

In Christ 2 Corinthians 12

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores the profound implications of being 'in Christ' and the transformative power of grace in the believer's life.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:2

Topics: "Grace", "Spiritual Conflict"

Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on 2 Corinthians 12, illustrating the profound contrast between the heights of spiritual experience and the depths of human depravity. He emphasizes that while believers can experience the glory of being 'in Christ,' they must also confront the reality of their flesh, which remains a hindrance. Darby highlights Paul's unique experience of being caught up to the third heaven, juxtaposed with the struggles of the Corinthian church, showcasing the necessity of grace to navigate the spiritual conflict. He asserts that true power and holiness come from recognizing our weakness and dependence on Christ, who enables us to live righteously. Ultimately, Darby encourages believers to glory in their position in Christ while remaining humble about their human frailty.

Transcript

There are some chapters in Scripture which contain so full and blessed a statement of some great truth of God that they acquire and retain a peculiar hold on the believer's mind. And though all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and has the same authority, yet this exceptional effect of peculiar passages cannot be blamed, because it is always found to be produced by some chapter which contains a special revelation of God and His ways, or the love of Christ towards us.

The chapter of which I would now speak can scarcely be said to have this character. But it contains so complete and remarkable a display of the extent and wondrous heights and deplorable depths to which saints may go; of the mighty principles for good or for evil which are at work in those natures, in which they have part in the highest associations on the one hand, and in the lowest degradation on the other; and of the way in which grace acts to give predominance to good in us - it presents such a view of the whole working of divine grace to give the perfect result in good and in blessing of the spiritual conflict now going on in us, through the knowledge of good and evil which we acquired in the fall, that I think it may be fruitful to the reader if I unfold it a little practically.

The way in which in this one chapter we find the highest state to which a Christian can be elevated, an exceptional one, no doubt, as an experience, and the lowest condition to which he can fall, and all the

practical principles on which the divine work is carried on between these two extremes, is very striking. In the beginning of the chapter we find a saint in the third heaven, in paradise, where flesh could have no part in apprehension or in communication. He knew not whether he was in the body or out of the body. There was no consciousness of human existence in flesh: so he could not tell, nor could he utter, what he had heard when he returned to the consciousness of flesh again. Such is the saint at the beginning of the chapter. At the end we find one, perhaps, many fallen into fornication, uncleanness, and lasciviousness, and unrepentant yet of their sins. What a contrast of the highest heavenly elevation and the lowest carnal degradation! And the Christian is capable of both. What a lesson for every saint, as a warning, though he may reach neither extreme; and how suited to give the consciousness of what natures are at work and of the elements which are in conflict in him in his spiritual life down here! Another part of this chapter will shew us where power alone is to be found to carry him along his path upon the earth in a way consistently with the heavenly good to which he is called.

271 Paul uses a remarkable expression as to himself when speaking of his elevation to the third heaven: "I know a man in Christ." A few preliminary thoughts as to the law will facilitate our understanding this expression. The law gave to man a perfect and divine rule for his conduct upon the earth. But it never took him up into heaven. Heavenly beings indeed, such as the angels, act upon the abstract perfection of this divine rule as it is stated by the Lord Himself: they love God with all their heart and their neighbour as themselves. This is creature perfection. But it is their nature in which God has maintained them.

To prescribe feelings and conduct by law is another thing. The contents of the law are perfect. It tells us what the right state of a creature is, and it forbids the wrong that flesh is inclined to. But why prescribe this? No doubt obedience is a part of perfection in a creature. Mere doing right would not suffice for a being subject to God to walk righteously, because God has absolute authority over him. Thus God can, and (we know) does, prescribe certain particular acts of service to angels; and they obey. But when a state of soul is prescribed, why is that? Because it is needed. It becomes necessary because of the state of the person to whom the command is addressed. He is otherwise inclined, in danger from other dispositions of doing otherwise. To command a person to do a thing supposes that he is not doing nor about to do it if without a command.

If we add to this that nine of the ten commandments forbid positive sins and evil dispositions, because men are disposed to them, or there were no need to prohibit them, we shall find that the very nature and existence of a law which prescribes the good on God's authority supposes the evil in man's nature which is opposed to it. This is a deplorable truth, take either aspect of the case. You cannot command love, that is, produce it by commanding it, and you cannot put out lusts by forbidding them to a nature which has them as nature. Yet this is what the law does, and must do if God give one. It proves that what is forbidden is sin, and that it is in man to be forbidden; but it never takes sin away. It prescribes good in the creature but does not produce it. It shews what is right on earth in the creature, but how far is it from taking man into heavenly places! It can have no pretension to this.

272 Man has now by the fall the knowledge of good and evil. The law acts on this amazing faculty, of which God could say, "the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil." But how? Man is under the evil, and law requires good in him which is not, and shews him all the evil which is in him. It presses the evil on him and its consequences in judgment, and as to the good it requires in him, it only gives the consciousness that it is not there. Further, it shews no good to him as an object before his soul. I repeat, to make the distinction clear, it requires good in him, loving God and his neighbour for example. But it presents no good to him. There is no revealed object to produce good nor be man's good in him in living

power. It works therefore wrath. Where no law is, there is no transgression.

