

II Corinthians Lesson 12

II Cor. Chapter 12

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Memory verses for this week: *2 Pet 1:19 We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: 2 Pet 1:20 Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.*

Introduction:

Last week in Chapter 11, Paul the church to not be deceived by Satan who wars against us each day. And to watch carefully for the false teachers that rise up in the church to teach false doctrine. This week, we discuss some of the visions and revelations that Paul received. Paul continues to defend his ministry and apostolic authority. He appeals to the time in his life that he was taken in spirit to heaven and received direct revelation from God. He further records how God thereafter gave him a thorn in flesh to prevent undue pride.

I. Paul's Visions and Revelations- Further Proof of Apostleship

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

The great Apostle indicates his reluctance to continue to focus upon himself. Nevertheless, he deemed it necessary. He speaks of visions and revelations from the Lord. In order to convince his recalcitrant brethren, he is about to reluctantly reveal details of his life never before made known.

Paul begins in verse 2 to refer to himself in the third person. The event in question took place more than fourteen years prior. The historical markers in Paul's life and ministry are not always clear. However, it would seem that fourteen years earlier was about the time he was stoned at Lystra.

In Acts 16:19, Luke records how that his antagonists dragged him out of the city, considering him dead. It may be that Paul did in fact die and was absent from the body and present with the Lord. It may be at this time that he was "caught up to the third heaven." In so many words, Paul indicated he had already been to heaven. He continues, "whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth."

He knew where he had been. However, the details concerning this event were somewhat fuzzy. If this was when he was stoned, it is understandable as he was first taken to unconsciousness and thereafter to heaven. It is probable that what he is about to describe was occasioned at this time. However, God had much more for him to do, so after having further instructed him in glory, he was sent back.

Paul finds it necessary to continue his “glorying and boasting.” Visions refer to supernatural sights granted to men, while revelations are the truths shown during such events. Paul was one of the few men who had such experiences, and he writes now of the supreme revelation. This came directly from the Lord. Paul did not go to the seminary or schools of higher learning to find out about Christ. He had attended the school of Gamaliel before he was saved, but God gave him a revelation about Jesus Christ. It was Christ himself that dealt with Paul when he was known as Saul there on the road to Damascus. This is where Paul always went back to concerning his salvation.

2 Cor 12:3 And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) 4 How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

He essentially repeats himself, perhaps for emphasis. “And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth)”. Again, he refers to himself indirectly and obliquely lest he be accused of an unseemly exaltation of himself. Paul spoke of how he was caught up into paradise. There he heard things he could not repeat because of their sacred character. It was unlawful. The thought likely is that he was told he could not repeat what he heard and saw in heaven.

Fourteen years had passed since this miracle, and Paul had apparently never told anyone about this revelation. And now, he couldn't reveal all of it. Paul does not take credit for this as to say “I did it”, but speaks in the third person as he relates himself as being “I knew a man in Christ”. He really doesn't reveal that it was he that he spoke of until verse 7.

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

It was of this one caught up spiritually to heaven of which he would boast. Paul would only glory in this one taken to heaven. In himself he gloried not. Rather, he only gloried in that he had suffered for Christ as described in the preceding

chapter. Paul would forego further glorying lest others think him to be more than he was. He truly was humble.

God, in his providential wisdom, made sure Paul did not become inflated by his privileged revelation. God allowed him a thorn in the flesh. What this 'thorn' was we are not told. It may have been the eye disease which faded his eyesight and distended his facial appearance. He further comments that this 'thorn' was "the messenger of Satan to buffet me." This raises the question whether his affliction was the direct action of Satan permitted by God, or was only indirectly so.

All sickness is the result of the curse which was prompted by Satan in the first place. The word translated as buffet (kolafizw kolaphizo) has the sense to 'strike' or 'be stricken.' In any event, the Apostle realized that God allowed this infirmity in his body to keep him humble.

Paul said he was raptured (caught up) to the third heaven, the place where God abides. He questions whether this rapture happened in the body or in the spirit. Perhaps it was just a spiritual event, but Paul himself was not sure. If he was not allowed to tell the words that he heard, then why was he permitted to hear these words? It was for his own personal comfort and strengthening. Each of us most likely have had an experience (outside of salvation) that you can relate to that you know came from the Lord.

I'm not saying a revelation like Paul, but something that you know that God spoke to you. Perhaps the reason that Paul was not allowed to tell all of his experience was that it might cause him to glory too much and exalt himself too highly. Paul said that if he gloried, he gloried in his weakness. He knew that it was a special honor to be used of the Lord, a feeble vessel that only God could turn into a vessel of honor.

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

On three occasions, Paul asked God to remove the affliction. In one of the most remarkable portions of Scripture, Paul revealed God's answer. "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness".

What a wonderful promise. God's grace is sufficient for whatever our need may be. The concept of grace is more than just unmerited favor regarding salvation. It also is that ongoing strength and help of God throughout the course of the Christian life. Whatever the need or crisis may be, His grace is more than sufficient for it. Moreover, God told Paul that His strength (literally 'power') is perfected through weakness in us.

