

- Good morning and welcome back to our study of 2 Corinthians. We are in the 12th Chapter and getting close to the end of this letter.
  - Last week we spent most of our time in Chapter 12:1-6, where I highlighted a shift in Paul's approach to addressing the Church in Corinth. I noted specifically how this shift wasn't a shift in topic, but rather a shift in tactic. His tactic to convince the Church at Corinth that he was who he claimed to be, which was an Apostle of Jesus Christ.
  - A man called by God to establish and set up churches in places like Asia minor and other places. And with all that said, what we know is the Church at Corinth has lost its way and has begun listening to some man, or men who have made their way into the church and somehow established trust within this fellowship.
    - And what we've also learned is that these men have begun undermining everything Paul had established and taught them some six years prior (when he founded the church). And so, Paul is battling the nay sayers in this church, the ones who have sided with this man, or men, and his weapon of defense in fighting this battle comes by way of writing a letter, where he slowly and methodically addresses each and every thing that this faction or group is saying about him.
  - Things like how unimpressive Paul's appearance was. Highlighting the fact that he didn't speak very well. They also evidently went as far as hyping themselves up by possibly talking about how they had had some kind of paranormal experiences. Some kind of supernatural interaction with God.
    - And of course, they used all of these examples as proof of how they too were Apostles, which is what led Paul to shift tactics in verses 1-7, and this is what Paul wrote:

**2 Cor. 12:1** Boasting is necessary, though it is not beneficial; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

**2 Cor. 12:12** I know a man in Christ, who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven.

**2 Cor. 12:13** And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—

**2 Cor. 12:14** was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

**2 Cor. 12:15** In behalf of such a man I will boast; but in my own behalf I will not boast, except regarding *my* weaknesses.

**2 Cor. 12:16** For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain *from this*, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees *in* me or hears from me.

- Last week we unveiled and unpacked a few things about this section of verses. First, we identified who this person was that Paul knew some 14 years earlier, and it turned out to be none other than Paul himself. He simply shifted from speaking in the first person to

speaking in the third person.

- And as I taught you last week, this was not an uncommon thing to do in Rabbinical writings. And as we know, Paul was a Rabbi. But the question was why? Why did he do this? And the answer was he did it for one reason and one reason alone – boasting. He didn't want to boast about his personal interaction or experiences with God.
  - Another way to say it is, he didn't want to be the center of attention, which, let me say, I do find somewhat fascinating, especially in light of what we've all been taught, or told throughout our life in the church of the 20th and 21st Century, which is the world that many of us have grown up in.
- If you grew up in church in the past 50 years and you attended an evangelical church, meaning if you grew up in a church that was evangelistically or outreach driven, you were probably told, or maybe you weren't told, maybe you assumed or mimicked or recited or copied or simply thought to yourself that the use of your personal testimony was a means of leading people to Christ.
  - Regardless of what you thought or were told, that's not the case. And we know this because when I study Paul's manuscripts, I don't see him doing that. Nor do I see any of the other Apostles or disciples doing it either. As a matter of fact, I see a concerted effort to do the opposite of that.
- Personal testimony is not a prescribed method of leading someone to faith in the scripture. The church invented it. Not intentionally, but it evolved into that over time, and it makes sense on the surface. God saved me, my life got better. A load was lifted off my shoulders, therefore, let me tell you about "my Jesus".
  - And I get it. This makes sense because it's a natural progression to share our experience when trying to lead someone to Christ or convince someone to change their mind over a particular spiritual matter. But that begs the question, if Paul and the others didn't use their personal testimony to lead people to Christ, then how did they do it?
  - Now before answering that, I want to ask you a question, and I want you to be honest with yourself. Have you ever personally stopped and asked yourself that question? Have you ever thought or said to yourself, is the use of personal testimony the method used for leading someone to salvation in the scriptures?
    - If you were like me, the answer would probably be no. Regardless of whether you have or have not asked yourself that question, it seems to me that it would be a pretty important question to ask yourself. Wouldn't you?
    - I mean seriously. When you were saved, if you were told your next step in your walk of faith was to lead others to Christ, wouldn't you want to see how it's done by the first people to have ever done it? I would.
    - But here's the reality. I was saved in 1988-1989, and I personally never thought to ask that question until roughly, some 10-12 years later, when I began studying my Bible. It was during my studies that I noticed that Paul, nor anyone else for that matter, used (as a method) their personal testimony to lead someone to Christ. They didn't even use it as an icebreaker or conversational piece.
- Let me say something before moving forward on this topic. If this bothers you, then just

know if you hang around here long enough it gets a lot worse, because over this past 17 years I have studied a lot of scripture and I have unpacked and ultimately questioned just about every topic you could imagine.

