

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECSTASY, AUTHENTICITY, AND PAIN

*SERIES: THE IMPORTANCE OF MODELS*

**By Doug Goins**

Today is Father's Day. In the song, *We Are Beggars at the Foot of God's Door*, which we sang this morning, I was struck by the powerful language; the "Father's Day" honesty. We are beggars. We are men of little faith. There is confession in that song of being tempted to pride, to dishonesty, to lust, to despair, unfaithfulness and hypocrisy. We know that in relationships we can be cold and distant, even with people we love.

And yet, the good news is that our God is one of stubborn grace. Wherever sin abounds the grace of God abounds in much greater measure. Through the innocent suffering of the love of Christ he has made us royalty. We are not beggars anymore. We are kings and queens. We have been invited into life! Life that is palatial and expansive. We no longer have to live with the sinful ambivalence described in the song's lyrics.

The apostle Paul understood these spiritual dynamics as well. He really had learned to live with confidence in Christ. A spiritual gyroscope in the middle of his life kept him balanced. He expressed his heart to his brothers and sisters in Ephesians 3:8a, 11-13:

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given...This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.

Tribulations are what the apostle Paul focused on in the second half of chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians. He boasted about an amazing list of hardships and difficulties in his life: beatings, imprisonment, hunger, being shipwrecked and almost stoned to death, danger from every imaginable source and he concluded with the embarrassing story of being unceremoniously lowered over a Damascus city wall in a basket in the middle of the night to escape a murder plot against him. It wasn't much to brag about as it was the collapse of his vision and plans for his ministry in Damascus. It was a humiliating failure. Yet referring to the incident in 2 Corinthians 11:30, Paul says, "If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness."

In 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Paul opens his heart and describes two experiences which authenticate his spiritual leadership. The first tells about a mystical experience which we would think is worth boasting about: God takes him to heaven. But in reality it is the second experience of painful suffering that becomes Paul's ground for boasting. He is awkward in talking about himself, grammatically stumbling over his words. Remember that Paul probably wrote this in his own hand without a secretary, which would explain some of it. Notice the relationship between spiritual ecstasy, authenticity, and pain or difficulty:

**Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out**

**of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. For if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one may credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.**

**And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.**

## **The glory of God**

This idea of visions as one of the ways God reveals himself is found in both the Old and New Testaments. Paul received visions from the Lord throughout his ministry. Apparently now the false apostles were claiming to have had incredible revelations and visions from God themselves as proof of their so-called superior spirituality. Claiming their visions as a basis for authority, Paul’s critics were evaluating the importance of such experiences as a means to discredit Paul. We can sense Paul’s reluctance to share this very private experience from the way he begins in verse 1, “Boasting is necessary [he means right now for you, it is needed], though it is not profitable; but I will go on....”

God used different visions to enlarge Paul’s ministry. In Acts 16:9 Luke writes, “A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’” Paul responded to that vision by crossing the Bosphorus Straits and taking the gospel into the European continent for the first time. Several chapters later, Luke describes Paul’s arrival in Corinth. Apparently Paul had struggled with apprehension, fear, and uncertainty. In Acts 18:9-10 Luke writes, “And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, ‘Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.’”

Paul had received visions from God to strengthen and encourage him. But the vision described here is unparalleled. God took him to heaven and then brought him back to earth. Verses 2-4a say:

**“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise....”**

We don't understand Paul's motive as to why he tells this story in the third person as if it had happened to somebody else. It may have been that after fourteen years, it was hard for him to believe that it actually had happened. Perhaps the experience was so intense and personal that he was reluctant to describe it in the first person. He may have purposefully distanced himself from it. As he admits in verse 7, he had a tendency in his own heart to elevate himself because of the spiritual ecstasy he had gone through. He did not want to think of himself as more important because he had been blessed in this way. What is clear is that Paul is talking about himself here.

Paul was not sure whether he had experienced this in his body, being physically transported to heaven, or whether he had experienced this in his mind, God using his thought processes. That is why he says, "I don't know if I was in the body or out of the body. God is the only one who knows because God is the one who did this." Paul didn't transport himself to heaven. It was God powerfully and sovereignly at work. The one thing that Paul was sure of was that he had been in the very presence of God. The word "paradise" which is used here is used only two or three times in the New Testament. Jesus used the word with the thief on the cross when he was dying, "...today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). The Persian word gives us a picture of a beautifully walled royal palace garden. When the king wanted to confer a special honor, he would invite the person into the intimacy of his garden where they could informally walk and talk together.

