

2 Corinthians 12

Verses 1-6:

--(1) Moving from sufferings to spiritual visions and revelations may seem out of place but Paul's boasting (if we can really even call it that) was meant to put the actual boasting of the false apostles into perspective.

--Again, Paul doesn't mention all the churches he personally planted or that were now in "his network"; he didn't recount the number of salvations in the year; the exciting testimonies of wild conversions; the extent and effectiveness of his preaching; etc.

--His focus from the last few chapters was on the cost, sincerity of heart, and humility required to serve the Lord. It is in that context that even his spiritual visions and revelations fit. They too were not related to his personal strength and had a cost.

--(2) It is clear from **7** that Paul is speaking about himself. ***I know a man in Christ.*** . . . is meant to emphasize God's work in this supernatural experience. He was a spectator and not a participant. Paul didn't receive these visions because of "secret" knowledge or works.

--God will give us the supernatural when He knows that we need it. If we don't have it then we don't need it. Ask by all means but do not demand.

--***Fourteen years ago.*** . . . Gives us some timing. Most think Paul was saved some 20 years before this which would put this event around 6 or 7 years after his conversion.

--Many try to tie this event to his stoning at Lystra (**Acts 14:19**) but the timing is a bit of a stretch. Also, the thorn being tied to his injuries from this event doesn't really square with ***a messenger of Satan*** which Paul is clear about later.

--The reality is that we don't have a good Biblical connection to this event.

--Paul then tells us that in this experience he was ***caught up***. The Greek word *harpazo* has the idea of being seized away by force. It is the same word used for the rapture in **1 Thess. 4:17**.

--(3-4) What was the experience of being ***caught up*** like? Paul tells us twice that he wasn't sure if he left his body behind or took it with him.

*Morgan (The Corinthians Letters of Paul): *I remember very well someone asking me in the States, 'Does that mean he was caught up in bodily form, or that his spirit passed on?' Of course my reply was obvious. My dear friend, how do you suppose I know, when Paul tells us twice over he did not know himself!**

--Lastly, Paul tells us that he was caught up into ***the third heaven*** or into ***Paradise*** which are obviously the same place—even if one is in the other like Philadelphia is in Pennsylvania.

--What is this ***Paradise***? The word gives us the idea of a park or preserve. It is used two other times: **Lk. 23:43 & Rev. 2:7**.

--Is paradise in the current heaven or a compartment in the realm of the dead (Sheol/Hades)? Is paradise the same as Abraham's bosom? Can the saints still go there even though they are set free in Christ? We don't know and Paul wasn't trying to answer these questions! Remember, the context is the weakness and cost of Paul's boasting Vs. that of the false apostles.

--Finally, Paul tells us that he **heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.**

--Either God told him not to, as John was told not to write some things in Revelation, or he just couldn't. *I had a hard time explaining American football to a foreign student!*

--(5-6) Paul admits that he had plenty to boast in—without lying or making things up—but to do so would be foolish. Instead, Paul wanted the internal to be evaluated by the external. *We usually want it the other way around—forget about what I said/did it's not my heart!*

--Paul didn't want anyone to think of him as something more than he really was. He didn't want people to have the wrong *positive* impression of his personal weakness or ministry. What a remarkably humble sentiment. Is that our desire? Do we want to be known as we are or to be mistakenly known 'above measure'? *Smarter; Wealthier; Spiritual; Godly; etc.*

Verse 7:

--Here Paul makes his "boasting" a clear contrast with that of these false teachers. He was given remarkable spiritual visions and revelations from God that he didn't share with anyone else, or boast in, because God already had to give him a **thorn in the flesh** with them to keep him properly humble.

--The word for **thorn** is that of a *stake*. This was something literally physical. He may have referred to it in his letter to the Galatians but we are not totally sure it was the same affliction he was speaking of.

Galatians 4:14: And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.

--There is some debate as to whether the **thorn in the flesh** and the **messenger of Satan** were one and the same or two different things. The language leaves some space for either in **7** but Paul's description in **8** makes it clear they were one and the same. He refers to it as **This thing** and **it** Vs. *these things + they*.

