

# 2 Corinthians 12

by John Nelson Darby

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*John Nelson Darby's sermon on 2 Corinthians 12 explores the interplay of divine revelations, human weakness, and the transformative power of suffering in the Christian life.*

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 12:1

**Topics:** "Power in Weakness", "Humility in Suffering"

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## Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on 2 Corinthians 12, emphasizing the dual nature of Paul's experiences of visions and revelations alongside his sufferings and infirmities. He highlights that while Paul received extraordinary revelations, he remained humble, recognizing that his flesh was a hindrance, and that God's strength is made perfect in weakness. Darby explains the significance of being 'in Christ' and how it allows believers to glory in their weaknesses, as they are vessels for Christ's power. He also discusses the importance of discerning the means by which the gospel is spread, cautioning against relying on worldly methods rather than the power of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, Darby encourages believers to trust in God's grace and to understand their identity and position in Christ.

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## Transcript

Here Paul says, "I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord"; and then we come to infirmities and persecutions, a kind of honour on one side; but the Lord is able to unite what is in one sense honourable with discipline in the flesh on the other side. It was Paul's honour in that he was suffering for Christ, but along with that it was discipline to the flesh. We have another aspect here to these infirmities, for they are the same though looked at in a different way.

Verse 2 should read, "I know a man," not "I knew"; he knew him while he wrote. The fourteen years ago is when it happened. "I know a man in Christ fourteen years ago caught up." The term "in Christ" is important, because that takes him out of himself; for he says, in himself he will not glory, but of such a one he will glory. The sense is, a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up. For it really was Paul; but he will not allow it was himself, because whether in the body or out of the body he cannot tell. He had not a consciousness of human perceptions; he perceived these things now, but then he did not know how he knew or saw it all. There is consciousness of the body and so he could not say whether in or out. His perceptions were gone from him; and when he got back, he could not tell about them; he did not receive them humanly, neither could he communicate them humanly. The church he had by revelation as he says. We have it as a thing we are accustomed to, but to have had it all come in fresh - a revelation - a thing we

have never known nor heard of before, is an amazing thing: and especially so to him, a strong Jew.

356 The third heaven here is in a different character from paradise. The third heaven is going on high - a degree of exaltation; paradise is rather the character of the thing. Our Lord went to paradise, but paradise is the character. The word "paradise" means nothing but a Persian garden; there they had beautiful gardens. The third heaven is hardly the heaven of heavens. There are the sky, the created heavens, the starry heavens, and then the heaven where the throne of God is placed, though this again is a figure no doubt. "Heaven itself" in Hebrews 9 means the reality, and not the figure. We see the same thing in Ezekiel, where he saw the covering of the cherubim and above that the throne of God or the figure of it. These have not exactly to be atoned for; but wherever any creature has been, it has to be cleansed.

We have also the tabernacle for a type. The camp is the world; the court gives the first heavens; the holy place the second; and the most holy, where the ark was, the third, with the throne of God. The brazen altar was not in the world, because Christ was lifted up out of the world. Then the holy, and the most holy; the expression "heaven of heavens" is used, I take it in rather a general way. "Rejoice, ye heavens," is in contrast with earth and that you find constantly; only we have in the tabernacle something more specific, and the Jews constantly used it so, and spoke of three heavens. It was very natural, if God had said Moses was to make all these things after the pattern of things in the heavens, that they should call them so, the three heavens, because there were the three places. The tabernacle represents three things: Christ Himself; the church because God dwells in it; and the creation or created heavens. Christ Himself, for the veil is His flesh - through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; next, as we have seen, we get, as shewn in creation, the three heavens; and then we have "but Christ as Son over his own house, whose house are we." It is not His body there, because we have it as the dwelling-place of God. We never find the temple in Hebrews, because the temple is the permanent thing, the millennium, while in Hebrews the saints are looked at as strangers and pilgrims in the wilderness.