## Hearing glorious communication

People who try to draw a picture of heaven from Paul's description miss the point in terms of how many heavens there are and the structure of heaven. Paul was saying to the people who were too impressed with his critics' stories of ecstasy, "I have been given an incredible vision of the glory of God. I have been in his presence and lived to tell about it. I have also heard glorious communication, things that are totally inexpressible and impossible to relate in human language." As the second half of verse 4 tells us, he overheard divine secrets shared only in heaven, things that God could speak and heavenly beings respond to, but things that humans could not understand or enter into.

## Refusal to boast

Imagine this happening: Paul is in the presence of God but he doesn't say one word about it for fourteen years. Even at this writing he is reluctant to talk about it and tell people what he had experienced. Paul is very different from some media-grabbing Christian leaders of today. He doesn't capitalize on his experience. There is no scheduled speaking engagements or magazine articles. No plans for a "made for TV" movie. No book contract. Most importantly, his attitude is not that of spiritual superiority because of his experience. Instead of exploiting it, Paul is silent. He waits for the right time to mention it. When he needs to, fourteen years later, he speaks in order to persuade his spiritual children in Corinth who are slipping away from truth, seduced by stories of visions, ecstasies, and revelations.

In light of this, Paul is a very uncommon man. He is a man of amazing authenticity and integrity, and far from making the most of his storytelling opportunity, he gives us only the barest details in verses 5 and 6, refusing to boast,

**"On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. For if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth [it did really happen to Paul]; but I refrain from this, so that no one may credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me."**

Paul wants to make certain that nobody gives him the credit for this glory that he experienced so he doesn't describe it. Instead he makes sure that his spiritual family in Corinth knows he is telling them the truth and that he is going to resist any temptation to boast about what happened. Why? So that no one can put him on a pedestal or canonize him into sainthood.

## The goodness of God in humbling Paul

Paul goes on to explain how God made certain that the exaltation of his vision would not become too much for him. God gave Paul a constant reminder of just how inadequate he really was to keep him from giving into pride. His goodness in humbling Paul in response to these revelations is seen in verses 7 and 8,

**“Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! [Notice the repetition of this phrase.] Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.”**

## Satan allowed to afflict

It is paradoxical that Paul's thorn in the flesh is a good thing, that God would allow Satan to afflict him. We don't fully understand the mystery of evil in the universe. We don't understand all of the purposes that God has in mind when he permits evil to come into our lives, but we do know that God controls evil. The Scriptures are clear that he can even use evil for his own glory. Satan cannot work against a believer without God's permission. Think about the life of Job. It is very clear in chapter 1 of Job that Satan had to have permission from God in the courts of heaven to be involved in Job's life. In the gospels, Jesus tells Peter that God is allowing Satan to sift him, to put pressure on him for his ultimate good. In each case God was ultimately sovereign; his will was at work in both the lives of Job and Peter.

We don't know what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. It was not necessary for Paul to explain it, either because the Corinthian church already knew what it was or because he felt it was not essential to the point he wanted to make with them. The word “thorn” meant a “sharpened stake or pole” used for torture or for impaling people in the first century. Since Paul wrote these words, there has been much speculation as to what this painful thorn in his flesh was. Most Protestant Bible interpreters think it was some nagging physical problem such as epilepsy, malaria, tuberculosis, eye disease, or a disfigurement like a hunchback. Most Catholic scholars think it was mental or spiritual in nature such as a persistent struggle with doubt or a besetting sinful temptation in his life that would never go away. Other commentators believe it was his constant exposure to persecution, criticism, and opposition. One thing is sure: we don't really know what it was.

I don't think the details are important. If we knew the exact nature of the “thorn” we would either discount it and say, “That does not relate to me. I have never been through that.” Or, if we had the same experience, we would identify to the extent that it would be difficult for us to keep an objective perspective and learn what God is revealing through Paul's struggle. That may be why Paul isn't more specific about his “messenger from Satan.”

