A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

***“Glory of the High; Grace in the Low”***

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

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In every human life there are highs and lows. There are good times and bad times. There are moments of elation and seasons of desperation. We know this, any of us who’ve lived any amount of time. Youth know this--they’ve walked the halls of middle school. So do young adults beginning the struggle to find their place in the world. Married people make promises with this in mind in their vows; parents know this too, there are really, really good days and there are heartbreaking days. As we get older, we experience this truth about life even more profoundly. There are some good days, and there are some hard days. This is a great truth: in every human life there are highs and lows.

Near the end of 2 Corinthians, in one passage, we have testimony to the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. Each is described in evocative terms. The highest of highs is described as being “caught up to the third heaven.” The lowest of lows is described as “a thorn given me in my flesh.”

The spiritual high could hardly be described in more exalted terms. Paul uses the third person singular here, saying, “I know someone who was caught up to the third heaven,” but it’s pretty clear he’s actually talking about himself and his own experience. The third heaven description isn’t something we hear much about. I think it’s an image of mystery, not a cosmological map. I think it’s the image that heaven is like the Temple’s three spaces. In the Temple were an outer courtyard, an inner courtyard, and the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was the inner sanctum, the place where God was encountered. The other courtyards were considered sacred space, but the Holy of Holies was where God was. If heaven is like the Temple, the image of a third heaven is like the Holy of Holies. Paul is saying, in essence, “Fourteen years ago I had an experience I still can’t fully describe or explain. It was an experience like being in the Holy of Holies, the unmediated presence of the living God.”

He doesn’t say much more than that about it, as if the whole experience is still a mystery to him about which words fall short. But notice this: he never forgot it. Fourteen years ago is pretty specific. Last year it was thirteen years ago, two years ago it was twelve years ago. Next year it will be fifteen years ago if he tells the story. This experience of God, whatever it was for him, was a stake in the ground in his life and for his faith.

The truth is we need moments like that, and when we have them we don’t easily forget them, even if we don’t know how to talk about them or whether we even should talk about them. While the Christian life isn’t an uninterrupted series of mountaintop experiences of elation in the presence of the living God, most of us need something. We need some experience of God’s power or grace or love; surely, God’s presence:

Abraham needed the visitors to the oaks of Mamre.

Moses needed the burning bush.

David needed Nathan’s prophetic courage.

Elijah needed the still, small voice.

Mary needed the angel’s visitation; so did Joseph.

The church needed Pentecost.

Paul needed the road to Damascus.

We need some experience of God’s immanent presence. And when we have such an experience we rarely forget. They are moments of deep grace. Sometimes it feels like God’s love is so thick we can grab it, or we’ve been clutched by such love. The mystics remind us that not all of life with God is characterized by such immediacy and they remind us that the journey of faithfulness for most of us is in the times in between, in the dark night when prayer can feel empty and lonely. We do not substitute mountaintop experience for the living God. Yet blessed is the person who can remember a time when the divine seemed real, so close.

Some people experience this in a Sunday worship service. Anne Lamott talks about her early Christian experience, a Sunday in particular when she could still hardly bear to endure the sermon, but the hymn at the end of the service was so rich with holy presence she almost broke down and wept. For another person it is a psalm read and then silence pregnant with holy promise. For another, it is a moment in a sermon that speaks to me as if I’m the only person in the room. You’re just going about your life and then God shows up. We don’t forget those moments. You may have vivid memories of spiritual highs, almost mystical experiences of the Holy Spirit’s presence in years gone by. Those experiences are dramatic, emotional, faith-confirming gifts. They have been the spark for spiritual growth and the answer to prayer for tough decisions about direction in life. Coming from those experiences we feel elated, exalted, blessed, strengthened, encouraged, loved. Do not easily forget such a gift.

This is a great spiritual truth. Spiritual exaltation is a gift, not an everyday occurrence, but a gift that sometimes comes as the fruit of faithful contemplation, and sometimes comes to a person stumbling through life but who has enough openness, or just flat out desperation, for a crack in the wall to allow divine light to shine through.

There is another spiritual truth, a second great one, a twin sister to the first. It is this: the spiritual highs are important, and so good, but the lows are the great teacher of our souls. Oh to spend my life lying in the green pastures, led to the still waters, restoring my soul. Oh that would be wonderful, but it is the journey through the dark valleys that is the true teacher of grace. It’s the dark valleys of life where God’s faithfulness is made known and God’s presence is most needed.

Not everyone has always understood that. Apparently there were people, super-apostles so-named by Paul, who were coming to Corinth trying to tell the Corinthians things about Jesus and the gospel that Paul thought were untrue. It seems like the main thing they were telling them was that Jesus makes everything better; he is a god like all the other gods they’d heard about who should be followed because he was powerful and could overcome opponents and make everything better. To demonstrate their theology, they told stories about their own lives as super-apostles, super-human, with their own authority and their own glorious experiences of divine power. “Look what Jesus has done for us,” they said. “This is what Jesus will do for you too, if you follow us,” which seemed, not surprisingly, to include giving them money.

