

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS
2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-13
By Kimberly Grassi

2 Corinthians 12:1-6

Paul extends his “Fool’s speech” into chapter 12 as he continues to “boast” and compare his ministry with that of the false teachers. At the end of chapter 11 Paul cited the anecdote of being lowered down the walls of Damascus in an attempt to thwart a plot against his life. As he concludes this speech, Paul shares with his readers a visionary experience that is too sacred to put into words and an agonizing thorn in his flesh that God chooses not to remove. Paul ends on a note of his own weakness, which is the very vehicle God chooses to reveal His power.

Paul begins chapter 12 by reiterating that boasting is a necessary evil in order to speak in terms that the Corinthians will understand. This is how the false teachers speak, so Paul will do the same. Except, he boasts in a very different manner. In chapter 11, Paul boasted in his trials and sufferings, now he will go on to boast in “visions and revelations of the Lord” (12:1). The Corinthians have been confused regarding the gifts of the Spirit. In particular, 1 Cor. 12-14 are written in order to explain the nature of spiritual gifts and correct their perception that the sign gifts were the most important expression of the Spirit’s work in one’s life. Paul rebuked them for their disorderly conduct when gathered together to worship. Although Paul spoke in tongues, received visions and revelations, he healed and he was healed, the focus of his ministry was on loving his congregations and teaching them the truth. He did perform signs and wonders in his own ministry, but they never took precedence over the spoken word. They affirmed his teaching but they were never the hallmark of his ministry. This is the issue at hand; that visions and revelations are valued above and beyond the message that is being preached. When Paul writes of his visionary experience, he makes the claim that he does have visions and they are superior to that of the false teachers. They need to be placed in their proper context though. Paul challenges the Corinthians to look beyond the externals and to compare the message of the false teachers to that which Paul has not only spoken but also demonstrated by his own life.

Paul describes his vision as happening to “a man in Christ.” Most commentators agree that although Paul is mock-boasting, he still exercises his humility in referring to his own experience as one that happened to “a man.” Paul experienced many visions and revelations (two terms that are virtually synonymous) during his ministry (Acts 9:3-19; 22:17-21; 16:9; 18:9-10), but it is not certain which vision he refers to in this passage. The only detail he provides is that it occurred 14 years ago, which would belong to a period after his Damascus Road conversion experience. Paul then makes a parenthetical comment that he did not know if the experience happened in the body or out of the body. In the Greek culture, the body and spirit were believed to be separate to the extent that what was done in the body did not affect the spirit. Paul has addressed this idea several times in both 1 and 2 Corinthians, making it clear that as human beings, we are unified beings and nothing can be done in one “part” of the

person that does not affect another “part” of the person. The point is not so much that Paul does not know if he was snatched up bodily or spiritually, but that God was the author of this experience. It does not matter because God can speak any way that he chooses to speak, and it is undeniable that God spoke. Paul then writes that he was caught up to the third heaven (snatched up—a term used also in 1 Thess. 4:17 describing a future time when believers will be caught up in the air to meet the Lord). There were different views regarding the nature of the cosmos during the time that Paul wrote, but it is most likely that Paul was referring to a view that the third heaven was the highest heaven, the dwelling place of God. 2 Cor. 12:3-4 repeat the thoughts of 12:2, almost verbatim. The differences are that Paul uses the term “paradise” instead of “heaven,” both of which intimate that he was in the presence of God. He also adds the detail that what “this man” heard was inexpressible. Either Paul was not able to communicate such a meaningful experience in human terms or Paul was himself uncertain of the meaning of the vision. Whatever he meant by “inexpressible” is not relevant because he was not permitted to speak of this experience. It was God who placed the limitation upon Paul. In sharing this with his readers, Paul subtly confronts the false teachers in their own boasting about visions and the Corinthians in their hyper-elevated view of the visions. Paul was given a vision, but the vision was for a specific reason. It was not meant to puff him up, or even to prove God’s call on his life. Likely it was meant to be a source of strength and comfort for Paul to draw upon in his ministry but because Paul was not permitted to share the contents of the vision, it is left between him and God. In contrast to the false teachers, Paul did not flaunt every detail of his spiritual life. We are challenged today to ask ourselves what we look at as we evaluate the teachers and speakers who stand before us. Sometimes we idolize people because they have more education, they are influential speakers, they have a strong prayer life, they hear God speak to them, or they have visions, healings, or miraculous experiences. Paul does not deny that God can be present and active in any of these expressions, but he does take issue with a person or people boasting in their gifts and in particular when these people have already been identified as servants of Satan who are actively harming the Corinthians. The message is of primary importance, the packaging may not always be what we expect. Although Paul is not permitted to speak of the content of his vision, he is unmistakable in that he does receive visions (as the false apostles also claim) and that this particular vision was superior to theirs.

