

"Paul's Defense of his Apostleship"

Part 10

2 Corinthians 12

**Introduction:** In our study tonight, we have come to chapter 12 of 2 Corinthians. Now we must keep in mind the chapter breaks have been placed here by the translators and so the original writing of Paul had no chapter breaks. In our study last week Paul pointed to the situation which happened in Damascus where he learned a most valuable lesson. It was in Damascus that he learned his natural abilities did not qualify him to be a servant of Jesus Christ but instead the key to serving was Christ in him. In his own efforts and in his own strength he had failed and that was a good thing because it was in his weakness and failure that he learned the key to serving the Lord. He learned what Jesus had taught to His disciples in John 15.

**John 15:1-5**

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.*

<sup>2</sup> *Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.*

<sup>3</sup> *Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.*

<sup>4</sup> *Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.*

<sup>5</sup> *I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye*

*can do nothing.*

The branch must be connected to the Vine because life flows through the Vine and out through the branches. In the very same way we are the branches and Christ is the Vine. We must be in fellowship with Him and His life must flow through us otherwise our labor and our efforts will bring forth no spiritual fruit. Paul learned that serving in the power of the flesh would accomplish nothing. He was weak but when he was weak it was then that the power of Christ could flow through him. Therefore, Paul would boast in his weaknesses.

Now as we step into chapter 12 Paul will boast again of his weaknesses and in getting to the point he desires to make we get some very interesting information.

I. The Strength of Grace

Part 1

**Notice 2 Corinthians 12:1a**

Paul has again been forced into a situation where he must boast because of all that is at stake in the church at Corinth. He is about to record an event that happened to him 14 years earlier.

In this verse Paul is stating that it is necessary to boast (because of the false apostles) but there is nothing personal to be gained by the boasting. It is completely against Paul's character but it **MUST** be done to silence the false apostles and to help the Corinthians to see that he is a **TRUE APOSTLE**.

**Notice 2 Corinthians 12:1b**

Here we see that Paul had been given visions and revelations from the Lord and he expected that he would be given more in the future. This was the basis for his claim of apostleship. One of the requirements to be an apostle was to have been an eyewitness of Jesus Christ after His resurrection.

**1 Corinthians 15:5-9**

<sup>5</sup> *And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve:*

<sup>6</sup> *After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep.*

<sup>7</sup> *After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles.*

<sup>8</sup> *And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.*

<sup>9</sup> *For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*

Paul's encounter with Jesus after His resurrection was far different than that of the twelve apostles. Jesus appeared to Paul on the Damascus Road in a vision. Now this vision was not something imagined by Paul but it was an actual meeting with Jesus Christ. This is what qualified him to be an apostle. It was because of the way Paul met Christ that his apostleship was questioned and attacked by the false apostles. But even though he was as "one born out of due time" he lacked nothing. There is something recorded in Galatians that helps us to see that in the visions and the revelations given to him Paul was fully equipped with knowledge. It was at Galatia that Paul met with the other apostles.

**Galatians 2:6-9**

<sup>6</sup> *But of these who seemed to be somewhat, (whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me: God accepteth no man's person:) for they who seemed to be somewhat in conference **added nothing to me:***

<sup>7</sup> *But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter:*

<sup>8</sup> *(For he that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles:)*

<sup>9</sup> *And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision.*

Those in the meeting could add nothing to the knowledge which had been given to Paul. So, we can understand that he came behind in nothing. This was exactly what the false apostles questioned.

Now let me just take a moment here to remind us all that God NO LONGER speaks through visions and revelations. These all ended with the apostles and the completion of the Scriptures. God does NOT speak through dreams or any such thing today. He speaks to us through His Word and through spiritual leaders. There are NO NEW REVELATIONS today. We have been given all the TRUTH we need in the Bible and any new revelation would be an addition to the Bible.

**Revelation 22:18**

<sup>18</sup> *For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, **If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book:***

Getting back to our passage Paul will now tell of one of the visions which he experienced.

**Notice 2 Corinthians 12:2-3**

Probably the most unusual thing about what Paul records here is that he tells the story in the third person. He will confirm that this individual was himself later in this passage. As we read this it first sounds like it happened to someone Paul once knew but it actually happened to him. Why does he record the account in the third person? I believe it shows us his reluctance to boast of this account.

Here in this verse we see that he was CAUGHT UP to the third heaven. The Jews of Paul's day believed there were three heavens. The air around us being the first heaven, the stars and the planets being the second heaven and God's dwelling place being the third heaven. Paul was CAUGHT UP which is the same idea as being raptured. There is something very interesting here and that is the account which he is speaking of had happened 14 years earlier and he had not referenced it even once before this. This account was not something that Paul went around telling others about. It was between him and the Lord. It was one of the visions which the Lord used to give to him the knowledge he needed for instructing the church. When it happened, Paul tells us he could not tell if he was in the body or out of the body and that did not really matter.

**Notice 2 Corinthians 12:4**

When Paul was caught up into Paradise he heard words that were unspeakable and if they would have been possible to speak they were not lawful for man to utter. We have no idea what Paul heard and all we can be sure of is that when we step into God's presence one day we will also hear these very Words.

