

A Study of Second Corinthians

Week Ten

2 Corinthians 12:1-18

Day One

12:1 I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. 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.

v. 1 – Paul wrote that there was nothing to be gained by his boasting, but I’m glad he did. We’ve certainly gained important insight into how God works with a man He calls. I’ve heard people say, “The Lord has confirmed to me over and over again that I’m going to do this or that.” I always tell them, “He has probably told you so often because you are **going to need it** one day due to the pressure or uncertainty surrounding what it is that God called you to do.”

Think of the circumstances around Jesus’ birth. An angel appeared to Mary, Joseph had dreams, and they were greeted by prophets when they took Jesus in the Temple to be circumcised. Why did all this happen? I think because Mary was going to need every one of those supernatural interventions in order **not** to go crazy! The pressure and circumstances around Jesus’ life and death would have been too much for her without all those supernatural confirmations.

So if you have tremendous angelic manifestations and dramatic supernatural experiences, hold them close to your heart because you are going to need them at some point.

v. 2 – Most would agree that Paul is talking about himself here, even though he wrote in the third person. Instead of saying “I,” he wrote “he.” Why the need to speak of himself in a detached manner? Probably because this was the first time Paul had shared this vision with anyone. Maybe he felt the revelation was so special that he did not want to exalt himself any more than necessary as he described this special event.

This vision or encounter with God had happened 14 years before Paul wrote about it. Some believe that would put it around the time that Barnabas came to get Paul while he was in Tarsus (see Acts 11:25-26), which could be considered the beginning of Paul’s apostolic ministry to the Gentiles. It would make sense that God would confirm Paul’s call at that time since he was going to face (and had probably already faced in Tarsus) tremendous opposition and persecution.

Paul wasn’t sure how he saw what he saw; it could have been a vision or he could have actually been transported to the place of God’s throne and glory. This would explain how Paul could possibly have been so adamant and committed to what he taught in spite of the opposition. Paul was able to stand firm because of what he had seen.

What have you seen? What is your vision for your life and life's work? Is your vision strong enough to carry you through tough times? The tougher the times will be, the more firm your vision needs to be. Does that make sense?

Day Two

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. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. 5 I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.

vs. 3&4 – What did Paul see and hear? Was this a vision or an in-the-body experience? Why couldn't Paul tell about what he it all? Were words not adequate to describe the experience? These verses leave so much unexplained, which leads to another question: Why did Paul choose to raise this topic if he could not talk about it? Plus if he was trying to establish his credibility, why would he talk about something that could not be verified and which he could not talk about the content of the experience?

I would imagine there were some “super spiritual” apostles at that time who were claiming all kinds of angelic and supernatural experiences. Paul probably just wanted those men to know that he had more things happen to him than he could even talk about. Paul wrote about these super-spiritual men in Colossians:

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow (Colossians 2:16-19).

Do you know any super-spiritual people like those described above? They have all kinds of encounters with angelic beings plus they have all kinds of unusual insight. Paul judged those kind of people with one measure: What was their connection to the Head, Jesus? That may give us another reason why Paul didn't write more about what he saw or heard. Unless what he saw or heard lifted up Jesus and not himself, he wasn't interested in sharing it. It was all about Jesus with Paul.

v. 5 – As stated, Paul kept the focus on Jesus. When he did have to “talk” about himself, he talked about his weakness when compared to Christ. Paul was not trying to develop personal disciples, but disciples of Jesus. Yet when his position as an apostle was weakened by criticism or controversy, he fought to re-establish his position so that no one's commitment and loyalty to Christ would be shaken. What Paul did, he did for Jesus!

Remember that Paul's weaknesses weren't his inabilities and areas where he wasn't gifted. His weaknesses were his struggles to accomplish his supernatural purpose in his natural body. He knew his limitations and did not want to portray himself as super-human because he had a supernatural task to do. Does that make sense? There is no way that Paul could have done what he did by relying on his "weakness" as some would describe it—areas where he had no talent or skill.

Day Three

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. 7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me 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.

v. 6 – What else was there that Paul never told us? What had he done? What had he seen? Can you imagine that he had these fabulous encounters with God and didn't bother to tell anyone or record them? Wow! I write every day and, if I get some kind of insight or have an experience with God, I write about it. Paul didn't, so that he would not attract undue attention to himself.

Once again, we see that Paul was "low ego." That is quite a contrast to many today who are "high ego" and even egomaniacs. How would Paul have done on Christian television? Probably not very well. I wonder if the truth that John wrote hasn't carried over into ministry, including my own:

For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever (1 John 2:15-17).

