Second Corinthians 12

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Introduction:

1. This is the third chapter in Paul's defense of his person and his ministry against false apostles and teachers at Corinth.
2. Here is a reminder of the reality of heaven and the attitude with which we must face infirmities and unanswered prayers.
3. And we shall also see the apostle's grave concern about this church falling into division and/or lascivious living.

Outline of Chapter 12

1. 1-6 Paul's extraordinary vision of heaven.
2. 7-10 God's grace perfected in infirmities.
3. 11-12 The Corinthians forced Paul's glorying.
4. 13-15 Paul had never sought their money.
5. 16-19 Paul deals with a slander of theft via others.
6. 20-21 Paul's fear of finding the church full of sins.

12:1 It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.

A. Paul did not boast for his own glory: he knew that was not expedient; he boasted to save Corinth.
   1. Paul already stated the folly and necessity of boasting about himself to Corinth (11:1,16,21,23).
   2. He will say it again in just a few verses, which gives this text a straightforward sense (12:11).
   3. He declared his boasting to be folly all along, but he was forced to such things for this church.
   4. It is generally not expedient for a minister to glory in himself, but Paul was compelled to it.
   5. This text and its reference to expediency cannot mean Paul should not glory in this unique case any more than the other verses listed above would prohibit him from being a fool in this case.
   6. The purpose for this whole section of personal glorying was for Corinth's edification (12:19).
   7. This was not Paul's ordinary purpose in writing or speaking, but he was forced to it to save them.

B. Corinth was a church with great emphasis on spiritual gifts, so Paul raised this subject (I Cor 1:4-7).
   1. There is a great leap from Paul's sufferings for Jesus Christ to his revelations from heaven.
   2. It is a shame today that so many put more stock in visions and dreams than in the word of God.
   3. No one has ever had visions or revelations even close to those of our beloved brother Paul.

C. Those exalting the gifts of the Spirit have always highly esteemed visions and revelations from God.

1. Paul had other revelations and visions (Acts 9:3,10; 16:9; 18:9; 26:19; Gal 1:12; 2:2; Eph 3:3).
2. But this experience he was about to tell far exceeded any other visions or revelations. Glory!
3. What could the charlatans in Corinth raise in comparison to this glorious blessing in Paul's life?

12:2 I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.

A. Paul used the third person to deal very humbly with this glorious event in his life. Mark his example.
   1. The larger context is of Paul's personal accomplishments beginning at 10:1 and going to 13:10.
   2. The smaller context is Paul coming to visions and revelations that he had received (12:1,7).
   3. The third person "man" that had the trip was a man that Paul could honestly glory in (12:5-6).

B. For more than fourteen years, we have no other record that Paul had spoken of this great event.
   1. God had given him this wonderful experience for the confirmation and strengthening of his faith.
   2. God had also given him this wonderful experience for this opportunity to humble Corinthians.

C. He was not sure if only his soul had gone to the third heaven, or if his body had been taken as well. And if Paul was not sure of how this event occurred, we are foolish to even inquire into it at all.

D. What is the third heaven? Where is it? Did Paul go to the place of the redeemed before having died?
   1. There are three heavens: (1) where birds fly, (2) space for planets and stars, (3) God's heaven.
   2. The first two of these may be understood by reading Moses' creation account in Genesis 1.
   3. The third heaven is the same as paradise, as Paul will use it as a synonym shortly (12:4).
   4. The third heaven, or paradise, is where the thief went the very day that he died (Luke 23:43).
   5. And since Jesus was going to be there as well, it must be God's very presence (Luke 23:46).
   6. The third heaven, or paradise, is where the tree of life is blooming with eternal life (Rev 2:7).
   7. Paradise is Abraham's bosom, the heavenly place that Abraham sought (Luke 16:22; Heb 11:16).
   8. Where do angels take elect men at death or translation? To the third heaven (II Kings 2:1,11).

E. We cannot prove when or where this event occurred. We cannot assign it to Lystra (Acts 14:19-20).

F. The Lord Jesus had given this event to Paul to encourage him in his great work, and it may have occurred during his trance in the temple at Jerusalem at his Gentile commission (Acts 22:17-21).

