

Lesson 22: 2 Corinthians 12:1-7

1) Verse 1

- a) **1 It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord:**
- b) Barclay: If we have any sensitiveness, we should read this chapter with a certain reverence, for in it Paul lays bare his heart and shows us at one and the same time his glory and his pain.
- c) Paul moves on to visions and revelations with a similar introduction to those found in 11:30 and 12:6, "it is necessary for me to boast." But he adds a crucial caveat that it is not expedient.
 - i) Paul keeps reminding the Corinthians that boasting is not only foolish and unbecoming an apostle of Christ, but it is unprofitable for them.
 - ii) To dwell on our own excellence is dangerous because it causes us to turn our attention from God's glory to our own and stokes the sinful desire to create a circle of admirers for ourselves rather than disciples for Christ.
- d) So why boast if nothing is to be gained from it?
 - i) Because much more could be lost if Paul does not somehow cancel out the seductive megalomania of his rivals.
 - ii) The rivals have set the agenda and have bedazzled some Corinthians with their boasts.
 - iii) Paul's deft use of irony in his own boasting helps the Corinthians to see the foolishness of all boasting and will help them see the rivals for what they really are.
 - iv) In short, his boasting is designed not to promote himself but to reveal the glory of the Lord. With these words, he clearly delineates the difference between himself and his opponents.
- e) "But I will come to visions and revelations" provides a transition that suggests that perhaps Paul is moving through a list of items the rivals used to captivate the Corinthians.
 - i) Some think that "visions and revelations" might even be a slogan.
 - ii) The Corinthians are enamored with the more electrifying displays of spiritual inspiration, and their worship service is marked by each one giving a

revelation and a tongue (see 1 Cor 14:6,26).

- iii) We can only guess, but it is not improbable that the rivals were quite ready to feed the Corinthians' appetite for spiritually thrilling visions.
- f) Visions were part of the religious landscape of the Gentile world as an important element in magical rites and as part of initiations into mystery cults.
- g) We cannot assume that converted Gentiles made a clean break with their religious past. Some Corinthian converts may still have been unduly influenced by their former religious background concerning visionary experiences.
 - i) Paul is reticent to speak about such things because he does not believe that recounting one's extraordinary mystical visions will do anything to build up the community.
 - (1) It only serves to build up the teller's ego and therefore is perilous. It certainly offers no proof of apostleship.
 - (2) History is littered with the tales of frauds who have seduced and deluded followers by claiming to have some divine mission from some divine vision.
 - (a) Pat Robertson is a modern example of such a fraud.
 - (3) Consequently, Paul rehearses this extraordinary episode in a way that only stresses how useless it is to prove anything about him.

2) **Verses 2-5**

- a) **2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago - whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows - such a one was caught up to the third heaven. 3 And I know such a man - whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows - 4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. 5 Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities.**
- b) Paul moves from the "embarrassing descent to escape the hands of men" to "an exhilarating ascent into the presence of God."
- c) Telling this story in the third person, "I know a man in Christ," causes some to question whether Paul is recounting what happened to himself.
 - i) Paul's clear reference to himself in 12:1,5,7, however, reveals that he has chosen to relate this event by referring to himself only indirectly.