- And for the most part, what I've discovered is that a large majority of what we have been taught is incorrect or has been skewed or bent to fit a narrative. So much so that it is no longer identifiable in God's Word. Meaning, it doesn't exist inside God's Word. And if you attend our Wednesday night study on how to study your Bible, then you will see real life examples of what I am talking about.
- And so, misquoting scripture or taking it out of context has become a real issue. It's rampant, and after a period of time those misquotes take on a life of their own. To the point that they somehow become fixed, or 'the way it is'.
- And so, my journey of questioning everything began over 20 years ago, and once I questioned one thing and discovered it to be wrong, well then, I questioned everything (which got me in trouble with church leadership).
- So how about this whole personal testimony thing as a means of reaching someone for Christ. Is it okay to use our personal testimony as a method of leading someone to Christ, or is it wrong? Or, how about a better question. Does it really matter? I mean, does everything we do as Christians necessarily have to follow or mimic exactly what the disciples or Apostles did in the scriptures?
  - The answer is yes and no. How's that for an answer? Sounds like an attorney, doesn't it? But it's true. The answer is yes and no. Let me explain what I mean. Do I think it is wrong to share your personal testimony with someone in an effort to lead them to the cross? No, of course not.
  - But that's not the question we should be asking. The question we should be asking is, does that method actually work or produce a result? The answer is no, and how do I know that? Well, I know it because I have studied Soteriology, which is the study and process of salvation; how someone is saved.
    - And when you study Soteriology, you will learn about the *interworking* of the salvation process. Specifically, how the true God brings about salvation in someone's life. This is so important, because when you understand exactly how Salvation works, you will understand why your personal testimony isn't necessary in the process.
    - Having said that, I don't think God will be mad if we share our testimony. And I don't think it's bad to use it as an ice breaker or a conversational piece. But if we use it as a sales tool or use it to try and talk someone into salvation, then 'Houston, we have a problem'.
  - But why? Because, generally speaking, when we give our testimony, we almost always say things like, well, here is what my life looked like without God, and now here's what my life looks like with God. Look at my life, it's so much better.
    - This tends to give people a false view or sense of salvation, because the truth is, your life may get worse from a worldly sense once you accept God's free gift of salvation. It will automatically get better from a spiritual standpoint, from an internal peace standpoint. But externally it will probably get worse.
    - And so, our experience, (or as we say), our testimony, is not a catalyst in the Salvation process, which is one of the reasons why Paul doesn't use his own

testimony as a method to lead someone to Christ.

- I find that fascinating, especially considering what most of us have been taught, right? From a strictly or purely evangelical perspective, if testimonies weren't an effective tool in leading someone to Christ, then I would say Paul's testimony would have been one of the best of all-time. But he never uses it in that way.
- As a matter of fact, he goes out of his way not to put himself at the center of the salvation process. So, what method does Paul use? Well, let's look and see. Turn with me if you will to Acts 16:25-30. Now, in the 'spirit of time' this morning, I won't explain at a high level what happens in this scene, jump in and read it.
- The situation is this. Paul and Silas were in Phillippi, and they were arrested, flogged, and imprisoned for causing a 'public nuisance'. After they were arrested, they were beaten, stripped naked, placed in stocks and chains, and shackled together.
  - The Bible says they began singing hymns to God at or around about midnight, and then suddenly there was a great earthquake, and their chains fell off and all the prison doors were opened, and they were freed. But then something interesting happened. Let me read what Luke wrote in Acts 16:25-29:

**Acts 16:25** But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them;

**Acts 16:26** and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains were unfastened.

**Acts 16:27** When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

- Now, let's pause here for just a moment, because what happens next is something opposite to what we might think would happen. In my opinion, I would think once they were freed they would have hit the bricks. I would think once the doors were opened, they would have immediately escaped. But that's not what happened. Listen to what happens next:

**Acts 16:28** But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!"

**Acts 16:29** And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas,

- Which then leads the jailor to say this in verse 30:

**Acts 16:30** and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

- Now, when you study verse 30 in the Greek, it reads this way, "And having brought them

out he was saying, Sirs, what of me is necessary to do, that I may be saved?”