Now grace works quite otherwise; it does not require good where it is not, though it may produce good. It does not condemn the wicked, but forgives and puts away their sin; it presents to us an object, God Himself, but God come near to us in love. It does more, it communicates what is good. It is not a law. It does not require good where it is not, but produces it. It does not condemn the wicked, but it forgives and puts away their wickedness. It does not lead us to carry on the conflict between good and evil by pressing the evil on us, and making us feel it a burden not to be got rid of, and ourselves slaves to it, which the law does, making us feel "this body of death" as that under whose power we are, sold to sin, and, supposing we are born again, making us only feel more truly and deeply that even this does not make us meet its requirements so that we should be righteous by it, however much "to will is present with us," but the contrary. In a word, grace does not, in the knowledge of good and evil with which it deals, lead us to carry on the conflict by the sense of the power and dreadfulness of evil to which we are subject and its consequences, but by the possession of perfect and divine good through which we judge the evil as raised above it, by the possession of an object perfectly good and which is our delight as well as our life, by the possession of Christ - being in Him and He in us.

273 "I know," says the apostle, "a man in Christ." But this we must a little explain and open out. It is often very vague in many a Christian's heart. In paradise, without law, under the law, and through the presenting of Christ to him, man was responsible for his own conduct as a living man, for things done in the body. He was viewed as a child of Adam or "in the flesh." He stood, that is, before God in that nature in which he had been created, responsible for his conduct in it, for what he was in the flesh. The result was, that in respect of every one of these conditions he had failed: failing in paradise, lawless when without law, a transgressor when under law, and last and worst of all, the closing ground of judgment, when Christ came, proved to be without a cloak for sin, the hater of Him and His Father.

Man was lost. In a state of probation for four thousand years, the tree had been proved bad, and the more the care, the worse the fruit. All flesh was judged. The tree was to bear no fruit for ever. Not only had he been proved to be a sinner in every way, but he had rejected the remedy presented in grace, for Christ came into an already sinful world, and He was despised and rejected of men. It was not all, that man, fallen and guilty, was driven out of paradise; but Christ come in grace was, as far as man's will was concerned, driven out of the world which was plunged in the misery to which sin had led, and which He had visited in goodness. Man's history was morally closed. "Now," says the Lord, when Greeks came up, "is the judgment of this world." Hence it is we have, "He appeared once in the end of the world."

But now comes God's work for the sinner. He who knew no sin is made sin for us. He drinks graciously and willingly the cup given Him to drink. He lays down the life in which He bore the sin, He gives it up; and all is gone with it. The very life our sin was borne in on the cross was given up, His blood shed. He suffered for the sins of every believer, by the sacrifice of Himself, He has perfected them for ever. He that is dead is freed from sin. But Christ died; He then is freed from sin. But whose? Ours, who believe in Him. It is all gone, gone with the life to which it was attached, in which He bore it. The death of Christ has closed for faith the existence of the old man, the flesh, the first Adam-life in which we stood as responsible before God, and whose place Christ took for us in grace. What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His only Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh. In that He died, He died unto sin once; in that He liveth, He liveth unto God.

274 Faith anticipates the judgment, as regards the old man, the flesh, with all its ways. Upon the ground of its responsibility we are wholly lost. We may learn it experimentally by passing under the law, becoming hopeless of pleasing God, as being in the flesh, or we may learn it by finding our opposition and indifference to Christ. But the whole thing is done away with for the believer on the cross. He is crucified with Christ, nevertheless lives, yet not he but Christ lives in him. If the cross has proved that in flesh there is nothing but sin and hatred against God, it has put away the sin it has proved. All that is gone. The life is gone. If a guilty man die in prison, what can the law do more against him? The life in which he had sinned, and to which his guilt attached itself, is gone. With us too it is gone; for Christ has died, willingly no doubt, but by the judicial dealing of God with the sin which He bore for us. If we are alive, we are alive now on a new footing before God, alive in Christ. The old things are passed away: there is a new creation. We are created again in Christ Jesus.

Our place, our standing before God, is no longer in flesh. It is in Christ. Christ, as man, has taken quite a new place to which neither Adam innocent, nor Adam sinner, had anything to say. The best robe formed no part of the prodigal's first inheritance at all; it was in the father's possession, quite a new thing. Christ has taken this place consequent on putting away our sins, on having glorified God as to them, and finishing the work. He has taken it in righteousness, and man in Him has got a new place in righteousness with God. When quickened, he is quickened with the life in which Christ lives, the second Adam, and submitting to God's righteousness, knowing that he is totally lost in the first and old man, and having bowed to this solemn truth, as shewn and learned in the cross, he is sealed with the Holy Ghost, livingly united to the Lord, one spirit. He is a man in Christ; not in the flesh or in the first Adam. All that is closed for him in the cross, where Christ made Himself responsible for him in respect of it and died unto sin once; and he is alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. He belongs to a new creation, having the life of the head of it as his life. Where he learnt the utter total condemnation of what he was, he learnt its total and eternal putting away.

275 The cross of Christ is for the believer that impassable Red Sea, that Jordan through which he has now gone, and which is his deliverance from Egypt for ever, and, now he has realised it, his entrance into Canaan in Christ. If Jordan and the power of death overflowed all its banks, for him the ark of the covenant passed in. It is just his way into Canaan. That which, if he had himself assayed to go through, as the Egyptians, would have been his destruction, has been a wall on the right hand and the left, and only destroyed all that was against him. He was a man in the flesh, he is a man in Christ. Amazing and total change, from the whole condition and standing of the first Adam responsible for his own sins, into that of Christ, who, having borne the whole consequence of that responsibility in his place, has given him, in the power of that, to us, new life, in which He rose from the dead, a place in and with Himself, as He now is as man before God.