Two lessons lay just beneath the surface.

(1) God does not always answer our prayer as we hope. At times He says ‘no.’

(2) it is not always God’s will for us to be healthy, claims to the contrary by Pentecostals and Charismatics notwithstanding.

It clearly was God’s will for Paul to be so afflicted. Therefore, Paul confessed, “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me”. If it meant infirmity for the power of Christ to be perfected in him, Paul gladly therefore would glory in that weakness. Through it came the power of God. A lesson is thus made clear how that God uses difficulties in our lives to further groom us and make us useful for His service. The power of God often comes at a price.

2 Cor 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 petitioned God three times to remove this thorn, which may have been his poor eyesight, but God simply told him that “My grace is sufficient for thee.” When we don’t see immediate answers to our prayers, God may be saying “No”, or he may just be saying “Wait a while.” But we need to seek God in all things we do, and be sure He is guiding us. Paul said this thorn was used by Satan as a messenger to buffet him. Paul did not view this as a good thing, and asked God three times to remove it.

When bad things come in our life, we need to look deeper to see if this is being used by God to mold us and make us into something greater for His service. As the years passed by, God revealed to Paul why he allowed this infirmity to remain. This was a gift to keep Paul from becoming exalted with spiritual pride, and to become a castaway. God not only granted Paul the grace to bear the “thorn”, but the grace to live victoriously in spite of it. Now Paul glories in the trials which demonstrate his weakness, for this made him cling more closely to the Lord. You know in your own life, physical infirmity is not always bad. Sometimes it comes for our own good.

Paul was more than willingly to endure the list of hardships listed here.

He lists five types of adversities he had faced in serving Christ.

(1) infirmities translated from the word (asyeneia) astheneia. The word has the sense of ‘weakness from injury or sickness.’

(2) reproaches which is translated from the word (ubriv) hubris. As the English word derived therefrom, it has the sense of ‘impudence,’ ‘pride,’ or ‘haughtiness.’ Here it has the sense of a wrong springing from insolence, an injury, affront, or insult. Paul surely had these throughout his ministry. Then, he mentioned

(3) in necessities , it has the sense here of ‘deprivation’ or ‘distress.’

(4) there were persecutions

(5) distresses which has the thought of ‘dire straits’ or ‘great difficulties.’

All of this and more, Paul was quite willing to endure for Christ’s sake. Here is why. “For when I am weak, then am I strong”. When he could rely on no one or anything else other than Jesus Christ, there was great power available to him.

When through trouble and distress he no longer had his own strength, the power of Christ took over. Hence, when he was weak, he rather was strong. His strength to continue came from on high.

II. Paul’s Unselfish Love for the Corinthians

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

Having reached the zenith of his case on this matter, Paul shifts back to a lower altitude. The focus returns to his embarrassment in having to so prove himself.

His thought is, ‘I am foolish in so boasting. But you made it necessary. Actually I should have been endorsed by you.’ He then references once again the trouble-making, self-proclaimed, Judaizing apostles. More than a hint of disdain is present. “For in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing”.

There is a hint of sarcasm here. These Judaizers might consider themselves as ‘super apostles,’ but Paul was not impressed. He fell short of them in nothing, though he humbly considered himself as nothing.

In verse 12, he shows the verification of his apostleship was manifested before them first in his personal integrity. It was manifest in his patience in dealing with them. It was made apparent outwardly through miracles God allowed him to perform here referred to as signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.

Two schools of thought exist regarding this verse. One takes the position that Paul was being direct. The other holds that the verse contains a bit of sardonic irony. The latter probably is the case. 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 may have been simply candid.

Paul says he is now finished with his glorying. He acknowledges that he had become a fool in so doing. He had truly been forced to write in this foolish way because they had compelled him to do so. He knew that when critics slandered him the Corinthians should have the ability to answer them. These people had seen in his ministry the signs of an apostle. Paul had not taken financial help from this church and he asked them to forgive him this wrong.

J. Vernon McGee had some excellent points about verse 12.

There are certain sign gifts which were given to the apostles to authenticate their message. They had the gift of healing. They could raise the dead and speak in tongues, which does not mean *unknown* tongues but languages and dialects. Paul had gone through the Galatian country, and there must have been fifty dialects and languages in that area. Paul could speak them all. Had he studied them? No. In that early day it was necessary to get the Word of God out into the Roman Empire in a hurry, and so these apostles were equipped with these gifts. Today missionaries and translators must spend years learning the languages they will use. "Signs of an apostle were wrought among you." They could identify him as an apostle because he had the gifts of an apostle.

We have just come through a wonderful section of Scripture. Someone has said that one of the reasons Paul was not to tell us about heaven was because there would be a mass exodus up out of this world to get there. I don't know about that, but it is true that we could spend our time contemplating heaven and lose sight of a lost world that needs to hear of the Savior. Heaven is a wonderful place, but very little is said about it in the Word of God. Probably it is so wonderful that human language cannot describe it. It is our business to try to reach folk with the gospel so that they will be in heaven someday.

