

The Book of 2nd Corinthians

Chapter 12:1-21

March 21, 1999

- **Outline of 2nd Corinthians:**

- Chapter 1 God equips His people through trial, comfort and perseverance.
- Chapter 2 Restore fellowship to the repentant; One aroma, two response.
- Chapter 3 The glorious covenants
- Chapter 4 The Light of the Glory of Christ
- Chapter 5 Longing to be further clothed; Christ died for the world
- Chapter 6 Faithfulness in persecution; Separation from the World
- Chapter 7 Godly sorrow leads to repentance.
- Chapter 8 Gracious giving abounds from grace received.
- Chapter 9 Sparse sowing yields sparse reaping.
- Chapter 10 Weapons of war; Spheres of authority.
- Chapter 11 Uncovering the false teachers.
- Chapter 12 Authentic Apostles; Sufficient grace

- **Review & Introduction**

Beginning in chapter 10, Paul has been aggressively defending himself to the Corinthians because his authority has been brought into question by his opponents in the city. Given the manner in which Paul lived before these people, and the evidences of his faithfulness, this never should have happened and instead the Corinthians should have been the ones defending Paul. Paul's love for the church has been clearly manifested in his zeal for their purity.

In this chapter, Paul continues with the same manner of sarcastic polemic so as to get the attention of the Corinthians and restore them to sound thinking. Clearly Paul is reluctant to speak as he does but he is willing to do what it takes to restore them.

- **Exposition of 2nd Corinthians 12:1 - 21**

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.³ And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—⁴ how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.⁵ 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.

- Paul now turns to his supreme boast so that he can explain his thorn in his flesh later. He continues with his tongue-in-cheek style of boasting, Paul turns his comparison of his ministry with the false apostles in the area of divine visions and revelations. It is quite indisputable that Paul is speaking here of himself despite the fact that he gives the explanation from the third person perspective. This is probably done because of the uneasiness that Paul has with speaking this way. Perhaps speaking in the third person softens his reluctance.
- Notice that this vision occurred 14 years prior to the writing of this letter. It was only this severe situation that caused Paul to write about the vision. If the dating of the letter is correct, this means the vision would have occurred about 10 years after his conversion perhaps while in Arabia (Galatians 1:15-17). He was taken up to the "third heaven" or "Paradise". We cannot be sure of what Paul means by "third" heaven but we do know that it is also called "Paradise". It appears that Paradise, which formerly would have been located in Hades, was relocated to the heavens at the ascension of Christ leaving behind the wicked in Hades along with Tartarus.
- The visions that were given to Paul in Paradise he was not permitted to tell. But he tells the story here apparently so that he can explain the thorn in his flesh. Perhaps the opponents had been using this thorn as a way to discredit Paul or question the blessing of God in his ministry given the presence of the thorn.

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.⁸ 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.

- To protect Paul from arrogance, God allowed a "messenger of Satan" to beat Paul with some infirmity. Although there

- has been much speculation regarding the nature of the thorn, whatever it was, Paul had pleaded for it to be removed.
- Notice that the thorn was a messenger or Angel of Satan. We can see the glorious sovereignty of God here in that even the kingdom of darkness can do nothing autonomously but all things are covered by our Lord's dominion. We can see this further in that Paul pleads with the Lord to have it removed. Even this mighty Apostle is told no by our Lord but here we are given a divine explanation. The thorn was given by God as a protection to keep him from the temptation of pride given the great visions he had been permitted to see.
- Notice the tremendous encouragement that comes out of this instruction. Paul gladly boasts in the infirmity. He does not do so reluctantly but instead, does so with pleasure because this trial manifests the power of Christ in his life. Paul considers it pure joy to dwell in the infirmity even though its severity prompted him to plead for its removal.

11 I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing.¹² Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds.¹³ For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong!

- Paul's boasting as a fool (while not actually being a fool) was a result of the provocation of the false teachers. When Paul should have been the one to be commended by the Corinthians, instead he was met with these accusations. Paul demonstrates how incredulous he is at the behavior of these saints.
- Furthermore, the divine signs which accompanied an apostle were manifest among the church for all to see. Paul brings this point up to further differentiate his ministry with the false teachers' ministry. As we have seen on numerous occasions, these divine, miraculous signs were used by our Lord to testify to the authenticity or authority of something. The signs were not performed strictly for the sake of the beneficiary nor for show but rather to testify to the validity of the men who held the office of Apostle.
- Another possible attack of the false teachers was that the miraculous gifts of an apostle were not as prominently displayed or manifest among the Corinthians as they may have been elsewhere. Perhaps the fact that all of the sick in the city were not healed was being used to question the love of Paul for the saints.

14 Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek 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 your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.¹⁶ But be that as it may, I did not burden you. Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you by cunning!¹⁷ Did I take advantage of you by any of those whom I sent to you?¹⁸ I urged Titus, and sent our brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in the same spirit? Did we not walk in the same steps?

- Paul still contends that he will refuse support from the Corinthians because he believes that this would be a more significant source for contention than simply refusing the support. Paul uses a general principle from life to describe his relationship with the church at Corinth as being like a parent and child. While in other places he has taught that the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should be supported by the gospel, here he understands the childishness of the Corinthians and chooses to forego his support.
- Notice also the attitude of a true servant of the church—Paul would willingly spend all that he had as well as himself in order to minister to the church. Those who enter the ministry should not view it as another career opportunity but instead as a high calling to minister eternal things that will have eternal consequences.

19 Again, do you think that we excuse ourselves to you? We speak before God in Christ. But we do all things, beloved, for your edification.²⁰ For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults;²¹ lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced. NKJV

- Notice that these various sins appeared to continue by some portion of the church and he makes a connection between this unrepentant sin and the gullibility of their minds. A church cannot expect to maintain doctrinal integrity nor fight off doctrinal heresy when it permits sin to thrive in her doors.
- Paul was hopeful of good things for the church at Corinth. Specifically, he is hopeful that the Corinthians will regain their senses and put the false teachers out from among them and restore their pure affections for Paul and the Lord.