to get these guys off his back and say, "You want to talk about knowledge. I have it." But now he talks about what happened to him personally as a result of this moment. Now you would think, right, that this kind of moment would make him better. It made him worse. Look down to verse 7.

[⁷So to keep me from being conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations,](#)

Now stop it right there. He says that going up to heaven had begun to control him to the point where he was becoming conceited, cocky and arrogant about what he saw and what he knew. And it was affecting who he was in Jesus Christ. Now I got to tell you. I know this is horrible but I got to tell you. This is good news for me. This guy is kind of the super apostle. The last words he will write from prison, right before Nero cuts his head off. The last words he will write are "I finished the race, kept the faith, fought the fight. Now there's laid up for me a crown of reward and not only to me, but to all who love the appearing of Christ." He ended well even though he fouls up right here. Now I don't know about you, I just know me. I know there are nights when I look in the mirror before I go to bed and I think, and I start thinking back on the day and I think, "Oh, you really blew it today. You mistreated that person. You didn't make that phone call. You didn't do this." And I find myself sometimes at night, and I'll tell you, if you've committed a sin that we all kind of put up here when they're not, but we have ours that we put up here. And if you've done that you're looking in the mirror going, "You know, Jesus and I will never be OK." Here's a guy who literally is a super apostle, who has this great gift from God where he takes him to heaven and he shows him all this cool stuff and he comes back down and it so wrecked him that he's arrogant and God has to discipline him to remove the arrogance. The arrogance is in control of his life and he can't stop it. Now that is the purpose of discipline in your life. It is not punishment. God doesn't discipline you for everything you do. If he did none of us would be sitting in here. We'd all be home sick. He doesn't discipline us for everything we do. What happens in all of our lives is we're walking this way toward Satan, we get saved, He turns us around, we're walking towards Jesus and we will periodically, just like Adam and Eve did, imperfection, the enemy will whisper something to us and we'll step off down here. It's what's going to happen. When you step off the Holy Spirit's going to start bugging you. And if you listen to the Holy Spirit you'll get right back on and you're going to walk and you're going to step off a bunch. Sometimes you're going to step off, you're going to quench the Holy Spirit in your life and you're going to step far enough here that this thing now controls you. It's controlling the greatest apostle of all time. It is in control of a guy that wrote 13 of our books. And so what God does is he brings discipline into his life, not to punish him, not because he's mad at him, not because he's trying to kick him, but he brings discipline to pull him back where Paul now spends the rest of his life walking toward Jesus. This doesn't control him anymore and he ends well in the jail.

So when God disciplines you and me, it's not because He's mad, it's not because He doesn't love us, it's not because He hates us and it's not because He enjoys it. It's the same reason we discipline our own children. We discipline them because we want them corrected. They're

going this way. We don't want them going that way. God is the same way. And if you're a born again child of God, you're never going to know punishment, but you are going to know discipline because all of us in this room are like Paul. There are times we're going to step out here, something's going to grab us and control us, and God is going to discipline us and bring us back. Now here's what he did with him. Look at this.

a thorn was given me in the flesh,

He did something to Paul physically. And we don't know what it was. He doesn't define it. We do know, I think I've shared this before, we do know a couple things. That it may well have been epilepsy because in the book of Galatians he says to them literally in the Greek, "You did not spit at me" which the Galatians did when someone had a seizure of epilepsy. They would spit at the individual because they believed that would stop the demon that was in that person from infiltrating them. And Paul says, "You did not spit at me." So it may have been epilepsy. We know at the end of his life he wouldn't write. He dictated all his letters. Even in one of them it says I made my mark. He can't write anymore. May have been all the stuff. But something physical God does. Now it's physical. Now a lot of the people that want you to believe that you're always going to be healed will say about that, "Well it's not really physical." Listen he could have said a thorn in the *pneuma*, spirit. He could have said a thorn in the *psuché*, soul. But he clearly in the Greek says a thorn in the *sarx*, in the flesh. He gave Paul some physical ailment which means you may not always be healed physically. And it doesn't mean you don't have faith and it doesn't mean you're not walking well with Jesus.

Now here's the difficulty.

a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me,

Now there's your problem, right. Can I answer everything in there? No. I can't. I can tell you this. I think the implication's pretty clear. Satan would love to do anything he can to us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. He would love to just wreck us. That's what he, he would love to do that. God pulls him in check in your life. He wants to do everything he can to you, but God says, "Nope." He holds him in check. In this particular moment when Paul's becoming so arrogant over this thing, he's preaching and thinking, "Yeah. I'm preaching to people that are not as good as me. They don't know what I know. I went to heaven." And this conceit is beginning to control his ministry. God took Satan and, now listen, with limitation, with control, he let Satan bring something physical into the apostle's life that damaged who he was. And the damage, look at this:

⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹But he said to me,

This is a guy that's known a bunch of miracles. He prays three different times, "God whatever is here from Satan, it's harassing me, and remember this is not a cupcake we're reading with, OK. This is not a guy that couldn't have gone to school because Trump got elected. This guy's endured every bad thing you can possibly endure. He listed those in the last chapter. This is no cupcake. This thing must have been horrendous which is why he said it's a messenger of Satan.

It was killing him. And so three times, the guy who's seen all sorts of miracles, says "God please whatever you do take this think away." And God said, "No." James 5 talks about the fact that if you have a disease in your life and it's because of your sin and you confess that sin and you get it right, that that disease you'll be healed from. So sometimes our discipline is temporary. There may be times in our life when it is not temporary. Paul needed a permanent discipline to make sure this thing didn't corrupt him any further than it did.

Now why does God do that? Look at this. Now we're going to look at this in deep detail next Sunday morning.

⁹He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

God's discipline always makes you weaker than you were before it started. And the purpose is that his power would be released in your life so that His glory can manifest itself in your life. And if you are, if you have sin, and we all do, we all get here. I step out here, I don't listen to the Holy Spirit and this sin is removing His glory from my life and His power, then He will discipline me to pull me back so His power and His glory can come in my life. Now I have people say to me, well-meaning and I get this. Sometimes our theology is American, not Biblical. There are many of you, I'm the same way, I don't like trials, I think if you enjoy that there's something really wrong with you. You don't enjoy discipline. You don't enjoy trials. It's heavy and it's hurtful. That's why he said, "God please take it away." And so I hear people say to me, "God wants my good." Which is true. But it's my good based on God's definition for my life, not my definition for my life. And the American definition is no struggles, no problems, no depression, all my diseases healed, everything's perfect, everything goes well. That is the American definition of good. It is obviously not God's definition of good. His definition of good is that His son is formed in a visible way in my life. And the way he does that is by His power releasing His glory in my life and He does that when I am walking where I need to walk. And so the end result of discipline is so that we look like Jesus Christ. And that is the ultimate good. What God wants for us is that our homes demonstrate the glory and the power of Christ. He wants that in our lives. He wants that everywhere we go. And so His agenda for me, His good for me, is His glory, not my pleasure. There's a difference between pleasure and joy. Pleasure is when all the circumstances in my life are good. Joy is when His spirit is in control of my life, His power reigns, and His glory shows. And those are distinct things.

Let's pray.

Father we don't like these passages. It's tough to read about all the things Paul went through. It's tough to read about your discipline. And so Father I know in my own life the only way I can move toward these is to be centered on your glory, not my good time. So shift us to where we are focused on our glory in our lives and not just how good we feel tomorrow. Thank you though that because of your discipline we can end well. In Jesus Christ name.