357 The thief was not in the "body." The very thing the Lord taught the thief was that he was to be in paradise before the "body" was formed. It is not into His kingdom, but "Lord, remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom." He had learned as a Jew that a Christ should come, and there Christ hung upon the cross. He owns Him there as Lord, and the Lord says, 'I cannot wait for that kingdom, but you shall be in paradise to-day.' That is, it is the happiness of soul meanwhile. That is the character of Luke all through in grace. We have no "abomination of desolation" in Luke 21, but we have Titus's army, and Jerusalem trodden down of the Gentiles till the times of the Gentiles shall be fulfilled. All is referred on to the kingdom. Our Lord said at the passover, "I will not any more eat thereof until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God." He looks at the present things: they are always brought in, though they are carried on. In these things Paul's ministry and Luke run together a good deal.

It is when Paul speaks of paradise that he speaks of hearing things he could not utter: that is where blessedness is. The paradise of God, and my Father's house are very different ideas. We have not the Father in Revelation except "having his Father's name written in their foreheads" (chap. 14), after the opening chapters. There is brightness and blessedness there, but not fellowship with the Father exactly: we have not that in the Revelation. We have all that is descriptive of glory and blessedness, and beauty, and so on - golden street and glass, and all the pictures of things, which, if we compare scripture with scripture, we get to understand. We have the capital of God's dominion where He has the garden of His delights; but this is a different idea from the relationship of the Son with the Father; and we are going into all that. One is secured delight with God and the other is with my Father; and this is the highest way of blessing.

The "place" John speaks of in chapter 14 is a place in these mansions; as if He said, 'Do not you fancy I am going off to leave you in the lurch,' as men speak. "I am going to prepare a place for you. It is not only a place for the high priest, but for the priests, for all of you, and I am going to get it ready for you." As regards locality, this is not brought into question, but it is the Father's house; and the place of it we really know nothing about. We say going up to heaven, but then that to Australia would be going down, and yet it is all quite right; it is only language adapted to our thoughts and feelings as men. There is no place with God in a sense, and no time either, but we speak as men. God is "I am," the self-existing One. Yet all these things are real, when you come to the moral relationship - very real indeed.

358 The "not lawful" in verse 4, means not morally possible. It is not that the things were not capable of being uttered, but that they were unutterable in their character. It is not like "cannot be uttered," but a thing that morally cannot be done. I say, such a thing cannot be, without meaning to say that the thing is not physically possible, but that it is a thing not to be done or thought of. I do not know any one word good for it. In Romans it is the denial of the utterableness of the groans. Then we have the glories of the man in Christ in the third heavens. We are not to be taken up there for unutterable revelations, but for unutterable glory we shall be. We are sitting in heavenly places in Christ; the man in Christ, is in Christ where He is.

Satan accuses the brethren before the throne. We have Satan in the opening of Job coming among the sons of God, where the government of God is carried on. "Spiritual wickedness in heavenly places" is in contrast with earthly things. Joshua wrestled with flesh and blood, we do not; but it is where our blessings are, and this does not say anything, except that they are not on earth. We shall rise into the air, and meet the Lord there first; we shall be in the Father's house, and we shall be free of all the heavens then; the Father's house is the highest thought we can have.

The government of Israel was carried on at the altar of incense, and that rather belonged to the most holy, though it stood outside, and the effect of the sin of the priesthood was that, after the death of Nadab and Abihu, they could not go inside, had it not been that the priest would have gone in and out continually as in the millennium. The incense belonged to the inner place. God spoke to Moses from the cherubim, but Moses was distinct from all the rest, for he found grace in God's sight.