Paul could have boasted, but instead he relays the story in the third person and he is faithful to God in keeping it as a personal message rather than a mark of superiority over the Corinthians. Paul does boast, but as we have seen, and as we will see, he boasts in his weaknesses. Paul does have a great deal of strength, talent, and gifting. If he were to boast in what God gives to him, he would only be speaking the truth, but he argues that he refrains because he wants people to judge him based upon his life and his message. The words he preaches and the life he lives are what will validate his apostolic standing. Yes, Paul has visions, but so do the false apostles (or so they claim). Visions given to any individual should support the gospel message. They are not meant to prop up the one sharing the message. Paul’s concern is that the Corinthians unambiguously grasp the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection for

their lives. He does not care what they think about him, as long as they are thinking about Christ.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

In this next passage, Paul goes from the height of the heavens to the depth of pain as he describes his “thorn in the flesh.” In 12:7, Paul subtly jabs the false teachers who claimed to be above him. His revelations were surpassingly great, but instead of dwelling on the greatness and in order to keep Paul from exalting himself, a thorn in the flesh was given to him. There is irony in the language that Paul uses. He contrasts being lifted up, or exalted, with being lowered down. The false teachers were exalting themselves above the Corinthians and above Paul. Paul, who had the authority given him from Christ, willingly allowed himself to be humbled, or lowered down so that the Corinthians would see the power of God at work in him. We left chapter 11 with Paul being lowered down in a basket. In 12:1-6 Paul is both physically elevated and elevated in rank through the better vision. In 12:7-10 Paul is brought down once again by his suffering. In 12:7, Paul says that a thorn was given to him in order to keep him from exalting himself. We learn several things in this verse. 1. Paul had a thorn in his flesh. Paul is oblique in his reference leaving commentators throughout history to speculate as what actually tormented Paul. Although many suggestions have been made, it is most likely that Paul suffered from some sort of trouble with his vision. Again, we don’t know for sure, but we do know that whatever the problem was, it was troublesome enough that Paul asked God to remove it. 2. Paul calls the thorn a “messenger of Satan.” Although Paul views it as a Satanic attack, he recognizes that the thorn was given to him by God and that ultimately Satan is under God’s authority. 3. The reason that God gives Paul the thorn is to keep him from exalting himself. This must have served as a very present reminder that Paul needed to depend upon God to be effective in his ministry. Paul continues by saying that he implored the Lord three times that the thorn might leave him. This evokes the image of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane as he prayed to his Father in the light of his impending suffering. This allusion serves to remind Paul’s readers that the Christ in whom they believed, suffered greatly. It is through His suffering that they have life in Him.

Paul reveals that he asked God to take the thorn, to take away his source of suffering, and in God’s response we have one of the most often quoted verses in the Bible. God’s response was, “my grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness” (12:9). In this verse, grace can be understood as God’s merciful kindness, God’s presence in our lives. Whatever Paul was facing, God had him there for a reason and He would be the one to continue working in and through Paul despite the fact that he was not the “perfect” mouthpiece. He was marred, he was hurting, and we are reminded of Paul’s words earlier in this letter that he can be a comforter because he himself received the comfort of God in his distress. This is a grand example of God acting as Paul’s comforter. God’s grace was sufficient for Paul. We need to trust that it will be sufficient for us as well. Does this mean that our trials and tribulations come from God? God may not cause them, but He allows them and in our pain He shows us that we can cry out to God and we can be recipients of His grace and agents of His

grace even though we do not receive relief from what might be plaguing us. Paul has previously listed numerous circumstances in which he was weak and yet God displayed His power. This is the great paradox of the Christian faith: to be weak is to be strong, to be humbled is to be exalted, to suffer is to save. Christ is the ultimate example of power perfected in weakness. Christ's weakest moment was the moment in which His suffering met the demands of the Law and salvation was made available to all mankind. God's power was made perfect in the resurrection of His Son. The life of Christ exhibits the great depth of weakness and the colossal height of power. As followers of Christ, we should expect our lives to be patterned after His. We have a tendency to think of the Christian life in light of our own culture's definition of success. We believe that we are successful as Christians when things go well for us. Paul faced the same kind of cultural expectation. Scripture tells us that weakness and suffering are part of this life experience, yet somehow we still tend to be surprised when it comes. Paul's point is that in our weakness, we can often let go of our expectations, step aside and let God do His work. When we are self-sufficient we run the risk of pride (like that of the false teachers) and excluding God because we are doing just fine on our own.