I like the translation from The Living Bible for those verses:

Stop loving this evil world and all that it offers you, for when you love these things you show that you do not really love God; for all these worldly things, these evil desires—the craze for sex, the ambition to buy everything that appeals to you, and the pride that comes from wealth and importance—these are not from God. They are from this evil world itself. And this world is fading away, and these evil, forbidden things will go with it, but whoever keeps doing the will of God will live forever (1 John 2:15-17).

v. 7 – There has been much debate over Paul's "thorn in the flesh." Some have felt it to be a sickness or disability. I had a seminary professor who made a case that it was the persecution, particularly those who followed Paul, urging people to ignore Paul and follow the Law of Moses. I like that interpretation, although we will never know for sure.

What we do know is that God blessed Paul, by His grace, to see and do magnificent things. For Paul's own good, God afflicted him with some unknown problem so that Paul would remember that he was human, just like everyone else. Does this sound reasonable?

If 1 John 2 that I quoted above is true, and it is of course true, then we can slip into sinful habits even when we are doing righteous things. Paul's revelation could have caused him to think that he was someone special. He was, but his special-ness was due to the grace of God, not his own worthiness. I have often heard people slip into this subtle mindset: "I have what I have because I pray or because I give a lot of money or because I fast." No, you and I have what we have by God's grace. Even the disciplines that we follow, like giving, fasting and praying, are a result of God's gracious work in our lives.

v. 8 – Paul begged God to remove this thorn. You can't really blame him, can you? But God didn't answer Paul's prayer. Well, he did answer it by saying, "No, as we shall discuss tomorrow. **Have you noticed how some have reduced prayer to a formula: *Words plus clarity plus faith times persistence equals God doing what is asked.* That formula puts God at the beck and call of the one who is praying. Is that your view of prayer? Is God obligated to give you what you pray if you just hang in there and keep asking? Is that how you pray? We'll discuss this more tomorrow.**

Day Four

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. 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.

v. 9 – Paul's request was for God to take away his thorn in the flesh. God's answer was to give Paul more power through His grace. You can see here how our agenda and God's agenda sometimes don't match up. I remind you that Paul's weakness here wasn't lack of giftedness. God didn't ask Paul to do the job of an administrator without any administrative gifts and then instruct Paul to trust in God's strength. Instead, God gave Paul something to do that was perfectly suited to who God made Paul to be, but then gave him something to do that was so large and fraught with so many dangers that Paul could only accomplish it in God's power and grace.

I'm weary of the bad thinking and application where this verse is concerned. As I mentioned earlier, God will not have you lead the choir if you can't read music or sing so you can learn to trust in His power to do it. That's silly.

Yet, Paul learned to boast about the difficulties so that people could recognize God's hand in what was accomplished. When Paul first came to Corinth, it was after unsuccessful ministry in Athens. Then he had opposition in Corinth. Yet there he was, writing to a church that was founded on his weakness and the power of God. His weakness came into play in regards to the *scope* of what God wanted him to do, not in the *nature* of what he was to do.

v. 10 – Here it's confirmed as to the nature of Paul's "weakness" – it wasn't that he had no skill or knowledge in the area to which God had called him to ministry. Instead, once he began to do what he was created to do, he encountered "weaknesses" such as insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties.

Has this explanation caused you to reevaluate how you have interpreted and applied these verses where weakness is concerned? What changes will you make in your work or ministry as a result of this new understanding?

v. 11 – Paul had to establish his credentials due to the fact that the Corinthians had relegated him to a low stature among the "super-apostles." The argument continued to rage as to who of the disciples was the greatest, even among those who weren't worthy of consideration! The common people were obviously ranking who was the most powerful and important, and Paul didn't make the list! Why? Because he wasn't "flashy" enough, wasn't flamboyant enough to make the grade. Yet Paul's explanation of his pedigree was sufficient to show that he was eminently qualified to be a super-apostle.

How do you judge ministry and ministers? Do you do it on the basis of eloquence? A good physical and public appearance? Or do you judge based on the fruit that is evident in someone's life, as Jesus suggested you do? Don't be swayed by outward appearances only. Look for the fruit and include that in your evaluation as you make ministry judgments.

Day Five

12 The things that mark an apostle — signs, wonders and miracles — were done among you with great perseverance. 13 How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

v. 12 – This is an interesting comment. Paul noted the things that mark apostolic ministry as signs and miracles. Plus Paul applied himself to demonstrating these things with great patience and perseverance. In other words, it was hard work! Two questions come up in my mind. One is whether or not these signs are for today's church or only the early church. The second is whether modern apostles should also be expected to be a source of the miraculous.