- ii) Reporting what happened to someone else he may know would be completely irrelevant to his argument.
- iii) The key question, then, is why does he choose to describe the vision in this manner.
 - (1) Paul may be falling back on the convention of pseudonymity in Jewish tradition concerning visionary accounts.
 - (a) Later rabbinic tradition considered this subject dangerous and forbade public discussion of it, and Paul's reserve may be an early reflection of this attitude.
 - (2) The use of the third person may derive from the very nature of the experience itself.
 - (a) Such an overwhelming event -- he is not sure if it was in the body or out of the body -- resulted in him observing "himself undergoing the experience" as a kind of spectator.
 - (3) It may also be attributable to his desire not to boast.
 - (a) Only the greatest figures of Scripture were ever snatched up to the heavens.
 - (b) Paul has no interest in ranking himself with these saints; he simply wants to drive pompous rivals from the ranks of the Corinthians.
 - (c) He therefore avoids an egocentric form of expression since he is already acutely conscious of the foolishness of self-praise.
 - (4) Paul's reticence to refer to himself directly fits his ambivalence toward boasting in this section.
 - (a) He can boast about such a person in Christ, but not about himself (12:5).
 - (b) What happened happened to a man in Christ. The reference to the man in Christ may lead us back to 10:17, "But, 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.'" God did not grant Paul this awesome experience of paradise because he was so special, "but solely because of his relationship to Christ."
 - (c) The incident was a cherished, life changing event for Paul; but it was also highly personal and not something he freely shared with others nor something about which he would brag.

- d)** Another curious detail in this account is his choice of an incident that happened “fourteen years ago”
- i)** If we date this epistle at the year 56, then Paul's vision occurred in 42, when he was founding churches in Syria and Cilicia (refer to Acts 15:41; Gal. 1:21). We know nothing about the years between Paul's departure for Tarsus and his arrival in Antioch (see Acts 9:30; 11:25-26). His trance in Jerusalem cannot be identified with this event because that trance does not fit the chronology (Acts 22:17).
 - ii)** We have already suggested that it was a life-changing event, and Paul will explain its repercussions in 12:7-8. But it also predates the establishment of the church in Corinth, which he claims validates his credentials as an apostle (3:1-3).
 - (1)** It means that he had spent months with them and never mentioned this incident once. As far as he is concerned, his visions had nothing to do with their becoming Christians; therefore, visions have nothing to do with authenticating an apostle.
- e)** Paul describes himself as being “snatched” or “caught up” to the third heaven and to paradise.
- i)** This verb suggests that “Paul's experience was an involuntary one in which God took the initiative rather than one brought about by preparation or special techniques.”
 - ii)** The experience was not something he sought or initiated and therefore was not something that he could repeat whenever he wanted.
 - iii)** It is something God did, and something only God can explain.
- f)** Paul repeats twice that he does not know the circumstances of his ascent, whether it occurred in the body or out of the body (12:2-3).
- i)** Why does he repeat himself?
 - (1)** One commentator thinks that Paul “may be emphasizing his total lack of comprehension about how the event occurred. It was a wonderful happening whose mode of operation was known only to God.” This conclusion makes the best sense of Paul's repetition.
- g)** The reference to “being caught up to the third heaven” in 12:2 and “caught up to paradise” in 12:4 presents another perplexing detail.
- i)** Barclay: "The word Paradise comes from a Persian word meaning a walled-garden. When a Persian king wished to confer a very special honor on

someone specially dear to him, he made him a companion of the garden and gave him the right to walk in the royal gardens with him in intimate companionship. In this experience, as never before and never again, Paul had been the companion of God."

- ii) The New Testament features the word paradise three times: Luke 23:43, "Today you will be with me in paradise"; Revelation 2:7, "To him who overcomes, I will give him the right to eat from the tree of life, which is the paradise of God"; and here.
- iii) Paul's account raises several questions. Is the third heaven identical with paradise? If not, is paradise in a realm higher than the third heaven and was his ascension a two stage process?
 - iv) Some argue that Paul ascended to paradise in two stages.
 - (1) It could perhaps explain the repetition, in the body or out of the body.
 - (2) While Jewish traditions spoke of seven heavens and even ten heavens, a three-heaven view was the most well established view, with the third heaven being recognized as the highest.
 - (a) 1 Kings 8:27 But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?
 - (b) Ephesians 4:10 He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.
 - (3) Calvin argued that the term "third heaven" is not literal but symbolic: "The number three is used as a perfect number to indicate what is highest and most complete."
 - (4) Another common view is that "The first heaven is that of the clouds; the second of the stars; and the third is spiritual."
 - (5) The most likely view is that "third heaven" and "paradise" are synonyms in this description.
 - v) When all is said and done, Paul confides very little about what happened.
 - (1) We learn only that he was caught up to the third heaven, paradise, how he does not know, and what he heard he cannot divulge.
 - vi) Paul's assurance that he beheld the glory of the Lord (3:18) and the coming glory of the believers (4:17; cp. Rom 8:18) may be related to this incident, but

that is merely a guess and ranges far afield from what Paul actually says.