It is to this position of the "man in Christ" the apostle refers, only that he was given in a very extraordinary manner to enjoy the full fruit and glory of it during the period of his existence here below. His language as to this truth is remarkably plain, and therefore powerful. "When we were in the flesh," he says. Thus it is we speak, when we refer to a clearly bygone state of things in which we are no longer. "When we were in the flesh," he says; that is, we are no longer in that position at all. "But," he says, "ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be the Spirit of God dwell in you." We are now alive in Christ. "If ye be dead," says he elsewhere, "to the rudiments of the world, why as though living [that is, alive] in the world are ye subject to ordinances?" "For you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory."

The reader will forgive me, if I have dwelt so long upon the first expression of our chapter. I have done so because of its vast importance. It is the very heart of all Paul's doctrine, the true and only way of full divine liberty and the power of holiness; and because many Christians have not seized the force of this truth nor of the expressions of the apostle, they use Christ's death as a remedy for the old man, instead of learning that they have by it passed out of the old man as to their place before God, and into the new in the power of that life which is in Christ. Ask many a true-hearted saint what is the meaning of, "When we were in the flesh," and he could give no clear answer; he has no definite idea of what it can mean. Ask him what it is to be in Christ: all is equally vague. A man born of God may be in the flesh, as to the condition and standing of his own soul, though he be not so in God's sight; nay, this is the very case supposed in Romans 7, because he looks at himself as standing before God on the ground of his own responsibility, on which ground he never can, in virtue of being born again, meet the requirements of God, attain to His righteousness. Perhaps finding this out, he has recourse to the blood of Christ to quiet his uneasy conscience, and repeated recurrence to it as a Jew would to a sacrifice, a superstitious man to absolution. But he has no idea that he has been cleansed and perfected once for all, and that he is taken clean out of that standing to be placed in Christ before God. But if in Christ, the title and privilege of Christ is our title and privilege. Of the full and wondrous fruit of this, Paul for God's wise and blessed purposes was made to enjoy in an extraordinary and special manner. In that, flesh and mortal nature has no part, nor ever can, though we as alive in Christ have, while in that nature, whatever be the degree of our realisation of it. Paul was allowed to know it, so that, while enjoying it in the highest degree in the new man, in his life in Christ - "the life hid with Christ in God - the "not I but Christ liveth in him," he had no consciousness of that other mortal part which yet burdens by its very nature (as well as by sin if its will works) the new and heavenly man in us. He could not tell if he was in or out of the body; he knew on re-entering his ordinary state of conscious existence that he had this body; but he could not tell if he was in or out of it when in the third heaven; he was unconscious of it altogether.

276 The reader will remark too how carefully the apostle distinguishes between the man in Christ and himself as he had the practical experience of himself down here, having indeed the life of Christ and the Spirit which united him to the Head, but having also the flesh in him though he was not in the flesh. Of this Paul, of what he was practically conscious down here, would not glory; but he had been given to be in the enjoyment of his place as a man in Christ with entire abstraction, as to his consciousness of it, of anything else - of such an one he would glory. And so can we, though we may never have been in the third heaven to realise fully the glory and privileges of the position we are brought into, yet we are men in Christ, and we have known enough - the feeblest saint who knows his place in Christ has known enough - of that blessing to rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory. He glories in the position of the man in Christ, which is his most surely and fully in Christ; and he may realise it too, so that at the moment he may not sensibly feel the working of sin in him, though he well knows it is there. We may be filled with the Spirit, so that the Spirit is the only source of actual thought in us.

277 Indeed this is our proper Christian state, not always with the same activity, it is true, of the Spirit giving the sensible apprehension of the glory and the things of Christ so as to elevate the soul to that which is above; but so that there is no consciousness of anything inconsistent with it in the mind.* There may be indeed even then when there is no conscious evil, the effect of obscure apprehension, an apprehension obscure perhaps even in a way which implies fault, negligence, want of singleness of eye, spiritual laziness, swerving from the path in which a single eye would lead us (though there uneasiness naturally follows in the soul because the Spirit does dwell in us and is grieved): still there may be no present disturbing element in the conscience.** The being, as men speak, in the third heaven is not always our

place and portion. It is a mistake to think it would puff us up. A creature is never puffed up in the presence of God and with Him before the mind. It is when the eye is off Him, when we have been in the third heaven but are no longer there, that the danger begins. We are in danger of being puffed up about having been there when we have lost the present sense of the excellency of what is there and in which we lose the sense of self. This is what we find in Paul's case. The man in Christ has Christ for his title and is entitled thus to all that Christ enjoys, to joys and glories which mortal apprehensions cannot receive and language formed by mortal thoughts and ways cannot express, that are not meet to be communicated in this scene of human capacities. They belong to another sphere of things

{*This is the state described in the Epistle to the Philippians - the true Christian state.}

{**The fact, it is important to remark, of sin being in the flesh does not make the conscience bad. When it becomes the source of thought or action, then the conscience is bad, and communion by the Holy Ghost is interrupted. But our chapter leads us farther into this.}

278 But wonderful as that is into which we are brought, the question of good and evil, the knowledge of which we have by the fall and cannot get rid of (nor is it desirable or meant we should), must be thoroughly and experimentally gone through by us. It has been as to acceptance. In respect of this it is finally and for ever settled before God by the death and resurrection of Christ. But we have to learn to judge the evil and to delight in the good. The law, as we have seen, makes us learn the evil as looking to be judged for it. In grace we are first put into the position of perfect blessing in Christ, and then we judge what is contrary to it. This is the difference of bondage and liberty. Still we have to judge it and grow in our apprehension of good. In the instruction of our chapter this, as in all God's ways with the apostle, who was to be both quickly and fully taught in order constantly and deeply to teach others, was done in the strongest and fullest contrast of the extremes. The third heaven, if it did not set aside the flesh in fact for ever, must shew what a hopeless unchangeable thing it is. And so it did. Paul had entered into the third heaven with no consciousness of the hindrance of the body, still less with any working in the flesh in any way. But he must return into the practical state of existence in which he had to serve Christ with the consciousness of what he was as Paul. And here the only working of the flesh, the only way it took cognizance of Paul's having been in the third heaven, would have been, if it had been allowed to do so, to have puffed him up at having such wondrous revelations. It was unchanged in evil. Paul must learn this practically, even by a visit to the third heaven, instead of this amazing privilege taking away or changing it. It was not allowed to act, but he must learn truly to judge it in himself.

