

2 Corinthians 12

12 I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord.

In verse 1, Paul says the he will continue boast but now he will switch gears and boast about visions and revelations. He does remind them that there is no benefit to boasting. Paul considers boasting juvenile. It reminds me of what was done in grade school, the old, “My dad is bigger than your dad.” Paul says that there is nothing to be gained by it but if it is what they want then he will continue.

I am guessing but the false teachers or “super-apostles” were boasting that they had visions and revelations too. As I said previously, Paul is getting tired of being compared to these fakes and their grand claims.

² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say,

Paul starts this section with “I know a man in Christ”. It is difficult to be sure but many theologians believe that Paul is talking about himself in the third person. It makes it difficult to tell whether Paul doesn’t want to boast more about himself or he really isn’t talking about himself. The NLT goes so far as to translate “I know a man in Christ” to say “I”. Guzik says, “But because he transitions into the first person in verse seven, we may be assured that he really writes about himself.”

He continues in verse 2 saying that this man (Paul) was caught up in the third heaven fourteen years ago. The first heaven is the sky above us. The second heaven is the stars, moon and planets. The third heaven is where God and His throne are. Fourteen years earlier Paul would have been 42 years old. He wrote his second letter to the Corinthian church at the age of 56. This would have been a few years after his meeting with Jesus on the Damascus road (age 34). He would have still been in Tarsus. Acts 9:29 – 30 tells us that “*He talked and debated with the Hellenistic Jews, but they tried to kill him. 30 When the believers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.*” Paul was in Tarsus for several years until Barnabas goes in gets him which is recorded in Acts 11:25.

In verse 3, Paul says that the vision was so real that he didn’t know whether it was a vision or if it really happened. He says that only God knows if it was real or not. Daniel had a vision regarding end times which is recorded in Daniel 12. He was told to “*roll up and seal the words of the scroll*

until the time of the end.”(NIV) Paul says he “*heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.*”

In verse 5, Paul continues to speak in the third person and says that he will boast of this unnamed person that had a vision about the third heaven but when it comes to boasting about himself, then he will only boast about his weaknesses.

In verse 6, Paul says that even if he boasted it would not be foolish because what he would be saying would be the truth and not exaggerations like what the false teachers were saying. Paul says that he does not want to get into a boasting match with the false teachers even though it is true because he only wants credit for how they see him live and the accurate Gospel message that he has delivered.

⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

In verse 7, Paul says he would also boast about the amazing visions that God had given him. The fact that Paul had these visions or revelations could have boosted his ego. He wasn’t speaking of mere dreams caused by something he ate or caused by stress. Paul was speaking about a true vision from God. It would be the same as being in God’s holy presence and speaking with God.

He continues in verse 7 with “but God found a way to keep me humble”. Paul says that “*I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*” Notice that Paul says the thorn was given to him. He didn’t say that he was afflicted by the thorn. The ESV says that Paul was given the thorn “*to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations.*” The word translated to mean thorn also means spike or stake so we are not talking about a splinter. This “thorn” appears to suggest some constant bodily ailment or infirmity that kept bothering him even though he was in a trance/vision that reminded him that he was in a human body.

“It seems that everyone could see the *thorn in the flesh* Paul suffered from — it was no secret. His heavenly vision was a secret until now, but everyone saw the thorn. Some among the Corinthian Christians probably thought less of Paul because of his *thorn in the flesh*, but they knew nothing of the amazing spiritual experience that lay behind it.” (Guzik)

In verse 8, Paul says that he pleaded three times with God to take it away. When you consider that Paul prayed three times and God still said “No”, you should be reminded that Paul is no different than us. Sometimes we pray to have God get us out of a bad situation but sometimes the answer is still No. We don’t know why but neither did Paul.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Christ is telling Paul that “Our personal relationship with Him is at its best when you rely on Me or when you bring your problems to Me. If everything is good in your life then you will become self-reliant.” As a parent, you spend your life trying to make sure that your children are able to stand on their own but when they reach that point you feel worthless and long for the days when they relied on you. You feel that in their weakness, your relationship is strong.

Paul says that he boasts in his weaknesses because his weaknesses bring him closer to God. Men pick on us when we are weak but we are able to be stronger when we are weak because we have the power of God in us.

As a young man I didn’t understand how I could love Terry more than I did but with the love of Christ in us, our ability to love is increased. As a man, weakness makes us weak but by relying on Christ our power is significantly greater. Back in 1 Corinthians 1:27 Paul wrote, *“But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.”*

In verse 10, Paul says that he boasts of his *“weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ.”* In BSF, we had a great discussion about how as men, our first approach to solving a problem is the say, “I got this one God.” Then we leave Him out of the solution until we fail then we try it God’s way.

