

# The Supreme Experience

by Vance Havner

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*The sermon emphasizes the significance of experiencing God's grace in both the highs and lows of the Christian life.*

**Duration:** 33:31

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 12:2

**Topics:** "Experience"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the experiences of the apostle Paul as described in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul shares how he had a remarkable encounter with God, being taken up to the Third Heaven, but also experienced great suffering and weakness. Despite not being able to fully explain or understand his experience, Paul found strength in his weakness through the grace of God. The preacher emphasizes the importance of having a genuine hunger for God and His Word, rather than seeking only spiritual experiences. He also highlights the need for Christians to have a supreme experience with God after being born again, and encourages the congregation to reflect on their own spiritual journeys.

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## Transcript

I'm not going to make any personal remarks just because this is the last meeting. You know my feelings about what you do here and about you people, but I want to give more time to what's on my mind and heart. I'm thankful for this attendance, but sometimes, and I thought this evening, with such perfect weather and as many Christians in all this area, of various shades and grades and degrees, and the hour in which we're living so awesome, I marvel at the places running over, not because of any preacher, but because of the sheer emergency of the time that we're in.

And I know nothing that sizes it up any better than a verse that jumped out of the Magnificat, and that's not my text tonight, from Luke 1. And I didn't see it, I'd seen it many times, but I hadn't seen it. Verse 53, Mary said, He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent empty away. That's the way people leave church today, most of them.

Old Sister Smith goes away happy because she came for a blessing and got it, but it may be the deacon so-and-so, rich and increased with goods and needing nothing, rich like Laodicea, went empty away because he came empty and didn't come for anything anyhow. It's a strange and weird time, but that's not my text. I want you to think with me about what is a Christian's supreme experience.

That is, after he's become born again, because that's the way it starts. Paul tells us in a sort of autobiographical chapter, in 2 Corinthians 12, what happened to him. I knew a man in Christ about fourteen years ago, whether in the body I cannot tell, or whether out of the body I cannot tell, God knoweth.

Such and one called up to the third heaven, and I knew such a man, whether in the body or out of the body I cannot tell, God knoweth. How that he was called up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter, of such a one will I glory. Yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

For though I would desire the glory, I shall not be a fool. For I will say the truth, but now I forbear, lest any man think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he hearth of me, unless I should be exalted, after whatever this was that happened to him, above measure, it got him into trouble. He never would have had the thorn in the flesh if he hadn't been for this wonderful spiritual experience, or whatever it was.

Through the abundance of the revelations there was given to me, the messenger of Satan, but given to him of God. Now that's one of those strange combinations, where the sons of God, for instance, met with Job, and says the old devil showed up in the same crowd. And that's what happened.

The messenger of Satan debuffed me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. He said unto me, My grace, that Bill just sang about.

My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities. He's not glorifying the infirmity, he's glorying in the infirmity.

That the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, reproaches, necessities, persecutions, and distresses for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then am I strong.

Now this is a strange threefold chapter out of the biography of the greatest gospel preacher of all time. He relates how fourteen years earlier, he had a trip to the third heaven, wherever that is or was. And from all that high adventure upward, he dropped as low as you can get, the other direction, into the valley of the thorn of the flesh.

So deliverance wasn't granted. God didn't give him subtraction, gave him addition, more grace. And found grace to stand whatever it was, by the power of God.

Three chapters. He rose to ecstasy, and he dropped to agony, and then he rose to victory. Have you had that kind of experience? What did Paul hear? I don't know, he couldn't tell about it.

How do you expect me to tell you what he heard? Was it anybody of the Spirit? I don't know. Where is the third heaven? That's beside the point. Was it a supernatural experience? Well, let it go at that.

It was a rapturous sort of thing, but it wasn't in order in the sight of God as the best thing for Paul to have, because he sent trouble immediately on the heels of it. Sometimes children have raptures, it's a good word. Nothing sweeter than the rapture of happy children.