--So Paul tells us that there **was given to me** a bodily affliction brought about by means of an enemy agent. Again, we must not lose sight of Paul's focus. He is not trying to describe the exact extent of his humbling malady or the specifics of spiritual warfare. He is saying God gave me incredible spiritual experience and then the needful physical humbling to keep me in a place of spiritual usefulness.

--Suffering and afflictions are spoken of in a few different contexts in the Scripture. Suffering is an effect of sin; can be a witness to the world; glorifies God in His plan; is God's nature of love overcoming the evil of the world; is a part of our call; is used as a tool to conform us into the image and likeness of God.

--Twice Paul says **lest I be exalted**. He felt the pull of ungodly exaltation and God used this thorn to clip his wings so he didn't fly too high! Suffering *like this* a mercy given of God no matter what agent He uses to bring it into our lives.

**Lewis (A Grief Observed): "The more we believe that God hurts only to heal, the less we can believe that there is any use in begging for tenderness. A cruel man might be bribed—might grow tired of his vile sport—might have a temporary fit of mercy, as alcoholics have fits of sobriety. But suppose that what you are up against is a surgeon whose intentions are wholly good. The kinder and more conscientious he is, the more inexorably he will go on cutting. If he yielded to your entreaties, if he stopped before the operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless. But is it credible that such extremities of torture should be necessary for us? Well, take your choice. The tortures occur. If they are unnecessary, then there is no God or a bad one. If there is a good God, then these tortures are necessary. For no even moderately good Being could possibly inflict or permit them if they weren't.*

Either way, we're for it.

What do people mean when they say, 'I am not afraid of God because I know He is good'? Have they never been to a dentist?

Yet this is unendurable. And then one babbles—'If only I could bear it, or the worst of it, or any of it, instead of her.' But one can't tell how serious that bid is, for nothing is staked on it. If it suddenly became a real possibility, then, for the first time, we should discover how seriously we had meant it. But is it ever allowed?

It was allowed to One, we are told, and I find I can now believe again, that He has done vicariously whatever can be so done. He replies to our babble, 'You cannot and you dare not. I could and dared.'"

--The work of God as the Great Physician is how Paul is speaking of suffering here—as a merciful act of God in his life to cut out evil and preserve the good. That is why he went to God in prayer and didn't start rebuking Satan or casting our demons!

--Imagine how horrible and prideful and spoiled we would be without any suffering. God will put this scalpel down when the cancer of sin is removed, but until then, He will do what He needs to do in us to love us and preserve life in us.

--So the question becomes—*Okay, but how much suffering do I really need?* Who else can truly answer that question other than God? He alone is wise enough, is powerful enough, and loving enough to get it right in all of our lives—remember, we don't suffer alone.

Verse 8:

--Paul says that he pleaded with the Lord three times to remove this suffering!

- 1) We don't need to hunt for suffering. Seek God's mercy!
- 2) There is no Biblical truth to the health and wealth doctrine.
- 3) Suffering does not make us second class or rebellious Christians.

--Why three times? I think the only significance is that it was after the third time that the Lord spoke to him. He probably would have prayed more if not.

Verses 9-10:

--Paul's prayer was answered by a word for the Lord. **He said to me.** . . . God does not use this type of suffering to discourage or destroy us. God knows what to say and when to say it.

***2 Peter 2:9: The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations. . . ***

--This Word from the Lord becomes personal: **He said to me**. . .

*Dallimore (Spurgeon: A Biography): *“Gentlemen, there are many passages of Scripture which you will never understand thoroughly until some trying or singular experience shall interpret them to you.*

*The other evening I was riding home after a heavy day’s work. I felt very wearied and sore depressed, when swiftly and suddenly that text came me, ‘My grace is sufficient for thee.’ I reached home and looked it up in the original, and at last it came to me in this way, ‘My grace is sufficient for THEE’, and I said, ‘I should think it is, Lord,’ and I burst out laughing. . . It seemed to make unbelief look so absurd. . . Oh, brethren, be great believers! Little faith will bring your souls to heaven, but great faith will bring heaven to your souls.”**

--God’s word to Paul was a promise. It remains so for us today. The sufficiency of God’s grace is not a hope. It is a fact. First, God’s grace made the removal of Paul’s thorn needless. Second, God’s strength made the weakness he felt beneficial.