- To my knowledge this is the only place in scripture where this question is asked in such a direct format. What must I do to be saved? Pretty important question, don't you think? I would say so. But what's more important is what happened next. Does the Book of Acts say, “Paul immediately sat down with the jailor and gave him and his household his personal testimony?”
- Did it say he testified of what all God had done for him, how God made his life better? Is that what it says? Nope, but why not? Well, first of all, as I previously stated, from the world's standpoint, Paul's life wasn't better, it was worse.
  - I mean, the jailor himself knew Paul and Silas had been beaten and imprisoned, so I think using their testimony as a method of leading someone to salvation would have been a hard sell. Don't you? Can you hear them trying to do that?
  - Hey Mr. Jailor, if you give your life to Christ, look how your life will turn out. It's awesome being a Christ follower. So, he doesn't use his testimony. But what does he do? Well, listen to it:

**Acts 16:31** They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

**Acts 16:32** And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house.

**Acts 16:33** And he took them that *very* hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his *household*.

**Acts 16:34** And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

- Now, the key to this section of scripture lies in verse 32, even though it may appear the key to salvation lies in verse 31, when the man asked, “What must I do to be saved?”. And then Paul answers the man and says, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”
  - Yes, that's important because that is what it takes to be saved. Belief in Jesus Christ is what brings someone into Salvation. But the question is, what causes someone to believe? It's not a testimony and it's not simply reciting words, or saying, “okay, I believe”.
  - And we clearly see that's not the case here with the Philippian jailor, because that's not what happened. The man didn't say, okay, I believe. No, there was a step that preceded the step of salvation itself. And what was it? Belief was brought about by the supernatural work of God, which was initiated when Paul took the man to God's Word, and they heard it.
  - The result being (not only) was this man saved, but the entire household was saved. All those who heard the Word of God. Now, what does all this have to do with today's study of 2 Corinthians?
    - Well, believe it or not, it has a lot to do with it. Because Paul's entire reasoning for hiding who this man was in verse 2, this man he said he knew 14 years earlier, revolved around boasting. How Paul did not want to elevate himself in

the eyes of this church in any way.

- You see, if Paul told this church about the experiences he had with God, he would run the risk of he, himself becoming ‘the man’ in the eyes of these people. Remember, idol worship was a real problem in those days, and Paul was hypersensitive to this fact. Which was one of the reasons he doesn’t give his testimony when trying to lead someone to God.
  - You see, when dealing with matters pertaining to God, we must never be the focus or the center of attention. And why? Well, first of all, that is not the method God uses to save people. His method comes by way of conviction which comes by way of His Word. God’s Word convicts because God’s Word is God in Word form.
  - The second reason Paul never used his personal testimony as a method to lead someone to Christ is because it leads to false conversion. If someone makes a decision for Christ outside the conviction of God by way of His Word, their decision will not hold up on their day of judgement, in God’s ‘Court of Law’, because it wasn’t of God. It was born out of the flesh, out of emotion or experience, brought about by a moment or a story of a downturn in someone’s life.
    - Meaning, when the person listening to someone’s testimony heard their story, it moved that individual, intrigued that person based on that individual’s personal experience, which usually included God solving a problem in their life. And most the time the problem He solved wasn’t salvation-related, but rather it was some everyday life or worldly issue where God made their life better.
    - Which as I said, can lead to false conversion. Because once you are saved, the problems in your life may not get better. There is really no stronger proof of this than what we read in Matthew 7:15-23, where Jesus Himself said the following:

**Matt. 7:15 “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.**

**Matt. 7:16 You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn *bushes*, nor figs from thistles, are they?**

**Matt. 7:17 So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.**

**Matt. 7:18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.**

**Matt. 7:19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**

**Matt. 7:20 So then, you will know them by their fruits.**

**Matt. 7:21 “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*.**

**Matt. 7:22 Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’**

**Matt. 7:23 And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; LEAVE ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.’**

- The key focus and intent of this passage lies in verse 22 & 23, where Jesus recounts what

these false prophets said. Look at what they said.

