

Power source: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

by [Daniel Harrell](#) in the [June 27, 2006](#) issue

The closest I get to the kind of religious experience the apostle Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 12 is the occasional Sunday when the music and the congregation merge in worship that is unrestrained praise. I especially enjoy communion, since the Eucharist itself is designed to anticipate heaven. With our sins confessed and forgiven, peace made and prayers prayed, we experience an unusual unity with God and with each other. It's a taste of paradise. Priorities reorder themselves and anxieties ease. There is a momentary sense that the worries of this world just aren't that important and that this earth is not our true home.

Unfortunately, I have an inbred cynicism that makes religious experience particularly tricky for me. I reflexively wonder whether it's really God I'm feeling or something I'm just imagining or inventing. Maybe what I need is a religious experience as potent as Paul's. God granted Paul a tour of what ancient Jewish cosmology labeled the third heaven: the place where God Almighty dwells. In the lectionary passage, Paul refers to another man making this heavenly journey, but most scholars believe that Paul is describing himself. He just doesn't want to brag about it.

Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul has been up against a group of religious pretenders, sheep-stealers who've discredited Paul by slinging mud. They point to his ongoing hardships and persistent troubles as signs of deficient faith. In contrast, these pretenders flash their own self-serving piety and worldly success as evidence of proper faith. They resort to boasting about their ecstatic religious experiences to boost their image further. Paul makes it clear that boasting about such experience does no good. Religious experience is by definition personal, alternately powerful and ambiguous and sometimes even bogus. Any true encounter with God is always an act of God initiated by God. It does not indicate anyone's superior level of faith or spirituality—which is why you can't brag about it.

Nevertheless, Paul was sometimes tempted to boast. After all, his extraordinary experience provided an enticement to one-up his annoying rivals' hype. For this reason, God gave Paul his famous "thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment [him]." As with the Old Testament story of Job, God released Satan to keep

Paul humble and weak. Why? So that no one could attribute Paul's success to his own talents. God also released Satan to keep Paul faithful. We may experience great religious heights, but it's the valleys and deserts that tend to draw us nearest to God. God's unleashing Satan on Jesus in the desert firmly grounded Christ for the unfathomable mission that lay before him.

Satan showed up throughout Jesus' sojourn: in the alluring words of Peter and in that tempting moment at Gethsemane where Jesus prayed three times for some other way to account for the sins of the world. Like Jesus, Paul prayed three times for reprieve. But Jesus answered Paul just as God answered Jesus: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Even after the resurrection, the way of the cross remains the way of following Christ. It's tempting to bypass the cross and rely instead on the religious pathways of pious behavior, ecstatic experience and doctrinal allegiance. We like to pretend that good deeds, a good attitude and attendance on Sunday suffice for the Christian life. But this is not what Jesus implied when he said to take up a cross.

To be serious about following Christ means suffering for Christ. The more serious we become about being salt and light in the world, the more devoted we will become to mission and justice, the more concerned for the least and the lost, the more stubborn about forgiving those who don't want our forgiveness, the more determined about exposing the works of darkness—and the more we will suffer. And yet, ironically, if ever we've suffered in this way for the sake of Christ, then we know the power of weakness, that spiritual force and joy of obedience that energizes us to endure the suffering with grace. It is what enabled Paul to declare, "I delight in weaknesses, I am content in insults, I am glad with hardships, in persecutions and in distress that I suffer for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."

I wonder if we'll ever really get this. I attended a recent gathering of large-church pastors in our area and enjoyed meeting colleagues whose church situations are similar to my own. It was helpful to hear how they struggle with the same problems—how to create community amid crowds, how to provide sufficient leadership training, recruit volunteers and run programs effectively. However, I confess that at times, instead of sounding like ministers, we sounded like managers of religious shopping malls who generate goods and services for the betterment of the customers who walk through our doors. This isn't necessarily bad, but it isn't necessarily Christian either.

By contrast, when I attended a gathering of pastors from much smaller churches, nickel-and-dime operations with meager attendance on Sundays, barely able to support their pastors, I did not hear the pastors talk about improving their facilities or putting together a smoother operation for Jesus. All these pastors could talk about was how they were going to bring revival to Boston and turn the city upside down. They were going to halt violence, redress economic injustice, and preach peace and forgiveness to every neighborhood. I can also be cynical about planned revival, but this sounded like Christ-directed ministry to me. When God does show up in the ways these small churches expect, we'll know it is definitely God, for they cannot accomplish these things by their own power.