Paul can boast in his weakness, because when He is weak this is when he experiences Christ at work in His life. When Paul writes of the power of Christ dwelling in him, he uses a term which is rich in Old Testament imagery. The term "dwell" is used to describe the presence of God in the Tabernacle. Prior to Christ, the presence of God was primarily associated with the tabernacle. It was where God dwelled and where the Israelites went to conduct all of their business with God. The apostle John describes Christ as the presence of God, when he says that he will make his dwelling among us (John 1:14). It is in his weakness that Paul experiences God's presence. Because of this he can write, "I am well content with weaknesses." Not only is he well content with his weaknesses, but with insults, distresses, with persecutions, and with difficulties; all of which Paul knew well. Paul is a model of one who is able to rise above his circumstances because he knows that his circumstances do not define him. What is most important to him is that the world might know the power, freedom, forgiveness, newness of life, and contentment that comes as a result of knowing Christ. That Paul has been willing to endure such pain and suffering to bring the gospel message to the world shows that he is willing to walk in the footsteps of the Savior. The false apostles criticize him for being weak. Paul accepts their criticism because in God's kingdom, weakness is not synonymous with failure. For Paul, it is the only way to succeed.

2 Corinthians 12:11-13

This next section is considered the epilogue to the "Fool's Speech." In his concluding thoughts, Paul puts an end to his "foolishness" and introduces the next topic which is his impending visit to Corinth. In 2 Cor. 11:1 Paul asked his readers to bear with him in a little foolishness. In 12:11, confronts them directly, accusing them of forcing him into this position. He writes that the Corinthians compelled him to respond in such a manner. The next few verses reveal the extent to which Paul has been hurt by their behavior. He tells them that he should have been commended by them, but instead he is forced to defend himself to them. Paul is in fact superior to "the most

eminent apostles,” a term he uses sarcastically to refer to the false apostles. He refers to himself however as “a nobody.” Paul places the perceptions of the Corinthians in stark contrast to the truth. In reality it is the false apostles who are “nobody” and it is Paul, the founder of the church and the one who first introduced them to Christ who is the “most eminent apostle.” Because he has not acted this way, the Corinthians have allowed their perspective of Paul to be swayed by the false teachers. Paul points his readers back to the particular moment in time when he made his first visit to Corinth. He writes that the signs of a true apostle were performed among them. When Paul made his first visit to Corinth, he did perform signs, wonders, and miracles. Paul returns to that shared experience to remind them that although he does not rest on signs and wonders, he prefers to be heard and to be seen, he certainly performed divine wonders that were intended to authenticate his original ministry. In the New Testament, signs, wonders, and miracles were always accompanied by the gospel message and were always intended to draw people closer to Christ. Signs and wonders that are performed for the sake of displaying power or as a means to assert authority over a group, are not being used the way in which they were intended. To these miraculous workings Paul also adds the quality of perseverance, a very necessary attribute for the one who is involved in church planting. Paul has offered the Corinthians themselves as proof of his ministry. It is their changed lives in response to the gospel message that is Paul’s letter of commendation (2 Cor. 3:2-3). Paul ends on a note of extreme sarcasm. If Paul has treated this church as inferior to the other churches, then he apologizes for not being a financial burden to them. He has said earlier in the “Fool’s Speech” that the Corinthians have borne the foolishness and the abuse of the false apostles beautifully. When he treats them with respect and concern, they misinterpret his intentions and feel slighted. Paul’s final words expose the very foolishness that the Corinthians have allowed to permeate their thinking. He has loved them, served them, confronted them, restored them, and refused to be financially supported by them for the sake of the gospel. This is how an apostle should treat his children and Paul will offer no apologies. 2 Cor. 12:13 returns to the subject of financial support, which will introduce a lengthy section on Paul’s imminent return to Corinth and his desire for the Corinthians to receive him well.

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Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on 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 out of the body I do not know, God knows-- such a man was caught up to the third heaven. ³ And I know how such a man-- whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows-- ⁴ was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. ⁵ On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. ⁶ For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.

- 1. What is your first impression of this visionary experience that Paul describes?**

- 2. Do you know of people who have made claims to a similar sort of experience? If so, how were you able to evaluate their experience?**

- 3. What do you think was the purpose of this vision if Paul was not permitted to speak of its content?**

- 4. According to 2 Cor. 12:6 what criteria does Paul want others to use when evaluating his ministry?**

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-13

2 Corinthians 12:7-13

⁷ Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me-- to keep me from exalting myself! ⁸ Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. ⁹ And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about

my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. ¹¹ I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody. ¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. ¹³ For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

5. How do you feel about God refusing to take away Paul's thorn?

6. Can you relate to Paul's experience? If so, how?

7. Where in your life do you need God's grace to be sufficient?

8. What would you consider your own weakness to be? Have you viewed it as something to hide or do you think it could be something that God could use to show His power to others?