

## 2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well I want to speak to you this morning about how to lose Chris as your minister. How to lose Paul as your minister. I don't know exactly how long it would take but there are some things you can do to get rid of them.

Five years maybe. Almost certainly by ten years. If you do these things you will lose your ministers. Here is a passage open in front of us this morning. I hope you've got it there in front of you. 2 Corinthians 11 and 12. Here is a passage that shows you how to lose a pastor.

Here is a text that shows you how not to be here in ten years time. This is a text about how to fail in ministry. That may seem very strange things to say. It's a wonderful day isn't it? A great occasion. And like I said a real delight for Angela and I here to share in this with you. Our church family in Aberdeen in just a short time took you and Emma and Gabriel into our hearts.

And I know that's just a fraction of what this church family feels for you. It's very evident today isn't it? What everybody wants today is success. A successful ministry. A successful ministry. A healthy ministry. You want it and God wants it. And so here is a text which will help give you it. And it does it. Well it does it in a surprising way.

[ 1 : 38 ] So let me tell you right up front this morning how to fail in ministry. How to be lost. How to get lost. Here it is Chris. Let the people that you pastor come to see more of you than they ever see of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is how to get lost. Let this congregation come to see more and more of you and less and less of Jesus. Allow yourself to come between this congregation and their view of Christ. Block their vision.

You know that kind of experience. You know that kind of experience. You know that kind of experience. It's awful isn't it? You've waited for months for the cinema trip or the opera trip. The big game. You've got the tickets. And you sit down in what you think is the best seat in the house and some huge oaf comes and sits right in front of you. And you cannot see. And your vision is blocked. And you cannot see. And you cannot see.

The view blockers here. The ministers in the way were super apostles. If you look at chapter 11 verse 5. Here are the view blockers that Paul is up against.

[ 3 : 23 ] Indeed I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super apostles. That's how they were calling themselves. How they viewed themselves. They were boasting apostles. Boasting ministers.

Look at verse 18. Since many boast according to the flesh. That's what these ministers were doing. Boasting according to the flesh.

Boasting about their signs and their wonders. Boasting about their conferences and their books and their followers on Twitter. Boasting about the size of checks they commanded for preaching in churches.

Boasting about their lives. And Paul says that kind of ministry will not last. It will not survive. It may be impressive.

It may be bold. But look what Paul says about it. Chapter 11 verse 13. Such ministers. Such men. Are false apostles. Deceitful workmen.

[ 4 : 20 ] And disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder. For even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.

Their end. It will not last. Their end will correspond to their deeds. Friends today. If you want to keep Chris as your minister.

Learn today to stop being impressed with him. Save your awe. Save your awe for God. Not Chris.

Not Paul. Save your awe for the Lord Jesus Christ. And you see the Apostle Paul here in this passage gives a minister. And gives a church family. Something else to boast in instead. Take your eyes off the minister for a moment. And look what Paul is saying here this morning. Instead of boasting in all the sorts of things that will harm a man's inner life.

[ 5 : 26 ] And ruin a ministry. And ruin a minister. Paul gives us something else to boast about. Chapter 11 verse 30. If I must boast. I will boast of all the things that show my weakness.

So what is going on here in this passage? I want to show you two things. In our time together. Number one. This is verses 1 to 6 of chapter 12. We're going to focus on chapter 12.

Number one. Our most impressive spiritual experiences. Can lead others away from Jesus. Not towards him. That's the first thing I want to show you.

Our most impressive spiritual experiences. Can actually lead other people away from Christ. Not towards him. If you look at those verses again.

At the start of chapter 12. They're unusual verses. Aren't they? Paul has been pushed into boasting about something. And in chapter 11. He's been boasting about his sufferings.

[ 6 : 27 ] But now verse 1. He's going to boast about something different. He's going to boast about visions. And revelations. And it looks as first. Doesn't it? As if Paul is talking about somebody else.