I used to, when I was quite a youngster, read Alice in Wonderland, and then the match volume through the looking glass. Some of you maybe remember that. That land on the other side of the looking glass, where everything's backwards.

And I used to go over to the next room and crawl up to the dresser, wouldn't give anything to worry if I could have got into that other territory. Trying to get through that old looking glass to see what it was like over there. Well, that would have given me raptures, I think, but I couldn't make the trip.

And that's why people go to Disney World, that's why some of them go on drug trips at the other end of the line, trying to get away from reality. God has granted some rare experiences to Christians, I don't deny that. I think there have been two kinds.

Some who've had such a trip, others I'm not so sure about. I've heard about it, but they snowball when they tell it, it gets bigger all the time. And I don't know whether they had a vision or a nightmare.

But there is such a thing as a trip to the third heaven, and it wouldn't do for us to have one, why, you'd want to put it on Technicolor, you'd want to go around advertising, going to tell Friday night about my trip to the third heaven, going to write a book about it, hope it's a bestseller and all the rest of that sort of thing. But somebody has said our spiritual experiences can be impoverished by too many spiritual experiences. That's quite true.

I wouldn't hunt too many of those. If it hadn't been for this one, there's a safe, I wouldn't have had all that trouble, God said he was going to get proud about it. There's a hymn, one of the old hymns, that we never sang much.

Hard to find it. Spirit of God descend upon my heart. Oh, that's a masterpiece.

And this line, I ask in no dream, no prophet ecstasy, no sudden rending of the veil of flesh, no angel visitant, no opening skies, but take the dimness of my soul away. That's a good prayer. I'm not asking for a fancy revelation.

I want my soul cleared up. I remember one time, I was a young fellow, I wanted to have some kind of an experience, never could work up an experience to suit me. So now I'm going out in the woods, way deep in the woods this time, sit there and think maybe I'll see an angel or hear a voice or something.

Got out there and got located. And a rascal of an old crow landed in the tree just above me and yelled at me the whole time I was sitting there. I think the devil got into that crow.

And the devil got into me almost because he got mad at the crow. Well, I wasn't ready then for any revelation if he had been run on the way. I don't know what all this was.

I don't think it was eye trouble that Paul had. I know some folks were willing to give him their eyes. He must have had eye trouble.

But I rather think that Alexander McLaren said it was more than a splinter in a finger. I think so too. There was agony in it, I believe.

No doubt, day by day, week by week, month by month. The greatest Christian experience in the second place is not a mighty deliverance. That's wonderful.

Paul didn't get it though. The Hebrew children said, now God is able to keep us from going into this furnace. But if not.

Are you ready for the if nots? If God doesn't do that wonderful thing, and I have to go through with this, I'm going to glorify him anyhow. Healing. I don't think God is going to heal everybody.

Or that even His intention is to heal everybody. I have some wonderful friends who think that everybody ought to be healed according to the will of God because that's what He wants to do. But He didn't heal the greatest preacher who ever lived.

Paul, who was in the best shape to get healed, anybody I know of, but he didn't get it. Some of the worst things on earth can happen to some of the best people. I've been on this road a long time.

I think of the professor in New Orleans Seminary. Some time ago I was there for a week to speak. He used to be there, and I think he's come back.

My good man, oh holy man of God. Went out holding meetings for a week, came home, went into the house, found the body of his butchered wife, and never found yet the rascal who did it. How do you put it together? I don't.

You can't either. I don't know why, but that's agony, beloved. And he's the kind of man you wouldn't think it ought to be coming his way.

I think of Amy Carmichael. I love her works. Sweet, tender soul.

And yet one night she didn't know they'd been digging a hole out there on the campus somewhere. She took a little walk and fell in it and so injured herself that no sedatives could deaden the pain. And for 15 years she suffered agony and wrote the best thing she ever wrote in all the years.