Note this difference. It is not necessary when we are in Christ that flesh should act in order that we should learn to judge it in ourselves. Alas! it is often in that way we do learn it, but it is not necessary that it should act even in thought. By God's ways, and through communion with Him, we can learn to judge evil in the root in us without its bearing fruit. If we do not learn to judge it in communion with God, where there may be very real exercise about it (and a very great conflict of will against God if it has acquired any head), we learn it in its fruits through the giving way to the temptation of Satan. When it is not judged, we learn, no doubt, the evil - not yet indeed the root; but Christ is dishonoured? the Spirit grieved, and, but for the coming in of grace, sin will in such case have acquired deceiving power in our hearts.

279 In what has preceded we have found three important points brought before us in this chapter. Firstly, the man in Christ; secondly, the gross evil of the flesh if our members be not mortified; thirdly, that this same flesh is not at all corrected in its tendencies even by a man's being in the third heaven nor by anything else. Paul needed a messenger of Satan to buffet him, lest he should be puffed up. There is

another collateral point indeed, which I would here briefly notice: the difference between our abstract position as men in Christ (and we are entitled to consider ourselves as such; it is our true position as Christians according to grace), and our actual condition with the consciousness of the existence of the flesh and all our bodily circumstances and infirmities down here. Into this actual condition we have now to follow Paul in our chapter and to learn where power is to be found to walk rightly in it. The flesh exists unchangeable in its nature, a pure hindrance.

First, we may remark that no extent of knowledge, even where given of God, is in itself spiritual power in our souls. We cannot doubt that such revelations as Paul received in the third heaven strengthened his own faith, made him understand that it was well worth sacrificing for it a miserable life, such as this world's is, and gave him a consciousness of what he was contending for, a sense of the divine things he had to do with, which must have exercised an immense influence upon his career in this world. But it was not immediate power in conflict in the mixed state in which he found himself when he had to speak of "myself Paul." He had, and so have we, to walk by faith and not by sight. The wickedest man would not sin while his mind had the glory of God Himself before his eyes; but that would no way prove the state of his heart and affections when it was removed. Like Balaam, he would turn to his vomit again. So in point of fact the Christian, however strengthened and refreshed by times on the road by what is almost like sight to him and by communications of divine love to his soul, has to walk by faith and not always in these sensible apprehensions of divine results in glory. Not that he is to walk in the flesh or lose communion, but he is not always under the power of especial communications of the glory conferred on him and of divine love to his soul. Paul knows a man fourteen years ago - not every day in that state. He could rejoice in the Lord always. Some Christians are apt to confound these two things - special joy and abiding communion, and to suppose, because the first is not always the case the discontinuance of the latter is to be taken for granted and acquiesced in. This is a great mistake. Special visitations of joy may be afforded; but constant fellowship with God and with the Lord Jesus is the only right state, the only one recognised in Scripture. We are to rejoice in the Lord always.

280 This the flesh would seek to hinder, and Satan by the flesh. Here we find first the privilege of having a title to hold ourselves dead. We are not debtors to the flesh. It has no kind of title over us. We are not in the flesh. We may reckon ourselves dead and alive unto God, and sin shall not have dominion over us. It is all-important to hold this fast. The flesh is unchanged, but there is no necessity of walking in it; not more as to our thoughts than as to our outward conduct. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and of death; sin in the flesh is condemned by the death of Christ; the power it had over us when under law (if not lawless) it has no longer. When we were in the flesh the motions of sin which were by the law wrought in us all manner of concupiscence. But we are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwells in us. We are delivered from the law, having died in that in which we were held. Our whole condition is changed. What the law could not do just because it was weak through the flesh, God, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, has condemned sin in the flesh. But if the flesh be not changed, how is this realised in practice? It is this which is taught us here. It is first the giving conscious nothingness and weakness in the flesh. This is not power, but it is the practical way to it. We are entitled, as to our standing before God, to reckon ourselves dead unto sin and alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord, and in practice to hold ourselves, as in this condition, not debtors to the flesh to live after the flesh; and sin shall not have dominion over us, for we are not under law but under grace.

281 But our chapter goes farther than this; it shews us power so to walk. The flesh is then practically put down. The measure, as stated by the apostle, is this, "Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our body." His object was not to gain this life. Alive in Christ we have it; but he held every movement, thought, and will of the flesh under the judgment of the cross, and so the life of Jesus was left free. Such is our path. Admitted into the very presence of God into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, we judge in its roots in communion with Him according to His infinite grace everything that is not of Christ in us, and the grace we meet and are made partakers of in this communion carries us along our road in lowliness and grace. Our fleshly tendencies are thus only the occasion of receiving the grace which keeps us safe from their power. I may be humbler than ordinary men if I have dealt with God about my pride, and so of every danger. The present power of Christ keeps the evil out of our thoughts. We have brought God into our life in this respect. It is not merely the absence, comparatively speaking, of a particular character of evil. The flesh - evil - is judged according to God, and I am lowly in spirit and walk softly and safely. But where there are real dangers, God helps us in this. Not only do I bear about the dying, but we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake. God works: some messenger of Satan is sent; not sin, far from it (God cannot send that); but some humbling process which prevents sin and pride working, unpleasant to the human heart, but needed for it. All self-activity of the flesh is sin; the body is dead because of sin if Christ be in me; that is, if alive, it is only sin; and if Christ is my life, "the Spirit is life." My body is not counted as alive, or to be so in its will. What is of me in will and nature - me as a conscious living man, a child of Adam in this world - is annulled, or is a hindrance; it has no connection with God. A man in flesh cannot please God. "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me."