What catches my attention here is that when someone claims to be caught up to heaven they desire to write everything down in a book and make money from what they claimed to have seen and heard. This verse alone tells us that those today who claim to have been taken to heaven and then come back and write in a book about what they seen and heard, are lying. If anyone would have recorded it, it would have been Paul to give the church Words of encouragement. But he tells us nothing except he was caught up and heard Words that were not even possible to utter and they were not lawful for a man to even utter them.

Now the Words that Paul heard were apparently Words that he understood but they were not able to be spoken by him. This tells me that when we step into the presence of the Lord one day that our knowledge will be greatly increased. The experience will be far greater than anything our minds can even imagine.

**1 John 3:2**

*<sup>2</sup> Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.*

**Notice 2 Corinthians 12:5-6**

Paul admits he could boast of the account but if he did he would be a fool. He desired to speak more of the experience but instead he would forbear meaning he would remain silent. The reason for his silence was he did not want to be known for this experience. He desired that people come to know him for who he was. He was a sinner who was saved by

grace. He did not desire people to think that he was some special person. Paul wanted others to know he was just like them and so they too could possess the very same eternal life which he possessed if they would come to Jesus Christ and repent of their sins. He refused to do anything to elevate himself. He was very careful not to lead others to think of him above what he really was and that was a sinner saved by grace.

**Notice 2 Corinthians 12:7**

Here we see that to keep Paul on the earthly level where he could be used there was GIVEN to him a thorn in the flesh who was a messenger of Satan so that he would not be exalted above measure. Now we can only guess what the "thorn in the flesh" was because we are not told. I believe it was a physical problem and many believe it had to do with his eyes. Let me show you why they believe this.

**Galatians 6:11**

*<sup>11</sup> Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand.*

When Paul wrote Galatians, he used very large letters probably because he had a difficult time seeing.

**Galatians 4:15**

*<sup>15</sup> Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me.*

These verses seem to point to Paul's thorn in the flesh which may have been his eye sight. This may have also contributed to his appearance also. We however do not know what the thorn was but we do know who the thorn was from.

**Notice 2 Corinthians 12:7 again.**

I want you to notice that the thorn was GIVEN to Paul. The word GIVEN tells me that God permitted this thorn to come into Paul's life. The thorn was from a messenger of Satan but it had to be approved by God. Satan's desire was to discourage and to destroy Paul with this physical problem but God permitted it to be in Paul's life to keep him humble.

**Application:**

We all need to be reminded that we are under the care and the protection of our Lord. There is nothing that can come into our lives that He does not permit. Looking at this passage I can understand that sickness, pain, sorrow, and suffering can all be used by God to make us the person he desires for us to be.

**Romans 8:28-32**

*<sup>28</sup> And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.*

*<sup>29</sup> For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.*

*<sup>30</sup> Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.*

*<sup>31</sup> What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?*

*<sup>32</sup> He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?*

Now getting back to our text we can be sure that whatever the thorn was it was very irritating.

#### **Notice 2 Corinthians 12:8**

Paul petitioned the Lord three times to remove the thorn.

There is something here that I find to be very interesting. The apostles had the ability to heal people and to raise them from the dead.

#### **Acts 14:8-11**

*<sup>8</sup> And there sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother's womb, who never had walked:*

*<sup>9</sup> The same heard Paul speak: who stedfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be healed,*

*<sup>10</sup> Said with a loud voice, Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped and walked.*

*<sup>11</sup> And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men.*

Paul had the gift of healing but would not use it for himself. Why? The apostolic gifts were given ONLY for proving the apostles and their doctrines were authentic. Once the Bible was completely these gifts ceased to exist. They do not exist today as some claim. There is no need of the gift of healing today or any other apostolic gifts for the Bible is complete and we know the Message is authentic. The gift of healing was never given so others could be made comfortable as many claim today. God is more interested in spiritual growth than He is in our personal comfort.

**Notice 2 Corinthians 12:9**

There is much to be seen within this verse. First of all, God's response to Paul's 3 petitions to remove the thorn was that His grace was sufficient. In other words, God's grace was greater than Paul's pain. He would be able to endure the thorn in the flesh because God's grace would carry him through as he lived with the thorn.

**Application:**

We all need to be reminded that when we petition God for situations which we face sometimes His answer is "MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT." God sometimes removes the suffering or He sometimes fixes the problem but not every time. Sometimes His answer is "NO". It all depends upon the will of God.

**Matthew 6:9-10**

<sup>9</sup> *After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.*

<sup>10</sup> *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.*

Jesus taught His disciples to pray for God's will to be done on the earth.

**1 John 5:14-15**

<sup>14</sup> *And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us:*

<sup>15</sup> *And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.*

Remember the prayer of Jesus in the Garden? He prayed 3 times that the cup of suffering would be removed from Him.

**Conclusion:**

It is often the will of God that we remain in a season of suffering for an extended period of time. It is not because He is upset with us or that He is punishing us. It may be so that we will remain dependent upon Him.