

You are you guys doing? My name is Barry. I'm the lead pastor at Providence Church in Frisco. We planted out of the Village about four years ago. If you will open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 12, we'll go ahead and jump right in. I want to talk a bit tonight just to encourage you a little bit. There is a particular phrase 2 Corinthians 12 that may seem paradoxical if you just read it at a glance. But I think if we dig into it and pull it apart a little bit, it will be very encouraging for you. Around my house, we watch a lot of cartoons. That's what happens when you have kids. One of the favorite movies right now is Kung Fu Panda. Now, there are good things and bad things about Kung Fu Panda. It gets worse and worse the more hundreds of times you watch it. We are leaving tomorrow to go to Sea World. If you allow your kids to watch television with no filter, if you do not talk to them afterwards, they will get a very strange version of reality. Your two-year-old has no idea that there is no Kung Fu Panda. So right now, he thinks animals can talk and know karate very well. So if we don't sit down with him, as we have, and say, "Hey, don't hit animals. They can't fight back. Our Miniature Schnauzer, he does not know karate. He is not a Kung Fu Schnauzer. If you don't do that, your child will grow up with a very strange alternate reality where they believe some things are real when they're not. And as we grow up, we even have this phraseology worked into our culture where we say our bubble was burst there or "a piece of me died that day" when you figure out something that you thought was real wasn't real.

In our Christian walk, in our spiritual journey, there are competing realities. There is a version of reality along side the version of reality that Christ gives. If we're not careful, then we will buy into the wrong one. Because we're not just sold an alternate reality by enemies; we're sold movie versions of reality by the church sometimes. I'll never forget, I got saved when I was fifteen. I had really never been to church before that. I came in and life was very difficult. I was raised by a single mother, I didn't know my father and I had abusive step-fathers. Well I come to know Jesus, and a couple of months later, my brand new Christian friends bought me a ticket to a Christian concert, and I was going to go to my first Christian concert. It was Carmen by the way. Don't tell anybody. This is very embarrassing for me. But they bought me a ticket and were going to take me to my very first Christian concert. So I go home and tell my mother, "Mom, my friends are going to take me to this concert at Texas Stadium." I was very excited, and my mother was very excited because she had surmised that since I was hanging out with these Christians, I had been arrested less and less. And that was a good thing for her. She was like, "That's fantastic. Go to the stadium." So she cooked me dinner early and sat me down at the kitchen counter. And this was about that time when my step-father walked in. My mother said, "He's going with his friends to see a Christian singer." And my step-father lost it, and he proceeded to pick up my plate, throw it against the wall and began to, for the hundredth time, assault my mother in the kitchen. And at fifteen years old, I decided for the first time that I was big enough to fight back. And so I did. About an hour and three broken ribs later, I'm bloodied on my front porch and the cops come and pick him up. I've never seen him since. And my life is radically different. My mother decides that probably the best thing for me to do is go to the concert. It's going to be encouraging, they're Christians. So she cleans me up and I go and watch Carmen box the devil or whatever he does in his shows. He does all of his singing and dancing, and at the end he gives an invitation. And he makes this statement, "If you will just come down front and accept Jesus, He will make everything better." And I thought to myself, "You liar. I've accepted your Jesus, and it seems like my life continues to get worse and worse. You are a liar."

And I'm not the only one who was sold that. Most of us were sold Jesus more than introduced to Jesus. He was almost an additive. He was almost like OxyClean or the ShamWow. There was almost a pitch. It was like, "This Jesus is awesome. He will make you taller, better looking, skinnier and you'll be able to dance. He'll keep hair off your back