282 We find in Philippians this confidence in the flesh (not lusts of corruption) judged by the apostle. All that made Paul of undue importance to himself or to others, and so reflectively to himself, was rejected. It would have been confidence in self. Our part is to be in the presence of God, that all which is of self may be judged. But God, as I have said, helps us. Here God had, by the abundance of the revelations given to Paul, given an occasion which the flesh could use. In His mercy He meets the danger for Paul, which he might not, surely would not, have rightly met; for God does not afflict willingly. He lets loose this messenger of Satan at him, but to do His own work as with Job. And Paul has some infirmity which tends to make him despicable in preaching. "My temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not," says he to the Galatians; a natural counterpoise to the abundance of revelations. What can the flesh do with this then? Well, it would be spared what seemed a hindrance. To whom? Why, to Paul. Just right. Paul had to be kept down - terrible truth for us. Must we be made weak and inefficient in order to be blessed and used? Yes, if, wretched worms as we are, we are in danger of leaning as man on the flesh's efficiency and strength.

The works that are done upon the earth, God does them Himself, and above all spiritual work. He gives the increase. If He puts the poor vessel in a certain sense in danger, and in many a case where it puts itself, He meets the danger by striking at its root in self. He makes nothing of self, renders the incapacity of nature to anything not only apparent, but apparent to ourselves; and this is what we want. That self should feel self nothing or a hindrance, is a most divine work, though it be a shame to a man who has been in the third heaven, to think himself something in respect of it; but flesh is incorrigible. But as to the instrumentality used, it is a mean and miserable process, such as becomes making nothing of flesh. If death is our deliverance from all sin, we must taste it for our deliverance practically. The bitter water of Marah must be tasted when the salt waters of the Red Sea have delivered us from Egypt for ever and ever. Put the wood of the tree, the cross of Christ, into our cross, and all will be sweet. "Crucified" is

terrible work - crucified with Christ, joy and deliverance; reproach is cruel, the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt.

283 But there are cases where the will and natural reluctance of the flesh to suffer are in question; there are also those which are characterised by the danger of positive evil working, as pride or vanity in the case of Paul. As to all, death must be tasted. The nothingness and incompetency of all flesh must be felt where it would be disposed to think itself competent. It must find its pretensions arrested and set aside when it has such, or would be disposed to have them; it must find itself consciously weak where it might hope to be strong or capable of something. As to what sell would lean on, it must find itself a hindering flesh where it would pretend to be a helping one. It is really nothing in the work and path of God; but when it would be positively something, it must be made to feel itself a positive hindrance. This is not the end, but it is the way. We must be humbled when we are not humble, or even in danger of not being so. This work may come in preventively. But the flesh must be nothing if we are to have blessing; and in order that the new man, which is content that God should be all and knows its power is in Christ only, may be free and happy, and God, as it desires, may be glorified. The power of Satan and the power of death concur in ministering to our usefulness in Christ, because Satan wields this power to kill practically the flesh, and we have another life which lives in Christ and lives for Him.

This question is first settled as regards righteousness, as we have seen. We are dead and risen again; but it has to be practically settled as regards life and power of walk also. So that we may say, whatever our little measure may be, "to me to live is Christ." But the fact that the flesh is thus practically mortified is not in itself power: we must be positively dependent on another, glad to be so, if our heart is in Christ's service and that we find His help only can make us to serve Him. To have Him is joy in every way. This is what follows: "I will glory in my infirmities"; not sin, but what broke down the flesh in its will and hindered sin, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Here is positive power capable of everything, of rendering us capable of everything in the path of obedience, giving no power at all out of it, but of fulfilling in power all the energy of love in obedience. For the Christian path is not mere legal obedience which submits to a will which arrests and stops our will, but an obedience which serves with delight in love and in which love is positively and energetically active in doing good. This path is regulated by the Lord's will and fulfilled by the Lord's power, but that power can have no adventitious aid. It must be the strength in us of a dependent nature. In this is the right condition of the creature, obedience and conscious dependence, and both delighted in, on one who has title and alone has title to all the praise, who loves us and on whose love we lean.

284 In the path of service, the energy of Christ's love impels us, Christ's power sustains and enables us. Flesh, only a hindrance to that, must be put down, and practically annulled, that Christ may work freely in us according to the blessing of that love. We then say the love of Christ constrains us. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me, the only true abiding state of the Christian, be he babe or father in Christ; only the thing he may have to do may be different and his temptations too. God in all cases is faithful not to suffer him to be tempted above that he is able. When a man is in Christ then, redeemed, quickened, and united to the Head, accepted in the Beloved, the work of God in order to power is to break down and bring the flesh to conscious nothingness wherever it is needed; not by mending, using, ameliorating, but, if needed by its will to be something, breaking it down, yea, making it for man's capabilities of acting a sensible hindrance. This is all that God makes of man as to his flesh and competency; but there is a deep lesson of blessing in it besides being the path of power in service. We are emptied of self; and Christ (that is, purity, and love, and blessing - God known to us in grace) becomes

everything to us, the more unhindered joy of the soul made practically like Him.

