

2 Corinthians 12:1-10 • Achieving Contentment

Introduction

It's important to put into the proper context the personal experience Paul is going to relate concerning a heavenly revelation in Christ. In 11:30 Paul precedes telling this experience by stating, "I will boast of what pertains to my weakness" and follows up this story of what most would consider an extraordinary "tale" with the problems that followed. Paul tries to use all events and opportunities to teach Christ's power working through Paul so that all men will be drawn to Christ – not to Paul. (Quite a contrast to false teachers who use such events to increase their ratings or contribution levels.)

¹Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

[Read 12:1]

Q: Why is "boasting necessary, though it is not profitable" for Paul?

A: Paul finds himself having to defend his position as an Apostle. He has tried to explain his qualifications in 4:7-12 (have someone read) and 11:22-29 (have someone read) to get them to see things from God's point of view, not by earthly standards of measurement. Paul is now using another way to get them to see the true meaning of what it means to be an apostle and how true spiritual leadership is revealed, that even the "signs and wonders" they may long for that apostles have experienced do not negate the pressures, trials and circumstances of life on this earth. Walking in Christ is not a test of knowledge, but faith.

Q: What is the meaning of the words "visions" and "revelations"? Is there a difference?

A: "Visions" refer to things seen, "revelations" to things heard or revealed in a particular way. They often reveal truth that has been hidden, things previously not communicated by God to man.

²I 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.

[Read 12:2]

Q: Can we figure out the name of "the man" Paul is referring to that had this glorious experience? Who is it?

A: It's Paul himself. He's referring in a third party way. This is significant because Paul is going to distinguish between the "glorified" person of this experience and the infirmity-laden victim of the "thorn in the flesh" in the section that follows. He is so concerned that we get the right message from this example that he doesn't even refer to himself in the first person.

Q: Is there a significance to Paul's statement that this experience came upon him in such rapidity and surprise that he still does not know if it occurred "in" or "out" of the body?

A: Paul is probably trying to reinforce that he cannot boast in such glory as it does not belong to him, but only weakness. He did not even know whether he was in or out of the body when the glory was put upon him, so far was the glory from being Paul's.

³And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—⁴was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

[Read 12:3-4]

Q: The word “caught up” in v.4 is used elsewhere and translated as what?

A: It's the word that is also translated as “rapture”. It's used in Acts 8:39 to describe what happened to Philip after baptizing the Ethiopian. Here it is plural and could be literally translated “these raptures” referring to “visions” and “revelations”.

The Point: Like others before and after him, Paul had a unique experience that brought him into the direct presence of Christ. Like Ezekiel or Daniel before God, or John before Christ, these experiences are often so profound that those experiencing them can't fully explain in human terms all that has happened. It's more important to understand that Paul, in trying to explain weakness, is contrasting a glory that has only been experienced by the likes of Daniel or Ezekiel, and how Paul puts it into the proper perspective so that **Christ** will be glorified, not Paul.

Q: What is the point of having such an experience, of being transported into Christ's very presence and hearing His very words, if one is not permitted to repeat those words to others?

A: First, it's an indication of a **PERSONAL** experience in which Paul is **PERSONALLY** reinforced in His faith by Christ. It's not an automatic nor logical continuation to assume that **ALL** such experiences are meant to send a message, or even be a witness, to others.

Second, let's re-visit the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. (Luke 16:19-31) What was Moses' response to the rich man to send someone back with a message in hopes of saving the lives of the rich man's brothers? (Luke 16:30-31, “*But he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.’*”) The Word of God, in our very hands as we go through this study right now, has already provided us everything we need to know. Obedience to the Word **WITHOUT** such revelations or visions is the ultimate test of faith over knowledge. Or another way to put it: A vision or revelation guarantees nothing without subsequent obedience in one's personal life.

For Your Consideration: How many people's testimony are you aware of that tell of coming to know the Lord without the involvement of humans? (It's very, very rare.) The point in time of salvation may not have another human present, but there's almost always an accompanying testimony of what others said or witnessed leading up to the experience. Even after Paul's vision of Christ on the road to Damascus God still sent Ananias to complete the work. The point is that God is presently at work through yourself and your brothers and sisters in Christ in sufficient power that you never need the kind of experience Paul is relating.

⁵On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. ⁶For 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.

[Read 12:5-6]

Q: How does v.5-6 relate to Paul's teaching to this point?

A: It's the summarization that glorifying in his other self, which received heavenly visions and revelations, was not for the purpose of giving glory to his fleshly self but to bring out the weakness of the fleshly self so that all glory would go to Christ. There's an overriding principle at work that in all we preach and testify and profess that it magnifies Christ while diminishing any focus on our self.

Q: What if people had known of this experience when they saw Paul healing someone or shaking off the lethal bite of the viper?

A: They may have attributed misplaced authority more to the **man** than to **Christ**. Paul's teaching is reflecting Christ's teaching that judgment should be based on one's fruit – the **visible** results of their teaching and ministry – and not on the **invisible** claims of heavenly visions or revelations.