and on your head and keep your teeth clean.” And you though probably like I did, “Life is hell right now. I’ll take your Jesus if that will make it better. Who wouldn’t?” The problem is it doesn’t work that way, does it? Lots of us have found that, after accepting and walking with Jesus, life gets more and more difficult, not less and less difficult. So what’s happening? What’s going on here? My faith was almost shipwrecked three months in because I thought, “This is not true.” And what saved my faith was reading the Bible and seeing what Jesus promised. And what I saw was His invitation was much different than the church’s. And my pastor, whom I love to death, was taught to sell a certain version of reality, but it wasn’t even close to the version of reality that Jesus gave. What I heard in church was, “Come down in front, accept Jesus and your marriage will get better. Or come down front, accept Jesus and your kids will be better behaved. All of these things will work themselves out and you’ll be freed from addictions. You won’t have any struggles or sorrows.” And then I began to read my Bible. I saw in Matthew 8 that Jesus said to His disciples, “Hey, follow Me, and you’ll have to quit your job forever.” He says in the verse after that, “Follow Me, and you’ll have to let the dead bury the dead. You can’t go to your family’s funeral.” If you go to Matthew 10, it says, “If you follow Me, you will be hated by everyone.” In Luke 17:33, He says, “Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.” He says earlier in Matthew 2, “If you follow Me, you will be homeless.” Jesus says, “Understand now, though there are big crowds, there will be no money in this. I am homeless. No condo, no rental house, no hotel. We sleep outside.” Now if I were to give that invitation after this sermon, “Hey, come down front and you’re going to lose your job, you’re going to be homeless and everybody’s going to hate you,” I probably wouldn’t be asked back.

And so I wonder which one is real. Because if we’re not careful and we buy into this kind of movie-esque, cleaned up version of reality, then we’re going to find ourselves living life saying things like, “I’m really disappointed in God...I’m angry with Him...I can’t believe she got cancer...I can’t believe he lost his job...I can’t believe she ran away...How could God do this to me?” We have to be very, very careful in understanding what Jesus is offering. We have to understand His reality and an alternate reality. Because make no mistake, Jesus does make everything better, but his better isn’t necessarily your better. So He will fix it, just not necessarily in the way that you want Him to. So we have to be very careful in buying into a reality that is God’s reality. Romans 8 says it like this, “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” In other words, there’s a mind-set that births a life. There’s a world view, there’s a way of viewing reality that shapes the way you live and what you believe. And the Bible says either your mind can be set on the flesh or your mind can be set on the Spirit. You can see the world the way man does or you can see the world the way God does. Which one you choose will create a vastly different life.

This is how we get statements like 2 Corinthians 12:9 where Paul says, “But [God] said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” What a strange statement. That’s not the type of language we use, is it? We want Jesus to minimize hardship and calamities and persecution. We don’t want to be living in them. Yet Paul says, “No matter what it looks like, I will boast all the more gladly in weakness because that’s when I’m the strongest.” What? How can we be strong by being weak? But the Scriptures are full of these paradoxes. “The last will be first...To die is to live...” It seems that God views the world differently than man does. Because for us, victory and defeat are very easy to measure. You can look at two people and decide which one is the winner and which one is the loser. You can just look at them. If you really need to, you can ask them a couple of questions, “How are you doing financially? Emotionally? Okay, you’re the winner; you’re the loser. You’ve made it; you have a long way to go.” But Paul, the author of a third of the New Testament, says, “Hey you know what? I boast in my weakness. When you think I’m defeated, that’s when I’m winning. I am glad in my weakness, because then the power of Christ rests upon me.” How many times have you prayed for that? How many times have you gone, “God, I pray that You would be near, that I would feel what Bleecker is singing about, that I would feel what Matt is talking about, that I would feel Your power in that

way?" Yet we try to access the power of Christ by acting strong. But He says, "Hey, it's found in weakness. My strength is made perfect in your weakness. My victory is found in utter defeat." He says basically that there is a mind-set, a world view that dictates your life.

