

2 Corinthians
Leon L. Combs, Ph.D.

Chapter Twelve

2Cor 12:1 Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

2Cor 12:2 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.

2Cor 12:3 And I know how such a man-- whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows--

2Cor 12:4 was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

Paul was again forced to boast even when it would not be profitable to the church or to him but he needed to do it because of the boasting of the false teachers. Visions are always seen and revelations may or may not involve something that he saw with his eyes. A revelation can be sensed other than by visual means. He is now forced to reveal a fourteen year old secret. The third heaven is the place where God dwells. The first heaven is the atmosphere, the second heaven is space, and the third heaven is the dwelling place of God. So Paul is revealing that he was taken to the very place where God dwells although he is not certain if his visit was purely spiritual or if he was bodily there. Paradise is the location of the righteous dead within the third heaven so he was in the very place where Jesus promised the thief on the cross He would be with him.

Luke 23:43 And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

This is also where the tree of life is located:

Rev 2:7 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.'

While Paul was in Paradise he heard words that were inexpressible in human terms but he was allowed to understand them. However he was not permitted to reveal the content of the messages, which indicates that the messages were for him alone. He was probably given words of encouragement to allow him to endure all the persecutions he previously revealed in "chapter" eleven.

2Cor 12:5 On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses.

2Cor 12:6 For if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one may credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.

2Cor 12:7 And 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 buffet me-- to keep me from exalting myself!

He is still reluctant to boast of the experience except to relate how his weakness was revealed to him. He wanted to dispel any thoughts of others that the experience somehow made him special and party to information not available to other Christians. It was the essence of the Gnostics that they were of this special class of people who alone were able to perceive hidden messages from the Word of God. Again he wanted people to just see him as he revealed himself to them in his service to them for the glory of God. He would not try to compete with the false teachers in the receipt of visions. However the trip to Paradise was very effective for him personally as he was then able to achieve incredible results for the inauguration of the church of Jesus Christ. But to make sure that his special treatment did not make him puffed up too much concerning his own importance, God allowed a messenger of Satan to buffet him. There have been massive efforts by many people to discern the "thorn in the flesh" but its precise identity is not explicitly revealed to us. Undoubtedly if he had told us that it was some illness then everyone would want to say that they had it also and hence make it rather like an idol. The word "flesh" should not be interpreted in any manner other than in a moral sense relating to his humanness. The messenger of Satan would be a demon and the torment would be some harsh treatment by this indwelling spirit.

I think its identity is very simple. Paul tells us of how he had persecuted the church and sent many people to prison and to their deaths. What would keep him humble more than anything else to constantly have the reminder of those past events in his mind? Maybe even the images of some people that he sent to prison and their families were constantly in his mind. Certainly such images and thoughts would be a constant way of reminding him that he was not so special and would keep him from exalting himself. Anytime he would think about telling someone how special he was since he had been to Paradise the thoughts and images of his persecution of Jesus would be in his mind.

Acts 9:5 And he said, "Who art Thou, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,

2Cor 12:8 Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 2Cor 12:9 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, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

2Cor 12:10 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.

It is unusual that Paul prayed to Jesus for the removal of this "thorn" and I think my understanding of this "thorn" is enhanced by his praying to Jesus. The reply of Jesus also enforces this understanding since He said that His grace is sufficient and it is the grace of Jesus that removes the penalties of our sins. The weakness Paul felt at having persecuted Jesus Christ would be the very source of the power of God to do the work required of him. When we feel that we are doing very special work for the Lord we had better be careful for each of us has

persecuted Jesus by our actions prior to our conversion. The manner in which Paul handled his weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties is a supreme example for all of us today. However it is important to note that all of these are the result of working for the glory of Christ and not for us. We can suffer because of sins or for just working for ourselves and those are not blessed. It is when we realize that we are not able to do what we know God wants us to do that we then are given the strength and abilities to do those tasks. It is when we begin to think too highly of ourselves that we get into trouble and God will discipline us for such thoughts. Whether He will give us clear remembrances of our sins against Him or what other type of “thorn” He gives us will have the result of humbling us for better service for His Kingdom. Always remember that God is sovereign and whenever He sends such humbling experiences to us it is for His glory and we need to always praise Him even in such tough times.

Heb 12:5 and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him;

Heb 12:6 For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives. "

Heb 12:7 It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

Heb 12:8 But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

2Cor 12:11 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.

2Cor 12:12 The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.

2Cor 12:13 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!

