

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC**

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

## **In Praise of Weeds**

(2 Corinthians 12:1-10)

Study #18

### **Introduction: Gardening's gauntlet...**

One of the great benefits of living in South Texas is the opportunity it affords anyone who wants it the chance to have two gardens. We get to have a fall garden AND a spring garden.

Well, I enjoy gardening, both fall and spring and we are now deep into the spring gardening season. I've planted most everything I'm going to plant. In fact, most of the garden was planted by late February/early March.

If that sounds a bit early, you are likely new to San Antonio. Oh, of course, we might have a late freeze that would destroy tender plants. But, knowing that it is going to get ridiculously hot soon, I've found that the best gamble is to plant early.

In my garden, the tomato plants are healthy, and the broccoli, chard, and lettuce are producing nicely. The bean plants are coming on strong.

And the weeds are doing well, too. Always, there are weeds. Gardening would be so much more enjoyable if I could just keep the weeds out.

And then there are the bugs. Last year I lost just about all of my tomatoes to stink bugs. And those big green caterpillars. Then, slugs eat the beans and vine borers destroy the squash plants and white flies damage the broccoli.

If only I could only eliminate weeds and bugs from my garden, I would be a really happy gardener. But, dealing with these annoyances seems to be the price of collecting vegetables later in the season.

And, since I really love eating fresh vegetables and I especially love going out on a hot summer afternoon and plopping a fresh tomato in my mouth, I'll gladly put up with weeding and bug-hunting.

Hope for a harvest makes dealing with the problems of gardening worth the bother. The product makes the process bearable.

Weeds-and-bugs could easily stand as symbols for the challenges we face daily. Weeds-and-bugs are problems that, if removed, would make our lives so much more enjoyable. Weeds-and-bugs are things like pain and trials and temptations and irritations.

Quick. If you could think of one weed in your life to remove, what would it be?

I'll bet it didn't even take that long to think of it. You can just picture your life without this one weed. THAT bug gone would be delightful. And there is certainly nothing wrong with eradicating weeds-and-bugs.

Now, what if, one day, I went out to my garden and found a weed that I couldn't pull. What if I found a bug I couldn't kill? What would I do then?

I suppose I would have to learn to garden around it. I'd have to cope. I'd have to learn a new strategy for gardening.

So, what are people like you and I to do with the weeds-and-bugs that show up in the garden of our personal lives and just stick around? We have tried everything we can think of, but no pesticides or herbicides seem to work to remove them.

This trial never goes away. This pain never ceases. This temptation never goes away. This anguish never lets up. What do we do then?

For those times when weed-and-bug extermination doesn't work, the Apostle Paul serves as our guide today in the fine art of weed-and-bug appreciation. Paul had way more than his share of weeds-and-bugs in his personal garden. He knows what he's talking about, so we would do well to listen carefully.

Last Sunday we observed that Paul had resorted to boasting. And he didn't boast about his academic degrees,<sup>1</sup> his numerous converts, the crowds he has preached to, his international reputation, or his remarkable miracles.

Instead, he boasted about his hardships and sufferings. He boasted about an embarrassing night in Damascus when he was let down in a basket to escape a plot to take his life.

If all of that doesn't seem much like boasting, keep reading.

At the beginning of chapter twelve he mentions an experience that looks more like what any of might call a boast than anything he has mentioned yet.

It happened years previous to the letter he's writing and concerned one wild and woolly ride.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, in the one place in the New Testament where he mentions his rabbinic training - Philippians 3 - he said it was worth less than barnyard dung in comparison with the value of knowing Christ.

## **Visions and Revelations (vv. 1-6)**

### **Paul Lets Fly with a BOAST! (v. 1)**

*[1] Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.*

As he has made clear, Paul wasn't a big fan of boasting. But he is going to make an exception to his rule of thumb here, and boast. It might not be wise to boast, but given what was happening in Corinth it was even more foolish to not boast.

