

2Cor. 12:1 ¶ It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.

This verse in the King James is certainly not easily understood, several other translations support the NLT: *“This boasting is all so foolish, but let me go on. Let me tell about the visions and revelations I received from the Lord.”*

“visions” = “visuality, i.e. (concretely) an apparition....” from the root that states, “to gaze (i.e. with wide-open eyes, as at something remarkable....”

“revelations” = “disclosure:—appearing, coming, lighten, manifestation....” from the root that states, “to take off the cover, i.e. disclose:—reveal.”

Revelations of truth can be made without benefit of visual aid, but I think every teacher would affirm that teaching reinforced with visual aids often enhance the student’s understanding.

Paul is careful to declare that though he was not a disciple of Jesus while He walked this earth, he too was personally instructed by the Lord.

2Cor. 12:2 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.

2Cor. 12:3 And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;)

2Cor. 12:4 How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

Paul here describes an experience of being caught up to the third heaven, but he is yet not sure whether or not it was a physical or out of body experience. He is certain that the experience was of the Lord, but he admits that only God knows the reality of that experience. We are also told that this experience took place over 14 years previous to this letter. This would seem to be the same experience he related in his letter to the Galatians.

*Galatians 1:11–17 “But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ....But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by his grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; **immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood:** Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.”*

The phrase “not with flesh and blood” is emphasizing that his instruction was of divine origin.

The next observation I made is that Paul equates the third heaven with paradise. The Greek connects “paradise” with Eden as connotative of a place of happiness. It seems obvious that Paul is speaking of a heavenly experience in the presence of

God. I've often heard the atmosphere we breathe described as the first heaven, outer space where the planets and stars are as the second heaven, and God's dwelling place as the third heaven.

Paul's experience in paradise was marked as special because of "unspeakable words" that he heard while there. It seems that Paul was helpless to verbalize what he heard there with human language; and even if he could, he wouldn't, because he was not permitted.

It's interesting to note that when Jesus spoke to the thief on the cross, He told the thief that he would be with Him in paradise that very day.

Luke 23:42–43 "And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."

This would seem to affirm that when the Lord took captivity captive, He took "paradise" to the third heaven.

*Ephesians 4:7–10 "But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore he saith, **When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.** (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)"*

2Cor. 12:5 Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

2Cor. 12:6 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.

In verse 5 Paul seems to be saying that though he is boasting about the experience in defense of the accusations made against him, he is not boasting to draw glory to himself. He admits that in the flesh he is tempted to draw glory to himself, but he knows that would be foolish. Still, he affirms that he is telling the truth; but he doesn't want anyone to think of him other than what he is—a dedicated servant of God. Paul's desire was to bring glory to God through the message he preached and the ways he served the body of believers.

With these words Paul is clearly showing a difference between himself and those making accusation against him. They were quick to boast about anything they thought would make them more popular among the masses. Again, I can't help but make comparisons between the faithful servants of God today who labor without regard to self vs. those who exalt themselves before the public as specially anointed prophets and/or ministers.

2Cor. 12:7 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.

Paul understood that he was especially blessed among men to have been given many divine revelations from God. In fact, the Lord specifically afflicted Paul with a “thorn in the flesh” that he defined as “the messenger of Satan” that caused him constant suffering. This *thorn* was meant to keep Paul humble before the Lord in light of his special blessings. The fact that the *thorn* is described as “in the flesh” seems to indicate that it was a physical affliction, but it could just be a reference to his humanity. Describing this *thorn* as a “messenger of Satan” seems to imply that Paul was singled out to have a specific fallen angel or demon continually working against him in the spiritual realm to impact his physical ministry to the body of Christ. We know from the book of Job that Satan has limited powers regarding the ability to cause physical disease, so it could be that this is a reference to a recurring physical affliction.

I thought the words of Spurgeon quite insightful as to why Paul’s thorn was not identified in scripture: “God wanted everyone with any kind of thorn in the flesh to be able to put themselves in Paul’s shoes.”

2Cor. 12:8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

2Cor. 12:9 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.

2Cor. 12:10 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’s *thorn* caused him such discomfort that he asked the Lord three times to take it away from him, but God refused. He told Paul that His grace was sufficient for him to be able to endure the suffering. In fact, God’s power is most effective when allowed to function through the weakest of humans. Why would that be? Because then it is obvious that the results are due to the power of God and not to the power or influence of the person. Understanding that truth caused Paul to change his attitude to one of being proud to be accounted worthy to suffer in any way that would result in bringing glory to Christ. He finally understood that when at his weakest in the flesh, he was positioned to show himself strongest in the Lord.

“infirmities” = “feebleness (of mind or body)...disease...sickness.”

“reproaches” = “insolence (as over-bearing), i.e. insult, injury:—harm, hurt...”

“necessities” = “constraint (literally or figuratively); by implication, distress...”

“persecutions” = “the infliction of loss, pain, or death for adherence to a particular creed”

“distresses” = “narrowness of room, i.e. (figuratively) calamity:—anguish....”

I like David Guzik's comments regarding the sufficiency of God's grace: "But there are two ways of taking away a burden. It can be done by *removing* the load, or it can be done by *strengthening* the shoulder bearing the load. Instead of taking away the thorn, God would strengthen Paul under it, and God would show His strength through Paul's apparent weakness."

It is important to note that Paul's experience flies in the face of the "name it, claim it" teachings popular today. It also reveals the fact that it is sometimes according to God's will to work through the believer through suffering. It also refutes the teaching that all sickness and/or affliction is a result of sin.