The verb tenses in verse 7 indicate that the struggle was constantly recurring in his life. Since it just wouldn't go away, we can understand when Paul boldly says in verse 8 that he entreated God to remove it from his life. He tells us that he

pleaded with his Heavenly Father three times. Every time his request was denied. Similarly, in the garden of Gethsemane Jesus asked his Heavenly Father three times to take the cup of suffering away from him. He did not want to go to the cross but he concluded, "...yet not My will, but Thine be done" (Luke 22:42).

## The grace of God

However, Paul is not left without the comfort or resources of God. Verses 9 and 10 focus on God's grace and tell us how God really did help Paul with the thorn in his flesh:

**And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."**

Notice the tense of the first verb, "said," in verse 9. It is very important. It literally says, "And he [God] has *once and for all* said to me." God gave Paul this message and it stayed with him. It's interesting to me that Paul was not allowed to share with us the words he heard in heaven; however, he can tell us about the things he heard from God in the middle of difficulty here on earth. These words are just as encouraging for us today as they were for Paul.

## The sufficiency of God's grace

The first word is the "sufficiency" of God's grace. Do you experience the grace of God in your own life? Grace is God's provision for every single one of our needs in life. It is provision that is there exactly when we need it, just on time. The grace of God to us is based on the saving work of Jesus Christ. The apostle John says of Jesus: "For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace [upon grace]" (John 1:16). There is never a shortage of the grace of God, the resource of God. If God's grace is sufficient to save us from sin and transfer us to eternal life, then surely it is sufficient to keep us and strengthen us in times of difficulty and struggle.

## The power of God expressed in human weakness

The second word, "power," is in the third phrase of verse 9. The power of God is expressed through human weakness, "...for power is perfected in weakness." This may be hard to understand but the reality is God does allow difficulty into our lives so that in our weakness, we will learn to depend on his strength, to be receptive to what he wants to give us, his resources. This is a continuing, life-long process. Literally, the phrase is translated, "My power is being made perfect in your weakness." Strength that is confident in itself to be strong is weakness in God's economy, but weakness that knows itself to be weak is actually strength.

## Learning to boast in weakness

Paul learned to boast only in "weakness," the third element as shown in the last phrase in verse 9, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me." There is tremendous humility here. Paul

is saying, “I am going to remind myself of who I really am in Christ, the need to rely on him and his resources. Then I will understand who I can be and what I can do in life. I am only going to boast in my weaknesses, in times of apparent failure, in times when I don’t think I do very well. That is what I want to boast about because those are the times that the power of God and the glory of God will be most clearly revealed to people.”

## Learning to be content in trouble

The last concept, “contentment,” is in verse 10. Paul says we are to be content in trouble, weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties. Now, as long as these things are coming for Christ’s sake, as long as they are coming into my life because I stand for truth and I live and speak for Jesus, I can be content with it because when I am weak, then I am strong. Paul is saying that when things are tough, when life is difficult, “I really want to learn to be content.” I don’t want to gripe or complain or feel sorry for myself. I want to recognize that this is the best setting for God to work in my life, because, again, when I am weak, he can be strong through me.

Dr. Richard Halverson, who was the chaplain of the U.S. Senate for a number of years, penned this reflection on 2 Corinthians 12:7-10:

*Sometimes God allows [human] weakness to remain! (Some nuisance that pesters like a low grade infection.) [Then] the weakness can be considered an asset rather than a liability. God uses it to build humility into their life. The weakness makes it necessary for the [Christian] to depend upon the grace of God at that point. He learns that he cannot depend upon himself for mastery—he must depend upon God. When one is strong in himself, he is less apt to acknowledge his need for Divine grace. Getting along on his own resources, he tends to draw further and further away from God. He may profess his faith...but he doesn’t feel the need for it, and pride leads to independence from God. Until some forgotten weakness emerges, or some unexpected failure occurs, and drives him back to humility and faith. As one matures he learns to accept weakness without capitulating, because he has learned the adequacy of grace simultaneously. He discovers God’s strength in his weakness.... (1)*

We have heard from two models: the apostle Paul himself, and a spiritual father, Richard Halverson. We also have a spiritual father among us at Peninsula Bible Church who is a model, Bob Roe. He and his wife Marylou came to PBC in 1951 when their children were very small. Five years later, Bob became an elder. During a 25 year career at Standard Oil as an executive in San Francisco, he was an active spiritual leader at PBC as an elder, a Bible teacher, and a discipler of men—one of Bob’s great strengths is pouring his life into other men.

