

## ***The Church of the Servant King***

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### ***Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians***

(SB\_2 Cor\_chp12)

#### ***INTRODUCTION***

In chapter 11, Paul presented arguments in support of the legitimacy of his teaching and ministry in view of criticisms that had been leveled against him by false teachers who were using deceptive rhetoric and promoting legalism and a return to the Mosaic Law. Paul supported his arguments by discussing his own sufferings and painful experiences on the behalf of those to whom and for whom he ministered.

Paul found it necessary to give details regarding his own sufferings and painful experiences because the “boasting” of the false teachers was being tolerated by the Corinthians. The false teachers were boasting in aspects of ministry life that Paul had not thought necessary to highlight previously. Paul had not highlighted these areas of ministry life because his modus operandi was simple and pure (11:3 – *“But I am afraid that ... your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ”*), thus not tainted with any agenda of self-promotion. Paul did not wish to inspire the Corinthians based upon appealing to a sense of obligation or guilt on their part to him.

We also noted that the Corinthians were susceptible to the deceptive rhetoric of these false teachers because they had a “knowledge” of the Truth (cf. Rom 6:3, 6, & 9); however, they had not “internalized” the Truth (cf. Rom 6:11).

<sup>3</sup> Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? (Rom 6:3)

<sup>6</sup> Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; (Rom 6:6)

<sup>9</sup> Knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. (Rom 6:9)

<sup>11</sup> Even so consider yourselves [*“internalize the Truth”*] to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom 6:11)

The Truth had not been made their own. They did not personally own it. It was still an external academic matter to them. The result was that they doubted Paul and they doubted the things he had taught them. James, the half brother of Jesus, would have described these Corinthians as “double-minded” and “unstable” (Jas 1:6-7).

<sup>6</sup> But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord. (Jas 1:6-7)

In chapter 12, Paul continues his argument by recounting the special vision he had received at the outset of God’s selection of him to be an Apostle.

## CHAPTER 12

### THE VISION OF PARADISE

<sup>1</sup> Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> And I know how such a man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows--<sup>4</sup> was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. <sup>5</sup> On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup> 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.

#### Observations

- ✚ Paul indicates that his boasting was necessary even though he did not consider it to be profitable.
- ✚ He continues his argument against the boasting of the false teachers with a recount of “visions and revelations” that he had received from the Lord.
- ✚ In this passage, Paul emphasizes what he heard, not what he saw in the vision.
- ✚ Paul speaks in the third person regarding the vision he had received, thus separating himself from the experience.
- ✚ Paul indicates that he was translated into “Paradise” which is translated “third heaven” in the NKJV and other translations. It is the Greek phrase *tritos ouranos* (Gr. τρίτος οὐρανός) which is literally – “third heaven.”
- ✚ Paul indicates that he doesn’t know whether the receipt of the vision was one received while he was in his physical body or outside his physical body.
- ✚ This passage is one of just a few passages where Paul provides us with a chronology associated with the events of his early life (cf. Gal 1:15-21 & 2:1-2).
- ✚ The man who experienced the ascent into heaven to receive a revelation was the same man who had experienced the humiliating descent from a window in the Damascus wall in order to escape persecution (cf. Acts 9:19-25; 2 Cor 11:32-33).

<sup>19</sup>and he took food and was strengthened. Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, <sup>20</sup>and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." <sup>21</sup>All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" <sup>22</sup>But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ. <sup>23</sup>When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, <sup>24</sup>but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; <sup>25</sup>but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket. (Acts 9:19-25)

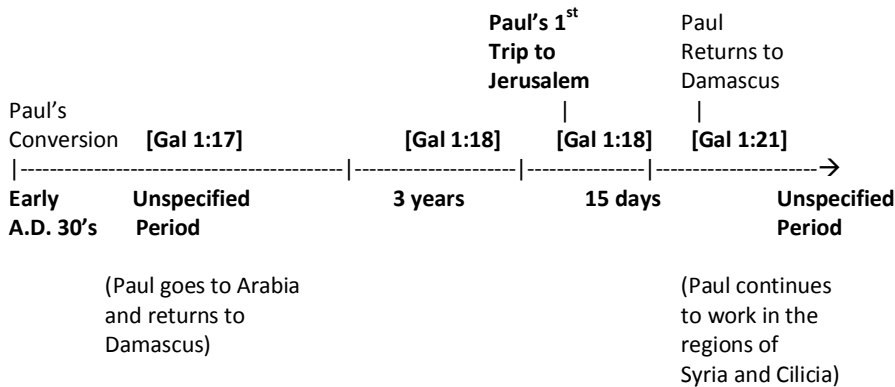
<sup>32</sup> In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, <sup>33</sup>and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands. (2 Cor 11:32-33)

#### Interpretation

- ✚ Paul knew that boasting in a worldly sense was incompatible with the new man in Christ; therefore, he highlighted that fact.