Verse 2. I know a man. In Christ. Who 14 years ago. Looks like he's talking about somebody else. In the third person. Called up to the third heaven.

In Jewish thinking. The third heaven was the kind of highest heaven. You can see it from verse 4. That it's paradise. Somebody has seen things.

That cannot even be uttered. Or told. This person has been caught up. Into the very place. Where God rules the universe. The control room of the universe.

The beautiful epicenter. Of everything. And although it looks like Paul is talking about somebody else. When you look at verse 7. We discover he's talking about himself.

[ 7 : 24 ] So to keep me from becoming conceited. Because of these great revelations. See it's as if Paul here is actually. So reluctant to boast about what he's seen.

That he cannot even bring himself to say. I've had some extraordinary visions and revelations in my time. He just can't bring himself to do it. So he says. Yeah okay. I know a man.

This happened to. You know what it's like. People say. I have a friend who. Now we don't know what these experiences were. Verse 2.

It's as if Paul himself. Doesn't even seem to know what the experiences were. He's. Was he dreaming? Was he transported? But look what happened to him. Verse 4.

This man. Myself. I heard things that cannot be told. Which man may not utter. Things that I saw. Things that I heard. Even if I was a lie to.

[ 8 : 21 ] I couldn't pass them on to you. All these things happen to me. Paul is saying. And if I was to come up to the front of church. And tell you all about them. Verse 6. I would be telling the truth.

But I just don't want to do that. I do not want you to know about my most impressive spiritual experiences. You see that?

At the end of verse 6. If I did. I would be speaking the truth. But. But. I refrain. So that no one may think more of me.

Than he sees in me or hears from me. I could tell you. But I refrain. I just press pause. On the microphone. Turn off the mp3 recorder.

You just don't need to know. It's amazing isn't it? Imagine. Caught up into paradise. Into the highest heaven. Remember the apostle John.

[ 9 : 19 ] In the book of Revelation. Has that kind of vision. It's as if God pulls back the veil. He sees sea. He hears thunder and lightning. It's strange.

Bewildering. An incredible spiritual experience. Paul says. I had it too. And I do not want to tell you about it. Can you see why?

From these verses. Your personal experiences. Which led you so close to Christ. And which meant the world to you. When they happened.

What could happen. If you share those experiences with others in the wrong way. Well the answer is there in verse 6.

I refrain. So that no one may think more of me than he sees in me. Or hears from me. I do not want you to see more of me.

[10:14] More than you see Christ. Paul is saying. See. I grew up. In Northern Ireland. In a church tradition. Where. Incredible. Dramatic conversion stories. Were really almost the norm. Almost. Well not quite every week. But very regularly. People would come to speak to us. To teach and preach in church. Terrorists. Who were converted to Christ. In prison. And men. About to detonate the bomb. And Christ met them. And changed them. People whose lives were broken. By drug addiction. Or alcohol abuse. Amazing. Spiritual experiences. Deep. Real. Turning to Christ. And it's wonderful. And yet. Paul says here. Doesn't he. Isn't there a danger.

[11:09] In a world like that. That the greatness. Of one personal. Spiritual encounter. With Christ. Well what happens. It makes. My relationship. With Jesus. Seem. Ordinary. Unimpressive. That's Paul's point here. Who looks great. The speaker. Or the saviour. Friends. Our most impressive. Spiritual experiences. Can lead others. Away from Jesus. Not towards him. Because people see. Us. Instead of him. They see. They see. What we tasted. And they don't get to taste it. And they're left. Hungry. Paul is. Teaching us here. In this passage. That. Closeness to Christ. Does exist. It can be found somewhere. But it is not. Usually. On the mountaintop. It is not. Usually. In the vision. Or the dream. As wonderful. As that is. When it happens.