So, Paul decided that it was important to share with the Corinthians what was probably the most intimate of all his experiences as a Christian.<sup>2</sup>

### **Paul's Trip to Paradise (vv. 2-4)**

*Fourteen years previous*

He references an event that took place fourteen years before he sat down to write 2 Corinthians.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It may be that Paul's enemies in Corinth had boasted of visionary experiences themselves. Some have suggested that they were seeking to undermine Paul's influence for the Gospel in the Corinthian church and were using their claims of having had ecstatic experiences to support their teachings as opposed to his.

<sup>3</sup> It is hard to pin down where Paul might have been when he received the revelation he describes in this passage. It wasn't his conversion experience on the Damascus Road which we read about in Acts 9, because that happened over 20 years earlier. Nor is it a reference to Paul's time alone with the Lord in the deserts of Arabia, for that, too, was well over 14 years previous to the writing of 2 Corinthians. Paul received everything he knew about the Gospel from direct contact with Jesus. In Galatians, he tells us that when he went to Jerusalem to meet the other apostles, they could add nothing to his understanding of the Gospel. That is probably because he, like they, received his message from Jesus Himself. It couldn't have been associated with anything that happened when he was stoned and presumed dead at Lystra (Acts 14) or in connection with the vision he had about the need for the Gospel in Macedonia (Acts 16), because those events were more recent than fourteen years.

As I have studied the chronology of Paul's life, it seems likely to me that this event happened when he was serving in the church at Antioch (~AD 44), just before he and Barnabas left for the First Missionary Journey.<sup>4</sup> This event is of the supernatural variety.

We know that Paul was no stranger to the supernatural. He was given visions and special dreams from God. His gifting as an apostle allowed him to perform miracle. The Lord spoke to him on more than one occasion.

But what he is about to describe tops any of that.

I find it amazing that he never mentioned this incident in any of his other letters. Nor, evidently, did he ever mention it to the Corinthians when he was with them - and he had been with them for a long time.

Today, if someone had an experience like Paul describes here, it would be on the Web within hours, twitted and FaceBooked. Book tours would follow.

But it took Paul fourteen years to let this cat out of the bag, and he does so now only because he feels compelled to do so.

Frankly, I would have loved it if Paul had chosen to give more details about this experience. But he leaves most details to our imagination.

*Physically inexplicable*

***[2] 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. [3] And I know how such a man - whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows [4] was caught up into Paradise...<sup>5</sup>***

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<sup>4</sup>Although it certainly could have occurred when he was still living in Tarsus, prior to actually going to Antioch at Barnabas' invitation (so Harold Hoehner).

<sup>5</sup> According to Luke 23:43, Paradise is where Jesus is!

His vagueness about the whole thing leaves us with more questions than answers.

But, notice that he doesn't describe the experience as a dream or a vision. This was not an imagination thing or a fantasy trip or something that just happened in Paul's mind.

He actually saw the Lord. He went to Heaven.

He says that he was "caught up" to Heaven. The word for "caught up" is a word that is used in 1 Thessalonians 4 to refer to a time when Christians will be physically taken *while still living* to Heaven to be with the Lord. (We refer to this event as the "rapture.")

So, while Paul is uncertain as to the role his body played in this experience, we can know that it really happened. It was not a dream.<sup>6</sup>

And, his reference to the "third Heaven" is consistent with what we know of the first century Jewish conception of the universe.

They called the atmosphere we breathe and in which the birds fly the "1<sup>st</sup> Heaven." The "2<sup>nd</sup> Heaven" is the place of the sun, moon, and stars. And the "3<sup>rd</sup> Heaven" is the place of God's dwelling.

Actually, their idea of Heaven was actually pretty close to ours, today.

They didn't think that God's Heaven was a long way off, spatially. The point is that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Heaven is, in this life, not visible or accessible to our senses like the other Heavens are.

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<sup>6</sup> The physical part of this experience seems to be rather irrelevant. In chapter 5 of this letter, Paul made some remarks about Heaven and called being in Heaven being "at home" with the Lord. Maybe there was so little consciousness about his body because he was completely at home and comfortable there. The climate was so perfect he wasn't even aware of his body. There was no pressure in Paradise.

