

## INTRODUCTION

We all know that humility is good virtue. However, humility is expressed the most effectively when it is unnoticed. Once you or people around you realize how humble you are, humility can become a source of pride. At one time I heard a sermon on the local Christian radio. The pastor told a story that a church asked the congregation to nominate the most humble person among them. The winner was their senior pastor. The judging committee thus presented a ribbon to the pastor. However, on the following Sunday the committee asked the pastor to return the ribbon. The reason? It was because the pastor pinned the ribbon on the outside of his suit!

Is pride your recurring sin? In 2 Corinthians 15 through sharing his personal testimony Paul tells us that the solution to pride is a humble and obedient heart to the Lord. Paul founded the Corinthian church and loved the believers there dearly. However, some people in the church challenged his qualification as an apostle of Christ. Some of those critics were very gifted believers. But in the book Paul sees them as “fools” because they were overcome by their pride. They despised Paul for being a Jew and did not have the same credentials as they did. Pride is detrimental to our spiritual growth and our relationship with the Lord and with others. God does not want us to show our pride because He desires for people to see Him through us.

## EXPLANATION

### 1. 放下自誇之處 Refrained from Own Pride

How can we overcome our pride? We see in Paul that he simply refrained himself from showing his own pride. He says in **verse 1**: I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. Paul shared that if he indeed had to boast about himself he certainly could take pride in a transcendent experience that no one had ever gone through, although such boasting amounts to prove nothing about him. Paul used third person to describe his experience. Paul says in **verse 2**: I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know - God knows. Then skip down to **verse 4**: (He) was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. From the context, there is no doubt that Paul was talking about himself. However, since Paul wanted to refrain himself from showing his own pride he wrote in a way as if it were not his personal experience. From the depiction Paul was taken to heaven. The term “third heaven” is a Jewish concept about where God dwells. The first heaven is where the birds fly, then there is the outer-space where the stars are hung in the second heaven. Beyond that is the third heaven where God lives. It may not make any sense to us. But don't forget that Paul lived in the first century and people had little knowledge about astronomy then. No matter how marvelous the experience was God forbade Paul to tell it to others. Some may wonder: then how can I know that it was truth? Nowadays people tell lies without blinking their eyes. But in Paul's days what a man said reflects his integrity, especially for a man who feared the Lord. Though Paul had his right to take pride in his supernatural experience he

chose to refrain from showing off his pride. He says in **verse 6**: Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say. Here we find the word “fool,” which Paul uses repeatedly in 2 Corinthians. Paul adopts the word to refer to people without spiritual insight. So the Chinese Union Version renders the word as “arrogant” is a correct translation. You may have know people who are highly educated and super smart. However, they are spiritual foolish because they are too arrogant to submit themselves to the Almighty God.

Paul had the perfect right to share about his supernatural experience. No one could criticize him as arrogant because he was telling the truth. However, he did not want people to hear comment like: “Wow, what a super Christian you are! I would be dying to encounter the same experience you had.” Paul also shares in **5:12** of the same book that: We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. That is the mindset of Paul; that he did not want people to focus on what is on the outside, but focus on what is on the inside. Based on Paul’s resume he was far from a nobody. Listen to his sharing in **Philippians 3:5-7** - 5 If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. 7 But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. Paul had the pedigree people envied, best training of his days and did what he was required as a zealous Jew. However, all that he could have taken pride in meant nothing after he became a Christ follower. Paul only took pride in the Lord.

Paul refrained from taking pride in himself. Let me ask you: what do you take pride in? I once know a pastor who served in a particular church. At one time he wrote an email to me and shared a self-introduction webpage he put online. He worked as a scientist before he became a pastor. (No, that is not Pastor Chou.) On the homepage he shares his testimony about how became a believer. There is also his resume on which he listed all his previous accomplishments – where he worked before and the positions he held, his publications, the honors and awards he had received, etc. When I looked at his record I was dumbfounded. Allow me to be judgmental. Why did he still care about what he did before? Did he want people to know that he was a successful scientist or a faithful pastor of the Lord? I don’t know. In my seminary years when students chatted with one another we often jokingly told each other what secular positions we held in our “former life.” Some were teachers, managers, engineers, etc. That was their past. Brothers and sisters: the only common title we all have should be “redeemed sinner.” It does not matter what family background you have, which school you graduated from, how much you have in your bank or what job title you now hold. In God’s eyes there are only two types of people – sinners and righteous people. Also, once you step into our church doors you should leave your hats outside. We are all the same as brothers and sisters in Christ. The only thing we can take pride in is that we were sinners but now we have the Lord in our lives.