[12:05] For Paul. And for us. Real. Closeness to Christ. Is found somewhere else. And this is the huge surprise. Here's the second thing. That I want us to see. Number two. Our most painful. Personal experiences. Can lead us. To Jesus. Not away from him. See Paul knows. Doesn't he. That his incredible. Spiritual experiences. Pose a perilous threat. To his spiritual health. Doesn't he. These surpassingly. Great revelations. Might have been. The end of me. Isn't that what he's saying. In verse seven. So to keep me. From becoming conceited. Because of the surpassing. Greatness of the revelations. God. Did something to me.

[13:04] Then if you remember. 2004. Young chap. Alex Malarkey. Was in a car crash. That left him in a coma. And when Alex Malarkey. Emerged from the coma. He told the world. That. While he had been in the coma. He went to heaven. And saw Jesus. Face to face. Now what happens. To somebody. When you come back. Almost from near dead. And say that. Well in Alex Malarkey's case. It got him a book deal. Got him television shows. Got him. Huge checks. Actually in his case. It was a book deal. Which was pulled. Eventually. As he admits. That he now made it all up. But he's not the only one. Is he? There's plenty of stories. Like that. Where people have. Extraordinary experiences. What happens. What happens. In your heart. As you appear. On the chat show. On live TV. As you tell your stories.

[13:59] And the money comes rolling in. What happens. Inside you. Surely what happens. Is pride. And conceit. So tomorrow morning. Or whenever the bank holiday passes. The Royal Mail. Are back in action. And an invitation. Drops through your door. Completely unexpected. Out of the blue. You are one of the few. Members of the public. Chosen to attend. Harry and Meghan's wedding. And you can't believe it. The invitation is stunning. It looks spectacular. And off you go. To the Royal Wedding. And you are treated to. Every single part of the day. You meet the Queen. For tea. You are there. In the church. You witness. Absolutely everything. You get to go to. Both receptions. You meet everybody. You're involved in it all. And as you leave. Someone in a dark suit. Pulls you up to the side. And says. You must not tell. A single person.

[14:56] About what you've seen. Today. It's the same. Isn't it. As verse 4. Paul has seen. Things that cannot be told. That he may not utter. You go back to work. And everybody's talking. About the Royal Wedding. Wouldn't it have been amazing. To be there. Imagine seeing it. And you're sitting there. And you have to keep. Your mouth. Shut. And yet you were there.

You saw it all. Experienced it all. What would happen. Inside you. At that moment. Would be pride. Wouldn't it. You would need.

Something. To kill your pride. To stop you feeling. Superior. Different. Better. More in the know. Look again.

At verse 7. So to keep me. From becoming conceited. Because of the surpassing. Greatness. Of the revelations. A thorn. Was given me.

[15:53] In the flesh. A messenger. Of Satan. To harass me. To keep me. From becoming conceited. See. Paul is saying. If that's all I've known of God.

What I saw in heaven. If that's all I've known of God. I would think I was so strong. So special. And so he says.

God set about. Killing. My pride. Humbling me. God set about. Poisoning. My conceit. At its very roots. Deep in my heart.

And let me tell you this. Paul says. It hurts. More than I can say. It's interesting. Over the centuries. Theologians have invested.

A huge amount of energy. People have done. PhDs. And all sorts of things. Trying to work out. What this thorn. Was. For Paul. And some people have said.

[16:49] It was malaria. Perhaps. A serious eye condition. Maybe depression. Some kind of physical. Deformity. Maybe it was a besetting sin.

That he just couldn't. Seem to shake off. Huge amounts of study. Have gone into. Trying to work out. What it was. When in fact. Isn't it the greatest. Help. And kindness.

To us. That it just. Says. Thorn. That's all we need to know. Think what would happen. If we knew it was. Poor eyesight.

Think how conceited. Everybody with poor eyesight. Would be. Towards everyone. With depression. I have Paul's. Thorn in the flesh. You're just dealing. With a scratch.