- “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name?”. Now, let me say, these words are really no big deal, because anyone could say they prophesied in Jesus’ name and there would really be no way of verifying what they said happened. But then they said, “Did we not cast out demons in your name, and perform many miracles in your name?”
- Different story here, because it appears they actually did these things. Which brings on more talk, because if they actually did those things, and yet they were not a child of God, then how did they do it?
  - It would have to have been under the supernatural power of some other spiritual entity, and there is only one other supernatural entity capable of doing such things. And so, it must have been the enemy.
- My point being, the method for how God saves people is pretty important, and in the last days, which, let me say we are definitely living in; in the last days false conversions will be rampant according to Revelations, which tells us that the church will be full of people who aren’t saved.
  - It’s imperative that we as a church understand why this is the case. It’s the case because the method God uses to save people has been abandoned, and in its place, we have substituted emotional experience.
    - Dr. James White said, “I fear our churches are full of people saved on music and emotion. Not the Word of God.”
  - And so now you should see why Paul is so concerned about this boasting topic and why he didn’t tell the church at Corinth he was the one who experienced the vision and revelation of God some 14 years earlier because he didn’t want to become elevated.
  - But why is boasting such a problem? Because it’s a form of pride and pride is ‘Kryptonite’ in the life of the believer. That’s why Paul wanted to stay as far away from it as he could. And guess what? God wanted him to stay away from it as well, so to ensure Paul would never think too highly of himself, God did something to him. And what did he do? Well, let’s read about it in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10:

**2 Cor. 12:7** Because of the extraordinary *greatness* of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!

**2 Cor. 12:8** Concerning this I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might leave me.

**2 Cor. 12:9** And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

**2 Cor. 12:10** Therefore I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in distresses, in persecutions, in difficulties, on behalf of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

- Now, as I told you last week, verse 7 has been a highly talked about and debated topic throughout the centuries. So, what in the world is “Paul’s thorn in the flesh”?
  - Some have said it was a woman (not me though. I didn’t say it. I said some have said). Some have said it was the continual persecution and the hardships that Paul faced. Others have said it was some individual such as Alexzander the Coopersmith, a man who did a great deal of harm to Paul, which we read about in 2 Timothy 4:14.
  - Honestly, it doesn’t really matter, because that’s not the point. The point is God made sure Paul stayed humble. And Paul himself was so cognitive of this that he would never broach any spiritual topic where he was the center of attention. Now, what I find even most interesting about all of this is the fact that Paul himself is never described in scripture as a proud or boastful man.
    - He is actually described as right the opposite of that, and we know that to be the case when we hear the men of Corinth talk about his appearance or his speaking ability. This is also confirmed in other places of scripture as well.
- So isn’t it interesting that a man who (by all accounts) doesn’t seem to have an issue with bragging or boasting, because he has nothing to brag about, that God puts a little extra work in on him to ensure he doesn’t become prideful. Once again, this leads me to ask why. Seem’s like if God was going to focus on someone’s pride issues, Peter might be the prime candidate to receive that treatment.
  - So why Paul? Because Paul had visions and revelations, like none of the others had. Six times he encountered God in that way, and with every God encounter, he ran the risk of becoming puffed up and boastful.
  - So, it’s as if God said, “Paul, because you have encountered me so many times, I must do something to keep you grounded.” And that’s exactly what He does. But then He does something else as well. Something that speaks to all of us sitting here today. Something that educates us in the ways of the Lord, specifically, on how He operates.
    - Listen to what He says, and we will close with this. Verses 7-10 – reading it again for context:

**2 Cor. 12:7** Because of the extraordinary *greatness* of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!

**2 Cor. 12:8** Concerning this I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might leave me.

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**2 Cor. 12:10** Therefore I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in distresses, in persecutions, in difficulties, in behalf of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.



- Once again, in this passage we see God operate opposite of the way we would think He would operate. By the way, this is the consistent theme of scripture. God always operates opposite the way we would. The first will be last and the last will be first. The greatest of these on earth will be the least of these in heaven.
  - And so, what we have learned this morning is that if you want to access the power of God, you don't do it through some emotional experience, through some 'Hyper Spiritual Experience'. You do it through weakness, and Paul believed that so much that he actually celebrated it.
    - He said, "I delight in weakness, insults, distress, persecutions, difficulties; all on behalf of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong."
    - Have you had a rough life? I get it, but know this. Your weakness, your hard time, if you are a believer, has purpose and meaning. It's doing something to you, and if you put those hardships into their proper perspective, you too will begin to know and experience what Paul is trying to relay.
  - God uses hardship as a tool of your development so that as you develop and mature spiritually, when you rise from the ashes, you will slowly begin to evolve into a piece of tempered steel, a tried-and-true instrument of God. And it's then, and only then, that your life will begin to bring Glory to God.
  - Which is the whole reason that God saved you in the first place. Remember, if you are a believer, your life is not your own. You have been purchased. Bought with a price. You belong to God, and He purchased you for His purposes, which ultimately culminates with Him being Glorified.
- Next week, the verses I would like for you to study are 2 Corinthians 12:11-21, as I will attempt to finish the chapter and move into Chapter 13, which will bring us to the end of this letter.