But we become now sensibly dependent, and Christ our power, I do not say sensibly power; for, though there may be a consciousness of His strength, the service and work is done indeed, but done without any conscious strength. It may be done with joy in communion with Christ, and thus with joy in the service itself. It may be done with fear and trembling, and hence with no joy though with confidence. That depends much upon how far we have to meet the sensible power of the enemy, always in weakness as to self, always in confidence as to Christ, though it is His work, and He the doer of it though He may use us as instruments. And this operation is not merely an effect in us, though there be one; it is the positive power of Christ, a real acting and working of His power, for which the sensible putting down of flesh was only preparatory, that it might be evidently not the power of flesh, and that there might be no mixture of the two in our minds. Hence the flesh is turned into positive sensible weakness. But the power of Christ rests upon us, so that it is joy to the soul because He uses us, connects Himself (so to speak) with us, deigns to make us the instruments and servants, willing and rejoicing servants of this power. It is His power, but it rests on us. This is not the man in Christ, but Christ with the man - His power resting on him emptied of self.

285 The path of strength then is the being made sensible of our own weakness, so that divine strength, which will never be a supplement to flesh's strength, may come in. Thus there is entire dependence, and the positive coming in of Christ's power to work by us. If Paul's bodily presence was weak, and his speech contemptible, and there was something which tended to make him despised, by whose power was it that such wondrous blessing for the whole world flowed forth on all sides from Jerusalem round about unto Illyricum?

One or two remarks more, and I will close my imperfect suggestions on this chapter. First remark that the humbling process with Paul was no depriving of the abundance of the revelations, or weakening the consciousness that he was a man in Christ. This would have been positive loss. These were fully maintained and gloried in. The use the flesh would make of them when consciously down here in the body, in the world, was met by an accessory humbling process carried on in the flesh itself.

Next remark that it is not merely power which is gained by this process. The discernment of good and evil, in its more subtle characters, is greatly increased; the judgment and knowledge of flesh greatly strengthened and deepened. Hence the liberty of the new man with God, confidence in Him, the sense of the careful and gracious interest He takes in us, and intercourse founded on this confidence, are greatly increased. Further remark, that dealing with self, our own spiritual condition, is the secret of power, not the quantity of divine revelations we have to communicate, valuable as that may be in its place. For power Paul was dealt with in his own soul, its own dangers and state, and then Christ's power rested on him.

286 Lastly note, that our glorying in our position in Christ is all right. "Of such an one I will glory; yet of myself I will not glory but in mine infirmities." When I think of my place in Christ, of the "man in Christ," of such an one we ought to glory. This is no presumption. It cannot be otherwise, whenever we know ourselves in Christ. Do you think I can do anything but glory in being in Christ, and like Christ in glory? Of such an one I will. Let no pretended humility deprive us of this. It is legalism. Of myself, of that of which I have the living consciousness as a man down here, I cannot glory, unless it be in those sufferings for Christ and infirmities, of whatever kind they may be, connected with them, which are used to put the flesh down, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

I would add to these one collateral observation. The Lord can unite discipline with positive suffering for Christ, though the two things are quite distinct. When Paul was subjected to contempt in his preaching it was for Christ's sake he suffered, yet the form of it was, we have seen, a discipline to prevent his being puffed up. This may be seen doctrinally in Hebrews 12:2-11. In verses 2-4 we suffer with Christ, striving against sin, even to martyrdom and death. In verses 5-11 the same process is the discipline of the Lord, that we may be partakers of His holiness. How wise and most gracious of the Lord's ways to turn our needed discipline into the privilege of suffering for Christ's sake, so that we can glory in our infirmities! There is chastening which has not this character, being for positive evil. In this doubtless we have to thank God, but it is another thing.

In fine, before God we have the "man in Christ" - blessed position - which is perfection where we want it; and as to our place before men, besides Christ in us as life, the power of Christ, where we practically want it, in weakness and imperfection down here, resting on the man for walk and service before men. The first is the basis of all our walk, but it does not suffice for power. This is had in daily dependence in which we walk, as humbled in ourselves, that Christ may be glorified, and the flesh practically annulled.

We need to be taught of God, what this "man in Christ" means. When we speak of a man in the flesh or a man in the Spirit, we mean his state or position; what characterises him before God. A man in Christ does not mean what he is in himself. It is the condition of every child of God "in Christ." This chapter, in what follows, shews us much of what flesh is; but in this state - "in Christ," flesh had nothing to do with it. The body had nothing to do with it. Paul could not understand it of himself. He says, "I knew a man in Christ, whether in the body I cannot tell," etc.; that is, it is not what he was as a man down here. It is the position of a believer contrasted with that of an unbeliever. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature." This characterises him, and the value and import of it are unfolded in that passage. And again, "Ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man has not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin." It is quite evident it has nothing to do with anything he has out of Christ. Whatever he was before, he was in flesh; now he is in Christ, and all is measured by Christ: he has got his place in the second Adam, and not in the first. It will shew itself in its practical ways, but this refers to his standing.