Application: *When it comes to the Word of God, just as "teachers" have greater authority and rank over gifts that "show off" God's powers (e.g., workers of miracles, healers, tongues, etc.), so Scripture that teaches the daily obedience of the heart has greater authority over prophecies and visions of things yet to come. What should be the focus of our devotion to God's Word – enlightenment of the future or the heart?*

Observation: *Have you noticed that those who have had what we might view as the most "spectacular" or "awesome" encounters with God have not celebrated their "good fortune"? Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, John and even Paul all came away from these experiences not only personally humbled but often sick and shocked. The common denominator to all these experiences is that God is praised and given higher importance than the mortal to which they occurred. (Moses was described in Numbers 12:3, "Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.")*

⁷Because 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!

[Read 12:7]

Q: Why was the thorn given to Paul? What's the lesson we should draw from this?

A: "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations..." Paul's very experience that seems so "lofty" and "magnificent" to many of us was balanced by God in order for Paul to remain in proper spiritual balance, which is defined as "not me, but God."

Q: What is the source of the thorn?

A: "...a messenger of Satan..." This is the same principle at work as in the case of Job (Job 2:7, "Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.") and the woman suffering physical affliction (Luke 13:16, "And this woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?").

It's a reminder of the answer to the question the disciples asked concerning the blind man as to whether his condition was the result of his parents' sin, to which Christ responded in John 9:3, "It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him." The point and focus is **ALWAYS** the glory of God, not the glory of men.

Q: What is the major contrast between what happened to Paul in the presence of Christ to the presence of Satan? What is the difference in how each interacted with Paul?

A: Paul's sight and hearing in the presence of Christ are magnified while his flesh is assaulted by Satan. (Remember Job's specific afflictions at the hands of Satan?) Paul is again teaching faith in the unseen rather than reaction to things that are seen. Our faith is focused and enhanced by what has been heard and seen from Christ so that even the most painful experiences seen in this life at the hands of Satan can be overcome and placed in their proper perspective.

⁸Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. ⁹And 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. ¹⁰Therefore 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.

[Read 12:8-10]

Q: What obvious parallel comes to mind in Paul's going to God in prayer 3 times to have this problem removed?

A: Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane. The first two times there is no direct response until the third time. The answer in both cases is not that the obstacle will be removed but that faith and trust in God is sufficient to overcome anything we may have to experience in this life. Just as escape from the cross was not to be elicited from Satan (Luke 4:7, "Therefore if You worship before me, it shall all be Yours."), neither are we to accommodate Satan in bearing his trials.

Q: Drawing on this example, what is the obvious parallel example to v.9, "...My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness...."?

A: The ultimate example of weakness – the crucifixion of Christ – manifested into the ultimate example of power – Christ's resurrection.

For Your Consideration: Another way to translate the word "weakness" is "strengthlessness". "Weakness" might paint a picture that we **should** be strong but are somehow inherently to blame for not being as strong as we should. "Strengthlessness" is the condition by which **we have no inherent strength** on our own; it comes exclusively and totally from God, not us. God may be stating through Paul something like, "Don't seek sensible strength to endure on your own, but in your very, present condition seek Me so that My power will be exhibited and experienced through you."

Q: Why does it appear that Christ needs our "weakness" more than our "strength"?

A: The number one obstacles between man and God as constantly addressed throughout the entire Bible is **pride**. Our "strength" (pride) is often Christ's rival; our "weakness" which causes us to draw on His resources and therefore reveals His glory, not our own.

[Read Psalm 88:1-7]

¹O LORD, the God of my salvation,
I have cried out by day and in the night before You.
²Let my prayer come before You;
Incline Your ear to my cry!
³For my soul has had enough troubles,
And my life has drawn near to Sheol.
⁴I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit;
I have become like a man without strength,
⁵Forsaken among the dead,
Like the slain who lie in the grave,
Whom You remember no more,
And they are cut off from Your hand.
⁶You have put me in the lowest pit,
In dark places, in the depths.
⁷Your wrath has rested upon me,
And You have afflicted me with all Your waves. Selah.

¹⁵“I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.”

[Read John 15:15-17]

Application: *Man's extremity is God's opportunity; man's security is Satan's opportunity. God's way is not to take His children out of trial but to give strength to bear up against it. To whose arms are you running in such times: To God's to obtain strength to endure or to Satan's to obtain security and avoidance of the stress? In which action will it most likely result that others will see the glory of God?*

Q: What is the conclusion of this teaching according to v.10? What does it result in?

A: Contentment. The result of seeing things according to God's view, that everything isn't supposed to be "smooth and easy" but that in everything Christ is to be magnified – even in the most imperfect of circumstances.

Q: Is there a commonality between the five things Paul lists in v.10? (weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, difficulties)

A: Whether it originates from Christ or Satan, I am content in Christ Who makes up the strengthlessness that cannot overcome any of them in any way on my own.

[Conclude with the reading of Hebrews 11:32-40]

³²And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; ³⁶and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated ³⁸(men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.