No. It is a great mercy. Because. Well. We do not live long. In this life. Do we. And in these bodies. Before we know. What it is. To be tormented.

[17:47] By something. Something. Nearly put. Out of your mind. By something. Thorn. This word. This word here. For thorn.

It's not a splinter. It's not even really. Your garden rose. Kind of thorn. This word. Is more like. A stake. It's like the kind of thing. You peg. You peg. Down your tent with.

It is big. And strong. And sharp. And you feel it. All the time. And look how it works. Look at the actual wording.

You notice what's happening here. Paul is given this thorn. And it seems like. He's given it. From Satan. The devil. It is a message. He has sent. To you.

Paul. And yet. Look at verse 8. He does not. Beg the devil. To pull it out. And take it away. But the Lord. See it might be. A messenger of Satan.

[18:42] But Satan. Paul knows. Satan is God's. Satan. He's on God's leash. And God can take it away. If he wants to. Did you notice.

What's happened here. Notice where Paul has landed. He has been taken. From the highest height. Right up into the third heaven. And God has taken him from there. And he has.

Brought him down. To the lowest low. He has arrived in a place. Where he knows. God is making him. Weak. To kill. His pride.

And to show. Christ. As powerful. And Christ. As everything. Here's how one. Commentator puts this. Listen to this.

Being tormented. By a messenger. From Satan. Is a gift. Because it is. Better than being. Ruined. By pride. Astonishing words.

[19:37] Being tormented. By a messenger. From Satan. Is a gift. Because it is. Better than being. Ruined. By pride. I think this goes. Right to the heart of it. I think this gets it. Right. Being tormented.

By a messenger. From Satan. Isn't Paul saying. God brought me down. From my elevated position. And he has. Pinned me. Staked me. To the ground. It is a severe.

Kindness. From God. Severe mercy. It is better. To have the thorn. In the flesh. Than pride. In the heart. Brothers and sisters.

In the healing. This morning. Friends. God might. Use. Satan. To keep. Your ministers. In ministry. In ministry. Chris.

Without weakness. If you love. Strength. It is possible. That you will come. To love. All the wrong things. In your ministry. And Paul.

[ 20 : 41 ] Is saying here. Isn't he. That the strong man. The strong man. Ministry. Gets. In the way. Of people. Seeing. Jesus. Jesus. And so.

What he does. So often. Is to. Gospel ministers. Is that he. Pins them. To the ground. So that there is. Less and less. Of them.

To be seen. And more. And more. Of Jesus. To be seen. I don't know. How God. Will do it. With you.

Chris. I think. The Lord. In his kindness. Treats. His gospel ministers. In different ways. Doesn't he. We're all different. Different struggles. Different personalities. And his severe.

Mercies. Are different. For each of us. For some ministers. God is gracious. In hiding. Our fruit.

[ 21 : 37 ] From us. Think about that. God often. Hides the fruit. Of our work. Because. For some of us. It would be more. Than our heads. Could cope with. Listen to J.C.

Ryle. He says this. Let it never be forgotten. That the time of success. Is a time of danger. To the Christian soul. The very hearts.

That are depressed. When all things. Seem against them. Are often unduly. Exalted. In the day of prosperity. Few men. Are like Samson. And can kill a lion. Without telling others. Most of Christ's. Laborers. Probably have. As much success. As their souls. Can bear. Where's all the fruit. Lord. Surely that's what ministry is about.

All this labor. All this work. What am I getting back from it? Maybe God knows us. Better than we know ourselves. To lose.

[ 22 : 36 ] To lose. To lose. To lose. Your minister. To lose. Chris. Grow his pride. To lose.

Chris. Put him on a stage. In your minds. In your hearts. To get lost. Chris. Fight. God. When he brings you low.

Be discontent. With the pain. In your life. See. This is only. Ten verses. From. One letter.

This morning. Isn't it? Chapter 12. Only one part. Of the Bible. But. Isn't it always. The case. That in every passage. In every place. We find the story. Of the whole Bible. For what was.