¹¹ I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the “super-apostles,” even though I am nothing. ¹² I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles. ¹³ How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

In verse 11, Paul said that through his boasting about himself he has made a fool of himself but it was their fault. They drove him to it. He says that even though he is nothing, he is still better than the “super-apostles”. He is better because everything that he has done, he did for Christ’s sake. His goal was not self-edification, it was to glorify Jesus. Paul has the same attitude regarding Jesus that John the Baptist had. In Luke 3:16, it is recorded that John said, *“I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”*

“The Corinthians should have remembered his signs, wonders and miracles that mark an apostle. Paul had performed miracles in many places as he had proclaimed the gospel of Christ, but in Corinth he had done these things with great perseverance. Time and again, he had demonstrated the divine authorization of his ministry before the Corinthians.” (Holman New Testament Commentary - 1 & 2 Corinthians)

In verse 13, Paul says the Corinthian church was not inferior to other churches except that he did not take money for his preaching. Remember in the previous chapter that the churches in Macedonia paid for Paul's living expenses while he was in Corinth. In order to reach the people of Corinth, Paul did not want to be a financial burden to them and they had a problem with it.

¹⁴ Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. ¹⁵ So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?

“Now for the third time I am ready to come to you: On his first visit to Corinth, Paul founded the church and stayed *a year and six months* (Acts 18:11). His second visit was a brief, painful visit in between the writing of 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. Now he is prepared to come for a third time.” (Guzik)

He says that when he visits, he will not take an income from them. He says that he does not want their money, he wants them. He wants them to fully accept Jesus as their savior. He says that a parent should take care of their children and not the other way around. Paul is the spiritual parent of the Corinthian church. After all, he led them to Christ and without his help, they may still be lost.

In verse 15, Paul says that he would gladly spend himself for them. He is going back to needing the financial support from the Macedonian churches to live. The fact that they didn't support him was not important but he would have appreciated it. Here he says, he would gladly give as much of himself in order to save their souls.

Paul says that it seems the more he loves them, the less they love him back. This reminds me of raising a teenager, the more love you pour into them, the less love they give you back in return.

¹⁶ Be that as it may, I have not been a burden to you. Yet, crafty fellow that I am, I caught you by trickery! ¹⁷ Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent to you? ¹⁸ I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not walk in the same footsteps by the same Spirit?

In verse 16, Paul says that it is not everyone in the Corinthian church that has a problem with Paul and these members did not feel that Paul was a burden. There are some that accused Paul of being “crafty”. Paul used sarcasm to say so.

Paul says that those few members that felt Paul was “crafty” believed that Paul got them to accept the Gospel message by trickery. It is strange because they were claiming that Paul took no money, was in it for the money but the “super-apostles” who were in it for the money, were doing right. Sounds very strange.

Paul asks them about the members of his missionary team that he sent to them. Did Timothy and Titus take advantage of you? To Paul this was a rhetorical question, it did not need answered. Back in 2 Corinthians 7:13, Paul said, “*By all this we are encouraged. In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because his spirit has been refreshed by all of you.*” He was sure that everything between Titus and the Corinthian church had a positive outcome. Paul felt that Titus walked the same path and walked in the same spirit that Paul did with the Holy Spirit.

When Paul wrote to Timothy, he said, 1 Timothy 6:10 (NIV) “*10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*” The whole problem that Paul has been writing about has been the influence of money. Was Paul and his missionary team misappropriating funds for their own personal gain?

¹⁹ Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening. ²⁰ For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. ²¹ I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.

In verse 19, Paul wants the Corinthians to know that he has been defending himself to strengthen them. He went down the route of boasting for their benefit. He was afraid that the Corinthians would think that he was just making excuses. Paul believed that everything that he had done for the Corinthian church was to lift them up or strengthen them and not for his personal gain. He said that everything he had said regarding Christ was done with God as his witness. He wants them to understand his motives were purely selfless. He preached Christ crucified for their salvation and not his own personal gain.

Paul calls them “dear friends” (NIV) or “beloved” (NASB). The Greek word ‘*agapētos*’ is used which is the same word used by Paul in 2 Timothy 1:2 when he calls Timothy his “*beloved son*”. It shows the love that Paul has for the Corinthians.

In verse 20, Paul says that he is afraid that things will not be civil between him and the Corinthians. He won’t see them as he wants and they won’t see him the way they want. He was afraid that there would be discord and every sort of problem between them.

In verse 21, Paul says that he is afraid that God will humble him before the Corinthians. Guzik says, “If the Corinthian Christians were still stuck in their worldly thinking, Paul would be *humbled*”

among them. He would have reason to think, "I must not be a very good apostle or leader because these Corinthian Christians will not respond to me." That was not the whole truth, but it would still humble Paul."

Just like any good pastor, Paul is afraid for the Corinthians. Read Luke 15:3-7. It is the parable of the lost sheep. Based on what Paul says in verse 21, Paul views some in the Corinthian church as lost sheep. They continue to sin doing their previous sins and have not repented from them. Paul is grieved by the lack of repentance. Remember Paul says that when we accept Christ as our savior, we are a new creation. Some in Corinth are not new, they are old and doing the same old sins.