- (1)** He does not say that he saw anything but reports only that he heard something.
 - (2)** Normally seers tell about what they see, but Paul tells about what he heard, except that he cannot tell it.
 - (3)** He heard unutterable utterances.
 - (a)** Was it impossible to express in human language or was he forbidden to express it because it was too holy or too horrible?
 - (b)** His explanatory statement, “which things it is not lawful for a man to speak” (literal trans.), argues for the latter.
 - (c)** There are certain divine things that humans may not know, and if they are granted the privilege of learning of them, they may not tell. Lazarus may have been such a person. See also Isa. 8:16; Dan. 12:4, 9; Rev. 14:3; and contrast Rev. 22:10.
 - (d)** Paul offers no explanation for why he must remain silent. If he gave any more hints, he would have broken the prohibition.
- vii)** Why did the Lord grant Paul this celestial view if the apostle is unable to reveal it? The vision was designed to encourage Paul in his work for the Lord, during which he would encounter defeat, distress, and physical abuse.
- viii)** When Jesus called Paul near Damascus, he appointed him to be a witness to the Gentiles and informed him how much he would have to suffer for the name of Christ (Acts 9:15-16).
- (1)** Paul met defeat in Damascus and fled under cover of darkness to safety (Acts 9:25; II Cor. 11:32-33).
 - (2)** His ministry in Jerusalem came to an abrupt end when his opponents tried to kill him and Christian friends put him aboard ship to Tarsus (Acts 9:29-30).
 - (3)** As he established churches in the provinces of Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:41; Gal. 1:21), he was flogged and beaten by either Jews or Gentiles (11:23-25).
 - (4)** He must have been discouraged. Yet during the time he spent in the provinces, God gave him the unique occasion of entering heaven for the purpose of strengthening Paul in his apostleship. He treasured the visions and revelations that continued to lift his spirit as he fulfilled his apostolic

task.

- ix) Whatever Paul learned during this experience, it was something he needed to hear but not something that we need to hear. We know all we need to know. Matthew 28:19-20 makes clear that the teaching of the church is based on what Jesus had already commanded on earth, not on the latest visions from paradise.

3) Verse 6

- a) **6 For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me.**
- b) The Corinthians cannot gauge his apostleship based on his tales about ecstatic visions. They can only evaluate him from what they have witnessed from his ministry among them (see 10:7, "Look at what is before your very eyes").
 - i) On the one hand, he does not want them to think too much of him because of any boasting on his part. To flaunt his heavenly visions would create in them a "worldly-minded trust in him, the apostle, rather than in God (cf. 1 Cor 2:5)."
 - ii) On the other hand, he does not want them to think too little of him because of the boasting of others.
 - iii) But validation as God's minister does not come from one's own self-endorsement or from otherworldly experiences.
- c) The problem is that the Corinthians do not understand him fully (1:14), and what they have seen of him they have misread (10:1,10; 11:21).
 - i) He needs to bring them to understand that the life and power of God (13:4) pulse beneath his mask of death, weakness, and humiliation (4:7-12).
 - ii) What is important are not the transcendent moments when he has become spiritually airborne, but his obedience in the daily chore of preaching the gospel faithfully despite "weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties" (12:10).
- d) If there should be anyone in the church who could glory in status, Paul would be the person. He had founded churches in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece. He had worked much harder, had suffered more frequently, and had been exposed to more dangers than anyone else. And he had been given a celestial experience that placed him far above his co-workers and certainly above his detractors.
 - i) But he does not wish to be a fool by bragging irrationally, a behavior that

apparently characterized his adversaries. He wanted to be seen in truth.