It is hard for me to see how anyone can make a case that the signs and miracles were only for the early church. Don't we need them as much today as then? I think we do. At this writing, it's estimated that two billion people still haven't heard the gospel. Many of

those are in the clutches of false religions and idolatry. Why would their needs be any less than those of people 2,000 years ago? Why would the same pattern not hold for today's apostle as for those who worked in Paul's day? I think those who hold the position that the signs stopped with the death of the last apostle in the first century have stripped the church of the power it needs to do the work of evangelism.

The second question is one where you may disagree with my answer (you may disagree with my answer to the first!). I don't think a modern apostle should only manifest signs and wonders that Paul referred to in this verse. Jesus said this:

I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it (John 14:12-14).

What were the greatest works that Jesus did? I would think it was raising the dead. That would be at the top of my list. What could be a greater work than that? Well, think about this. Did Jesus ever build a hospital? Open an orphanage? Write a book? Oversee a missions organization? The answer is no. It's not that He couldn't do those things; He left them for us to do.

So I think a great sign and wonder for a leader to be considered a modern apostle could be to administrate or organize some significant work in the modern Church. I know that leaves me open to criticism, but that's alright. What do you think about what I just wrote? Do you agree or do you think I have twisted Paul's meaning?

v. 13 – Paul returned to his use of sarcasm in this verse, rather disgusted that he had to defend himself when he did nothing wrong. His only “wrong” was not to take any money from the Corinthians for the work he did!

Day Six

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?

v. 14 – Once again, I wish I could isolate this verse and send it to some church leaders with whom I have worked. They need to understand that the people don't exist for the leaders, but the leaders exist for the people. They need to stop trying to figure out how to get more honor or another offering, and focus on what they can do to build up the people. Paul didn't want the people's possessions but their hearts. He set about, however, to earn their hearts, not demand that they give them their hearts because he, Paul, was the leader.

That's a good question that any leader should ask: Am I a burden to the people who follow or are their lives better off because I, the leader, am a part of it? I hear a lot of talk about church leaders being the "father" in the house. If that's true, and I think it's hard to make any biblical case that they are, then the fathers should be doing something for the children and not expecting the children to do for them.

I heard of a man who was visiting a church to speak and informed the church that he would not come back unless he was picked up in a Mercedes Benz instead of the Toyota. He was saying that secular dignitaries would be picked up in a Mercedes and he was someone more important, he was a man of God. I agree with that—someone more important was there. I disagree, however, that because he was more important, he deserved to be treated like a visiting dignitary would.

Am I being too harsh? Do you agree or disagree? Do you think Paul would request a Mercedes Benz limo if he were alive today and working in and planting local churches? I don't think he would.

v. 15 – Paul was glad to spend himself on behalf of his people, the people of God among whom he labored. I worked for a pastor who had regular birthday parties and anniversary celebrations. The expectation was that he had done so much for us that we should now do something for him. If that didn't happen, the family members would "fuss" at the staff and people. **Is that what Paul would have done? Is that what Jesus would require of the people?**

I believe that men and women who do God's work are worthy of honor. I don't believe, however, that they can insist this honor be given. The ideal would be that the leaders have no expectations and serve the people, while the people have no expectations and serve the leaders. That way every person is freely doing what is in his or her heart to do where this issue is concerned.

What is your opinion or personal philosophy on this issue? Even if you disagree, write and let me know so that others can read your comments.

Day Seven

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 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 act in the same spirit and follow the same course?

v. 16 – There goes the sarcasm again! Paul was insinuating that he had not taken advantage of them financially, but because he had not, he actually had taken advantage of them! He had tricked them by pretending to be humble and caring, but had captured them by his trickery into thinking that he was spiritual and cared for them. Confused? So was Paul! He was trying to figure out how he could have been so judged and

criticized by not taking money from those among whom he ministered. His opponents were saying that this was proof that he wasn't a true or super apostle.

This is now messed up things can become in a spiritual setting. Things that would never be tolerated in other places are tolerated and even celebrated in the Church. Sloppy work is tolerated as good enough. Poor leadership is accepted as the best that can be expected. Poor performance is deemed worthy of little or no feedback. Bad thinking is honored as logic. And we wonder why the Church isn't making an impact.

vs. 17&18 – Paul insisted that even his fellow workers live by his philosophy. Titus, Timothy, Silas, Luke and the others never took advantage of the people either. They paid their own way, so to speak, and were careful not to be perceived as living off other people's generosity.

If Paul was anything, he was consistent! He knew what he believed, had a well-defined leadership philosophy and lived it. I urge people in my leadership seminars to develop their own leadership philosophy, preferably before they have power or money. Once a leader has those two things, he or she can fall victim to the mentality that those things were deserved or must be preserved at any cost.

What is your leadership philosophy? What kind of leader do you want to be? What kind of leader are you? Do you know? How do you know? Are you in touch with what people think concerning your decisions and style? What can you do to make your leadership more Paul-like?