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

The statement that this was the third time I am ready to come to you does not necessarily mean he had already paid two visits to the city. He plainly says that this is the third time he was ready to come. Sometimes we make plans, and God does not allow us to complete those plans for whatever reason. We know in chapter 1 of this book that Paul said that the second time he planned to come he was hindered from coming due to their conduct. Because Paul would not be burdensome unto them earlier, he purposes that he will still not take their financial support. Paul was their spiritual father and he would care for them, even though they may not appreciate it.

2 Corinthians 1:15 And in this confidence I was minded to come unto you

before, that ye might have a second benefit; 16 And to pass by you into Macedonia, and to come again out of Macedonia unto you, and of you to be brought on my way toward Judaea. 17 When I therefore was thus minded, did I use lightness? or the things that I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, that with me there should be yea yea, and nay nay? 18 But as God is true, our word toward you was not yea and nay. 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us, even by me and Silvanus and Timotheus, was not yea and nay, but in him was yea. 20 For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us. 21 Now he which stablisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God; 22 Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts. 23 Moreover I call God for a record upon my soul, that to spare you I came not as yet unto Corinth.

Paul speaks again of his impending visit. "Behold, the third time I am ready to come to you". There is a diversity of opinion as mentioned earlier as to whether Paul had actually been to Corinth twice already. Some take the position he was there only once as recorded in Acts 18. This view holds that he, however, had attempted to visit at least once before, and maybe twice, but hindered. (I Corinthians 16:5 and II Corinthians 1:15 lend credence to this position.)

Others take the view that Paul had in fact been there a second time. They point to II Corinthians 2:1 and 13:1 for support. If this be the case, there is no record in Acts. If it indeed took place, it probably would have had to happen during his initial visit to Ephesus. Inasmuch as there is no record in Acts, the more conservative view is the former.

In any event, in coming, Paul determined to not be burdensome to them. Because of the criticism of some, he would be careful not to benefit financially from them during his visit. Though some implied his ministry was for mercenary motives, he reemphasized his concern was for them and not any support he might receive while there.

To further that point, he mentions a simple axiom of life, "for the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children." He was their spiritual parent and he therefore was coming to give of himself to them and not the other way around. As a loving father, he was willing to expend himself on their behalf to the point of depleting himself for them. The irony of it all was the more he loved them, the less he was loved. They almost were like adolescent children. The more a parent loves them, the less they care.

2 Cor 12:16 But be it so, I did not burden you: nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you with guile. 17 Did I make a gain of you by any of them whom I sent unto you? 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?

In almost an air of resignation, he commented, "But be it so, I did not burden you." The fact was clear for all to know. Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you with guile. He likely quoted his critics, throwing back onto them their baseless charges. They likely were implying that his appeal for financial aid for the Judean churches was really for himself and he was just being devious in it all.

To further his point, he frankly asked, "Did I make a gain of you by any of them whom I sent unto you?" Had he financially benefited by any whom he had sent unto them? The answer is obvious. When Paul sent Titus (and another brother), did he profit from them? Again the answer is clearly no. The truth is, both Paul and Titus were in complete harmony of spirit.

Certain of the people, the critics of Paul, said that even though he was not taking their money, perhaps he was using guile and getting money through such emissaries as Titus. He tells them that his friends were people who sacrificed just like he did to serve the Lord. Titus and Paul walked in the same footsteps, and those where the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ.

III. The Warning

2 Cor 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. 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 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.

The final three verses of the chapter form a warning. Paul in essence warns, 'Lest you think we are defending ourselves to you, we rather declare this before God in Christ.' There was not a selfish bone in Paul's body. All of this debate and discussion was not to justify Paul, but rather for the edification of the Corinthian church.

Upon arrival in Corinth, Paul feared he would not find them in circumstances as he desired and they would therefore find Paul in a frame of mind not to their liking. His fear was that he would find debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, and tumults. He feared he would find people arguing, being envious, angry, bickering, backbiting, gossiping, proud, and in general, in an uproar. Not only were there some who were bitterly critical of Paul, but they evidently were bickering within.

Paul makes it plain that he is not writing in this manner simply to defend himself. While not bringing this case to them to judge them, Paul speaks as before God. His purpose of helping was to edify them. He fears lest when he makes his

promised visit, he will find them earnestly and humbly living the Christian life, but he fears they may be doing the very opposite.

If they are not following the commandments and doctrines laid down to them, Paul says he will be forced to correct them. He also warns against sins which were evidently special temptations to them. Paul's heart and soul's desire was to see the churches, both these in Corinth, and all other true churches of the Lord, to serve the Lord faithfully.

In verse 21, Paul told them that they were his work in the ministry, and they were on the verge of becoming a humiliation to him. He warned how that he would bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness which they have committed.

There apparently still was serious sin in the Corinthian church, particularly of a moral nature. Paul would not only be humiliated by their bickering, but would mourn unless they dealt with it. He thus, in not subtle fashion, sent warning ahead for them to correct the problems prior to his arrival.

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Prov 4:18 But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

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Practice Random Acts of Kindness. Each act spreads, and many will be blessed.