- ii) "We are familiar with the danger of thinking too highly of ourselves; it is as real a danger, though probably a less considered one, to be too highly thought of by others. Paul dreaded it; so does every wise man ."

4) Verse 7

a) 7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

b) Barclay: After the glory came the pain.

- i) God brought the elated Paul down to earth and pinned him there with a thorn. But that thorn also kept Paul pinned closer to the Lord.
- ii) The Greek term for "thorn" means either a stake or a thorn. We should not think of the crucifixion because Paul always uses a different Greek word when he writes about the cross.

c) Paul introduces "the thorn in his flesh" as stemming from the excessive number or exceptional nature of the revelations.

- i) He could be referring to the quantity of the revelations and implying that he has received many others besides this one fourteen-year-old revelation.

(1) It is more likely, however, that he refers to the quality of the revelations as in "these surpassingly great revelations."

- ii) Over elation from the incredible experience of being allowed entry into paradise could easily lead to an over inflation of one's ego so that one feels superior to others less blessed by supernal visions.

(1) To prevent such spiritual pride from welling up in Paul, he was given a thorn in the flesh, and the passive voice implies that God gave it to him.

(2) The thorn punctured any pride that might surge within him because of his grand entry into heaven, and the result was that he dealt with others with the meekness and gentleness of Christ (10:1) rather than with the arrogant puffery of Satan. The temptation to elevate himself above his companions was real.

(3) It is telling to compare the attitude of Paul with the attitude of modern day Pontiffs, some of whom also call themselves Paul, as they parade around in their flowing robes and tall pointy hats and stand in lofty positions far

above the crowd. They seem to be exalted far above measure!

iii) The exact nature of this "thorn in the flesh" has prompted much speculation.

(1) Paul does not go into any detail in describing it because the Corinthians apparently were well familiar with what he meant. Some of their number or his competitors may have made it the object of their derision.

(2) As the Pulpit Commentary points out, "There have been endless conjectures as to the exact nature of this painful and most humbling physical affliction" (vol. 19). In that very statement one finds a conjecture - that the affliction was physical. Not all agree with that.

iv) We can divide the numerous theories into four categories: Fringe/Agenda Theories, External Theories, Emotional/Spiritual Theories, and Physical Theories

(1) The Fringe/Agenda Theories

(a) These theories belong to the lunatic fringe and to those who interpret the Bible with an agenda. When you have an agenda, it seems that every verse provides support for it. When all I have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail!

(b) Some have proposed that the thorn was a wife who did not share his convictions, and thus proved to be a constant source of agitation and irritation to him.

(c) Other argue that the thorn was an actual, literal thorn that somehow lodged itself in Paul's flesh and was festering there. This view has been promoted by a few extreme textual literalists.

(d) Among the more bizarre, and certainly despicable, theories is the one by the Very Perverted Bishop John Shelby Spong, who proposed that Paul's thorn in the flesh was the fact that he was "a repressed homosexual."

(2) The External Theories

(a) A popular interpretation is that Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was a figurative reference to his many caustic critics and devoted detractors.

(i) This view has the advantage of being consistent with Old Testament imagery. The enemies of God and Israel were frequently characterized by this figure of speech.

(ii) "If you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land before you, then

it shall come about that those whom you let remain of them will become as pricks in your eyes and as thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land in which you live" (Numbers 33:55).

(iii) Some scholars feel Paul's focus on his many enemies in Chapter 11 is the basis for his "thorn in the flesh" remark in the very next chapter.

(b) Some argue that the thorn was demon visitation. This theory teaches that when Paul was in heaven, his pride overwhelmed him. But he was suddenly attacked by a demon who punished him to keep him humble. Paul prayed three times to the Lord to have the attack stopped.