287 I desire to shew, first, the force and bearing of this - a man being "in Christ." So long as Christ was in the world, nobody could speak of "a man in Christ." "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone." God's grace was working from Adam downwards; but that is another thing. In order to know what it is to be in Christ, we must know what this Christ is. Why should God have peace and blessing for a man in Christ? Because there was none for him anywhere else. There would be judgment for his sin, but no life or righteousness, or power; not one thing that he needs before God could he have without being in Christ. There is plenty of wickedness and pride, creature work of our own, but nothing that can go up to God. We may clothe ourselves in our own eyes, but Adam was naked before God, even when he clothed himself. There may be bright qualities, intellect, etc., but WHO is clothed in them? MAN. He prides himself in them. But there may be good qualities in any animal. There is a difference between some and others; some are vicious, others the reverse. The intellect of man and his wonderful faculties are not the question, but what do they turn to? Pride, title to be something, man clothing himself in his pride! Is this the way to heaven? God says, "there is none righteous, no not one." Does the man think so, who hopes to go to heaven that way? No! he has nothing else but filthy rags. When the voice of God is not there, the fig-leaves may do very well. They may do for man; but when God comes in, they will not do

before Him. God clothed Adam, but then death had come in. When man clothes himself, it only brings out his shame. When God clothes him, he is fit for God; he has "put on Christ."

288 There is no desire in the natural man to be with God; man has no desire to go to God. Conscience drives a man away from God, and his heart keeps him away. Any honest unconverted man would own he has no pleasure in Christ. It is thoroughly brought out that the carnal mind is enmity against God. The man out of Christ is either a gross outward sinner, like the publican, or the respectable and hard-hearted man who has no sympathy with the reception of a sinner. See what the Christ is, in whom we are. Christ comes; God occupies Himself with these sinners, but see how they treat Him! Knowing all the sin, all the hatred of their hearts, the breaking of the law, and a thousand other sins, He came for this reason - He came to seek sinners. The grace of God, who is love, has risen above all that man is. If man feels what he is before God, he gets into despair. You do not trust everyone who comes to you, because you are sinners. God knows all about you. Christ came because you are wicked. If this suits you, that is the God you have in Christ. If it does not suit you, there is judgment for you.

But in Christ God is above all the sin of man, and because it is what it is, He sends Christ to die. What man means by God's goodness is indifference to sin. God never in grace alters His holiness. Before a man could be in Christ, the whole work was needed to be done. He made Him to be "sin for us." The first thing is Christ made sin, and then grace reigns through righteousness. Christ was entirely alone to drink that bitter cup, and then God could not only save the sinner but glorify Himself about the sin. God would glorify Christ in Himself. When Christ was made sin, God was perfectly glorified. There was perfect righteousness against the sin, perfect love in bearing it. He is gone up to the throne of God as a man. Now there is a Christ to be in; righteousness is accomplished; the whole thing is done; and the Holy Ghost is sent down to bear witness that God has accepted this man and His work. Righteousness is glorified in the presence of God.

289 As a Christian, I am a man, not in the flesh but in Christ. The whole work is done that fits Him to sit on the right hand of God. He has glorified God, and God has glorified Him in Himself. But before I can have a man in Christ, I must have a Christ to be in there, on the throne of God. Directly I take knowledge of what Christ has done for me, as applied by the Spirit, I am a man in Christ. It is not given to every one to have spiritual manifestations, as Paul had. Paul saw more of what it was to be there by what he saw here.

Now we see what the flesh is in connection with this. In the beginning of the chapter, we see what the height was to which a man could be taken. The thief might go into paradise the same as Paul; but it was a wonderful thing for a man down here to have these revelations. But in the end of the chapter we see what the flesh is capable of. Nature cannot go into heaven. If God is pleased to take Paul up there, there is no consciousness of being in the body at all. "A man in Christ" - "of such an one will I glory." There is the glorying of a Christian. How many an one would say, "You must not glory; but Paul says, "I will glory in it." There is a man dead! No, he is not dead; he is alive in Christ - as a man out of himself in Christ. He will glory in this; and you could not help glorying, if you really believed it. It is not thankfulness not to glory in it. You may not apprehend all about it; but if you believe it, you will glory in it. If Paul had gone up to a fourth heaven, there would have been all the more need for the thorn, or he would have gloried in that. The danger was not when he had the apprehension of the presence of God, but it was when out of His presence, when he got thinking of it. The revelation was not a source of strength; he needed something else. Whenever he preached, he had something to make him humble, something to keep the flesh down (the thorn, not sin), something to make nothing of him - breaking down the pride of man. He was humbled, because in danger of not being humble. There was strength for him. If he preached in a despicable

manner, but souls were converted (as they were), how was that? If that is the way of getting blessing, it was not Paul's power, but Christ's power. Then let me have the thorn, he says. Thus we have the danger of the flesh dealt with in humbling him in the presence of man - breaking down the very thing that would puff itself up, and Satan that would puff up is obliged to be an instrument to break it down.

290 Now I have the power of Christ in the man, not only a "man in Christ." While in this world, I want something to carry me through, and to protect me from being cheated - something for the conflict I am in. That is power in the Christian, as well as being in the Christ. There was something there to keep the nature down that would have gloried; and, besides that, it was the occasion of bringing in Christ. There is always something to glory in in Christ. Do not believe that the saint is not entitled to enjoy all the advantages he has in Christ. All the hindrance, all the wretchedness, made him glory more in Christ. He says, "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."

At the end of the chapter we see what the flesh left to itself even in a Christian is. Flesh in its fairest forms, its capacities, etc., is all a hindrance. He may only glory in the old man, in its being dead - "reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord." We may rejoice in finding the flesh good for nothing. What man is in flesh, and flesh is in a man, is all bad. God says, I will visit you by my word and Spirit, and then bring you to where I am. The sins are gone. But the sin is not gone, you say. But "sin in the flesh" has been condemned. Christ has died for it, and I am clear, justified from it. I have got out of this condition thus condemned. If you have got into the third heaven, you may know that all the flesh could do would be to make you proud of it. A man in the flesh cannot please God, and the flesh in a man cannot please God. If you were in the fourth heaven, it would be just the same. Sinful flesh has been condemned. Then I can say, I am dead and I am in Christ, the Man at the right hand of God. Whether an apostle or the simplest saint that ever was, I need the power of Christ in the man.