And you don't understand that of all people. Well, you know, the Bible tells us about the righteous man who, going through the valley of Baca, leaves it a well. And he said, when you go through the valley of suffering, leave a well for the next fellow to drink from when he comes along.

And we don't do that. But some people have, thank God. Some people are healed.

I sat in Billy Graham's home and heard his father-in-law, Dr. Bell, the missionary, then living, of course, tell about the healing of the other daughter in a miraculous way, nearly dead, lung gone, not in the will of God, bitter against the will of God, not married and all out of fix. And she got right with God and then said, maybe God would heal me. And a few folks had her prayer.

She said, I'm not taking any more treatment. That doctor called up her dad, the doctor, and said, what are we going to do? He said, we'll do what she wants to do. She got well, she's married, she's as healthy as anybody today.

That's a miracle. And I came down that mountain that night on cloud nine. I said, Lord, you're still in the business.

And I've had an incident in my own hometown along that very line that's thrilled my soul. Now, some have the ecstasy and some have the agony. Don't ask me why it's partitioned like that.

Don't ask God anyhow, but two questions. Don't ask him why. Don't ask him where or when or how.

That's all his business. There are only two things to ask him. And Paul asked him both when he got saved.

Who art thou, Lord? And what will you have me to do? That's all you're supposed to ask. Get straight on that. God will straighten out the rest of it in the hereafter, if not now.

The greatest Christian experience is to find sufficient grace. His grace is. It is.

It is now. It doesn't say it will be if you pray long enough. It's already sufficient for your every need.

I don't know why it is that you have a testimony meeting in some places and the fellow who was the town drunk gets up and tells about being converted. That's wonderful. And everybody says, Amen.

But let some good brother stand and say, Well, friends, I didn't have an experience like that, but by the grace of God I've been kept 60, 70, 80 years by the power of God. And the attitude is so what? Why doesn't that excite some of us? And then healing. One person gets up and tells about being healed.

I love to hear it. But somebody else wasn't healed. And they say, Well, that doesn't add up.

How do you know it doesn't add up? In the book of God. Sometimes it takes a thorn. There was given me a thorn of the flesh.

Jesus did not glorify suffering. Paul did not glorify the suffering. He gloried in it.

Jesus said this woman whom Satan had bothered, bound. He gave the devil credit for all this. Paul said in one of his letters, I wanted to come visit you folks, but I was hindered.

And he didn't use that preachery word. I was providentially detained. Oh, that does sound so preachery.

That's all right. But he said the devil got in the way. I like it that way.

That's what happened anyhow. Satan hindered me. In the world you shall have tribulation.

So don't be surprised if it comes along. Satan is going to cast some of you into prison. Well, that was very interesting news.

And so it goes all through the book. The greatest Christian experience is to believe that all things are working together for good, whether it looks like it does or not. And that his grace is sufficient, but the factual must become factual, and we must live as though it were true.

Grace for all gears. You remember the day of the old model Ford just had two gears, high and low. High wasn't very high, and the low was very low sometimes.

Not much of a Ford, but we got around in it. And then we put in that intermediate gear. Well, I thank God that they that wait on the Lord shall travel in high gear, mount up with wings as eagles, run and not be weary, walk and not faint.

Maybe somebody here tonight is saying, that preacher doesn't know it, but I'm in extreme low gear. Some of you look a little bit like a chair-up friend. It can't be that bad.

Well, there's grace for all kinds of gears in the will of God. And when you're in that will, you have nothing to fear. I've told you already, I think, about when Augustine started out on a trip and his mother wanted to go, and he said, Mother, you're too old.

You might not make it. She said, My life is hidden with Christ in God, and if you're homed, H-O-M-E-D, be homed in God. You can't die away from home.

That does me a lot of good, because I'm away from home in some old dark, dismal motel room most of the time. Wake up in the middle of the night, what if something would hit me here? It hasn't yet. Oh, it hasn't, but not bad.