(3) The Emotional/Spiritual Theories

(a) Others have claimed that Paul suffered from some psychological ailment or distress, perhaps caused by depression over his earlier persecution of the church. But this latter view seems to contradict what Paul says elsewhere:

(i) Philippians 3:13-14 but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

(b) Some say Paul's thorn was a personal struggle with an explosive temper. They point, for example, to his argument with Barnabas and his confrontation with Peter.

(c) A good many medieval theologians felt Paul struggled with "lusts of the flesh." Lenski, however, rightly assigns such a view to "the pathological filthy monkish imagination" of the Roman Catholic theologians.

(4) The Physical Theories

(a) Most interpreters through the years have assumed that Paul alludes to some bodily ailment.

(i) The very word "stake" indicates an almost savage pain. The whole picture before us is one of physical suffering.

(ii) But to do and suffer all that Paul lists in 11:24-27 would rule out some chronic debilitating disease.

(iii) "One wonders if a person who was so often on the battlefield

could have been so physically weak and still have withstood the rigors of Paul's life. ... Paul is one who must be seen as in robust health and with a strong constitution.”

- (iv) Whatever the thorn was, the man who endured so many other sufferings had this agony to contend with all the time.
 - (v) Because Paul prays so fervently to have the stake removed, it was most likely something that he felt interfered with his ministry.
- (b) Many scholars are quite convinced Paul's affliction was epilepsy.
- (i) "When the people of Palestine found themselves in the presence of epilepsy they customarily protected themselves (from the demons they believed to be responsible for this affliction) by spitting. It is sometimes pointed out by those who favor this diagnosis that Paul expresses his gratefulness to the Galatians in that they did not 'reject' him, a word which in the Greek actually means 'to spit out.'"
 - 1. Galatians 4:13-14 You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. 14 And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.
 - (ii) David Lipscomb, in his commentary on the text, also makes this connection.
- (c) Tertullian and Jerome believed Paul's malady was most likely a persistent earache or headache.
- (d) Others suggest a speech impediment -- "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech." (1 Cor. 2:1 and 2 Cor. 10:10).
- (i) The “angel of Satan” could allude to the story of Balaam (Num 22:22-34) where the angel of the Lord gets in his way three times to prevent him from speaking and cursing the nation of Israel, against God's will.
- (e) Some scholars feel it may simply have been Paul's less than impressive physical appearance.
- (i) “His bodily presence is weak” (2 Corinthians 10:10)
 - (ii) It has been suggested that he suffered from some disfigurement which made him ugly and hindered his work. But that does not

account for the sheer pain that must have been there.

- (f)** Barclay: By far the most likely thing is that Paul suffered from chronically recurrent attacks of a certain virulent malarial fever that haunted the coasts of the eastern Mediterranean.
 - (i)** The natives of the country, when they wished to harm an enemy, prayed to their gods that he should be “burnt up” with this fever.
 - (ii)** One who has suffered from it describes the headache that accompanies it as being like “a red-hot bar thrust through the forehead.” Another speaks of “the grinding, boring pain in one temple, like the dentist's drill -- the phantom wedge driven in between the jaws,” and says that when the thing became acute it “reached the extreme point of human endurance.”
- (g)** If indeed Paul's reference to the "flesh" is interpreted to refer to a physical affliction, the most likely explanation for the "thorn," in the minds of most, is bad eyesight.
 - (i)** Indeed, many suggest the problem was far more severe than just poor vision, and entailed a very painful disease of the eyes that could have been both incapacitating and disfiguring.
 - (ii)** After the glory on the Damascus Road passed, he was blind (Acts 9:9). It may be that his eyes never recovered again.
 - (iii)** This was a disease quite common in the Middle East and was referred to as Egyptian Ophthalmia. We know it better today as trachoma.
 - (iv)** We know that Paul had been in the Arabian desert for three years (Gal. 1:17), a region notorious for the prevalence of this particular affliction (which was quite contagious).
 - (v)** Some feel this may explain why Luke (a physician) is often found in the company of Paul. Three times Paul sought relief from God, and also (coincidentally?) we read of three times where Luke joined Paul. It is speculated Luke may have appeared during three particularly painful outbreaks of this affliction.
 - (vi)** Paul speaks frequently of problems with his eyes. In fact, he usually dictated his letters to others, only signing his name at the end, or writing a very brief greeting in rather large letters.
 - 1. “See in what large letters I am writing to you” (Galatians 6:11)