Maybe a helpful picture for you would be of a canvas, and your world view, your reality is like a canvas. Your life, your redemption, your story is painted on top of it. If a canvas is clean and pure white and you paint a life on it, you paint a portrait, no matter what you paint, that will be a clear piece of art. People will look at it and say, "That's art." If you take a canvas that is scribbled on, two-year-olds have put stickers, people have thrown paint on it and then you begin to paint on that canvas, no matter how beautiful a picture you paint, it will not come out beautiful. There is a sense in which the painting has to match the canvas, and you can see the beauty of a painting through the canvas. You can go, "That's clear, and it's beautiful." Or you can go, "I have no idea what I'm looking at." Now of course, the illustration falls apart when you just have blotches of paint on the canvas and people call it art. Sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's just blotches of paint. If your drawing doesn't look like anything, you can't draw. That's neither here nor there. But you get the idea. There is a reality on which your life, your story is painted on that's appropriate, and then there's one where it doesn't make sense. And so many Christians are living their lives, having their lives painted out on a reality that doesn't match up. And deep down they're going, "I hear that there's a peace that surpasses all understanding. There's courage. I should want to die for Christ, I should want to be generous and I should have all these fruits of the Spirit. I'm doing all of the right things, but I'm not getting any of the right deliverables. This doesn't match." The issue might not be the painting; the issue might be the canvas. The issue might not be your disciplines; it might be the way you view the world. Maybe you should redefine victory and defeat. Maybe you need to redefine how you view the world.

What we see in the beginning is God put man on the planet. In Genesis 2, He puts Adam in the garden and says basically, "This fruit is good; this fruit is bad. This will lead to life; this will lead to death. Have fun. Have a ball. You can name the animals." That's an awesome job, right? Then Genesis 3 comes along. We see the devil enter the picture, and what does he do? He offers an alternative reality, an alternative way of viewing the world. But how he does it is brilliant. He doesn't say, "God has said this is the way the world is, but I, the devil, am telling you that this is the way the world is." That probably wouldn't get him any votes. What he does is say, "Hey, do you know who should define reality? Eve, do you know who's smarter than God? You are. God, whoever He is, shouldn't be telling you what is good and what is bad, what is death and what is life. You should define that for yourself. Eve, no one knows better what's good for you than you." And sin enters the world. And alternative way of viewing the world is created. It's not God's reality vs. the devil's; it's God's reality vs. yours and mine. And we love us above everything. And so we have to be very, very careful not to just buy into God's way once. But every single day we should go, "I want to see the world like God sees the world." And something amazing happens when you do that. All of a sudden, no matter what appearance is, you have this unshakable, unchangeable reality that you get to hold on to. You have this foundation, so that no matter what storm comes, your house does not fall.

Let me show you an example of this. Flip over to Exodus. The story of Exodus is a great illustration of what Jesus is doing in your life. What we find in Exodus 1 is basically a canvas on which the story of Exodus is going to be painted. Before we get to the actual story, we have somewhat of a setup. This is very common in storytelling and movies. If you go to a movie today, while the opening credits are rolling, they're giving you five minutes of back story to set up the movie. That's kind of what Exodus 1 is. Before you get to Exodus, here's what you need to know. In Genesis 12, God told Abraham, "I am going to use you to bless the whole world. You are the center of the world." If you go to Israel today and ask them where the world began, they will tell you, "Here. Everything begins here. We are the center of the earth. We are the most important people on the earth." That comes from Genesis 12. Do you know how God does it? He first grows up a people through Abraham. And through Abraham's lineage, we find a boy named Joseph who is hated by his brothers and sent into slavery. So all of a sudden, you have Joseph sitting around going, "Okay, my people are supposed to be the

center of the earth, the apple of God's eye, and I am a slave. That doesn't seem like victory." I mean, if I told you today, "God is going to make you the blessing of all the earth," you would think, "Man, I'm going to twitter that I'm getting a promotion...at least maybe a crown or benefits. I'm getting something better." But Joseph's life gets worse. He's a slave. He works his way up, things go well, he's blessed, he gets a good reputation in Egypt and things are getting better. All of a sudden, he's sent to prison and he has to start all over again. Then he grows out of it again, pulls himself out, God blesses him again and then we find ourselves in Exodus 1.

The people that God loves the most are in Egypt and here's what we find out about them. Starting in verse 8, "Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us." So they again have gotten too big and their lives are going too well. So Pharaoh says this, "Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." So Egypt now turns on Israel again, and Israel is oppressed again. They are defeated again. So when God comes to them and says, "I'm going to bless you like you could never imagine," and then they see their lives go this direction, they have to ask the question, "Are we going to buy in to what I see or what God says? Am I going to view the world like I want to or like God tells me to?" And here's what we see. Here's God's reality playing itself out. Verse 12, "But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad." So the more it seems they're defeated, the more they actually win. This is the set-up for the Old Testament. The more it looks like the people of God are being defeated, the more God is actually setting up victory. We see the same thing happening with Jesus. Jesus' ministry builds up, His disciples think, "Man, things are going well. People like us. We're drawing a crowd," and then Jesus is captured, tortured and killed. They could believe what they saw apparently or what God said. It's their reality or His reality.