The first sin. The greatest sin. The root. Of all other sins. It's pride. The greatest sin. Was not.

[ 23 : 33 ] Taking the fruit. Or touching the fruit. Or tasting. That was not. The deepest. Act of rebellion. That merely. Rode the crest. Of the wave. What drove it all. The seismic.

Shift. At the center. Of the universe. That sent the waves. Crashing through time. Was pride. I will be. Like God.

And take the place. Place of God. And from start. To end. The story of the Bible. Is the story of. Human strength. And puny. Human fists. Being shook.

In God's face. I will. Be king. Here we are. This morning. 2018.

Taking our place. In the story. Of the world. And simply. Doing the same. As our forebears. Did. And what their forefathers. Did before them. We will be God.

[ 24 : 26 ] We will say. What is right. And wrong. We will decide. Read the story. Of Israel's kings. And again. And again.

You get the refrain. He became strong. And did what was right. In his own eyes. Strength. And rightness. In my eyes. Go together. Paul says.

And Paul says. To all of us. This morning. There is no enemy. In our lives. As sinister. As stubborn. As strong. As persistent.

As pernicious. And pervasive. As pride. No enemy. Is strong. We all battle.

Other significant. Personal enemies. Don't we. And yet. God thinks. Our humility. Is more important. Than our comfort. God gave Paul.

[ 25 : 21 ] The gift. Of pain. The gift. Of pain. To kill his pride. He was making. Paul weak. So that. All over the Mediterranean. All over the first century.

Ancient world. People would hear. A man called. Paul speak. But. As he spoke. They were coming. Face to face. With Christ. With Christ. Not with Paul.

Is there a point. To you being pierced. To my being pierced. Yes. God is killing. Our pride. Will not be all.

God is doing. In our pain. In every single thing. Happening to us. God is always doing. A thousand things. But isn't this. What we're learning. You. Here in Ealing.

As a church family. Isn't it. What you're learning. Week by week. Year by year. Some of us. Here this morning. Are not the people. We were. Ten years ago. Or maybe even. Ten months ago. We have.

[ 26 : 18 ] Cried. More than we ever. Thought possible. But. Christ. Is all the more. Precious to us. Through the pain. We're learning.

Aren't we. That the Lord Jesus. Has a way of. Creeping. Into the windows. Of our lives. And switching. All the price tags. Around. I didn't actually ask.

Paul this. This morning. I don't know. If this is true here. But it never ceases. To amaze me. How particularly. When it comes. To world mission. Particularly.

World mission. God. Takes the people. Who seem. To want. To give. The most. Seem. To be willing. To give up. The most. And yet. Seems. To make them.

The weakest. We've had it. In our church family. Just recently. A precious family. Returning. From Cambodia. Because of. Health. Concerns. After years.

[ 27 : 14 ] Of preparation. Years of language study. In many ways. It seems like. They're just getting going. About to. Be effective. And useful. And their home. For good.

Why? What is God doing? Do we grasp. How deeply. God treasures. Weakness. Among his people.

See in chapter 11. If you just look. Back at it. The bit that Paul read. Read to us. Paul is listing. All the things. He boasts in. It's an incredible list. It's all weakness. Five times.

I received. From the hands of the Jews. The forty lashes. Beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. And. This is his. Medal of honor list. See in ancient Greece.

The finest. Military award. You could get. The top. Dog honor. You could get. Was called. The Corona muralis. Like today. In our day. The George cross. Or the purple heart. And do you know.

[ 28 : 12 ] What you got. The Corona muralis for. You got it. For being the first. Over the wall. The first. Over the line. In battle. In the face. Of the enemy.

And here is Paul. In second Corinthians. With a church. Full of leaders. And they are all. At the front. And in their. Leadership style. These super apostles.

As if they are all. Lined up at the front. Showing off. Their medals of honor. We are such. Significant leaders. And Paul joins them. At the front.