One more important truth—The Lord is ever in sovereign control over the forces of Satan.

I like these comments from JFB: "The Lord has more need of our weakness than of our strength: our strength is often His rival; our weakness, His servant, drawing on His resources, and showing forth His glory. Man's extremity is God's opportunity; man's security is Satan's opportunity. God's way is not to take His children out of trial, but to give them strength to bear up against it."

2Cor. 12:11 ¶ 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.

2Cor. 12:12 Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.

Paul does not like it that he has felt forced to boast of his experiences in defense of the accusations of the false teachers that were trying to increase their influence among the Christians in Corinth at his expense. He feels that the believers in Corinth should have defended him in light of the signs, wonders and mighty deeds he had performed among them—actions that gave proof of his apostleship. This implies that these actions were unique to apostles and necessary to authenticate their ministry as the early church was taking form.

Paul is careful to note that though he can rightfully claim his place among those considered the "chiefest apostles," he is nothing but a vessel in the hands of the Lord.

"in patience" – The Greek makes application to endurance and perseverance. This would seem to imply in light of great opposition.

2Cor. 12:13 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.

Paul is saying that the main difference in his ministry in Corinth from that in other churches is that he completely supported himself; he purposed not to be a burden on them in any way. If that was wrong, he is very sorry.

I know that Paul often plied his trade as a tentmaker, but evidently he usually also received some support from the believers among whom he ministered. Since the people of Corinth were so materialistic, I think Paul decided to be extra careful to present himself as totally without financial motives for his ministry.

Why did Paul reference this as an inferior form of ministry? I think because it did not allow the believers there to have a part in what was accomplished and experience the reward that comes with sacrificial giving.

2Cor. 12:14 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.

2Cor. 12:15 And I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved.

Paul reveals his plan to come to Corinth for the third time. He declares that once again he will not be a burden to them because he is not seeking to profit from them. Then he gives reasoning to help them understand his mindset. Children are not meant to store up treasures for their parents; parents are to sacrifice to provide support to their children. As their spiritual father, Paul is ready to sacrifice himself in every way to promote their spiritual well being. Sadly, he has to acknowledge that so far the more he sacrifices to show his love for them, the less they seem to appreciate it.

It is so true that so often we are prone to take for granted the sacrifices that are made on our behalf. Especially in America today, even in the church, we have a culture of expectation rather than appreciation.

2Cor. 12:16 But be it so, I did not burden you: nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you with guile.

The different translations all have different shades of meaning with this verse. The insight expressed in the NIV Commentary made sense to me in light of upcoming verses: "The rumor had circulated at Corinth that because Paul was unscrupulous by nature, he was exploiting the church's generosity and trying to gain surreptitiously through his agents what he had declined to accept personally. What Paul almost certainly has in mind here is the collection for the poor at Jerusalem, which some charged was a convenient way to fulfill his covert wish to live at the church's expense."

Let's be clear in understanding that Paul was not admitting to using deceit in ministry. That would be contradictory to the teachings of the Lord. He is obviously responding to false allegations by the false teachers in Corinth.

I liked this statement by Calvin: "It is customary for the wicked impudently to impute to the servants of God, whatever they would themselves do, if they had it in their power."

2Cor. 12:17 Did I make a gain of you by any of them whom I sent unto you?

2Cor. 12:18 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?*

These verses are directly linked to the previous one. Paul is basically saying that he did not profit from any individual that he had sent to minister to them. He reminded them of the ministry of Titus and his ministry partner. He knew that Titus had served them with the same spirit that he had. Evidently Titus was not being attacked, and Paul is pointing out that he and Titus had served them in the same way.

2Cor. 12:19 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.*

Paul is basically saying that he and those that minister with him have no need to defend their ministry to the Corinthians before God. In fact, they acknowledge God as their witness that their goal is for the edification of the believers—the desire to build them up in their faith. This is in direct contrast to the false teachers who were motivated toward their own profit.

I believe herein lies the great identifying factor of many false teachers today. Examination of their ministry gives testimony to luxuriant lifestyles maintained through the fleecing of the professing body of believers. They are obviously focused on self. If their focus were truly on ministry as exemplified by Christ, they would be dying to self in service to others before the Lord.

2Cor. 12:20 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:
2Cor. 12:21 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.

I liked the wording of the NLT for the first part of verse 20: *“For I am afraid that when I come to visit you I won’t like what I find, and then you won’t like my response.”*

This implies that Paul is not planning on acting with political correctness or catering to the desires of the people. He plans on confronting specific sin according to the truth of scripture. Because many pastors today no longer follow Paul’s example, this has become a major reason for spiritual weakness in the body of believers.

Paul is fearful of finding that the Corinthian church is more identified with the deeds of the flesh than of the fruits of the Spirit. It would humble Paul to find those in whom he had invested so much of himself were not producing spiritual fruit and in fact were still serving the flesh.

Helpful insights from the Greek & Webster:

“debates” = quarrels and contentions

“envyings” = the zeal of an enemy, jealousy

“wraths” = uncontrolled anger

“strifes” = intrigue or scheming and contention

“backbitings” = defamation, evil speaking

“whisperings” = slander

“swellings” = haughtiness, pride

“tumults” = instability, disorder, confusion

“uncleanness” = physical or moral impurity

“fornication” = adultery and incest, idolatry

“lasciviousness” = filthy, wantonness, lewd, lustful