And I say, Well, I'm homed in God. Nothing can get through God's protection to me. God knows what He's doing about all this.

And we read about the sparrow that nests in the temple. I love to hear the birds, and they're around here. I heard this afternoon, I've been disappointed, because one of my favorites, the Hooded Warbler, hasn't been singing.

And I thought, Well, what's happened to him? Somebody shot him, I reckon. But this afternoon, I heard his sweet little chip down the road, and quite a song he has, really. And the Wood Thrush came along and sang for my edification.

But you know the sparrow in the temple? The sparrows are despised, but this variety, there are 15 or 20 or more kinds of sparrows, for that matter. The song, and the White-throated, and the one that I like best is the sparrow when I used to hoe corn and cotton. The hotter it was, the louder he sang, all the rest would shut up.

But he sang right along, it couldn't get too hot for him. The field sparrow. Well, the sparrow here puts his nest in the temple.

You know, a lot of people want to abide in the Lord, but they don't get the thing right. You can't be rested till you're nested. You can't just run to God every once in a while, and you get in a jam, you get in trouble.

You've got to nest, and two words, one says abide, that's a good word, and that's what you're supposed to do. And dwell, that means settle down. Are you settled down in the Lord, or just when things are going pretty good, you forget about it, and then that awful news comes, or that doctor says you've got this or that, and then you run to the Lord in a hurry.

Why aren't you nested? You'll never be rested like you ought to be, till you're nested, till you're abiding there. There are so many depressed people these days. Missionaries come home, many of them crack up, and preachers, and there are books galore on the subject.

Why can't I be like the great saints of the past, and not have all these depressions and so on? What are you talking about? Which saints are you talking about? Moses, almost ready to quit. David's had to look up to sea bottom. I'm going to fly away and be like a bird, and be at rest, oh, for the wings of a dove.

And Jeremiah said one of the worst things, Wilt thou be unto me as a lyre, and as a brook that fails? That's an awful thing to say to Almighty God. But he went on preaching anyhow. Poor old Elijah under the juniper, all the good folks are gone but me, and I'm not feeling so well myself.

Jonah, let me die, let me die, after his great revival meeting, let me die. Spurgeon, with his gout, never could get rid of whatever that, what form of rheumatism or whatever it was, that the dear man go to France, so I'll come back and preach some more. But oh, so beset with depression.

How about Robert Murray McShane, and Robertson and Brighton, they didn't live long, both died young, but beset so much of their lives with depression, that doesn't justify it. But don't get too blue about the thing, they made it. And they're blessing us today, even with their short-lived testimony.

Well, Jesus said, you said, but Jesus said, let not your heart be troubled. Yes, and he also said, now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say? That's what he said. Oh, I know, he had the weight of a whole world on him.

And he was human, you can't take it apart and put it back together, but there was a sort of a drawing back, as he faced what lay before him. Think of the agony of it, they tell me that the original drops of blood, there is really clots of blood. It was as if there were clots of blood falling to the ground.

So, he knew he had the weight of all the sins of all the world upon him. I don't ever expect to get to the bottom of what that agony was, how could I? There's a picture that, oh, one of the evangelists sent to me, and I've hung it up over my desk. It's not pretty, it's Jesus in the garden, I know there are many pictures of it.

Some of them, I don't care much about them, it looks like he's not having any trouble at all in some of these pictures of Jesus in the garden. But not this one, he's hanging on to a rock as it were, down here lie the disciples asleep. And it's written all over him, agony, agony, agony.

I can understand the blood in a case like that. Some time ago, two preachers were talking, one said, man, I sweated blood over that problem, and the other said, don't let me ever hear you say that again. You don't know what sweating blood is.

Don't ever say that again, he was absolutely right. And then don't get your head up, dear friend, about something that's not worth the trouble. Some dear saints remind me of a man swatting mosquitoes with a sledgehammer.