There was nothing in the government of God in Israel that corresponded to the church of God. God governs us now according to the relationship in which we are placed; Israel was governed according to what a man ought to be, for although God was in heaven, in a certain sense, He governed on earth. Although what they had were shadows of things in the heavens, yet it was real government by them by earthly means. God gave distinct law, which goes to the extent of what a man ought to be and no farther: but we are brought into the light to God, as His own children, with fitness for the heavenly places. There may be something of likeness in the individuals because saints in Israel had to go and suffer like us; but this was exceptional, while with us it is the reality. Israel's calling was a very different thing from the exercises of individual faith. But God had to deal with the individuals on what was really higher ground than that of the calling within which they were. Individually Abraham must go higher up to get with God, even as a figure he is not in the plain but on the mountain.

359 Discipline is government. We ought to walk in the light as God is in the light. We have two things, the veil rent, and our calling into God's presence without a veil; and also we have a Father who is holy: "Holy Father, keep them in thine own name." And then we have a third thing, and that is "the Lord" in the general administration of things - the general idea of the Lord's disciplining. The whole place of the Christian is a different thing from Israel's. God may shew His government as He did in bringing in the flood, and if He

need He will. Righteousness does exalt a nation, though the direct government of God is over. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without Him, but direct government with laws leading to certain results is over, though what a man sows he reaps. God does not let the reins out of His hand. He takes His people of old and deals with them as a nation, but now His children have the fullest revelation of His dealings with them, and that as children, and He does not even say "not a sparrow falls to the ground without (God, but) your Father"; as one who has to you the place and tenderness of a Father, and not a thing can happen to you without His care.

Well, we are in Christ; we have not these visions and revelations of course (they were special to Paul), but we have this association above, and the place of a Christian in which we can glory. All that was revealed to Paul belongs to us. We are not made the vessel of its revelation as he was, but all things are ours, just as much as they were Paul's, and it is "a man in Christ," and of such an one will I glory. If I look at myself "in Christ," I can glory, not talking of revelation now, but if I say "myself," I cannot glory except in my infirmities; "for though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool, for I will say the truth; but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me" - revelations, of course, were neither seen nor heard - "and lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure." Now we have the vessel again - we have had it before - we have the immense revelations that he had, so that he could not tell them, and then the vessel in which the revelations were, and which had to be put down.

360 And another thing we have in passing; we see here a proof that no extent of divine communication ever corrects the flesh, even where it is real; but the flesh is a judged thing, and a hopelessly bad thing. If we take the flesh by itself, it is lawless, so that God has to bring in the flood upon it. If you take it under law, then it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. Then if we take flesh in the presence of Christ (that is, God come in grace), it crucified Christ; or, if we bring in the Holy Ghost, men resist Him; and then, if we put flesh in the third heaven, he will be puffed up; and if there were a fourth heaven, and he be put there, he would be more puffed up still. Such is its character; all the effect of the abounding of grace and glory is only to shew its character out. Here the Lord had to put Paul in danger, and gave him a remedy; the flesh is not exactly corrected here. Morally all the Lord could do was to keep the flesh down for him. Paul was a man, and he must be dealt with as a man in his responsibility. The time was not come to give him glory instead of flesh, and so he is dealt with as he is.

It is a great point - man's real condition. All would own that flesh is bad in a general sense, but because they think so, men would correct and improve it. We are bound to do good to every man, whoever it is, even as man; but the pretension of men is, that at bottom there is something good in a man, and so ultimately you may make anything out of him. And so they are working education for one great thing. Of course, everybody has to learn something, but the common idea of education now is an infidel idea. They give everybody votes, and then it follows that they must be educated in order to know how to use their vote. The whole thing is nonsense - a mere question of the passions of the flesh. In some states they compel education. God has committed children to parents, and the parent is bound to care for his child. No state can come in between God and the parent. If the state come in, you will have to leave the state. It is from no resistance of the power that I say so, for that would be wrong directly; but it is the word of God that gives the state its authority, and therefore I submit or go. If you were compelled to be a soldier, if it is against your conscience, you must be shot, or something else: that is all.