And this 3<sup>rd</sup> Heaven is where God took Paul.

There are accounts in Scripture of other people being taken to Heaven. Enoch and Elijah were taken to Heaven before they died. Paul, though, is the only one who came back.<sup>7</sup>

Others - Ezekiel, Daniel, and John - witnessed what we would call heavenly scenes and they described what they saw in their prophecies.

But, Paul doesn't try to regale us with descriptions of Heaven. He just says he went there.

We don't know why Paul was given this experience. For reasons known only to God, Paul was given this glimpse of Heaven's glories.

So, we don't have any specifics about what Paul SAW - and he makes sure that we don't know what he HEARD.

*Verbally incommunicable*

He simply tells us that he ***“heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.”***

It may be that the words were inexpressible, as in unpronounceable. Or (what I think is more likely) maybe the words were about unfathomable truths.<sup>8</sup>

Imagine. Experiencing things that could only be experienced in Heaven; hearing things that could only be heard in Heaven; seeing things that could only be seen in Heaven - and not being able to tell anyone about it! Wouldn't that drive you nuts?!

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly enough, Lazarus, who was dead for four days and raised from the dead by Jesus, is never said to have gone to Heaven.

<sup>8</sup> In agreement with some of my commentaries, I would suggest that whatever Paul heard must have exercised an incalculable influence on his whole ministry and apostleship, providing a key to his astonishing zeal and indefatigable labors.

But Paul has revealed this experience to us, not so that we would think of him as someone special in light of this revelation. Not at all.

### **Paul Hesitates to Boast (vv. 5-6)**

***[5] On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. [6] For if I do wish to boast I shall 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.***

So, if he didn't want us to think of him as some big deal for having gone to Heaven and back, why mention it?

Well, besides being another part of his claim to be a genuine apostle, Paul tells us about his experience in Heaven because it made necessary another experience that he also needs to tell us about.

And, while none of us can identify with a trip to Heaven, we can all identify with a ***“thorn in the flesh.”*** God allowed a weed to sprout in Paul's garden, a thorny weed. And I'm intrigued by the way he describes the thorn's invasion

### **A Thorn in the Flesh (vv. 7-10)**

#### **A Thorn to Prevent Pride (v. 7)**

***[7] Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger<sup>9</sup> of Satan to torment me - to keep me from exalting myself!<sup>10</sup>***

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<sup>9</sup> Messenger - does not imply that Paul is speaking of a person, either human or demonic.

<sup>10</sup> One thing becomes clear from verse 7: God REALLY doesn't want His people to exalt themselves. His concern for Paul in this regard was especially great in light of the “surpassing greatness of the revelations.”

### *God uses Satan*

Both God and Satan were involved in the gift of this thorn, but Satan's activity is here - and always - limited by what God allows. Satan is a powerful enemy, but God is always in control - never Satan.

We learned this from the Old Testament book of Job.

God allowed Satan to wound Job and to take away everything that was dear to him. But all of Satan's attacks were allowed - and limited - by God both to prove and to improve the purity of Job's faith.

So also Paul's thorn is called a "*messenger from Satan*" yet was "*given*" to him by God.

There is no doubt that Satan's purpose was to make life miserable for Paul. After all, Satan hated Paul and had a terrible plan for his life, just as he hates all believers in Jesus.

But God gave the thorn, sent the messenger, and allowed the pain to accomplish His own purposes in Paul's life. He planned to use the thorn to humble Paul and to strengthen him.

Of course, we all would love to know - what was Paul's thorn? I, for one, certainly don't have a clue as to what his thorn was.

### *What was the thorn?*

Through the centuries of church history, though, many people have tried to figure it out, and many believe that they've arrived at the answer.

Some have suggested that his thorn consisted of remorse over the way he had lived before coming to faith in Christ. Some believe he was excessively tempted to sexual sin.

It has been thought by some that he suffered from a nagging wife, frustration over his inability to win Jews to Jesus, or overtly demonic attacks.

Others have wondered if the thorn was a disease like malaria or leprosy, or a chronic condition like epilepsy, gastritis, rheumatism - even hypochondria.