12:3 And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;)

A. Paul repeated himself for emphasis, because what he is now describing is most remarkable indeed.

B. The words are not redundant or unnecessary. It is a common practice to repeat for greater emphasis.

12:4 How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

A. Here Paul described heaven as paradise: the third heaven is the same by use as a synonym (12:2).

B. The Garden of Eden is never called Paradise in the Bible, though men often call it by this name.

C. The man under consideration is Paul, but he is still referring to himself by the third person "a man."

D. How were the words unspeakable? He heard things beyond human communication (9:15; I Pet 1:8), as it is common for a man to hear or feel things that he cannot possibly put properly into words.

E. Observe from what follows that there was an abundance of revelations made to Paul, the nature of which was beyond his ability to properly communicate to the dull hearers at Corinth (12:7).

F. How were they not lawful to speak? Jesus Christ gave them only to Paul. We are limited to the N.T. And the Lord Jesus Christ sealed up Paul's vision and revelation from our understanding until later!

G. Observe from what follows that there was an abundance of revelations made to Paul, which went beyond the Lord's plan for our knowledge of things at this time (12:7).

H. Why did Paul not tell us these things? Surely there would be many more believers by his testimony.
   1. The main purpose for the details of what Paul heard was his own personal encouragement.
   2. God has given us enough information in His Word for our faith, and we should not need more. If we firmly believe all we read in Scripture, we have been given much indeed (II Pet 1:16-19).
   3. We walk by faith, not sight. If He were to give the details, then less faith would be required.
   4. Consider your weak mind and imagination and vocabulary. How could you possibly comprehend heavenly mysteries in your present state before glorification (John 3:12; I Cor 2:9)?

12:5 Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

A. I will glory in the third person about this event to me, but I personally will only glory in my troubles.

B. Though mentioning this vision and revelation for his defense, he keeps his focus on his infirmities.

12:6 For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me.

A. Paul could have gloried more in this great revelation, for he was giving a true record of real events.
   1. He spoke in the subjunctive mood, the hypothetical and possible case of further glorying.
   2. He would not be a fool by such glorying, because the event was fantastic, and it was all true!
   3. The sense of this part of this verse has been seen before in a context of his authority, where he argued that there would no shame in his boasting due to the truthfulness of it (10:8).

B. But he chose to not glory further in the revelation; he would glory in what men could see and hear.
   1. Are you able to forbear speaking when you have abilities, knowledge, or experiences that exceed those of the persons with whom you are talking? Here is a wonderful example of humility.
   2. The weakness of any vision or revelation is the lack of corroborating evidence (II Pet 1:16-19).
   3. Paul did not want to defend himself by an event that he could not fully prove to them all.
   4. So he restrained himself to the things that could be verified by sight and reputation – infirmities.

12:7 And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

A. Lest Paul get puffed up in pride by his trip to heaven, God humbled him by Satanic oppression.
   1. Pride is a very serious threat to every single child of God, and we must war against it at all times.
   2. If you do not reject pride by His word and Spirit, He may have to humble you in other ways.

B. We understand this thorn in the flesh to be some bodily ailment that caused Paul further suffering.
   1. The LORD can use Satan as a tool for bodily ailments. Job suffered greatly by Satan's buffeting.
   2. An evil spirit in a person can cause physical afflictions, as in a bowed woman (Luke 13:10-17).
   3. Here might be a possible further explanation for Paul's weak bodily appearance, if it was visible.
   4. We know Paul likely had poor eyesight by the Galatians desire to replace them (Gal 4:13-15).
   5. Whatever it was, Paul did not like, it was Satanic, it was a buffeting, and it was effectively bad.

C. Consider why some things have not worked out in your life? Could you have wisely handled them?
   1. Certain business, employment, or investment successes might have led you to pride or carnality.
   2. Certain physical features or abilities might have led you to haughtiness or worldliness. Consider.
   3. Certain family blessings might have provoked you to arrogance or continuance in your errors.
   4. You can know one thing for certain – God does all things for His own glory, so glory in Him!
   5. The lesson is to learn to live without pride in any area of your life and give all areas to the Lord!

12:8 For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

A. The satanic spirit to buffet Paul into humility was painful enough that he asked for it to be removed.
   1. For the reasons given above, God did not hear the first, second, or third prayers as Paul hoped.
   2. God had a different answer for Paul than what he desired: God would give him grace to bear it.