The Lord give us to judge flesh, and all the scene around that ministers to it.

We are apt to make a mistake in speaking of our weakness and unprofitableness, forgetting that it is when we have done our duty, we are unprofitable servants. When we speak of it, we mean our failure; and so, when we speak of our weakness of spirituality or conduct we mean failure. But when Paul speaks of weakness, it is that which makes room for power ("when I am weak then am I strong"); and the result fully produced is with the consciousness of there being no strength in us. This is a very different thing from our failure. Our failure ought to lead us to humble ourselves before God for that which led to the failure. If we have not done what we ought, why have not we? We cannot glory in not having done it. There is a strength that the babe in Christ may have and needs - power guided by wisdom, and this does not fail. When we have not been emptied of self and are full of self-confidence, we must be broken down. Pretension to strength is always in the way for failure. The first step towards failure is forgetting our entire and absolute dependence. As Christians we know we have no strength, but we forget we have none.

291 This chapter brings out in a remarkable way the dealings of God in giving strength. There is a wonderful scene going on in the heart of man. God does not let us always see it - it would not be good for us: we could not bear it. Sometimes the veil is drawn aside, and, as in the case of Job, the heart is exposed to itself; God and Satan there. It is a serious thing when God thus lifts the veil and shews what is going on for good and evil in a poor little heart like ours! "God hath set the world in their hearts"; and if it ends there, it is all vanity and vexation of spirit.

Another question, as a moral question, is the will of man. When will is not at work and sorrow comes in, it is the happiest portion. The first who begins that question is God. It is a question of Satan's power, man's will, and God's goodness in the midst of all that. You have the conscience of evil in your hearts, and the evil is too much for you. You do not know what to do with it. The conscience of good and evil has come in by the fall. Adam had the conscience of good and evil with sin and by sin; he had it by disobedience. Conscience therefore cannot guide a man right. The converted man has the light of God to bear upon it. This shews man what he is. The soul has to own its badness and say, God is right. I go with Him morally in condemning myself. God shews man to be vile as to nature, rebellious as to will, and hateful to God as to his affections; and it is a blessing when He shews it to us. But it is not deliverance; this is another thing. The glory of God's ways is that He puts us down completely as to ourselves, by the fact that our salvation is wrought out by Another, when I had done nothing but sin. I find God has condemned sin in the flesh. Where? In Christ. I see my sin all measured and dealt with on the cross.

292 As the beginning of the chapter shewed us what a man in Christ gets - revelations, etc. (if we do not have them now, we shall by-and-by); so afterwards we see what flesh in a man is, what it may come to - debates, envyings, wraths, etc. These are the extremes of both - revelations in the third heaven, and flesh in its worst character. Most Christians are in neither one nor the other state practically.

Paul says, "I know a man in Christ . . . Of such an one will I glory." This is what all Christians should have got hold of. If you are not a man in Christ before God, you are lost; it is presumption to think of being anything else. Can I know that I am going to be like Christ in glory and not glory in it? We must glory. Paul was not glorying in the revelations when he was in them - he had no time then to glory; but he gloried in what was his portion - Christ his life, righteousness, and glory. Paul speaks of those revelations as fourteen years ago. It is not intended that we should be always living in the wonderful enjoyments connected with the glory of Christ; if we were, it would be sight, not faith. There was no danger of being puffed up when in the third heaven, it was when he came down to Paul again that there was the danger, not while in the presence of God.

By and in Christ I learn now another thing - that it is not God's thought at all to alter my flesh, my old nature; the tree is bad. The flesh can be puffed up in Paul by the consciousness of having been in the third heaven.

There is no good in me. I am a sinner - more than being under the curse of a broken law. Where I am, where my flesh is, I should pervert even the third heaven (v. 7). God turns that by which Satan would have tempted one into a rod to keep down his pride. We are not told what the thorn was, but it was something that made Paul despicable in preaching (alluded to in Galatians) to meet the pride that would come from the revelation. Numbers were converted, not by Paul's eloquence, but by the Lord's power. Their faith was not to stand in the wisdom of man, but in the power of God. There was Christ for the man upon earth. You must be brought down to nothing, having no strength in yourselves. The flesh was not allowed to act in Paul, a thorn for it was sent to buffet him lest he should be exalted. Such is the normal condition of a soul - power given not to sin. If the heart is exercised in dependence, we judge the root of the evil, and it does not come out. My business is to learn the evil in my character by judging it and not by its coming out. If I have a proud character and am humbled before God about my pride, I go out, and am more humble than a very humble man by nature. There is not a bad conscience by the flesh being in me, but I have if I allow it to act: the thorn is sent to prevent it.

293 Before we come to power, the question of righteousness has been settled by Christ being at the right hand of God; it is a settled thing. It is practically learned when I am saved; then I have a title to the third heaven; and strength is made perfect in weakness. The Lord never gives us intrinsic strength, He makes us feel our dependence. I am made to feel my weakness when I see how my flesh would even pervert the blessings that are mine in Christ. Therefore will I rather glory in infirmities (not sin, but infirmities - for example, distresses, persecutions, etc.). The Spirit kept him from that which would have given him a bad conscience.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-nelson-darby/in-christ-2-corinthians-12/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net