- ✚ The false teachers had not received direct communication from the Lord and had not been transported to heaven to witness scenes there.
- ✚ “Paradise” in this passage is equivalent to heaven.
- ✚ The reason that Paul spoke in the third person was in order to objectify the discussion and to emphasize that he was taking no personal credit for what the Lord had chosen to reveal to him.
- ✚ The experience was so real to Paul, yet, at the same time, so unique that Paul wasn’t sure whether he had been transported in spirit only or in body as well.
- ✚ When we compare our passage in 2 Corinthians with Paul’s account in Galatians, we see the following in regards to a chronology of Paul’s early Christian life as a believer.

*Approximate chronology presented in Galatians 1:*



*Approximate chronology presented in Galatians 2:*



There are two views regarding when the fourteen year period began: 1) from the date of Paul’s conversion in the early A.D. 30’s; or 2) a period which is dated based upon his first trip to Jerusalem that is mentioned in Galatians 1:18, i.e. at the end of the three year period that he was in Damascus. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* has suggested that the following dates are possible and they reflect a view compatible with the 2<sup>nd</sup> option.

- A.D. 32 – Paul’s conversion
- A.D. 35 – Paul’s trip to Jerusalem from Damascus (Acts 9:23-30 cf. Gal 1:18-20)
- A.D. 49 – Paul’s 2<sup>nd</sup> trip to Jerusalem that is the subject of Galatians 2

I think either view is possible, but the dating scheme proffered by *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* is helpful and consistent with the number of years mentioned by Paul in Galatians for certain periods of time.

The chronology of events mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Galatians must be overlaid with Paul’s additional chronology provided to us here in 2 Corinthians 12:2 – “*I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago .... was caught up to the third heaven.*” Fourteen years prior to the writing of 2 Corinthians (i.e. the Fall of A.D. 56) would have meant that Paul was caught up into the third heaven in A.D. 42 – approximately ten years after his conversion in A.D. 32-33. At this point in Paul’s ministry, Paul was ministering in and around Tarsus near or in Cilicia.

## Application

- ✚ We need to see the Corinthians as an example for us.
- ✚ If we fail to internalize the Truth that we know, then we too, like the Corinthians will have the following be true of us:
  - We will be susceptible to the rhetoric of those advancing false doctrine.
  - We will grapple with doubts over arguments and positions that we see to be merely academic.
  - We will miss the spiritual import and our lives will not have spiritual impact.
- ✚ The greater extent to which a person is engaged in a spiritually accurate ministry to others as a yielded believer generally means a life of greater visibility and attacks against his or her person and ministry.
- ✚ For a believer to stay focused and committed to a Biblically accurate ministry to others in the face of continuous voices against that ministry requires the believer to have “internalized” the Truth so that there is personal ownership of the Truth.
- ✚ In other words, the pre-requisite to effective and consistent “actualization” of the Truth is personal ownership of the Truth – i.e. “internalization” of the Truth.
- ✚ Paul took personal ownership of the Truth which was evidenced by approximately 35 years of continuous service in the face of incredible adversities that would have caused anyone who was walking in the flesh to retreat to one degree or another.

## A THORN IN THE FLESH

<sup>7</sup> 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! <sup>8</sup> Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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.

## Observations

- ✚ Paul indicates that he was given a thorn in the flesh due to the incredible nature of the revelations he had received.
- ✚ Paul does not disclose the content of those revelations in this passage.
- ✚ This “thorn in the flesh” is described by Paul here as a “messenger of Satan.”
- ✚ Its purpose was to “torment” Paul in order to keep Paul from exalting himself.
- ✚ Paul specifically asked the “Lord” that it be removed.
- ✚ God responded with a principle that Paul records in verse 9.
- ✚ Paul’s response to the Lord’s answer is provided in verses 9b thru 10.

## Interpretation

- ✚ Paul’s appeal was to the “Lord” – a word which Paul used frequently as a reference to Jesus Christ.

