

Thorns

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

- Paul begins this chapter talking about boasting. Why?
- In the previous chapter, Paul does some boasting.
 - **2 Corinthians 11:16-18** I say again, let no one think me a fool. If otherwise, at least receive me as a fool, that I also may boast a little.
¹⁷ What I speak, I speak not according to the Lord, but as it were, foolishly, in this confidence of boasting. ¹⁸ Seeing that many boast according to the flesh, I also will boast.
 - Paul here is boasting about his qualifications but then it turns into boasting about all the suffering and persecution he has faced.
 - But the real question is why? Why is Paul boasting?
- Vs. 18 “Seeing that many boast according to the flesh, I also will boast”
- We must understand what was happening in the Church at Corinth.

Corinth – A Church Gone Wild.

In the church at Corinth, things were out of control. Communion became a time of feasting and getting drunk. The services had no order to them. People had no respect for authority or the Word of God.

And they believed that many of them had passed Paul in his spirituality because they all the time boasted about their spiritual acts.

- These people boasted about how spiritual they are because they believed they were speaking on behalf of God – but it was in the flesh.
- This resulted in heretical teaching, but because this one was “spiritual,” they put up with it.
 - **2 Corinthians 11:20** For you put up with it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours you, if one takes from you, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face.

And that brings up to the “Super Apostles.” They were above the other apostles because they had spectacular spiritual experiences, visions and revelations. Which they constantly reminded everyone about.

Side Note – We do not really have to call ourselves by titles or spiritual positions. Or remind people how spiritual we are. They should be able to figure all that out just by being around us. (ex of “smart” guy at ATC)

So Paul brings up his visions and revelations

2 Corinthians 12:1-2 It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago--whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows--such a one was caught up to the third heaven.

- A lot of people think that Paul may have had pride problems.
 - Paul did not. Paul wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit
 - He did not share this extreme vision with anyone for 14 years!
 - Those super Apostles and prophets would have shared it immediately
- I know a man – Is this Paul “asking for a friend?”
 - Paul is distancing himself because he wants to relate this experience without glorifying himself.
- Paul has a vision of heaven (3rd heaven)
 - He does not know if it was a vision, or if he was actually there. (This could have happened when he was stoned and left for dead if he actually went there). But regardless, it is from God so it ultimately does not matter.

2 Corinthians 12:4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

- All Paul says about this amazing experience is that he heard things that God does not permit him to speak.

- When we think of this, we realize how different Paul is from most of those who describe their so-called “visions” of heaven today. There is nothing self-glorying, self-promoting, or anything foolish in the description of his experience.
- Paul waited 14 years to say anything about the incident, and when he finally did he said it reluctantly. He did everything he could in relating the story to take the focus off himself (such as writing in the third person).
- He doesn’t bother at all with breathless descriptions of what he actually experienced. Instead, he says nothing of what he saw, and says only that he heard things not permissible for a man to utter.

2 Corinthians 12:5-6 Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. ⁶ For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me.

- Basically what Paul is saying is that this guy (himself) really has something to boast about. But it would be foolish to. Rather, Paul is interested in preaching the truth.
- This vision does not mean that Paul had more of the spirit or was closer to God or that he was superior to others in any way.
 - But this is how many in the church want to be viewed. Gifts become for show. We must tell everyone our revelations, our visions so they will know we are super awesome.
 - There is nothing wrong in sharing them. It’s about the motive.
- Paul says to think of him according to what he is preaching and living, not by how great of visions he has.

2 Corinthians 12:7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

- Paul is given a thorn in the flesh.

- Lest I should be exalted – This makes it seem like God gave this thorn to Paul to keep him from becoming prideful.
- But it would be more accurately interpreted that the thorn was given to him to keep him from being exalted by others too highly. And there is not evidence that it was given to him by God. In fact, there is evidence to the contrary.
- What was Paul's thorn? We don't fully know, and that may be the point. We will eventually get to the conclusion where Paul tells us how to overcome. This is applicable to any form of weakness or imperfection, not just Paul's exact situation.

But what do we know about the thorn?

- Paul said it was a messenger of Satan.
 - Messenger = aggelos or angel of Satan – so a demon.
 - Buffet = to strike
- Many have said it could be sickness because of Paul's later use of the word infirmities. But that word is also used by Paul elsewhere, like:
 - **2 Corinthians 11:30** If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity.
 - He just listed his persecutions.
- Paul asked God to remove this from him and God said no. So it could not have been something God redeemed us from. Therefore, persecution makes the most sense.
- Thorns in the side is also OT speak for persecution
 - **Numbers 33:55** But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall be that those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell.
 - **Judges 2:3** Therefore I also said, 'I will not drive them out before you; but they shall be thorns in your side, and their gods shall be a snare to you.' "

Most likely the thorn was a demon that brought persecution against Paul to keep him from having too powerful of a ministry. Keep people from receiving his message.

2 Corinthians 12:8-10 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. ⁹ And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

- Paul does the right thing. When we experience something undesirable, go to God in prayer.
- Paul did not get an answer two times. But he did not give up.
- God's response - My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness

There are 2 ways weakness may be addressed – Removal or Grace

But when it is not removed and we are told to rely on the grace of God, we may not respond as Paul did!

We may:

- Try to fix it ourselves
- Give in to it to get it to go away
- Ignore God's grace and try other more "active" ways to fix it
 - Get others to pray also
 - More scripture quoting
 - More spiritual warfare
- But if God has given an answer – go with that.

How did Paul respond?

Most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

- Grace allows Paul to just let God work through his life as God sees fit.
- Grace allows Paul to be content even in persecutions, in want, in distress – because it allows God's power to work all the more.
- Paul realized that Paul's strength will only get him so far. But God's strength has no limits.
 - And it is easier to rely on God's strength than your own when it is in an area of weakness.

For when I am weak, then I am strong.

This is what every believer needs to realize. God works the most powerfully through us when we acknowledge our areas of dependence. Where we are not self-sufficient.

And for Paul, because he did have strengths, God allowed a thorn to remain with him so that he could move in complete dependency on God.

What are you trying to do in your own strength? How can you enter into rest and allow God to be strong through you in that area?