I mean, how many times have you said that to yourself? "I try and I just cannot get ahead. Every time I get a little bit ahead, I get slapped back down. It seems like I take one step forward and two steps back." In those moments, you have a choice. You can set your mind on the flesh and you can judge what is victory and defeat, or you can trust God's reality and go, "No matter what it looks like, I know Matthew 28:20 where Jesus says, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'" So it may look like you are being left or forsaken, but you are not, ever. Functionally, that means Christians never lose. We don't lose, ever. Do you know what Joseph says to his brothers when he sees them? Genesis 50:20, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. So when it looked like you were defeating me, I was really winning." Romans 8:28, "For those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." When it seems like everything is against me, God is really making it all work for me. We never lose, ever. No matter what it looks like, cancer can't win. No matter what it looks like, the economy, bad or good, can't win. No matter what it looks like, hardship, insult, persecution can't win.

Paul has these rants he goes on that I love. When he's kind of getting on in this kick, Paul says this in Romans 8, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." So he goes, "I know you're killing us. I know you might be killing our flesh." But then he goes on to say, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." We don't lose, ever. And so we may have been sold a bill of goods sometimes that Jesus will be handing us a designer life and if we just accept Jesus our kids will behave and our hair will be perfect. But He does make all things new. He does turn death into life.

Last year, Charity and I led a group to Israel. It was one of my wife's dream trips, so we accepted an invitation to go and teach. On the last day, we went to the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, and it's an unbelievable experience to walk through that building. It's magnificent. But as crowded as the building is, it's also unbelievably quiet. You could hear a pin drop. And I am being led by a Jewish man, a friend of mine, who fought in the Six Day War, who has been through it, seen it, fought for the nation of Israel, and he's showing me different things in the museum. And we come up to a particularly difficult exhibit. It's a pile of baby shoes that are burned. There is a famous psychotherapist who survived the Holocaust named Victor Frankl. He actually went to four concentration camps. His testimony is unbelievable. In his years of suffering, he developed an unbelievable way of coping and he saw horrific things. One them I'll highlight for you. At Auschwitz, there was a period of time where they just formed two lines. They would walk through a crowd and separate people randomly. The line on the right would walk themselves into a furnace to be burned a live. The line on the left would be freed. They would just literally walk through and divide people. His entire family, his wife, his children and his parents were with him at the time. All of them got put in the line walking toward the furnace. And they're just marching along, hearing the screams, smelling the flesh...unspeakable horror. And he sneaks into the other line. His family tries as well, but every one of them is caught. Victor Frankl is going to be freed while watching his family walk into a furnace. So he does. And when he gets out, he is asked the question, "How in the world did you go on? How do you deal with that kind of defeat?" And his response is staggering because he redirects his answer not to the predicament at hand, not to the circumstances which would overwhelm the strongest among us. But he points rather to the reason he's alive. He says this, "He who has a 'why' to live can bear with almost any 'how.'" In other words, if I just saw defeat as defeat, there's no way I live through the day. There's no way you can watch something like that and make it through tomorrow. But even though this looks like this is the worst thing in the world, more than I trust my eyes, more than I trust human reality, I trust what God has said. And He said he will never leave me, ever. We never lose. So this may look like a loss, and by everything that I can put together as a human being, this is unbearable defeat. But that is no the way I view the world. God is my hope, period. So for you and I, we have this choice. We can be tossed about by the circumstances of life because it's easier, or we can root and ground ourselves in the truth, the way that God views the world and we can bank on the fact that, no matter what it looks like, we don't lose, ever.

Let's pray. "God we love You. Thank You for Your Son. Thank You for the fact that You are the king. No matter what it looks like, You are on Your throne, You are in control and we trust You. So God, our prayer is that You will bless these families, You would protect them and that You would speak to our hearts that truth. We love You, God. In Jesus' name, amen."