361 But we have not got quite to the end of the thorn in the flesh. It is called the "messenger of Satan," because it was an instrument of Satan; just as in Job's case, when Satan brought sickness and disease on Job, the Lord let Satan loose at him; so it was Satan's messenger here to buffet Paul. It is an additional proof, that no grace ever mends the flesh. Put the flesh down; everything is useful for that. It was putting down the flesh, making Paul contemptible; it was a sort of counterpoise to the abundance of revelation. He besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from him; but the flesh must be put down. "You must trust My grace, and the character of My grace is that My strength is made perfect in weakness. If it is My strength, it is not in man's power that it is made good." Of course it was all through death: Christ was crucified through weakness, and that He might destroy him that had the power of death; and the character of Christ's strength working in us is the putting down of all our strength, and then His power can work - "Most gladly, therefore, will I glory in infirmity, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." We have the man in Christ first, then we have from the "in Christ" abundance of revelation, which might puff up the flesh, and then flesh is made totally nothing of, a hindrance put upon it, and Christ's power brought out. Only in the case of Paul, all this was for Christ's sake, though it was a thorn in the flesh, so that it was his glory in the other aspect of it, and he was suffering for Christ. All this is very instructive as to any ministry, because the power of ministry is in putting the man down that Christ's power may be there. God's power is a very different thing from man's. Man may take a vessel and do what he likes, but he cannot fit the vessel with any conscious power in itself. God cannot use the vessel until its qualities be mere qualities, and this connection with man's will and energy be broken.

362 Men are found constantly trusting in means. Now I quite admit certain things, and all things are lawful to me, and I am thankful for any facility in my way, but trusting in such things will not do. The Holy Ghost is acting, and when He works, all else must fall into low place. The apostles went on foot, and we go by rail; but ten thousand times more was done then, because the Holy Ghost was carrying on things everywhere. "Your faith to Godward is spread abroad." That is better than any railroad; the power of the Spirit of Christ was what he reckoned on and trusted to, and that really did the work. We go looking at what are facilities for the body, human things, and things which we are thankful for; and they get trusted, instead of the power of God. In Paul's day these things were not known, and yet immensely more was done, because the Holy Ghost wrought. We see it clearly enough. Instead of three thousand souls converted by one sermon, it takes more like three thousand sermons for the conversion of one soul. Yet God is working now remarkably through mercy; He comes in and acts sovereignly. Take printing again, it is all very well; God can use such things as well as anything else. All things are lawful, but it is the trusting to these immense facilities that is our error. Here was a little handful of Thessalonians converted, and all the world is really preaching the gospel by telling what had happened there: "from you sounded out the word of the Lord, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to Godward is spread abroad, so that we need not to speak anything." All the world was talking about it. "Why, there is such a people started at Thessalonica, they have given up all their idols, and they are waiting for God's Son from heaven." The world itself spread it - there was such a power in the testimony.

Some use placards. I leave every conscience free to judge for itself, but I should not use them. I doubt very much that more work is really done by it, but I leave every conscience free. I would trust God for it all, and meet people as God brings them. I would not announce even a gospel meeting, except among the saints, and I should be glad of their fellowship in it. I was in Edinburgh once, and there was a certain person who asked me to go on with his meetings. I did not, but I got to know some of the people with him, and talked to them about the Lord's coming. They considered it quite a wild thing, but yet thought I ought to lecture about it, but I would not have any bills. They wanted them to be put in the shop windows, but I

would not have any. Well, we had the meetings on the Lord's coming - a set of lectures - and this man who had been very violent came. We had twenty people from different congregations - just the people I wanted - and it set the Lord's coming as a thing on its legs again; and then some of them set up a kind of society for having lectures every year.