The more things change, right? Indeed, the more things change, the more they stay the same. This version of the gospel was attractive to them then and still is today. It’s an appealing story. Jesus came and conquered human suffering, making way for his followers to conquer life and be victorious. In the face of sickness, they will be well; in the face of poverty, they will be rich; in the face of failures, they will be successful. Christians will have their prayers answered, all of them, in the way they’d like for them to be answered. This is the super-great gospel preached by super-apostles then and now. Do you know how you get to be a super-apostle? Tell people what they want to hear. They’ll love you for it.

And you’ll be long gone before the house of cards crashes down around them when the wind blows. “Why didn’t my prayer get answered? Why did I lose my job? Why did I fail that class? Why this sickness, why this pain, why this breakup? Why can’t my life work out right?” They can do super-apostle calculus, too. If God promises these things, and things haven’t come to be, then maybe there’s no God after all. That’s the calculus of bad theology.

When you tell people what they want to hear, you deny them what they need to hear. Paul wasn’t a super-apostle, but he became a saint because he told people what they needed to hear, and more than that, he lived it himself.

The gospel St. Paul preached was honest about the human condition and the price that following Christ may cost. In chapter eleven he lists all that he went through. Listen to this resume of someone whose life was completely devoted to Christ: five times I received forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. A night and a day I was adrift at sea, on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers, in toil and hardship, through sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there’s the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

In Old Testament theology, anyone with this happening to them would be Job-like, judged to have something wrong with him if all this bad stuff is happening, but in the New Testament, these things are badges of honor, or at least passages of Christian maturity; persevering them is evidence of God’s faithfulness. This is the same Paul who wrote to the Romans that nothing, certainly nothing like these things, can separate us from the love of God in Christ. That we rejoice in our sufferings, suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame.

This is the theology of the cross. Jesus had nails driven into his hands and a spear into his side. St. Paul tells of a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass him, to keep him from becoming conceited. No one knows exactly what he meant, but we all know what it means to us personally. It’s one of the evocative images of all scripture, a mirror held up against the universal human condition of suffering.

Throughout history people have read back into the “thorn in the side” their own life experiences. In the 2nd century, Tertullian believed Paul was talking about an earache or a headache. For Chrysostom, a couple centuries later, he thought it was a person, specifically “Alexander the coppersmith,” who fought against Paul. Augustine in the 5th century saw persecution as the thorn in the flesh. In the 16th century, the Reformers Luther and Calvin thought Paul was inflicted with impure lust and temptations. In the 19th century, William Ramsay thought it must be recurrent malarial fever. Everyone reads back into the thorn in the flesh what they are dealing with.

In more recent times, the idea was that Paul’s problem wasn’t physical but emotional or psychological, his “great sorrow and unceasing pain” because of the unbelief of others around him. Others have proposed hysteria, hypochondria, gallstones, sciatica, deafness, speech impediment, remorse. What projections are yet to come in this generation? What will people see in Paul’s thorn in the flesh in the next generation? Low Testosterone? Premature hair loss? Your neighbor’s bumper sticker touting the other political party?

The very mystery of Paul’s ailment allows each generation to see their own weaknesses, their own experiences of suffering and pain. And that’s a gift. One commentator (Lightfoot) insightfully asks, “Is there a single servant of Christ who cannot point to some “thorn in the flesh” visible or private, physical or psychological, from which he or she has prayed to be released, but which has been given by God to keep him or her humble and therefore fruitful in God’s service?”

Every believer learns that human weakness and divine grace go hand in hand. Paul’s thorn in the flesh is a type of every Christian’s suffering, not in the specifics, but in the spiritual significance. For Paul, and for us, the pain is a more important teacher than even the glory. The rain more important than the sunshine. With Paul, we can say, “Over and over I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”

It is only through some hard times, and I know you’ve had them, that you learn to say, “I am content with weaknesses for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

And not only that, but when you are weak, and honest about your weaknesses, your struggles, your hardships and temptations, and can tell of how God was with you through these, how in your weakness, you found strength, your weakness becomes strength for others.

Which has been more universally encouraging and strengthening to the faith of others: the story of the glory of the high or the grace in the low? One person’s spiritual glory or God’s abundance in our need? Which has been more important to more people over the centuries: that Paul was elevated to the third heaven, or “my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

This is the gospel of the cross, the gospel we need to hear: the very Son of God, lowered himself, took human form, even that of a servant, and was obedient to death, even to death on a cross. He who experienced the glory of the transfiguration on the mountaintop, experienced the loneliness of the crucifixion and the shadow of death. This is he, The Word of God, whose habitation was heaven itself, but it was by this defeating faithfulness, this weakness in the body, this so-called failure, that he took on death, and created a new life possible for all of us, that he can make this promise to all of God’s children: in this world there will be trouble, but I have overcome the world.

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