

# THE MINISTER: HIS SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

## 2 CORINTHIANS 12:01–10

### *Introduction*

Paul seldom if ever talked about himself from the pulpit. He certainly did not boast in himself or in his achievements (cp. 2 Cor. 11.1, 16-17). This is clear from what he often said.

*1 Cor 14:18-19* I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

*1 Cor 14:36-37* Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.

*Gal 6:14* May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Because of his hesitancy to speak about himself, the false teachers and critics of Paul were saying that he lacked in spiritual experiences, that his salvation and ministry were suspect because he had not had the kind of experiences they were privileged to have. They thought to themselves and questioned others: "How could Paul be called of God if he has not had spiritual visions and revelations from the Lord? We have had them. If he has really been called of God, why has he not had them?"

Paul had to defend himself against his critics, and he had to save the Corinthian church from the false teachers. He was left with no choice. This is the reason he shares this spiritual experience. However, even in sharing this experience, He does not share anything about it. He wants no attention upon himself, but rather all attention upon Christ Jesus our Lord.

- I. His boasting is unprofitable, but he must defend himself (v. 1).
- II. He had experienced unspeakable spiritual experiences — visions and revelations (vv. 2-6).
- III. He had experienced the spiritual power of Christ (vv. 7-10).

### **I. 2 Corinthians 12:01 Minister's Boasting**

The minister's boasting is unprofitable, but he must defend himself. As stated, Paul had no choice; he had to defend himself against the false accusations. His salvation and call from God were real. God had saved him and called him into the ministry; therefore, he had to do all he could to substantiate his salvation and call.

Paul says that boasting is unprofitable, but it was necessary in order to defend himself. Therefore, he would share the visions and revelations which the Lord had given him.

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**Thought 1.** Note how cautiously Paul moved in boasting or in sharing any of his spiritual experiences. This is a much needed lesson: we must always lift up Jesus and not ourselves. The gospel of Christ alone can reach and grow people, not our personal spiritual experiences. Paul knew this, and we must learn it.

## II. 2 Corinthians 12:02–06 *Paul's Spiritual Experiences*

Paul had experienced unbelievable spiritual experiences, that is, visions and revelations. Note that Paul called himself “a man in Christ”; he did not share this experience in the first person. He was reluctant to speak about himself and his spiritual experiences. (Cp. v. 7, which shows that Paul was referring to himself.)

1. The experience happened fourteen years ago. This experience is not referring to his conversion experience on the Damascus road, for his conversion had occurred earlier, about twenty years before the writing of II Corinthians. Apparently, God had given Paul this wonderful experience one or two years before the launch of his missionary journeys. In a most wonderful way God was beginning to prepare His dear servant for the strenuous ministry upon which he was soon to embark.
2. Paul was caught up into the third heaven. The third heaven is God's dwelling place (cp. Lk. 24:43), the very special place where the presence and the glory of the Lord are fully manifested and experienced. Paul called it “paradise” (v. 4. See *Heaven*, 2 Cor. 12:2; *Paradise*, 2 Cor. 12:4.)
3. Paul had an indescribable experience. Note the depth of the experience.
  - a. How it took place is not known, whether in the body or out of the body; only God knows. The transference from earth to heaven was entirely of God and not of self, nor of any other person; therefore, God is to be glorified, not self or man.
  - b. Paul was caught up into paradise (see *Paradise*, 2 Cor. 12:4).
  - c. Paul heard unspeakable words which were unlawful for him to utter. Note this: it means that the deep, intimate experience was for Paul and for Paul alone. God forbade him to reveal and share it. Paul needed a very special experience and strengthening from the Lord; therefore, the Lord met Paul in a very special way. The intimacy was not to be shared.

**Thought 1.** What a lesson for us! Our intimate experiences with the Lord are to be as personal as our intimate experiences with our spouses! We are not to be boasting of experiences with the Lord. Such boasting...

- makes us appear super-spiritual
  - tends to make others feel inferior
  - tends to make others seek and focus on experiences instead of the Lord
4. A man with such spiritual experiences has the right to boast, but Paul says that he will boast only in his weaknesses. Very simply, if Paul knew a man who had had

such a spiritual experience, he would personally boast in that man, but he will not boast in himself.

5. Paul desired but one thing: not to be judged by such spiritual experiences, but by what is really essential — what they saw in his life and what they heard him preach and teach.

Paul could have proclaimed the truth of his experience describing it in detail, but he would not, lest people begin to think too highly of him. Exalting the person who has had some unusual experience is always dangerous; therefore, Paul kept his experiences to himself. He wanted men to know *only* the absolute essential in life: the testimony of his pure life and witness for the Lord.

*2 Cor 1:12* Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace.

*Phil 1:9-10* And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ.

*1 Tim 1:5* The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

*1 Pet 3:16* Keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 12:02 HEAVEN

The third heaven is God's dwelling place (cp. Lk. 23:43). The clouds are the first heaven; the stars are the second heaven. □

## 2 CORINTHIANS 12:04 PARADISE (PARADEISON)

The other world, the unseen world, the spiritual world, the spiritual dimension of being. Jesus Himself revealed that paradise is a place which is divided into two huge areas, sections, compartments, worlds or dimensions of being. The two areas or worlds are separated by a great gulf that is impassable. One area or world is the place of sorrow, a place called hell. Hell is where unbelievers go. The other area or world is the place of paradise where believers go. Paradise is the picture of heaven, the place where God's presence and glory are fully manifested and experienced. (See *Paradise*, Lk. 16:23.)

