

Paul Continues to Defend His Apostleship

2 Corinthians 12

2 Corinthians 12: It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. 3 And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. 5 Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. 6 For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me. 7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 11 I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. 12 Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. 13 For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong! 14 Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. 15 And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved. 16 But be that as it may, I did not burden you. Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you by cunning! 17 Did I take advantage of you by any of those whom I sent to you? 18 I urged Titus, and sent our brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in the same spirit? Did we not walk in the same steps? 19 Again, do you think that we excuse ourselves to you? We speak before God in Christ. But we do all things, beloved, for your edification. 20 For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults; 21 lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced.

Background Notes

In verse 11 Paul said that the Corinthians had forced him to become foolish. He was referring to the fact that normally he would not have shared his spiritual experiences and qualifications as an apostle, because he would not have needed to.

The Corinthians should have commended him as one of the apostles because:

1 - He had led them to Christ, he was their spiritual father, and he had founded the church in Corinth (chapters 10 and 11).
2 - As a true apostle, he had done signs and wonders and miracles in their midst, as God confirmed his words as an apostle. 2 Corinthians 12:12: *“Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds.”* But the false teachers at Corinth were undermining Paul’s credibility as an apostle, so Paul thought it necessary to engage in this rather foolish business of “boasting” about his experiences, qualifications, and credentials to prove that he was a true apostle - and the false teachers were not.

In the second half of chapter 12 that Paul used a great deal of sarcasm or irony. When using irony, you say just the opposite of what you mean, to emphasize the point you’re making. For example, if you say, “it’s a great day for golf!” when it’s raining, you’re using irony. In verse 13 Paul asked the Corinthians to forgive him for the “wrong” of not receiving any money from them. Obviously, receiving money from them was *not* wrong, but Paul, using irony, emphasized that he had not been a financial burden to them.

Neither did Titus become a burden to them. *“I urged Titus, and sent our brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in the same spirit? Did we not walk in the same steps?”*(v18). Besides his work in ministering to the believers, Titus probably got a secular job when he made his visit to Corinth.

In verse 16 Paul said, *“...crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by cunning”* [deceit]. Here again is irony. The false apostles at Corinth were accusing Paul of deceitfully making the collection for the needy saints in Jerusalem, so that Paul could raise money for his own use! Paul refuted this lie by using irony: *“... crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by deceit.”* Obviously Paul didn’t do that, but he used irony to emphasize his point that he had *not* taken advantage of them or deceived them in any way.

In verse 14 Paul said that he was planning a third visit to Corinth. The first visit was when the church was founded. The second visit was the painful visit, mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:1. Verses 19-21 reveal that on his third visit, Paul hoped he would find that the Corinthians had not slipped back into their former sins, but instead they would be continuing to move forward - as Titus had joyously reported in chapter 7.

Doctrinal Points

1. God may or may not give “third heaven” experiences to believers.

In verses 1-6 Paul reluctantly shared an amazing spiritual experience that God had given to him. I say “reluctantly” because in verse 1 Paul referred to it as “boasting” which was not profitable. And in verses 5-6, he said that he’d rather

boast in his weaknesses and have the Corinthian Christians accept him for what they see and hear as he preached the truth to them.

Paul shared this awesome spiritual experience with them only because his opponents claimed that visions and revelations were necessary credentials of a true apostle. So, in essence, Paul said, "You Corinthians want to know if I ever had a vision? Well, can you top this?!"

Notice several significant things about Paul's vision:

a. It was fourteen years ago. That would have been well before Paul began his missionary journeys. So even Paul did not have this kind of experiences every day. We should not expect spiritual experiences like this every day either - and maybe never.

b. Paul did not know whether he was alive when he had this experience. He wasn't sure if he was alive, or temporarily dead and then raised back to life when he had this experience. So again, believers should not expect this kind of experience as a way of life.

c. This pattern parallels what every Christian will experience. As Paul was "raptured" (caught up) into the presence of Christ, so in the future all believers in Christ will be "raptured" into God's presence, whether they have died in Christ or are alive in Christ.

As Paul heard inexpressible words, so we read in 1 Corinthians 2:9, "*Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.*" We look forward to a wonderful future, but we shouldn't expect to have "third heaven" spiritual experiences while we're here on earth. God may - or may not - give "third heaven" experiences to believers.

2. God may or may not remove "thorns in the flesh" from believers.

What was Paul's "thorn in the flesh"? (v7-10). We don't know. Many suggestions have been made – eye problems, malaria, migraine headaches, a speech impediment, toxic memories, etc. Maybe the Lord purposely did not have Paul share exactly what his problem was, so that if we have a "thorn in the flesh," we can more readily identify with Paul's situation - and also to learn how he was enabled to handle it through the Lord's grace and strength.

God allowed Satan to use this problem to bother the apostle Paul - so much so, that Paul prayed three times for this problem to be removed (v7). But God did not remove the problem. Why not? Paul gave three reasons.

a. *It kept Paul humble.* Paul had been caught up to the “third heaven,” and could have become proud of this experience. Through this problem Paul was “*kept from exalting myself*”(v7).

b. *The Lord said that His grace was sufficient for Paul.* The Lord promised that this problem would not overwhelm Paul. He would be able to handle it, because God’s grace would be sufficient. “*And He said to me, My grace is sufficient for you...*”(v9).

c. *The Lord’s power is perfected in weakness.* The Lord cannot work well through proud, self-sufficient Christians. However, when our pride is broken down, and we’re made weak and are humbled by difficulties and distress and persecutions - *then we’re made strong - in **God’s** strength!* “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses... for when I am weak, then I am strong*”(v9-10).

The fact that Paul’s “thorn in the flesh was not removed doesn’t mean that God will never remove a believer’s “thorn in the flesh.” It’s not wrong to pray for removal, but God may or may not remove the “thorns in the flesh” that believers may be called on to suffer.

Practical Application

Don’t read too much into Scripture!

At the end of verse 14 we read, “*Children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children.*” Some children pull this verse out of context to justify not caring for their elderly parents - or to say that parents should leave big fortunes for their children! That kind of interpretation is “reading too much into Scripture.”

Paul’s point here is that, in the normal course of life’s events, parents have the responsibility of providing food and shelter for their children - of meeting the needs of their children in the home. In the same way, Paul considered the Corinthians his beloved children. He considered it his responsibility to serve them, and not take money from them.

So this verse has nothing to do with not taking care of your elderly parents. This responsibility is clearly taught throughout Scripture. And it has nothing to do your parents leaving you a large inheritance! Don’t read too much into Scripture.