

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF CORINTHIANS

Second Corinthians – Chapter 12

Paul's Vision

“It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord” (v1)

As we can remember, Paul ended chapter 11 boasting of his suffering for Christ by permission. He said:

“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? —I speak as a fool—I am more: in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity.” (vv11:22-30)

In this chapter, he started by stating that it is not profitable for him to boast i.e. he would rather not do it but since he was contending with those who have taken the hearts of the church in Corinth by boasting and puffing themselves up, he was left with no choice but focus the minds of the Corinthians by boasting a little.

On this occasion, his boast was not concerning his infirmities but concerning visions and revelations of the Lord.

“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. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. 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.” (vv2-6)

There are several compelling reasons to conclude that the “man” Paul refers to in vv. 2–4 is himself:

1. He knew the exact time this ecstatic experience took place.
2. He knew that what was overheard in the third heaven was “inexpressible” and not to be repeated or uttered.
3. He was not certain about what state he was in (embodied/disembodied).
4. In v. 7, he uses the first-person pronoun *me* (“a thorn in the flesh was given to me”) as a counterbalance to the high level of revelation that Paul had received.

It was a common literary device, a rhetorical ploy, to avoid speaking of oneself directly in this fashion and by using the phrase “*I know a man in Christ*” (v. 2) when he, in fact, was referring to himself. It is a sign of Paul's humility and integrity that he did not “boast” of this event that took place fourteen years earlier. His statement “*yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities*” clearly expresses the humility of Paul.

What Paul described as the third heaven in v. 3 is called Paradise where Paul was privileged to see and hear of mysteries that are beyond the reach of human language and unable to be spoken by human lips.

Paul's Thorn

“The extraordinary level of the revelations I’ve received is no reason for anyone to exalt me. For this is why a thorn in my flesh was given to me, the Adversary’s messenger sent to harass me, keeping me from becoming arrogant.” (v7 TPT)

What is Paul's thorn in his flesh?

If we believe the thorn means disease, sickness, demonic attack, or infirmity, it is pretty hard to pray confidently for healing. After all, how would we know if God wants to heal, or if He wants to teach us a lesson and keep us humble? Can God even be good if He is purposefully willing sickness on us?

The word for thorn is "skolops" and it is the only time it is used in the New Testament. It means "a point, a prickle, a stake" according to the Strong's Greek Dictionary and NASB Dictionaries.

There are a few cross-references for this word according to my trusty Key Word Study Bible. Let us look at some of them to discover the meaning of this word "thorn."

The first instance in the Old Testament is found in Num. 33:55 and it is referring to inhabitants of the land becoming *"But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall be that those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell."* It is interesting that in this context, the thorn is not a thing or disease, it is a people group. God tells Moses to drive out the inhabitants of the land before they possess it. If they do not, these folks are going to be a pain in their sides! In the principle of first mention, the use of “thorn” is clear.

The second use of this word is found in Ezekiel 28:24. It says, *“And there shall no longer be a pricking brier or a painful thorn for the house of Israel from among all who are around them, who despise them. Then they shall know that I am the Lord God.”* This is not talking about a sickness or infirmity. It is talking about Israel's enemies who have scorned them and been like a painful thorn to them. It is persecution.

From what I can tell, the meaning of the word thorn is not used for sickness, disease or infirmity. It has more of a persecution, enemy attack, annoying people connotation to it.

Paul's Prayer Answered Differently.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to relieve me of this. But he answered me, “My grace is always more than enough for you, and my power finds its full expression through your weakness.” (vv8-9 TPT)

Paul engaged with the Lord on the level of persecution he had to face. Three times he did this, and all God would say is this: *“My grace is always more than enough for you, and my power finds its full expression through your weakness.”*

The weakness that Paul is mentioning here and that he had mentioned before, is the same weakness or infirmity he would rather boast of – persecution, beatings, left for dead, shipwrecked etc. Paul would have to trust in God's Grace through all these... and they will be there for him.

Paul's Attitude to God's Grace & his Weaknesses

“So, I will celebrate my weaknesses, for when I’m weak I sense more deeply the mighty power of Christ living in me. So, I’m not defeated by my weakness, but delighted! For when I feel my weakness and endure

mistreatment—when I’m surrounded with troubles on every side and face persecution because of my love for Christ—I am made yet stronger. For my weakness becomes a portal to God’s power.” (vv9-10 TPT)

Now, this is the attitude we should all display. Paul had his prayers answered according to God’s will and not his will and he took it on the chin cheerfully. Paul said:

- I will celebrate my weaknesses
- I am not defeated by my weaknesses but delighted
- I am made stronger when I am surrounded with troubles and face persecution because of my love for Christ.
- FOR MY WEAKNESS BECOMES A PORTAL TO GOD’S POWER!

Apostolic Signs

“I have become foolish to boast like this, but you have forced me to do it, when you should have boasted in me instead. For there is nothing I lack compared to these “super-apostles” of yours, even though I am nothing. The things that distinguish a true apostle were performed among you with great perseverance—supernatural signs, startling wonders, and awesome miracles.” (vv11-12 TPT)

The whole essence of Paul’s boasting was the “super-apostles” disturbing the church in Corinth. Paul confirms that the signs that distinguishes a true apostle were performed among them with supernatural signs, startling wonders, and awesome miracles.

The Pains of Leadership & Spiritual Parenting

“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. And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.” (vv14-15)

Paul is prepping this church of his coming and informing them that he would not be burdensome to them – perhaps, in terms of requesting that they walk more worthy of the Lord and/or financial burden. Paul then used natural parent/child relationship to explain how he would rather spend and be spent for them. One could feel Paul’s pain in this phrase: *“though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved”*

Integrity

“Be that as it may, I haven’t been a burden to you at all, yet you say of me, “He’s a scoundrel and a trickster!” But let me ask you this. Did I somehow cheat or trick you through any of the men I sent your way? I was the one who insisted that Titus and our brother come and help you. Did Titus take advantage of you? Didn’t we all come to you in the same spirit, following in the ways of integrity?” (vv16-18 TPT)

Again and again, Paul is doing his utmost to clear his name as it were. He is focusing the minds of these people with key questions:

- *Did I somehow cheat or trick you through any of the men I sent your way?*
- *Did Titus take advantage of you?*
- *Didn’t we all come to you in the same spirit, following in the ways of integrity?*

This is Paul really labouring for this church and people. He could give up on them and move to other churches that would listen but like he wrote to the church in Galatia, he is appealing to their senses.

“My little children, for whom I labour in birth again until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19)

Paul's Fear

“I hope that you don't assume that all this time we have simply been justifying ourselves in your eyes? Beloved ones, we have been speaking to you in the sight of God as those joined to Christ, and everything we do is meant to build you up and make you stronger in your faith. Now I'm afraid that when I come to you I may find you different than I desire you to be, and you may find me different than you would like me to be. I don't want to find you in disunity, with jealousy and angry outbursts, with selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance, and turmoil. I'm actually afraid that on my next visit my God will humble me in front of you as I shed tears over those who keep sinning without repenting of their impurity, sexual immorality, and perversion.” (vv19-21 TPT)

We can sense Paul's frustration and fear here. He wondered if he would find disunity, jealousy, angry outbursts, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance, and turmoil when he gets to Corinth. What will he find?

Considering all he had written in 1 Corinthians and the other letter not included in the canonised scripture, should he still be this concerned about this church? Perhaps. It looks as if they are an unrepentant bunch to which Paul said he is shedding tears for those who keep sinning without repenting of their sins.