363 I find these things going, and it is a very serious question. I see a great deal of work doing, and work that I delight in abstractedly, missionary work, tracts distributed, and so on; but I see, too, that the world and the church are mixed up together, and the manner of doing these things is of the first importance in doing them. Am I to do good, or seem to destroy my good by mixing with the world? There was a dear old man - an Independent secretary for the Irish schools - and he asked me if I would be on his committee. I said, 'I cannot go with an accredited religion through the world.' 'Oh,' said he, 'we must be accredited with the world.' 'But I will not be so,' said I; 'and look! here come all these people with their guineas. Why, even Peter himself could not be a member of your society, for he says, Silver and gold have I none.' It is very often the question whether the way of doing a particular thing is right. By the manner you may do a great good, or a great deal of evil. Am I to accept the evil in order to do good, or am I to trust the Lord? What God is now doing is separating the precious from the vile; and this is not a matter about which I have no feeling. It is often pressed upon my spirit, Am I to put water in the wine that people may drink it? At first, I did not care where I went - into a church or elsewhere - to preach the gospel, or into a Methodist chapel, and so on. I have no principle that directly hinders me, but one day, at Plymouth, they brought me short up, for I had in the vestry to write down who ordained me, and this brought me to a point. There was the question straight out: Am I to accept that, in order to get an opportunity to preach to five thousand people? Spiritual means, of course, can be used, such as saints going round to houses in the way of positive love to make the preaching known. The means are all in our power.

364 It was that verse in Jeremiah 15:19, 20, that laid hold on me, "If thou return, then will I bring thee again, and thou shalt stand before me; and if thou take forth the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth; let them return unto thee, but return not thou unto them. And I will make thee unto this people a fenced brazen wall; and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee? for I am with thee to save thee, and to deliver thee, saith Jehovah. And I will deliver thee out of the hand of the wicked, and I will redeem thee out of the hand of the terrible." Jeremiah is in exactly that position. Jerusalem is looked at as a blessed thing and as a wicked thing, and so is the church now in a sense. And after speaking of all that conflict in Jeremiah's spirit, the Lord says to him, "If thou separate the precious from the vile, thou shalt be as my mouth." At the first beginning that sentence laid hold of me. An infidel might say of the church, 'Down with it! Down with it!' and I could not say, "The temple of Jehovah, the temple of Jehovah are ye." So, then, what am I to do? Separate the precious from the vile. And then comes the question, What means am I to use for doing that which I desired to do? and can I associate myself with worldly means for a divine thing?

I know that preachers come by rail, preach, and are away again; but I doubt that more work is done. I doubt that this great employment of means to carry things through has any real power in it. Some ask how would I compel them to come in; but this is compelling them to come in to heaven, not to come in to the preaching. The question is, are the means I am employing, such that I am not mixed up with the spirit of the world and the mere world's instrumentality? Though I quite believe God is using means, many means that I could not use, it does not move me. Take the handbills; it does not follow that these people would not have been converted if there had been no handbills. Yet I have not the most distant idea of even convincing other people about it, or of binding their consciences. We have to go on with the Lord. I see

God working in all kinds of ways. One gave it me as a reason for staying in the Establishment, that he was useful there, and that he had such numbers of people to hear him there, that he would never get elsewhere. And that might be quite true as to fact. I am delighted when good is done; but what I see, even as a fact, is that where there is earnestness and faith, God blesses the earnestness and faith. But there is a quantity where there is a flood; and if the earnestness is great, it is like a river swollen, that carries down a quantity of mud with it, and there is a bar made outside. After a revivalist sermon, for instance, you find the greatest difficulty in the world to get the people to go on without excitement. Still I rejoice that many are converted. God may use all sorts of means that I could not use; but He can do what He pleases - I must do what is right. If I cannot do what others do, I should be very wrong in condemning them for using such and such means. It is not merely placards that I speak of; but it is a large question that one has to be exercised in - what means can I use? I can suppose one who has not had his conscience awakened, going on with this and that - take a clergyman saying that children are converted in baptism; or any one kept excusing plenty of inconsistencies, and worse, where numbers are converted by the preaching; but that justifies nothing. Take women again, who are going about preaching, but I do not believe it is right, however many conversions there may be.

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