Still others have been of the opinion that Paul suffered from earaches, headaches, dental problems, deafness, gallstones, gout, sciatica, lice, bad eyesight or a speech impediment.<sup>11</sup>

The plain fact is that it is anyone's guess as to the precise thorn from which Paul suffered. Who knows, maybe it was a thorn in his flesh?!?

If pressed, I would guess that Paul's "thorn" was of a physical, not psychological, nature. It was a probably a chronic thing and it was almost certainly painful.

But we don't know what it was. And I, for one, am grateful that we don't. As far as we know, it could have been anything.

*Thank God we don't know!*

Christians who come to this text have tended to identify Paul's thorn as something with which they themselves wrestle.

Those with cataracts wonder if he had an eye problem. Wheelchair bound people wonder if he walked with a limp. People with asthma suppose he had compromised lung capacity. Depressed people assume he was depressed.

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<sup>11</sup> Many think that we should associate this "thorn" with Galatians 4:13ff? If so, then he is certainly speaking of a physical disability. And that reference makes us think, too, of a problem with his eyes.

This kind of identification may be helpful. It frees any of us recognize that as Paul coped with his “thorn” so we can learn to cope with our “thorn” (whatever it might be), too.

All we know, though, is that it was a genuine problem - a problem so severe that Paul, this man who endured beatings, imprisonments, stonings, rejections, humiliations and more, begged God to take it away from him.

### **Paul Wanted the “thorn” Gone! (v. 8)**

*[8] Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.*

Whatever it was, he wanted it gone. It was no light and trivial thing. And so, Paul, being a man who believed in prayer, naturally prayed that the Lord would remove it.

He prayed three times. No. He implored the Lord three times.

And I’ll bet the Lord Jesus listened and that He listened with great compassion. After all, Jesus knew what it was to be in anguish. He Himself prayed three times in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup of God’s wrath would pass Him by.

There is nothing wrong with wanting a weed, a bug, a thorn in the flesh to be gone. Maybe you’ve prayed a similar prayer from time to time. Maybe there have been times when your prayer for relief has been answered and God has graciously delivered you from a thorn.

Paul’s prayer was perfectly legitimate. It was fine for him to want relief.

But, while a prayer for relief is a welcome one, God is not obligated to say “Yes” to that prayer. Sometimes, God will say, “No” to our prayers for relief from a thorn - and that is exactly what He said to Paul.

### **God’s Response: no (v. 9a)**

*[9a] And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.”*

The “thorn” is going to stay. It will not be removed.

I think most of us are like Paul. If I identify a weed in the garden of my life, and it hurts, it’s thorny, I want to get rid of it. You, too?

So, how would you like to receive the response Paul got to his request that God would take away the thorn?

*“No, Dave, I am not going to take your thorn away. I love you, but My love for you will not always look or feel the way you think love should look or feel. I am going to allow the thorn to remain, to fester in your body and soul.”*

Brothers and sisters, if God chose to say “No” to the Apostle Paul’s perfectly legitimate request for relief so that Paul would not exalt himself, and so that Paul would learn to rely on God’s grace, and so that Paul’s weakness would be replaced by God’s perfect strength - should we be surprised if He does the same thing with us and our thorns?

Shouldn’t we be expecting Him to allow hardships in our lives, too, in order that we might know His power?

When we feel weak, under attack, or inadequate to handle the pressures we face, we need to realize this: God is in it. He is either allowing it or He is orchestrating it. He might be using satanic pressure or health or money or relationships. But God is in it.

Now, let me just say a word on behalf of God’s goodness, because it is possible that this idea - that God is on our pain, either passively or actively - may be difficult for some to hear.

We need to not confuse the ideas of God's goodness and life's difficulties. The fact that life is hard doesn't mean that God is not good.

God is good. Period. He proved that when He sent His Son to be a sacrifice for our sins. Every good gift comes from God. He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

That God is in our pain doesn't at all mean that God is mean. It means that His goodness and grace and love sometimes reveal hard sides.