--What will it mean to have God’s grace sufficient for our personal suffering? It will mean that the circumstances remain while the “issue” is settled between us and Him.

--Can I just add here, if you do not truly have the victory here as Paul does, then keep praying to God and asking Him for mercy or grace! You will know when to stop.

--What did that look like for Paul? Gladness! This very boasting. A joyful acceptance of the hand of God in **infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake**.

--It will look like the **power of Christ** in our lives. Power to do what? To live, obey, suffer, and serve as salt and light for Christ’s sake.

--Paul was glad when the power of Christ was at **rest** on him. The word **rest** has the idea of *pitching a tent upon*. Paul’s victory over his thorn was in the fact that his weakness and needs made him a dwelling place for God. *This is learned in personal experience—that is why you hear people say things like: *I wouldn’t change a thing*. Because despite the pain or hardships, you cannot imagine life without God.*

Verses 11-13:

--Here Paul basically reproves the Corinthians who should have known above many others the truth of his apostleship in Christ. They should have defended him instead of doubted, questioned, or slandered him.

Verses 14-15:

--There is some debate here as to whether this is actually Paul’s second or third visit to Corinth. The question being, is **for the third time** connected with **ready** or with **come**? The first being: I am prepared to make my way toward you for a third time. The second being: This will be my third visit. Either works.

--The plain language is probably best and this is likely Paul’s third trip to Corinth—us not having any record of his second trip.

--Here we get a glimpse into the apostles remarkable heart for these people.

--First, Paul refuses to “love” them in a way that actually harms them. *How many refuse to do what is right because they will be loved less for it?!*

--Second, Paul’s love was not needy. His love was freely given without strings attached, without payback, with reciprocation. He uses the illustration of correct parental love that doesn’t seek anything from kids but simply relationship. ***I do not seek yours, but you.***

Matthew 5:46: For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

--It is a travesty for a parent to only love a difficult child—love with their life as Paul had no money—if that child is first loving to them. It shows there is something lacking in the adult.

--Neediness in love always taints relationships—parent; spouse; friend; etc. Need-love no longer does what is best for others but for itself. *Mrs. Fidget in C.S. Lewis’ Four Loves*

--We are all so needy, and all of our love reaches a point where it can no more give freely. Only God loves purely from who He is. He alone is Perfect. He needs nothing from us—never has, never will. God is love.

Verses 16-18:

--Here it seems that Paul was being accused of being crafty and enriching himself by taking money from those he sent. Paul rebukes this by their collective example of Christian life.

Verses 19-21:

--(19) Paul is not writing these things in personal self-defense. He is writing this letter because the Corinthians needed to be able to see the difference between godly ministry by real apostles and ungodly ministry by false apostles.

--He was writing for their edification. ***Beloved***, their failings had not changed his heart of love toward them one bit.

--(20-21) That said, Paul admits that he fears to come and discover clashing realities between him and them. They didn’t want to find him as someone bold in judging unrepentant sin and he didn’t want to find them defending unrepentant sin.

1:23: Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth.

--It is important to recognize that the apostles dealt differently with sin *inside* the church and sin *outside* the church. This was expounded on in **1 Corinthians 5**.

--His mind is particularly on those sins that were previously addressed in **1 Corinthians**.

-***Uncleanness***: All types of sexual interaction outside of marriage. *Not just intercourse*

-***Fornication***: All forms of sexual intercourse outside of marriage. *Lev. 18*

-***Lewdness***: The unbridled lust that ignores all decency and created order. Sexuality out of bounds—and yes, God has ordained boundaries.