

**A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church  
“Mountaintop Experiences & the Sufficiency of Grace”**

**By Eric Howell  
2 Corinthians 12:2-12  
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Have you ever heard someone describe a ‘mountaintop spiritual experience?’ I’ve had a few of those. I like to remember my first time walking into Cameron Indoor Stadium on the Duke University Campus as one of those experiences. I had been a Duke basketball fan since I was a kid . . . family trip . . . went to Monticello, Mount Vernon, DC, Jamestown, Williamsburg. All I wanted to do was go through Durham, North Carolina and see Cameron, which in my mind was mythical . . . where is it? Over there . . . small. Behind that little building. It is that little building. Unlocked door, past the national championship trophies, into the gym lighted on one end. Just me, alone, walking onto the court. The angels sang, and a ball rolled out. Coach K emerged from the shadows—let’s see what you’ve got kid.

Now about that kind of experience, we might say we were in seventh heaven, but we would have little idea why we would say something like that. Dante. In first-century Jewish cosmology, it was third heaven that was imagined to be the place where God lived, the highest, inner court of the heavens.

Paul says he knew a man who went to this place. . . . Cameron aside, I’ve had a few spiritual mountaintops. It’s funny, most of them happened on mission trips: A mission trip moment in South Charleston, West Virginia, where I first sensed the Holy Spirit, another in Mexico when I feel like I heard God’s voice, a third when through a book I was reading, I felt like I understood God’s grace for the first time. But these mountaintop experiences aren’t just moments. They can last as long as a worship service that touches your soul, a week on mission trip, or even a longer season in life during which you feel closer to God and more in tune with God’s ways than any other time in life. It is a euphoric experience.

It’s no wonder that, having had a mountaintop experience, that people would want to have it again and again and again. To return to a heightened emotional and spiritual consciousness over and over. I think this is what drives many of the highly emotional worship expressions found in churches all over. It feels so good to feel like this that you want it. And that’s totally understandable.

But what happens is that you start to manufacture it. You start to think that everything that doesn’t feel like that is somehow absent of God. When you come off the mountaintop, you start to wonder what you are doing wrong such that you aren’t having the mountaintop experience.

Do I have unconfessed sin?

Am I not praying enough or praying in the right way?

Maybe I'm not reading my Bible enough?

Maybe I need to go on another mission trip to rediscover that feeling?

Maybe I need a new church. Maybe our church needs a new style of worship. Maybe God doesn't love me anymore.

So, what happens to some people is that God becomes equated with that feeling, and so all the things of God become means to the end to not God but the experience of God, which are two different things—so confession and right living, praying and seeking God, reading scripture and practicing spiritual disciplines. These become more than the faithful expression of faith in Christ. These become strategies to recreate the emotional and spiritual mountaintop.

Then worship becomes that too. And not just worship, but the worship song. I attended a weekend worship and renewal event a couple of years ago with some well-known pop-Christian leaders. The music was rocking. Which was fine. The problem as I experienced it, was that every song was designed, strategized to bring you to an emotional climax of euphoria. And then the song would end and the climb would begin again. I've climbed a few real mountains in my life, and I'm not sure anything is as exhausting as being force-marched up an emotional mountain like you are a prisoner to someone whose expectations will not be met unless you are on top.

There's nothing wrong with emotional experience or expression in worship. And truth be told, many of us and many churches are too skeptical of the heart. If you've never cried in worship or laughed or felt something, then I would have to wonder about your heart. However, if worship or anything else in the Christian life, is all about your experience, then you have made a god out of something that is not God.

As it has been said, the greatest obstacle to your next spiritual breakthrough is likely to be your last great spiritual experience. Like the Israelites were tempted to find holy ground and set up an altar on it, we, too, are tempted to make altars out of road signs, sanctifying the smallest glimpse of the joy and wonder of spiritual experiences with God, collecting them like souvenirs of the journey.

When Paul talks about a man he knows who had an experience of third heaven, he's talking about himself, about an experience he had in the past, 14 years prior to be exact. When you have such an experience, you don't quickly forget it. But he didn't go around talking about it all the time. Apparently, some other teachers were going around bragging about their ecstatic experiences and the Corinthians were buying it as a validation of their authority. So Paul responds, I've had that kind of experience too, but I haven't tried to sell it to you. That's a wonderful part of the Christian life, but it's not the whole life, and I didn't want to mislead you. To believe that the whole Christian life is lived on the mountaintop is to not live in reality and to not understand God and to sell the gospel short.

Life is not just the mountaintop. Life has peaks. And life has valleys. The mountaintops are great. You feel on top of the world and close to God. But you have to have had some time in the valley to appreciate the mountain. You can't trust yourself on

the mountains. It's just too easy there to mistake emotion for spirituality, your own good feelings for prayer. . . .

It's the valleys in life when you encounter God. The valley is the real stuff. When you desperately need God is when God most often shows up, but not in the ways we often hope. That's not to glorify the valleys or suffering. It is to say that there will be times in life that are tough, really hard. Life breaks everyone, Hemingway writes. Everyone has valleys, and no matter what it is, it feels like a valley to you.

The medical condition . . .

The relationship meltdown . . .

The financial troubles . . .

The consequences of a bad decision or the slavery to a bad habit . . .

When life hands you lemons, you can't always make lemon pie.

Paul describes his situation as having a thorn in the flesh that he begged God to take away from him. And nothing happened. God didn't fix it. God didn't solve it.

As mountaintop-loving people, this is discouraging and disheartening, but we must acknowledge this is true to human experience. Despite what pop-Christianity sells, God doesn't solve all of our problems for us.

Sometimes we make our bed and we have to lie in it.

Sometimes it's no fault of our own.

But we all suffer the consequences of living in a fallen world, and being fallen ourselves.

Not all is hopeless. Sometimes God does do miracles. Sometimes things do work out. Sometimes cancers are cured, layoffs avoided, relationships mended, sin is conquered. Those things happen. They happen all the time. As a pastor, I get to hear these stories.

Marriages on the brink get reconciled through hard work and some extraordinary grace. Children hit the edge of danger and then come home. A check arrives in the mail at just the moment the money runs out. Sometimes God acts amazingly and things work out smoothly.

But sometimes they don't. The Bible describes it as a thorn in the flesh. Three times Paul begged God, take this thorn away from me. And God's soft, gentle, assuring reply, "My grace is sufficient for you." And that is a remarkable utterance of faith. God's grace is sufficient for me. It's all I really need. And as long as I have God's grace, I can make it through anything.

The only person who can learn this about God's grace is the person who has nothing else to lean on. I think that's why mission trips and serving others gives us that

kind of experience. When you are out of your comfort zone, you have nothing else to rely on other than God. And then you learn this lesson again, “God’s grace is sufficient for you.”

Think about Job’s experience for a moment. . . . We have a lot here to be thankful for, more in this country than most in history and most around the world. But sometimes, no matter who you are, no matter when you live, sometimes the ground gives way beneath you and you sink down. That’s when you find out what you are made of. It’s in the valley, much more than on the mountain, that you find out who God is.

Whatever else happens in life, whatever you lose, whatever you break, whatever you spoil, wherever you fail, whatever you don’t have, God’s grace is sufficient for you. Now, there’s a lot I don’t want to lose. I have no desire to be like Job—to lose my health, my finances, my house, my family. These are all good things. But my faith assures me that if my house burns down tomorrow, if my health betrays me, if we do lose any of the things or all of the things that are precious and important to us, I can say God’s grace is sufficient for me. And I will never lose that.

In our weakness, God is strong.

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