Judging by the way God dealt with Paul, I conclude that it was more important to God to keep Paul trusting than it was to make Paul comfortable. Same for me. Same for you.

He really, really cares that we learn to draw on His resources for living. And one of the sharpest tools in His toolbox to mold us into dependent people is the chisel of pain - be that pain physical, emotional, relational, psychological or spiritual.

God is more interested in our welfare than we are. But His methods for promoting our welfare don't always coincide with our self-perceived need for ease, creature comforts, leisure, or for rest.

I said a minute ago, that God's answer to Paul's prayer was "No." Well, I'm going to amend that slightly. God's answers to prayer are never negative, except in a superficial sense.

In the final scheme of things, God's dealings with His people are always "Yes!" (see 2 Corinthians 1:19-20). And His "No" was qualified by this assurance: by leaving the thorn to torment Paul, Paul would experience the power of Christ.

With that "Yes" attached to the gift of the thorn, listen to Paul's reaction to the "No" answer. His response is what some have called the high point of 2 Corinthians. It just doesn't get any more authentic than this.

## Weakness CAN Lead to the Experience of Christ's Power! (vv. 9b-10)

*Wedding weakness to faith*

***[9b]... Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."***

Having heard God's answer, Paul not only does not plead for release from the thorn, he welcomes thorns and glories in them. He embraces weakness and pain.

This is not Christian masochism. In and of itself, pain does not necessarily manifest God's power. It does so ONLY when we allow our pain and weakness to turn us to Jesus.

So listen as I read the list of weaknesses with which Paul is "**well content**" now that he embraces how God is willing to use them in his life.

*Well content with weaknesses*

***[10] Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.***<sup>12</sup>

Today our understanding of "**thorn in the flesh**" greatly expands. Persecution qualifies, sure. But so does any other weakness or indignity we might suffer.

Any minor annoyance and any personal catastrophe can be a tool God will use to promote our growth, our purity, and our faith - if we will turn to Jesus.

Take a careful look at the weaknesses listed here. Do any of them correspond to your life experience?

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<sup>12</sup> Note 4:7-10 and 6:4-10 for similarities in thought with what is here.

Paul lists “*insults*.” Have you ever been insulted? How did that insult make you feel? Angry? Weak? Depressed?

Paul says that when we are insulted, we can both experience and display God’s power as we trust Him.

Same thing with “*difficulties*” and “*distresses*” - just in case any of us have ever experienced a difficulty or a distressing situation.

God can use anything that makes us feel weak - a cancer or the flu, a hard marriage or a rebellious child, a hard-starting car or a near fatal car wreck, a stubbed toe or a relational snub, a lost job or a smaller than normal bonus at work or a lousy grade on a major exam - to teach us to rely on His strength.

So, a question: How is God’s strength developed in us? Answer? God uses pain and weakness to teach us to trust in His power.

### Conclusion:

It’s delightful when “everything’s comin’ up roses” in our lives.

But in all of our gardens there are some weeds and bugs. And sometimes we encounter the weed we can’t pull and the bug that won’t die. What do we do then...?

It’s not at all wrong to seek relief from pain. But if we can’t find *legitimate* relief from pain, maybe we need to accept the pain as a thorn, the way Paul accepted his own “*thorn in the flesh*.”

Your thorn might be a long-term frustration, a chronic pain, a nagging ache in your body or soul, or a temptation that won’t go away.

OK.

Perhaps God intends to keep that thorn in place to teach you to trust Him more fully. Perhaps your thorn is His gift to enable you to come to a robust faith.

Maybe it is time to stop trying to use God to relieve your pain, and time to start using your pain to seek and find God. (Thanks, Dr. Larry Crabb.)

From my experience with vegetables, I can tell you that weeds-and-bugs are an unavoidable part of gardening. From nearly forty years as a believer in Jesus, I can tell you that weeds-and-bugs are also an unavoidable part of life. Responsible gardening demands pulling weeds.

And when weeds-and-bugs, when *pain* remains, we can live in constant resentment and frustration and become bitter, demanding people OR we can turn to the Lord, learn contentment in our weakness, and become strong in His strength.