Don't ever do that, you'll bust up all the furniture and break out all the window panes. And you'll get all excited over something not worth it. Go tearing around, swatting right and left, and you won't kill many mosquitoes after all doing that.

So, spend your energy on something that's worthwhile. For when I get up in the morning, I have beside the bed there, God is able to make all the grace abound toward you, so that always having all sufficiency in all things, you may abound to every good work. In other words, there'll always be enough of everything you need to do all God wants you to do, as long as He wants you to do it.

What more do you want? That wraps it up, doesn't it? That's all I can think of, that takes in all the territory. And then I've got another one up on the wall. The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me.

Psalms 138:8 The Lord has started a good work, the Bible says He'll perfect that. God starts something, He doesn't make a failure out of it. We have need of patience, beloved.

Oh, I think of the widow who came to Jesus, avenged me of my adversary. She really meant vindicate, that's a better word. She wanted justice, I've not been treated right.

Vindicate me of my adversary. The Bible does say, Shall not God avenge? And He will, the vengeance is His too. And sometimes, I think about the preacher who said the other day when Walter Cronkite used to

broadcast the news, he'd always end up by saying, that's the way it is.

He said, I always said, no Walter, that's just the way it looks. That's right. Many times after hearing the news, or reading the news, I find myself out walking.

Careless seems the great avenger. Lord, where are you? Why don't you come down and straighten out this mess? Where is the great avenger today? History's pages but record. One death grapple in the darkness, twixt old systems and the word.

Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne. That's the way it looks. But that scaffold sways the future.

And behind the dim unknown standeth God, within the shadows, keeping watch above His own. To God be the glory. Fanny Crosby could have sat around and said, Why did that nurse get hold of the wrong poultice and lay it on my eyes when I was a baby and blind me for ninety years? Now, if anybody had anything to grumble about, she had it.

But she went through the valley of bacon. She didn't do that. She left wells behind her.

And what wells? To God be the glory. Blessed assurance, redeemed how I love to proclaim it. All the way my Savior leads me.

Draw me nearer. Jesus, keep me near the cross. He hideth my soul.

Jesus is tenderly calling. Savior more than life to me. When Jesus comes to reward His servants, rescue the perishing.

Some day the silver cord will break. I shall know Him. Pass me not, O gentle Savior.

That's what I call digging wells. And there's not a Sunday goes by but we drink water from some of those wells. Written by a woman who never saw.

And she could have been cynical all her life, like this dear girl today, Johnny. A normal girl to suddenly have such an awful accident and be completely paralyzed from the waist down. Looks like for the rest of life.

Well, she could drive, but she's written and said some marvelous things. Seems like the Lord has to half kill some of us to get things like that to come from us. But it's going to get better.

Some time ago I was invited up to Hampton Institute, the great black college, to preach to over 400 black preachers. I tell you, I nearly preached myself to death. I said, if I get white folks to back me up like this, I might turn out to be a pretty fair kind of preacher.

We had it. And I was preaching on this rock I stand, and you know how they can get the rhythm of the thing. And I ended every paragraph by saying, on that rock I stand.

And they saw it coming. They caught on. So I'd get to that, and when I came around that place, the whole crowd.

And on that rock I stand. But we had a revival meeting there pretty soon. And I had the time of my life.

And then they stood up and my heart melted when they started, farther along we'll know all about it. I sat down and patted one foot and just bowed. I said, I'm just bowed for sheer joy.

I said, Lord, this crowd's going somewhere, and I'm going with them. They're going somewhere. I don't care what.

And if I only had had a recorder and could have taken that down, I'd play it every day of my life. Because that was just spontaneous, unpracticed, from the heart it was a blessed thing. It's a good thing to be ready for it.

Have you ever stopped to think, dear friend, what remarkable things we are here tonight. These bodies of ours. Doctors will tell you that it's a wonderful thing if you really think it over.

For instance, your eyes don't see. You see with your eyes. Your ears can't hear.