With their medals. And he says. I've got a medal too. Do you know. What my medal is. Do you know. What my claim to shame is. Verse 32. Chapter 11. I was the first one. Down the wall.

Not over. And up. I ran away. I escaped. I didn't stand and fight. I ran. That's how weak I am. They came to get me.

[ 29 : 06 ] And I turned. And ran. Oh. You are so magnificent. In your strength. See how broken I am. Helen Rosevere.

Helen Rosevere. Who just died. Very recently. The veteran missionary. To the Congo. In the 1950s. Helen Rosevere. Was part of the same mission. As C.T. Studd. The famous Cambridge missionary.

And you'll know C.T. Studd. Many of you will know. His famous words. He said. If Jesus Christ. Is God. And died for me. Then there is no sacrifice. That I can make. If Christ is God.

And died for me. There is no sacrifice. That I can make. And Helen Rosevere said. Nearly right. C.T. Studd. Was nearly right.

She said this. If Jesus Christ. Is God. And died for me. Then there is. No sacrifice. That I can make. C.T.

[ 30 : 05 ] Studd. Said. There is no sacrifice. Too great. For me to make. See. Helen Rosevere came along. And said. No. There is actually. No sacrifice. You can make.

At all. All. Is privilege. All. Is privilege. Helen Rosevere wrote. Two books. About her time.

In the Belgian Congo. And she wrote a book. Called. Give me this mountain. It was a story. Of her work. In the country. Up until that point. When she had to leave. The country. Due to civil war. And she returned.

Several years later. And she wrote. A second book. Of all that she experienced. Second time round. I know that many of you know this. Do you know what the second book is called? First one. Give me this mountain.

The world at her feet. Her dreams. Her life ahead of her. Her second book was called. He gave us. A valley. Give me this mountain.

[ 31 : 01 ] He gave us a valley. And as you read. That second book. What you realize. Is that Helen Rosevere. Her. Well. She recedes. More and more and more. Into the background.

She goes down and down. Into the valley. And Christ. Gets. Bigger. And bigger. And bigger. Chris. The most.

Painful. Personal experiences. Can lead. You. And others. To. Christ. Not away from him. Very little.

Grows. On the mountain tops. But plenty. Grows. In the valleys. That's how it goes. With God. Grace. Rests. On those. Who have been brought low. And so Chris.

Today. Is a significant moment. Isn't it? In your life. And Ealing's life. But it's true. Significance. And it's deepest. Impact. Lies. In where you are.

[ 31 : 58 ] With God. Reset. Your contentment settings. Congregation. This morning. Click. Refresh.

On what impresses you most. Let me finish. With these words. From Pilgrim's Progress. We come again.

To this valley. Of humiliation. It is the best. And most fruitful. Piece of ground. In all those parts. It is a fat ground. And as you can see. Consists much in meadows.

Behold. How green. This valley. Of humiliation. Is also. How beautiful. With lilies. I have known. Many laboring men. That have got good estates. In the valley. Of humiliation. For God.

Resists. The proud. But gives grace. To the humble. For indeed. It is a very fruitful. Soil. And does bring forth. Crops. By the handfuls. In this valley. Our Lord.

[ 32 : 56 ] Formerly. Had his country house. He loved much. To be here. Here a man. Is free. From all the noises. And hurrying. Of this life. Only the valley. Of humiliation. Is an empty.

And solitary place. Here a man. Shall not be so hindered. In his contemplation. As in other places. He is apt to be. This is a valley. That nobody walks in.

Unless he loves. The pilgrim's life. And though Christian. Had the hard happenstance. To meet here. With Apollyon. And to enter with him. In a brisk encounter. Yet I must tell you.

That in former times. Men have met. With angels. Here in the valley. Of humiliation. Men have found. Pearls here. And have in this place.

Found the very words. Of life. Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[ 33 : 52 ]