There are other scriptural examples of believers addressing their prayers to the second person of the Trinity (Acts 1:24; 7:59). However normally they [are] addressed [to] the Father in the name of the Son with the Spirit's help (e.g., Eph. 2:18). Here "Lord" definitely means God, and probably it means Jesus with emphasis on His being Paul's

master (cf. Acts 9:5). The fact that Paul repeated his petition three times shows how intensely he wanted God to remove his affliction, like Jesus in Gethsemane.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>24</sup> And they prayed and said, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen. (Acts 1:24)

<sup>59</sup> They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" (Acts 7:59)

<sup>18</sup> For through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. (Eph 2:18)

<sup>5</sup> And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. (Acts 9:5)

- ✠ We do not know the exact nature of the thorn in the flesh to which Paul refers except that it is described as a "messenger of Satan."
- ✠ This has led many to conclude that this was a demon that was allowed to torment Paul frequently in some type of physical manner.
- ✠ Many early church Fathers and Reformers understood the thorn as a spiritual temptation, perhaps a tendency toward pride or the opposition of Paul's enemies.
- ✠ Some modern Roman Catholic interpreters take it as temptation assailing moral purity.
- ✠ Many modern Protestant interpreters see it as a physical illness or infirmity such as bad eyesight, a speech impediment, malaria, or epilepsy (cf. Gal. 4:13-15).

<sup>13</sup>but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; <sup>14</sup>And that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself. <sup>15</sup>Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. (Gal 4:13-15)

- ✠ God's modus operandi with regard to His true servants is one in which His power is manifested by using the weakest of vessels from a worldly perspective.
- ✠ It has often been said that in the Christian life – "the way up is down."
- ✠ Paul's statements in verses 9b-10 (*"Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. <sup>10</sup> 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"*) reflect the thoughts and attitudes of a believer who is demonstrating the various components of function within the divine power sphere:
  - Internalization and actualization of the Truth.
  - Objectivity – interpreting life and human history from God's perspective.
  - Humility – submission or yieldedness to God's authority.
  - Momentum – consistency.
  - Personal love for God – motivational virtue.
  - Impersonal or agape love for all mankind – functional virtue.
  - Momentum testing – serves to keep the believer oriented to the source of his or her empowerment and is the bonding agent for all of the other components.
  - Sharing God's happiness and contentment – resting in God's plan, purpose and use of one's life.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Constable, "Notes on 2 Corinthians" at [www.soniclight.com](http://www.soniclight.com)

- ✚ Only the believer who is residing and operating in the divine power sphere can share Paul's statements in verses 9b-10 cf. Rom 8:35-37.

<sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

<sup>36</sup> Just as it is written,

"FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG;  
WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED."

<sup>37</sup> But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. (Rom 8:35-37)

#### Application

- ✚ A recurring principle in Scripture – to whom much is given, much is and will be required.
- ✚ The world respects and bestows honor upon those who have worldly power, influence and means.
- ✚ God can use those who have worldly power; however, if there is any possibility that there might be confusion as to the power behind the accomplishments God allows through those individuals, God will insure that there is ultimately no legitimate basis for any boasting on man's part.
- ✚ Do you own the Truth or is it still an external, academic discussion to you?
- ✚ Are you engaged in the battle for your life and time?
- ✚ Do you acknowledge that what you do with your life, talents, spiritual gift, resources, etc. really matters?
- ✚ If not, then to you, all of the Bible Study, discussion surrounding Christianity, and life surrounding the local church is mere ritual without reality and your life is effectively no different than the life of the religious person who is not walking in grace and righteousness.
- ✚ There are times when God will deny our prayer request and we must rest in that type of an answer to prayer so that we do not miss the blessing God has in store. (In Paul's case, that blessing came in the form of a fuller realization of God's power working through Paul's weakness so that Paul saw himself as the conduit that he was).
- ✚ There is great confidence and assurance when we finally rest in the Lord and through the eyes of faith observe how he is using us as a conduit of blessing to others.
- ✚ The greater we sense our weakness, the greater we realize God's power (Eph 3:16; Phil 4:13).
- ✚ Only then can the believer relate the illustration that we find in Hebrew history through Esther – "Yet, who knows whether you have come into the kingdom for such a time as this?" (See Esther 4:14).

#### SIGNS OF AN APOSTLE

<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. <sup>13</sup> 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!

