

2 Corinthians 12 - Paul's Defense of His Ministry; Thorn in the Flesh

III. Paul's vindication of his apostleship (2 Cor 10:1–13:14)

- (2) Paul defends his apostleship (11:1–12:13)
 - (C) Paul's revelations evidence his apostleship (12:1-10)
 - (a) Paul's vision (12:1-6)
 - (b) Paul's thorn (12:7-10)
 - (D) Paul's signs evidence his apostleship (12:11-13)
- (3) Paul announces his upcoming visit (12:14–13:10)
 - (A) Paul's concern not to be a financial burden (12:14-18)
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2 Corinthians 12

- (C) Paul's revelations evidence his apostleship (12:1-10)
 - (a) Paul's vision (12:1-6)

1 Boasting is necessary, though it is not beneficial; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

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1 I must boast, although it does not do any good. Let's talk about visions and revelations from the Lord.

1 It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.

- The Judaizers had boasted of honors and "their letters of recommendation" (1 Cor 3:2ff). Paul did not look for honor from men; he let God honor him.

God had honored Paul with visions and revelations:

- (1) Paul saw the glorified Christ on the very day he was converted (Acts 9:3; 22:6)
- (2) He saw a vision of Ananias coming to minister to him (Acts 9:12)
- (3) He had a vision from God when he was called to minister to the Gentiles (Acts 22:17)
- (4) He had a vision of God when he was called to Macedonia (Luke?) (Acts 16:9)
- (5) When his ministry was difficult in Corinth, God encouraged him by a vision (Acts 18:9-10)

- (6) After his arrest in Jerusalem Paul was encouraged by a vision (Acts 23:11)
- (7) In the midst of the storm at sea an angel appeared to him and assured him that he and the passengers would be saved (Acts 27:33)

Along with these special visions related to his call, spiritual revelations of divine mysteries were also communicated to Paul: the mystery of the church itself (Eph 3:1-6).

God also honored Paul by taking him to heaven 14 years earlier (AD 43?), between his departure for Tarsus (Acts 9:30) and his visit from Barnabas (Acts 11:25-26). Jewish rabbis were accustomed to speaking about themselves in the third person and Paul adopted that style in sharing this experience with his friends (and enemies) in Corinth.

2 I know a man in Christ, who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven.

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2 I know a man who belongs to the Messiah. Fourteen years ago—whether in his body or outside of his body, I do not know, but God knows—that man was snatched away to the third heaven.

2 I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.

3 And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—

3 And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—

3 I know that this man—whether in his body or outside of his body, I do not know, but God knows—

3 And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;)

4 was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

4 was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

4 was snatched away to Paradise and heard things that cannot be expressed in words, things that no human being has a right even to mention.

4 How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

- Paul was taken to heaven after his conversion and given revelation about the nature and purpose of the church age (Gal 1:11-12; Eph 3:4)

5 In behalf of such a man I will boast; but in my own behalf **I will not boast, except regarding my weaknesses.**

5 On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to *my* weaknesses.

5 I will boast about this man, but as for myself I will boast only about my weaknesses.

5 Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

- "...I will not boast, except regarding *my* weaknesses" - we are a culture which has become obsessed with personal peace and comfort

— We almost view it as a right. This presumption not only sets the stage for disappointment but also blinds us to the powerful role that discomfort and pain can play in our spiritual growth.

6 For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from *this*, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees *in* me or hears from me.

6 For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from *this*, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees *in* me or hears from me.

6 However, if I did want to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be telling the truth. But I am not going to do it in order to keep anyone from thinking more of me than what he sees and hears about me.

6 For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me.

- How could Paul, after such an experience, remain humble? Because of his second experience:

Thorn in the Flesh

The Lord knows how to balance our lives. The mystery of human suffering is the topic of the oldest record in the possession of Man: the Book of Job. His critical "friends" felt that if he just had more faith...or if...etc. What makes this speculation dangerous is that there is some (occasional) truth in it.

Sometimes we suffer because we are foolish and disobedient. Sometimes for chastening (Heb 12:3ff). Cf. David, because of his sin (2 Sam 12:1-22). God forgives us, but we must reap what we sow. Sometimes we suffer to build our character (Rom 5:1-5). Along the shore you can see rocks that are sharp in the quiet coves; but polished in those places

where waves beat against them. God can use the "waves and billows" of life to polish us, if we let Him.

(b) Paul's thorn (12:7-10)

7 Because of the extraordinary *greatness* of **thereweb**, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, **there was given to me a thorn in the flesh**, a messenger of **Satantotormentme**—to keep me from exalting myself!

7 Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!

7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of the exceptional nature of these revelations, a thorn was given to me and placed in my body. It was Satan's messenger to keep on tormenting me so that I would not become conceited.

7 And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

- "...the revelations" – Paul was caught up to the third heaven and taught things by God that man was not fit to hear

- Paul had direct divine revelation from God, which gave him knowledge that mere man did not have; this certainly would've boosted Paul's pride

- So God kept Paul humble through physical pain, to keep his pride in check and ensure that God could continue to use him mightily

- "...there was given to me a thorn in the flesh" – *skolops*, a pointed piece of wood, a pale, a stake

- It is good that Paul doesn't further define his "thorn in the flesh." If He did, some might feel ashamed by their own inability to conquer something lesser; others might feel superior to Paul thinking, Oh, that is all he had to deal with.

- "...Satan to torment me" – *kolaphizo*, two meanings:

- (1) To strike with the fist, give one a blow with the fist

- (2) To maltreat, treat with violence and contumely

Tense (verb: aorist active indicative (plural!)) implies was either constant or recurring

- The ambiguity of the precise nature of Paul's "thorn in the flesh" allows us to more easily apply it to our own "thorn..."