In 1973, Bob took an early retirement so he could join the pastoral staff here at PBC. However, before he could start his work as a full time pastor, Bob was diagnosed with congestive heart failure and had to have open-heart surgery. Bob says that he came to PBC as “damaged goods.” That struggle required yet another heart surgery in 1985.

In my 23 years here, I have watched Bob teach the Scriptures and disciple men. I have seen him lead out of weakness and limitation with a degree of frustration that he could not physically offer more to the people here. Bob retired both as a pastor and an elder in 1990, but he and Marylou are still in church every Sunday morning. Bob still leads a weekly men’s discipleship group in his home.

Bob and I recently sat together and reflected on this passage in 2 Corinthians, focusing on God's goodness and grace in humbling and helping Paul. I asked Bob how the spiritual dynamics in the Scriptures had worked in his life in light of his suffering. Chronic pain is a very big part of his life now; he has very little lung capacity. In light of this gradual loss of ministry involvement and ministry effectiveness, I asked Bob what all of that means to him.

*There you are. You either scream at the Lord or you can say "yes" or "no." That's what I'm doing. I can't say I rejoice in it...I'm a pastor, a preacher, a Bible teacher, but I can't talk, I can't project my voice, I can't teach a class except for the five guys in my men's group. This is not what I signed up for. I came down here to storm the world for Christ, but first I ended up having heart surgery...and now I'm crippled. I can't be the pastor I wanted to be.*

I then asked Bob if there is a sense in which the power of God in Christ has been expressed in his life.

*I am frustrated and I can't really teach, but whatever I teach has more impact. Whenever I disciple somebody it has more impact. It's coming out of very damaged goods.*

*To be honest with you, I wouldn't trade this for anything. I don't like it...I'm not going to kid you. But what it's done in my life and in my relationship with my wife—we love each more than we ever have. I get the "warm and fuzzies" just talking about Marylou. After 53 years, just holding her hand gives me a thrill. I can't imagine how I felt in the beginning—I didn't know what love was—feeling like this. Just seeing her sitting there gives me a thrill. So, there is a deep sense of abiding love, or an abiding relationship with Jesus Christ. In that sense I have. But, I don't like not being able to talk. I try to be honest; I'm not real content with weakness. I have struggles with being content....*

*Ray Stedman used to say, "Better felt than telt." I have a relationship with my Lord that is indescribably delicious, delightful, lovely, and it's worth the price.*

We went on to discuss what Paul says about God's sufficiency in our lives, Paul's "thorn in the flesh," and how he entreated the Lord three times to remove it. That is actually a euphemism for continually, constantly, probably a lot more than just three. Bob says that he has entreated the Lord also, but has watched his ministry being squeezed.

When I asked Bob about the sufficiency of God's grace in his life, he commented:

*Paul went through this stuff and the Lord was always there. I'm in pain today...But I know the Lord is there, and the pain will be there while the Lord wants it there...I think the word "acceptance" is the best way to describe it. It's from maturity, not so much that you walk on water. It's the product of accepting the will of the Lord, which I've seen in the life of Christ. I'm sure he didn't like being crucified. I'm sure he didn't like being separated from the Father. He had never had that happen in all eternity...The more I see about the Lord, the one word that describes the Lord better than anything else is "acceptance." Whatever the Father wanted, the Father got. No questions asked, no arguing.*

*I have come more and more to learn how to accept things. I may bellyache. [Jesus] cried out to the Father three times in Gethsemane...He didn't say I couldn't cry out, that it didn't hurt, but he did say, "When you're done you say, 'Not my will, but Thine be done'" ...That's what I see in the Lord's life. So, I figure, well, if it's good enough for the Lord, it's good enough for me. He died for me....*

*I did entreat the Lord three times...three hundred times...three thousand times...and he says, "No." It's getting hard to entreat...I don't have the air anymore. [he chuckles]*

You see the life of Christ in Bob. I think that is what suffering can do to people. Many people get bitter when they suffer, but with Bob, there is a sweetness, there is a fragrance because of the sufficiency of God's grace in his life.

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#### NOTES:

1. Richard C. Halverson, *Perspective*, Vol. XXV, No. 4, January 24, 1973. Published by Concern, Inc., Washington D. C. 20016.

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[Back to Index page](#)

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