*Luke 23:43* Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

*2 Cor 12:4 Was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.*

*Rev 2:7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. □*

### **III. 2 Corinthians 12:07–10 Minister's Spiritual Power**

Paul had experienced the spiritual power of Christ. God had given Paul deep and intimate spiritual experiences. There was the danger that he might begin to think too highly of himself; therefore, God gave Paul a “thorn in the flesh.”

1. Paul needed a “thorn” to keep him ever mindful that he was no better than other men. He was totally dependent upon God despite the indescribable spiritual experiences. What was his “thorn in the flesh?” The word “thorn” (skolops) means either thorn or stake. It is generally taken to mean *thorn* in this verse.

There are many guesses as to what the “thorn” was:

- ⇒ some spiritual suffering such as constant attacks by Satan or opposition by men, or occasional evangelistic failure in order to keep Paul humble and on his face before God seeking supernatural strength.
- ⇒ some physical suffering such as a recurring fever (for example, malaria), or epilepsy or poor eyesight.

Just what the thorn was is not known. The best guess seems to be some physical ailment, for suffering is what this passage is all about (cp. 2 Cor. 11:16-12:10). The words flesh, weakness and weaknesses are used; and, although these same words could be used to describe spiritual sufferings, the context does not weigh toward spiritual suffering (cp. also 2 Cor. 10:10).

The clearest description of the thorn is probably eye trouble (cp. 2 Cor. 10:10; Gal. 4:13-15; 6:11). Paul had been stricken blind for three days at his conversion, and he had been badly beaten and stoned several times (2 Cor. 11:24-27). A serious injury to his eyes, or for that matter to any other part of his body, could have occurred at any of these tragedies.

2. Paul wanted deliverance and relief; he wanted God to remove the thorn. Why? Because...
  - it pricked and bothered him
  - it distracted him from his labour
  - it made him appear personally weak and sickly

Note that Paul prayed three times for God to remove the thorn. Jesus Christ had also prayed three times for the suffering of the cross to be removed (cp. Mt. 26:36-46).

3. There were three reasons why God refused to remove the thorn from Paul's flesh.
- a. First, God wanted to guard against Paul's being puffed up (see pt. 1 of this note).
  - b. Second, God wanted to reveal His power in Paul. The weaker the vessel, the more God is glorified when the vessel really serves Christ. Note God's answer to Paul:  
=> "My grace is sufficient for you": the presence, love, favour and blessings of God are sufficient to help the believer walk through any suffering. The word "sufficient" (arkei) means the power or strength to withstand any danger. God's grace within the believer can carry the believer through anything. In Paul's case, it was physical suffering. In our case it may be either physical or spiritual attacks; but no matter: God's grace is sufficient to see us through whatever the thorn is.  
=> "My power is made perfect in weakness": the weaker the believer, the more God can demonstrate His strength. If a man is self-sufficient, he does not need God; but if he is weak, he needs God: the help, provision and sufficiency of God.  
=> "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me." Note the point of this statement: infirmities or weaknesses are purposeful. The believer suffers for a reason: that the power of Christ may be demonstrated and clearly seen in his life. The word "rest" (episkenosei) means to fix a tent upon. The idea is that the power of Christ rests upon the suffering believer just as the Shekinah glory dwelt in the holy place of the tabernacle. What a glorious thought! The strength of Christ fixes itself upon and dwells within the believer — filling him with the Shekinah glory of God — when he suffers.
  - c. Third, God wanted to teach Paul to live "for Christ's sake." When Paul suffered some infirmity or weakness, it gave Christ the chance to infuse power into Paul and to overcome the weakness for Paul. Paul's weakness gave Christ an opportunity to prove Himself. Therefore, Paul says that he took pleasure...
    - "in weaknesses": a general term meaning all kinds of sufferings and weaknesses, whether moral or physical. The power of Christ can overcome any weakness or temptation for the believer.
    - "in insults": whether ridicule, insult, slander, rumour or whatever.
    - "in hardships": needs, deprivations, hunger, thirst, lack of shelter or clothing or any other necessity.
    - "in persecutions": verbal or physical attack, abuse or injury.
    - "in difficulties": tight situations, perplexities, disturbances, anxious moments, inescapable problems and difficulties.

When the believer is weak, he is strongest. How? By the power of Christ. And the power of Christ is much stronger than all the combined forces of mankind.

**Thought 1.** The great need of the believer is to acknowledge his weakness before the Lord. When he does, the Lord pours His strength into the believer's mind and heart. The Lord empowers the believer to overcome and conquer all infirmities and weaknesses.

**Mat 19:26** *Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*

**Luke 1:37** *"For nothing is impossible with God."*

**1 Cor 1:27** *But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.*

**Eph 3:16** *I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.*

**Eph 3:20** *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.*

**Heb 11:33-34** *[Believers] who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.*

**Psa 8:2** *From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.*

**Psa 62:11** *One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong.*

**Isa 40:31** *But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

**Isa 41:10** *So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. ■*