8 Concerning this I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might leave me.

8 Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.

8 I pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away from me,

8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

- Paul implored the Lord 3x to remove this bodily condition, but the Lord did not answer his prayer

— So it is ok to ask God to remove physical ailments as Paul did, but it is not ok to demand that God make good on a promise that He never made

9 And He has said to me, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."** **Most gladly**, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

9 And He has said to me, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."** Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

9 but he has told me, **"My grace is all you need, because my power is perfected in weakness."** Therefore, I will most happily boast about my weaknesses, so that the Messiah's power may rest on me.

9 And he said unto me, **My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.** Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

- God told Paul that is this adversity that was keeping him in a place of dependency, and when we're dependent upon God, we're usable by God

— God told Paul that what he needed was not the pain and torment to be removed, but he needed God's grace in the midst of illness

— When we pray for healing in people, we should also request God's grace be given to them in the midst of their illness

- "...Most gladly" - most believers think illness is an enemy, but Paul says he boasted about his weakness

— Paul's whole mindset changed...he no longer viewed the thorn in the flesh as an enemy, but as an ally or a gift, because he understood how God was using it to keep him from becoming an arrogant jerk, and keeping his focus on preaching the gospel and speaking divine revelation.

— He does not remove the affliction, but He gives us grace so that the affliction works for us and not against us

- Sufficient Grace - there is never a shortage of Grace. It is sufficient for our spiritual ministries (2 Cor 3:4-6), and our material needs (9:8) as well as our physical needs (12:9).

- Strengthening Grace - My power is being made perfect in your weakness

10 Therefore I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in distresses, in persecutions, in difficulties, in behalf of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

10 That is why I take such pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties for the Messiah's sake, for when I am weak, then I am strong.

10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

- Paul had moved beyond acceptance to praise and gratitude.

Practical Lessons

- (1) The spiritual is far more important than the physical.
- (2) God knows how to balance the burdens and blessings, sufferings and glory.
- (3) Not all sickness is caused by sin. Job's comforters were incorrect. God often permits these things to accomplish greater things in (through) our lives.
- (4) Sin is worse than sickness; and the worst is pride. Afflictions can keep us humble.
- (5) Physical affliction need not be a barrier to effective Christian service.
- (6) We can always rest in God's Word. Whenever you are going through suffering, spend extra time in the Word of God... ***We do not live on explanations; we live on promises.***

(D) Paul's signs evidence his apostleship (12:11-13)

11 I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, since I was in no respect inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody.

11 I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody.

11 I have become a fool. You forced me to be one. Really, I should have been commended by you, for I am not in any way inferior to your "super-apostles," even if I am nothing.

11 I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me: for I ought to have been commended of you: for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing.

12 The distinguishing marks of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs, wonders, and miracles.

12 The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.

12 The signs of an apostle were performed among you with utmost patience—signs, wonders, and powerful actions.

12 Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.

13 For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

13 For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

13 How were you treated worse than the other churches, except that I did not bother you for help? Forgive me for this wrong!

13 For what is it wherein ye were inferior to other churches, except it be that I myself was not burdensome to you? forgive me this wrong.

(3) Paul announces his upcoming visit (12:14—13:10)

(A) Paul's concern not to be a financial burden (12:14-18)

14 Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for *their* parents, but parents for *their* children.

14 Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for *their* parents, but parents for *their* children.

14 Now I'm ready to visit you for a third time, and I will not bother you for help. I do not want your things, but rather you yourselves. Children should not have to support their parents, but parents their children.

14 Behold, the third time I am ready to come to you; and I will not be burdensome to you: for I seek not yours but you: for the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children.

15 I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?

15 I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?

15 I will be very glad to spend my money and myself for you. Do you love me less because I love you so much?

15 And I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved.

16 But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, devious person that I am, I took you in by deceit.

16 But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit.

16 Granting that I have not been a burden to you, was I a clever schemer who trapped you by some trick?

16 But be it so, I did not burden you: nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you with guile.

17 *Certainly* I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I?

17 *Certainly* I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I?

17 I did not take advantage of you through any of the men I sent you, did I?

17 Did I make a gain of you by any of them whom I sent unto you?

18 I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit *and walk* in the same steps?

18 I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit *and walk* in the same steps?

18 I encouraged Titus to visit you, and I sent along with him the brother you know so well. Titus didn't take advantage of you, did he? We conducted ourselves with the same spirit, didn't we? We took the very same steps, didn't we?

18 I desired Titus, and with him I sent a brother. Did Titus make a gain of you? walked we not in the same spirit? walked we not in the same steps?

(B) Paul's concern not to find them carnal (12:19-21)

19 All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. *Actually*, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for building you up, beloved.

19 All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. *Actually*, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for your upbuilding, beloved.

19 Have you been thinking all along that we are trying to defend ourselves before you? We are speaking before God in the authority of the Messiah, and everything, dear friends, is meant to build you up.

19 Again, think ye that we excuse ourselves unto you? we speak before God in Christ: but we do all things, dearly beloved, for your edifying.

20 For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish, and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps *there will be* strife, jealousy, angry

tempers, selfishness, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances;

20 For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps *there will be* strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances;

20 I am afraid that I may come and somehow find you not as I want to find you, and that you may find me not as you want to find me. Perhaps there will be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorderly conduct.

20 For I fear, lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not: lest there be debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults:

21 *I am afraid* that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and indecent behavior which they have practiced.

21 I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced.

21 I am afraid that when I come my God may again humble me before you and that I may have to grieve over many who formerly lived in sin and have not repented of their impurity, sexual immorality, and promiscuity that they once practiced.

21 And lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and that I shall bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness which they have committed.