We say, you hear with your ears. You weren't in there, there wouldn't be any hearing done. Your tongue can't talk.

You talk with your tongue. Take your tongue out and lay it on the table. It wouldn't start talking.

You talk with your tongue. You can see a brain, but you can't see a mind. Ever thought of that? Now, the tenet's you.

Call it spirit, soul, or whatever you want to. You're the tenet. Your body's the tenement.

You're in the flesh. That doesn't mean the old nature there so much as the body in that case. Well, what's going to happen when the tenement leaves the tenement and they take the tenement out to the graveyard and say, dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

What became of the tenet? Well, if you were a Christian, you went to be with Jesus. Of course. But marvel of it all.

I don't understand all about what happens between death and the resurrection. I wish the Bible told me more about it. There's some things that I'm not absolutely clear because I can't get that far yet.

But I'll get that far one of these days. Be a wonderful thing. And God has shown us in his word enough to quit up our appetite for the rest of it.

As my dear one lay nearly at the point of death, I used to preach on living in the great until. The New Testament's just full of until, until, until. Sarah heard it a number of times.

At the last, she couldn't talk. She had the thing in her mouth to breathe through. But she could scribble a little.

And only I could decipher it. And I've got it put away in my book. I can't tell you some things I'm going through until.

And that's what I'm waiting on. Just until. Sometimes I get letters from folks since I've told that.

They don't answer yours truly. They say until. You write to me sometimes.

Just put until. I know what you're talking about. And I think of that dear saint that suffered so.

Oh, suffered so. She always insisted there be a vacant chair beside the bed. She said, I like to think that Jesus sits there.

It makes it easier to talk with him when I try to pray. Visualize him being there. And then she went to be with the Lord.

And the nurse told it this way. She said, I had been out of the room for just a few moments. When I came back in, she was gone.

Lying there just like always. Except that one hand was out on the chair. That's the way I want to go.

I think you do too. I want to get home before dark. This good man wrote that marvelous prayer poem.

And you know they've put it to music now. In one place where they had music of it. And it's distributed from the Bible College.

And I've been hearing folks tell about blessing received. Lord, I want to get home before dark. I'm not going into that.

But I think many of you tonight, you've had your things you can't understand. You don't understand. You got a thorn in the flesh? Maybe not.

Or something that, Lord, why? What have I done to have all this? Well, he knows. And he has said, I've done it with a purpose. Because my grace is sufficient for thee.

I believe most of you folks, at least, would like to say, Brother Haven, I've not been coming here just to pass away the time. I've heard the messages that the men have wrote. God's blessed me.

I don't want to take what I've heard and just sort of put it away as a souvenir. I want to do it. How many of you have firmly resolved by the grace of God that this preaching and teaching you've heard this week, you are not going to just accept it as information and be dismissed? Some of you have told me you've already started working.

And you want to make this a reality in your lives. Because we're accountable for what we hear. It's not as easy as it looks just to walk out and say, well, it was up to Ben Lippin and I heard so and so.

Friend, you are under responsibility. But it's a blessed responsibility. And I beseech you in the name of Jesus.

I could ask you how many will do it, but I don't know. I'm not going to force everybody to get up and say, you wouldn't sit there. But you look honest.

I'm going to leave it between you and God. Because I believe God knows already. You have maybe last night or sometime already.

You say, Lord, that preacher said the thing I needed and I want to do something about it. And I can, but by the grace of God. He'll give you the victory.

You don't need so much the ecstasy. We're going to have a lot of that in the world to come. When you have got some of the agony, get through to God's victory.

That'll carry you through. Father, bless what's been said. I never know what heartaches are represented in a crowd of this size.

What desperation. What problems that avenge me and avenge me of my adversary, Lord. Where are you? Like Mary and Martha.

Lord, if you'd been here, this wouldn't have happened. No, don't let us go at it that way, Lord. But let us say, thy will be done.

Help me to believe that grace is sufficient for this need. I pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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