

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

JULY 6TH-7TH, 2024 // 2 CORINTHIANS

VISIONS AND REVELATIONS (2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-5)

Paul's character and integrity as a minister were under assault from his critics in Corinth who were being led astray by the false teachers Paul sarcastically refers to as "super-apostles" (11:5).

- Paul has been defending his ministry credentials against those who claimed he was supposedly inferior to these false teachers.

In defending his ministry credentials, Paul is tired of talking about himself and doesn't think this kind of boasting is profitable, but he knows it's necessary to reestablish his credibility (v. 1).

- Most likely, these false teachers had claimed fantastical visions and revelations of ecstatic supernatural experiences as proof of their superior spiritual authority.

Reluctantly, Paul shares in the third person (see v. 7) about an experience he'd had 14 years earlier where he'd been "caught up" (raptured) to the third heaven (v. 2).

- This might have been a near-death experience Paul had when he was stoned at Lystra (Acts 14:19). Paul wasn't sure if this was an "in-body" or "out-of-body" experience.

Whatever it was, Paul saw and heard things so wonderful they were inexpressible through the confines of human language, and God wouldn't permit him to speak of it (v. 4).

- This nameless man Paul refers to is himself and he certainly had something to boast in, but Paul instead will boast of his weaknesses (v. 5)—not this strange, wonderful experience.

The "super-apostles" dazzled and impressed their gullible victims through their unverifiable claims of the supernatural—they'd made a living boasting about visions and revelations.

- Even though Paul had experienced profound supernatural revelations (6 visions in Acts), his ministry wasn't built on him boasting about these things.

Sometimes God gives certain people profound, personal spiritual experiences as gifts of sovereign grace—those things are not intended to be used to glorify ourselves so we can boast on our spiritual status (sometimes God might not even want us to share them).

- Our faith is not to be built on these things, but instead we're to put our faith in Christ.

A THORN IN THE FLESH (2 CORINTHIANS 12:6-10)

If you're a Christian, God has an agenda and a perfect program for your life to make you look like Jesus and help you bear fruit.

- God knows exactly what you need, when you need it, and how to give it.
- God knows when you need blessings and encouragement, and He knows when you need trials and difficulties.

The trials and difficulties God allows in our lives keep us humble, mature us, and strengthen our character, and they teach us what it means to be dependent on Him.

- God gave Paul the blessing of an extraordinary revelation of the 3rd heaven, and then God allowed a messenger of Satan to torment Paul so he wouldn't exalt himself (v. 7).

"A THORN IN THE FLESH"

We don't know the exact nature of this affliction, but it might have been...

1. A physical ailment, perhaps poor eyesight (see Galatians 4:15).
2. Paul's critics, enemies, and opponents.
3. Demonic attack in Paul's life, perhaps severe temptation or mental/emotional torment.

Paul was a man of great faith, and three times he pleaded with the Lord to take away this affliction (v. 8).

- But God said, "No." Sometimes God loves us too much to say yes to the things we ask for.
- God had something better in mind for Paul—a revelation of grace and God's power perfected in Paul's weakness (v. 9).

Some of us are naturally inclined to be self-reliant and think that we're a lot stronger than we actually are.

- The truth is that we need God more than we think we do, and God, in His great love for us, knows how to reveal this truth to us.
- God often reveals to us our need for Him by exposing us to our own weakness.

You can't truly believe that God's grace is sufficient for you until God brings you to a place where you realize that you are insufficient in yourself.

- Through our weaknesses, as difficult and painful as they are, God builds our reliance on Him.
- When we're totally dependent and reliant on Him, we begin to see our difficulties as opportunities for God's power to show up (v. 10).

Paul never lets his "thorn" and weaknesses, difficulties, and hardships act as an excuse to not serve and follow Jesus.

- We are so quick to let the difficulties in our lives be the excuses that incapacitate and sideline us from serving God, loving people and living the Christian life.
- We can be strong in our weaknesses!

