

THE ART OF BATTLING GIANTS

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

2nd Corinthians 12.1-10

Prepared by Curtis A. Bronzan
curtis@gspc.org | 562/493.2553 x115

I. Introduction to this Study

Last week we began a four-week series entitled *The Art of Battling Giants* - inspired by Malcolm Gladwell's book *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants* - engaging the story of the shepherd boy David, and the Philistine warrior Goliath.

This week we turn our attention to the Apostle Paul, who was no stranger to giants. While the shepherd boy David felled the giant Goliath (in the same way that the Good Shepherd Jesus conquered the grave!), the Apostle Paul didn't always overcome the difficulties he faced.

We can sympathize with him, can't we? Sometimes there are dilemmas that we battle that we can't totally conquer this side of heaven. What about *those* giants?

II. Connecting with One Another

Think of a time when you asked for something (from another person or from God), and the answer was "no."

How did that make you feel? How did you respond? Did anything change within you as a result?

III. Study the Text

- a. Let's start with our complementary reading in worship Sunday: 2nd Corinthians 11.16-21. Perhaps it's difficult to turn to such a passage and understand the full context of what's going on, but how would you describe these verses in your own words? (Pay careful attention to verse 18 and look ahead to 12.11, each of which help frame the content of these verses)

Try writing the content of these verses in your own words here:

- b. Continue reading 2nd Corinthians 11.22-33. Why is Paul "out of [his] mind to talk like this"? Paul boasts about different kinds of things in these verses. How would you categorize them?

What kinds of things does 21st century American culture boast about? Are they similar to Paul or not?

- c. One Bible commentator notes that Paul is "choosing to boast in things that others would judge as weak and shameful." Why do you think he would do so (remember the context of 11.18 and 12.11)? What would that look like in today's culture - that is, what would a Christian leader boast about today that our culture would judge as "weak"?

- d. Continue reading 2nd Corinthians 12.1-10. After writing about his own personal experiences, in 12.1-5 Paul speaks about "a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven."

Scholars are convinced that Paul is, in fact, speaking about himself in these verses. Does that make sense to you? Why do you think he would do so?

A number of theories have been offered as to why Paul would write in this manner. Among them are

1. that Paul is distinguishing between the physical and material persons within himself,

2. that he is seeking to distance himself from such braggadocious boasting since that was common among philosophers who charged a fee, or
3. that "Paul's use of the third person is a means of reflecting his embarrassment (or reluctance) at boasting of what he has done or been a part of."

What do you think? What makes the most sense to you?

- e. Reread verse 2. One scholar writes that Paul's inclusion of the phrase "in Christ" could be interpreted to mean that "any Christian can have this privilege of a vision, for there are no 'favorites' in the economy of the church." Do you know anyone who has had such an experience? Have you read about anyone who has had such an experience? Have you? If so, how did this experience change their - or your - life?
- f. In the first century, it was not uncommon to hear of those who had similar spiritual experiences to Paul. Interestingly, Paul does not engage whether it was an "out-of-the-body" experience. In fact, he gives very little detail at all. Why do you think this is?

Read 2nd Corinthians 12.6-7a (ending at the word "revelations") to possibly engage why Paul does not go into greater detail. What do you think? Does that help explain it?

It has been written that "Paul downplays his vision because it fails to build up the church." What do you think? (see also 1st Corinthians 14.18-19)

- g. Read 2nd Corinthians 7b-10. One commentator writes, "Paul viewed the thorn as a bitter reality that drew him closer to God. But whether or not Paul saw this as a good thing in the beginning remains beyond our ability to answer." What do you think: Does Paul see "the thorn" as a good thing? Why or why not?
- h. Scholars have offered various theories of what Paul's thorn was: Opponents to his ministry in Corinth, some kind of sinful temptation, an eye disease, the agony of the Jewish rejection of the gospel, or malarial fever. While each of these are possible, we are unable to conclude with any degree of certainty.
Have you heard any other theories? The Apostle Paul is often very forthright, but doesn't give us much detail here. Why don't you think Paul tells us what it was?
- i. John Calvin once wrote that this experience was "to strengthen Paul by special means that he might not give way, but might persevere undaunted." Why do you think he wrote that? Do you agree?

IV. Reflect and Respond

- a. In what ways have you experienced difficulty or suffering? How did you know God's presence in the midst of that time? How did that experience shape you?
- b. In what ways are you weak? With what do you struggle? Have you invited God into that difficulty or struggle?
- c. What spiritual high points have you experienced? How have such events strengthened you, so that you "might not give way, but instead persevere undaunted"?

V. Pray

- a. Ask God to guide our ongoing dismissal process from the PC(USA),
- b. Pray that the Holy Spirit would continue to draw people of all ages to worship,
- c. Lift up our Children's Ministry, asking God to call willing people into serving in the 2/3 room or teaching at the 10:45am hour.