Paul does not like to be bragging so he complains that actually they knew enough about him to have been commending him to everyone. He refers again to the false apostles (most eminent apostles) sarcastically for they have been commending themselves and putting down Paul. He says that he actually is nobody meaning that relative to the Lord he indeed is only a servant. He reminds them that he had shown the signs of a true apostle to them: signs, wonders, and miracles. Paul saying that the signs, wonders, and miracles are the signs of a true apostle also limits them to this time in church history. The purpose of these supernatural events was to authenticate the message of God as done by Jesus also (Acts 2:22). We also read of the confirmation meaning in Heb 2:3, 4. The apostles had to be chosen by God and Paul was so chosen:

Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

The apostles also had to have actually been with Jesus. Paul was with Jesus although it was after the resurrection:

1Cor 15:8 and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

Jesus appeared to Paul three other times in the recorded Scripture (Acts 18:9-10; 22:17; 23:11).

The apostles had to have received the gospel by direct revelation from Jesus and Paul did:

Gal 1:11 For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man.

Gal 1:12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

The only way that he treated them differently from the other churches was that he did not take money from them and he sarcastically asks that they forgive him for not requesting material support from them.

2Cor 12:14 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.

2Cor 12:15 And I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you the more, am I to be loved the less?

2Cor 12:16 But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit.

2Cor 12:17 Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I?

2Cor 12:18 I urged Titus to go, and 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?

His first visit was to establish the church (Acts 18). His second visit was the painful disciplinary visit (2 Cor 2:1; 13:2). The third visit would be the one he is now contemplating. He does not intend to accept funds from them for his needs on this next trip for he wants their hearts and not their money. He states the common way of families taking care of each other and he is their spiritual father so he is responsible for them and he will gladly spend his money for them and to sacrifice himself for them.

1Cor 4:15 For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

His acts of service are exemplified by our Lord Jesus Christ:

Mark 10:45 "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

But it seemed that the relationship between them was disturbed since it seemed that the more he loved them the less they loved him. Such a relationship is very selfish on the part of the Corinthians and not uncommon today as the work of the church leaders is often unappreciated and taken for granted. However, regardless of their actions, he was going to continue to not be a

burden to them. He would continue to love them sacrificially and such is a great example of Christian love.

What a beautiful sarcastic comment in verse 16! He is probably using the words of the false apostles concerning him. The Greek word translated “deceit” literally means to use as bait to catch fish. He was then being accused of using deceptive means to get people to accept him and his teaching. They were probably claiming that the collections for the Jerusalem churches would go into his pocket. He attacks these false accusations by reminding them of the people that he sent to them regarding the collections. He was being very careful to make sure that nobody would be able to legally accuse him of taking their money for false pretensions. We have already discussed these actions of Paul in 2 Cor 8:16-24. Paul and his fellow missionaries acted only with great integrity and honesty so there were no accusations that could be proven by the false apostles.

2Cor 12:19 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.

2Cor 12:20 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 may be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances;

2Cor 12:21 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.

He now wanted it to be clear that his lengthy defense was not as though he were personally on trial. The only tribunal with which a faithful minister is concerned is before God and his conscience is clear before Him. He had to defend himself before them so that they would carefully listen to him and be continually sanctified in Christ. The people were his spiritual responsibility.

In verses 20 and 21 he states the purpose of a minister and that is the edification of the church and the sanctification of the members:

*Matt 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Matt 28:20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. "*

Given the history of the church at Corinth he was concerned that he would come and find unrepentant sinners and that much conflict could arise from his visit. His wish was for them to be continually growing spiritually and helping others to mature in the faith. Strife is one of the deeds of the flesh:

Gal 5:20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions,

Jealousy is warned by James to be an example of demonic wisdom:

James 3:14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.

James 3:15 This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.

James 3:16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.

“Angry tempers” is what occurs spontaneously from an evil heart and is also mentioned in Gal 5:20. “Disputes” is meant to be what comes about from people who are selfishly ambitious.

Rom 2:8 but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.

Phil 1:17 the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment.

“Slander” is open and public defamation of someone rather than gossip behind their back so he is describing both actions against the character of someone. Arrogance is the mental attitude of superiority and all of these would result in great disturbances. All of these words used by Paul are descriptive of people who are not demonstrating Christian characteristics. Paul was afraid that he would find people who had not repented of their sins impurity, immorality, and sensuality that they had practiced. Such would humiliate Paul and he would mourn over their sins and lack of repentance. Those people who fail to repent would face discipline that is discussed in the next chapter.