#### Observations:

- ✚ Paul highlights again his opinion of what he writes in this chapter – "I have become foolish."
- ✚ He notes that he was compelled to be "foolish" by the Corinthians.
- ✚ Paul states that the Corinthians should have commended him.
- ✚ Paul connects that statement to the statement that "in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles" with the word "for" – the causal conjunction gar (Gr. γάρ).
- ✚ Paul qualifies such a statement with the acknowledgment that he is a "nobody."

- ✚ Paul notes that the “signs of a true apostle” were performed among the Corinthians with “all perseverance.”
- ✚ The “signs of a true apostle” are described as “signs and wonders and miracles.”
- ✚ Paul asks the Corinthians if there was any way in which they were treated as inferior to the rest of the churches – except that he did not become a burden to them.

Interpretation:

- ✚ Paul knew that he was just as qualified as the Twelve, more prominent Jewish apostles. An alternative and very credible interpretation is that Paul was referring to the “false apostles” who had deceptively tried to lure the Corinthians away from him.
- ✚ Paul considered himself a “nobody” in the sense that he had received everything that made him an apostle. Another possibility is that Paul was using irony – a description of himself employed by his critics.
- ✚ The “signs of a true apostle” are in reference to the Twelve in the sense that at least for a portion of Paul’s ministry, supernatural manifestations of the power of the Holy Spirit accompanied his ministry among the Gentiles.
- ✚ Paul’s perseverance in the midst of so much opposition and adversity in Corinth set him apart from the false apostles.
- ✚ Paul uses irony again to indicate that he had purposefully not become a burden to them and strongly implies that in some way, they had complained that he had treated them in an inferior manner to the rest of the churches he founded and visited.
- ✚ Paul’s ministry focused upon his obligations as a minister, thus it was servant-leader in character and nature.
- ✚ Had Paul’s ministry been focused upon his rights as an apostle, he would have been demanding of more from the Corinthians than just their acceptance of his teaching and message.
- ✚

Application:

- ✚ Like Paul, we should demonstrate spiritual servant-leadership toward all of those to whom we have a responsibility as believers – co-workers, spouses, etc.
- ✚ The believer who is always demanding his or her “rights” or who is focused upon his or her own interests is a believer who has yet to have internalized the truth and who is certainly not actualizing the truth.
- ✚ This phenomenon is manifest in many ways in such a believer’s life – complaining, refusal to align thinking and belief systems with Biblical instruction in any given area of life, demands for respect without a corresponding demonstration of respect for others and the Truth, etc.

LOVE FOR THE CHURCH

<sup>14</sup> Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. <sup>15</sup> I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? <sup>16</sup> But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit. <sup>17</sup> Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I? <sup>18</sup> I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps? <sup>19</sup> All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for your upbuilding, beloved. <sup>20</sup> For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances; <sup>21</sup> I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before

you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced.

#### Observation

- ✦ Paul planned another visit.
- ✦ Paul indicated that he would not burden them with any demand or need for provision – neither he nor any of those sent by him.
- ✦ Paul compares himself to their parent and them to spoiled children.
- ✦ Paul indicates that he is most responsible before the Lord and is defending himself before Him – not so much the Corinthians, contrary to what they may think.
- ✦ Paul notes the possibility that when he comes again, both parties might be dissatisfied with what they see.
- ✦ If so, Paul could be humiliated before them.

#### Interpretation

- ✦ Some in Corinth had evidently accused Paul of craftily obtaining money from the Corinthians indirectly through his agents such as Titus.
- ✦ They may have regarded the collection for the poor Jerusalem saints as one way that Paul was stealthily getting money from them for himself.
- ✦ If that was their charge, he may have used his critics' terms in irony to show that he had been crafty.
- ✦ However, he was crafty not in getting money from them but in giving money to them. He had done this by working to support himself while in Corinth.
- ✦ Paul recognized the principle that in ministry, we are ultimately responsible before the Lord, not man.
- ✦ All of the conduct that Paul names in verse 20 is a manifestation of old-man thinking and belief systems – evidence of having not internalized the Truth.

#### Application

- ✦ If we keep our focus upon Who it is to Whom we are responsible, we can look past injustices suffered in ministry.
- ✦ This is tantamount to occupation with Christ and does not occur unless there has been internalization of the Truth.
- ✦ Old man thinking is interlocked with old-man belief systems.