- (vii)** It is also interesting that Paul mentions his "bodily illness" (Gal. 4:13) and "bodily condition" (Gal. 4:14), and then immediately says to the Galatian brethren, "I bear you witness, that if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me" (Gal. 4:15).
- (viii)** Paul had difficulty seeing the high priest, Ananias, at the meeting of the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:5).
- (ix)** It is my opinion that this affliction of the eyes was most likely Paul's "thorn in the flesh," although given the lack of any actual specifics in Scripture, we cannot know for sure. Also, even if we could firmly establish that Paul had poor eyesight, that does not mean that the thorn must be an eye condition. He could have had two ailments.
- v)** The ambiguity about Paul's thorn in the flesh allows others to identify their own personal "thorns" with Paul's.

 - (1)** But we should be careful as we make that application. These verses are easy to trivialize. Not every complaint we might have qualifies as a thorn in the flesh --- and if we do have a thorn in the flesh it is hardly complaining to ask God to remove it. I do not for one instant think that Paul was complaining any more than I think that Jesus was complaining when he voiced a similar prayer in the Garden.
 - (2)** Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was something sent by God to humble Paul so that he would continue being an effective minister of the gospel. Absent that thorn, Paul's effectiveness would have decreased as he, perhaps, became more like the pompous strutting fools he spoke of in the previous chapter and less like the humble servant of God that he was throughout his life.
 - (3)** Many of us have problems in our lives that we would like removed, and perhaps that we pray will be removed -- and yet they remain. Are those problems our thorns in the flesh? Perhaps, but only if their presence makes us a more effective servant of God.
 - (4)** Paul's thorn was given for a reason; that is not the case with all physical suffering.
 - (5)** In Paul's case, his thorn was a constant reminder of God's grace and God's power working through him and a constant reminder that he must not be exalted above measure.
- vi)** In Verse 7 Paul describes the thorn as "a messenger of Satan to buffet me" or

torment me.

- (1) The verb “to torment” (“abuse,” “batter”) implies humiliating violence -- being slapped around; and the present tense suggests that it was persistent -- something that happens over and over again.
 - (2) Remember who is writing this. Paul was tough! We should keep his life in mind as we consider the meaning of “torment.”
 - (3) The stake was physical, but that does not mean the torment was solely physical. Whatever this stake was, Paul thought it was hindering his ability to proclaim the gospel - and that thought must also have been a torment to him!
 - (4) The same word is used for the abuse of Jesus before his crucifixion (Mark 15:65; Matt 26:67), and by choosing this word Paul might connect his sufferings as an apostle with those of Christ.
 - (5) Satan usually comes as God's adversary to lure people away from God's rule, but he sometimes comes as God's proxy to implement trials God authorizes. The story of Job provides the foremost example of the latter.
 - (6) Satan no doubt thought this thorn would be a great hindrance to Paul's proclamation of the gospel, and Paul at least for a time thought so as well, but God knew otherwise.
- vii) What is sent to torment Paul is transformed by God into a means of proclaiming Christ's power and grace.
- (1) This surprising twist reflects the paradoxical way God defeats Satan.
 - (2) God permits Satan to strike the apostle, but God turns the stricken Paul into an even greater instrument of his power.
 - (3) A proud, arrogant Paul would have only hindered the gospel's advance. A humiliated, frail Paul, led as a captive in God's triumph, has accelerated the gospel's progress so that the fragrance of knowing God spreads everywhere (see 2:14).