## 2. 領受上帝之恩 Sustained by God’s Power

God does not want us to show our pride because He desires for people to see Him through us. Paul is a man who refrained from showing his own pride. Instead, he took pride in God who

sustained him by His power. Let us read from **verse 5**: I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Rather than boasting about the special revelation God showed him Paul boasted about his weaknesses. To do so God first humbled Paul in a special way. Paul testifies in **verse 7**: To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. God understood how prideful a person could easily be after encountering such out of this world experience. Therefore, God gave Paul “a thorn in the flesh.” Paul never specified what that thorn was. That created research opportunities for Bible scholars. Some said it could be a physical illness, others claimed it might be a psychological sickness, yet some scholars believed it was threat from Paul’s opponents. No one knows for sure what the thorn was. But notice how Paul describes this thorn: God allowed a messenger of Satan to torment him with the thorn. The word “torment” means to strike with a fist. It is like a boxing game, except that Paul was not able to fight back. The present tense of the verb means that Paul was being beaten up repeatedly.

Isn’t Satan God’s spiritual adversary? How could God team up with Satan to inflict pain on Paul? In the Bible there is another well-known character who was tormented by Satan. His name is Job. In chapter 1 of the book of Job there is a dialogue between God and Satan. God praised Job for being a righteous man who feared God. Satan protested that Job was being obedient simply because God was protecting him with a fence and blessed him with everything. Satan challenged God that if everything was taken away from Job then he would quickly abandon God. God responded in **Job 1:12** - The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger." You may be familiar with the rest of the story. Job lost everything overnight – his possession and his children. Despite all the calamities Job still maintained his loyalty to God. Later Satan appeared before God a second time to contend that Job remained faithful because all that he had lost was external to him. God then gave Satan permission to inflict pain directly on Job. As a result painful sores appeared all over Job’s body. Till the end Job still trusted God, even though he did not know why all the hardship fell on him. If we use Job’s experience as a commentary for Paul’s suffering we understand that it was God who relieved His protection on Paul temporarily to allow Satan’s messenger to hurt Paul. Also, God clearly drew out the severity and boundary for Satan’s attack. What happened to Job and Paul may also happen to you and me. Very often difficulty falls into our lives out of nowhere. But God does not make mistake. He has a reason for that. More importantly, even if Satan is the agent through which suffering comes to us it is by God’s permission. Isn’t that a comforting promise to you? Naturally, in the midst of this painful thorn Paul begged God to remove it. God did not give Paul what he asked for, God gave Paul something better. Paul continues in **verse 9**: But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. God gave Paul sufficient grace to overcome the pain. As a result, Paul told us that he no longer boasted about himself. Instead, he boasted about his weaknesses. The discomfort reminded Paul to constantly look up to God for power. Paul concludes in **verse 10** by saying: That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. In our human nature none of us would delight in suffering. However, Paul understood that he could not have endured the pain unless he relied on God. Hence, God’s power was manifested in his weaknesses. Christian or not, we all face problems in life. Brothers and sisters, what or whom you rely on in times of difficulties? Is there any thorn in your flesh, whether it is a short-term or long-term problem? Your thorn may be a

chronic disease. It drains your energy and it keeps you from functioning at 100 % of your physical strength. Your thorn may be a psychological issue. You may have a low self-esteem, thinking that you are inferior to others. It may be anxiety about the future, or depression that prevents you from even doing your daily tasks. Your thorn may be a relational obstacle. You may have ongoing conflict with your spouse or your family members because they are not believers. It may be a child who no longer walks in the truth. It may be a daily struggle with your supervisor or your colleagues. Just like Paul, you cry out to the Lord to remove the thorn. It seems like your prayer vanishes in the air and God remains silent to your petition. Maybe it is time to change the direction of your prayer. Ask God to give you power to overcome the pain. You may not know how long the thorn may stay. God may choose not to remove it for His purpose. Ask God for patience and endurance. Pray that what people around you may see is not grief and burden in your heart, but joy that can only come from God despite your difficulty.

## CONCLUSION

God does not want us to show our pride because He desires for people to see Him through us. Paul refrained from showing his own pride, rather, he relied on God to sustain him by His power. Paul had a thorn in the flesh. Actually, I have a similar experience too. A handful of brothers and sisters know that I have Glaucoma on my right eye. It started about 8 years ago. If you know something about Glaucoma, this eye disease can usually only get worse. It does not affect me physically, but spiritually too. There was time when my eye was swollen, inflamed and painful. I had my struggle inside wondering what God's plan was for me. I am thankful for all the brothers and sisters who have been praying for me. For now my eye condition has been stabilized. Since a year ago I do not even need any eye-drop to lower the pressure. If I do not tell you, you may not even know there is something wrong with my eye. Some of you may be curious to walk to me after the service to check it for yourself. Because of this disease my eye-sight is deteriorated as a result. Please forgive me if I accidentally bump into you when you walk past me from my right side. Through this thorn in the flesh experience, it keeps me humble, knowing that I should never take good health for granted. I am thankful that God still keeps my other eye relatively healthy despite the far-sightedness. Otherwise, I may be ministering the blind people elsewhere. To me this thorn in the flesh never causes me to doubt God's grace. Rather, it helps me cherish God's grace all the more. Your thorn may be different than mine. No matter what it is, God's grace is sufficient for you. There is a song by that title. In closing let us listen to part of it.