The great paradox of the Christian faith is that we are strongest spiritually when we're weak and realize we've got nothing apart from God's grace at work in our lives. It's the illusion of our own strength that makes us spiritually weak.

- God has a track record of choosing the weak, the poor, the insignificant, and the unnoticed to do mighty things.

SIGNS OF AN APOSTLE (2 CORINTHIANS 12:11-13)

In defending his authority as an apostle, Paul has been forced to boast more than he's wanted to before the Corinthian Believers.

- To Paul, boasting like this is what makes someone a fool, and if the Corinthians had shown him proper honor and respect as an apostle, he wouldn't have had to make himself foolish (v. 11).

One of the reasons Paul should've been properly honored and received as an apostle is because he performed the "signs of an apostle" in their midst—the Holy Spirit empowered signs, wonders, and miracles that authenticated apostolic authority and standing as an eyewitness of Jesus (v. 12).

- Yet, the Corinthians seemed to forget this evidence.

It can be easy to take for granted and forget some of the incredible things God has done for us, around us, and in us through His people, His Word, and the power of His Spirit.

- We can be so short-sighted and easily distracted by the idols, falsehoods, and lies peddled to us by our culture.
- It's important for us to stay connected to God!

Paul didn't deserve the disrespect shown to him.

- The only way Paul had treated the Corinthians as "worse off than the other churches" is that he'd not been a financial burden to them.
- Sarcasmically, Paul begs for forgiveness from the Corinthians for the "wrong" he'd committed against them by not taking money from them as the super-apostles had done (v. 13).

PASTORAL CONCERNS (2 CORINTHIANS 12:14-21)

The false apostles apparently had warned the Corinthians that if Paul returned to Corinth, he'd drain their financial resources.

- Paul was being painted by his critics as a deceiver who simply wanted money for himself.
- Paul wasn't seeking these Believers' money; he wanted a relationship with them (v. 14).

Paul was not serving for what he could get from the church, but for what he could give.

- For the sake of these Believers that he loves, he will gladly "spend and be spent" (v. 15).
- Paul addresses the slanderous charge of him being sly and taking them by deceit by reminding them of his track record of operating with integrity and honesty in the past (vs. 16-18).

Paul doesn't demand trust from these Believers without giving them a reason to trust him.

- Trust in any relationship is built over time through consistent actions, transparency, integrity, and honesty.
- If you want people to trust you, be trustworthy.
- If you're struggling to trust someone, look at their track record and make a wise judgment.

Paul's defense of his character was not just about him—it was about his ministry that proclaimed the truth of Christ and built up the churches to keep them healthy (v. 19).

- Speaking of building up a healthy church, Paul is worried he's going to find the same old problems amongst the Corinthians when he visits them a third time (vs. 20-21).

Quarrelling, jealousy, angry outbursts, selfish ambitions, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder are the fruit that comes from immature, self-centered Christians who aren't truly following Jesus.

- Paul pleads with these Believers to repent so that he wouldn't be humiliated and grieve over their sins when he comes (v. 21).

VISIONS OF HEAVEN AND THORNS IN THE FLESH

- It's not always visions of heaven, and it's not always thorns and torment—it's both.
- What makes Christianity so beautifully unique is that we believe there is a sovereign God who is fashioning a plan and purpose for our lives out of the pain, triumphs, difficulties, blessings, trials, and victories.

1. Humility – an acknowledgment that we're not as in control or powerful as we try to imagine we are, and can't be solely credited for all the good things and blessings we enjoy in our lives.
2. Security – we can rest in the storms, trials, burdens, weakness, and pains in this life because we know that even when we can't understand, God has a plan for what He allows in our lives.

"FOR WHEN I AM WEAK, THEN I AM STRONG."

- We don't have to have it all together, have all the answers, know the reasons why, and we don't have to pretend like we're ok when we're not.
- God uses broken, weak, and imperfect people to do His best work—the only prerequisite is surrender, trust, dependence on Him, and radical obedience.