

2 Corinthians 12:1-13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 1 to 13 I must go on boasting, though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven, whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise, whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.

And he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.

Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

[1 : 02] Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. I have been a fool, you forced me to it. For I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing.

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. For in what were you less favoured than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you?

Forgive me this wrong. In 2 Corinthians chapter 12, Paul continues his fool's speech, in which he has adopted a persona in order to beat the so-called super-apostles at their own game.

[2 : 07] Throughout, he has made sure to hold this persona at arm's length, ensuring that the Corinthians recognise that he isn't speaking as himself at this point. While engaging in boasting as a fool, Paul has cleverly subverted the boasting of the super-apostles, boasting about the greater sufferings and indignities he has suffered for Christ, things that wouldn't be a cause of boasting for almost anyone else.

He has shown that he can best the super-apostles in cause for boasting, while also showing that their supposed grounds for boasting are not the true grounds for boasting at all. Now he takes this further, to a dangerous point, where he might risk tipping over into actual boasting, as it is harder to establish a clear distance between himself and his fool's speech at this juncture.

While Paul is showing that the grounds of the super-apostles' boasting is illegitimate, he is also showing that, if he were a fool, he could outmatch them in such boasting. Paul doesn't avoid such boasting out of fear of losing, but because the boasting is incompatible with Christ.

Having listed a great number of hardships, Paul moves to speak of astonishing degrees of revelation. The super-apostles might boast of their visions, but Paul's visions and revelations greatly exceed theirs.

Speaking of these visions more directly in his fool's speech would be unfitting, and would easily seem like actual boasting. So Paul chooses to relate the vision that he received in the third person, speaking of a man in Christ, while clearly relating his own personal experiences.

[3 : 40] This actually happened to Paul, and was a clear sign of the great blessing that he received, one that was manifestly far greater than that enjoyed by others. He needs to speak of this with great trepidation though, because whether or not he intended it as a boast, it would have the same effect, and would undermine the critique of boasting that he is advancing here.

Paul doesn't go into details about the experience. He casts a veil over much of it. He speaks of himself in the third person. He doesn't know whether he was in the body or out of it, and he heard things that can't be told.

Paul is mostly intentionally tipping his hand here, to reveal cards that he would never actually play, encouraging all of his opponents to fold. He has presumably revealed nothing of this event to the Corinthians prior to this time.

This would have strengthened Paul's point that such boasting was incompatible with faithful Christian service. In all of his time of knowing them, he hadn't mentioned this remarkable vision, precisely because such a vision could only properly be received by a profoundly humble person.

We should probably recall Numbers chapter 12 verses 1 to 8 here, where Miriam and Aaron challenged Moses, insinuating that Moses' prominence as the prophetic leader of the Israelites was ego-driven.

[4 : 59] Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses?

Has he not spoken through us also? And the Lord heard it. Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth. And suddenly the Lord said to Moses and to Aaron and Miriam, Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.

And the three of them came out. And the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam. And they both came forward. And he said, Hear my words.

If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make myself known to him in a vision. I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house.

With him I speak mouth to mouth clearly, and not in riddles. And he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?

[5 : 59] Moses was the one to whom God revealed himself most fully. He was the faithful and most trusted servant. Moses' humility may be related to the intensity of the revelation that God gave to him, and the intimacy that he enjoyed with the Lord.

Extensive revelation, power or authority, are huge liabilities, and can easily corrupt people. Moses' extreme humility is that which fits him to be the recipient of a unique level of revelation.

If he was not the meekest man in the earth, he would not be suited to have the greatest degree of revelation in the earth. If, for a moment, Moses had thought that the exceptional degree of revelation he had received was about him, he would be in extreme peril of pride.

It was because Moses was the meekest of all men that the Lord could reveal himself so fully to him without puffing him up. Paul doesn't actually express this vision in the form of a boast.

He just relates the story as one that he would be able to make a boast about, should he want to do so. Yet, after tipping his hand, he doesn't play any card. Rather, he puts the cards he has been playing with in his fool's speech down, and starts to dismantle the logic of the boasting.

[7 : 13] He concludes verse 6 by declaring that he refrains from such boasting altogether. He doesn't build his apostolic credentials upon the basis of special revelations and visions, but upon things that the Corinthians had seen in him and heard from him.

From his astonishing heavenly vision, Paul moves to speak of a thorn in the flesh that the Lord had given to him, to ensure that he didn't become conceited. This was given by God, but is also described as a messenger of Satan designed to harass him.

There's been much speculation concerning the character of this thorn in the flesh. What exactly is it? The word thorn might refer to a stake upon which someone might become impaled on a battlefield.

It seems to be a stratagem designed by Satan to undermine Paul's ministry. It is both a messenger of Satan, but also something that God permits and wills Paul to suffer in his gracious providence.

Like Job in the Old Testament, Paul is someone that Satan has his eye on, and whom he wishes to destroy. By allowing Paul to undergo the testing of Satan, God proves the effectiveness of his work in him.

[8 : 21] It is probably best not to engage in too much speculation about what this thorn might have been. Some have suggested loss of eyesight, others epilepsy, others severe headaches or something like that.

We should assume that it was some affliction, rather than a sinful temptation. A sinful temptation would undermine Paul's point here. Rather, it is likely similar to the things that Job suffered in Satan's attack upon his body.

External hardships and afflictions hadn't done the trick with Paul for Satan, as they had also failed with Job. So Satan struck closer to home. The actual thing that was the thorn in the flesh isn't the real point.

The issue is what Paul learned through it. While the super-apostles seem to have emphasised their victories, their revelations, their strengths and their riches, Paul had discovered God's grace and power in the place of his greatest weakness and suffering.

At that point, God was fashioning him to be a fitting bearer of his power by emptying him of all of his own. He prayed three times for the removal of the thorn in the flesh.

[9 : 27] We should probably remember Christ's own three-fold prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup would pass from him before surrendering himself to the Father's will. Paul is probably conscious of this parallel.

He is sharing in the sufferings of Christ. Paul has learned contentment in the sufficiency of God in his weakness. God's grace is enough. And this is all for the sake of Christ, in whose sufferings he is ultimately sharing.

Paul wraps up his fool's discourse. The Corinthians should have known that Paul was the genuine article. He shouldn't have needed to play the part of the fool to show the Corinthians that he has the marks of a true apostle, and that he is by no means less than the supposed super-apostles.

The fruits of his genuine ministry were amply manifested among them, and even in them. They themselves were epistles of Christ, ministered by Paul and his associates.

He had patiently proved himself to them in his ministry among them. Nor had Paul treated the Corinthians any less than any other church. The one exception to this is what they have come to imagine as a wrong done to them in his not taking support from them.

[10 : 36] Paul's response to this at the end of verse 13 is suitably sarcastic. A question to consider. Paul presents his thorn in the flesh as the necessary companion to the wonderful revelations that he received.

What are some other biblical examples of God humbling people in order that they might be more powerfully used by him?