B. The blessed God does not owe you the answer to any prayer, but by His promise to answer prayers.

C. Even then, when He does answer your prayers, He is not bound to answer them the way you expect.

12:9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

A. The first half of the verse is the Lord's answer to Paul's three prayers for the thorn to be removed.
   1. There was another way Paul could cope with his thorn in the flesh. God could help him bear it.
   2. God's grace was sufficient for Satan's painful thorn, for God's grace is sufficient for anything!
   3. If you do not feel God's grace is sufficient for your infirmities, it is your own fault (I Cor 10:13).
   4. Paul wanted the thorn gone. God promised help for it. Whose glory and will is always best?
   5. God's strength is made perfect – best displayed – in a man bearing up under obvious difficulties.
   6. Can you grasp this important lesson? God is better glorified in your pain than in your prosperity!

B. God may send afflictions and trials in your life and not remove them for His and your own profit.

1. The grace to bear the calamity is often greater than your perceived blessing of it being removed.
2. Since you cannot see beyond this moment, you do not know why God may not answer a prayer.
3. How do you know you would not swell in pride and depart from God with your desired blessing?

C. The second half of the verse is Paul's response to God's declaration of why the thorn would remain.
1. Paul did not submit barely to God's alternative to his request. He most gladly chose to glory!
2. The "therefore" explains that Paul's choice to glory in infirmities were due to Christ's reasons.
3. Is your heart so committed to God's glory that you can rejoice in infirmities to show His power?
4. Your perfection is by God's helping grace and strength in enduring trials, not eliminating them.
5. It is your wisdom to rejoice in afflictions and trials as for your profit (Rom 5:3-5; James 1:2-4).
6. It is also your wisdom not to confuse your foolishness and stubbornness with God's trials!

12:10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

A. In consequence, "therefore," Paul accepted the Lord's alternative and chose to take pleasure in pain!

B. How can you take pleasure in pain? Is it deceit? A fraud? A pretense? No! God's grace relieves pain!

C. The strength of Jesus Christ is better shown through your afflictions than through your successes!

D. Consider the several categories of troubles that the beloved apostle gives in this glorious text.
1. Infirmities. Human weaknesses, handicaps, defects, or disease that reduce a man's natural force.
2. Reproaches. Blame and slander and other personal assaults that damage the reputation of a man.
3. Necessities. Shortages of food, money, clothing, or other things that hinder proper performance.
4. Persecutions. Direct attacks to destroy a man, his work, his reputation, his will to continue on.
5. Distresses. Situations that bring evil circumstances to bear that put undue pressure on a person.

12:11 I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me: for I ought to have been commended of you: for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing.

A. Corinth forced Paul to glory in himself, which would ordinarily make him a fool (11:1,16,21,23).

B. Though it was doubtless not expedient for Paul to glory (12:1), this church had forced his hand to it.

C. Instead of Paul commending himself to save them, they should have commended him by themselves.

D. In summarizing his person and office, he states again his rank at the head of the apostles (11:5).

E. Yet, as usual with Paul, he covered himself by saying that he was nothing in the world (I Cor 15:10).

F. When did you last tell anyone that you are nothing? Paul was one million times your superior!

12:12 Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.

A. Having done his glorying about his infirmities, he closed out his glorying by the proofs of an apostle.

B. The apostles were very special men, and they had very definite superiority in numerous abilities.

1. From the very beginning, Jesus Christ specially magnified His handpicked men (Acts 5:12-16).
2. Of all the ministerial offices in the New Testament, the apostles were first of all (I Cor 12:28).
3. It was not unusual for the apostles to speak of their great miracle power from Jesus Christ (Luke 10:17-20; Acts 2:22-23; Rom 15:17-21; Heb 12:1-4).

C. Paul, when at Corinth, had given all the signs – evidences and proofs – that he was an apostle.
1. And he had performed all the proofs of an apostle in Christian patience – exceptional grace to keep preaching and serving against all forms of opposition and persecution.
2. Signs – casting out devils, speaking in tongues, healing, and other gifts (Mark 16:17-18).
3. Wonders – miraculous works above and beyond the ordinary sign gifts (Acts 19:12).
4. Mighty deeds – we are not told what these great works were, but they were similar to the others.
5. Keep in mind that at Lystra the apostle had risen from the dead (Acts 14:19-20).

12:13 For what is it wherein ye were inferior to other churches, except it be that I myself was not burdensome to you? forgive me this wrong.

A. Paul sarcastically rebuked the church for not accepting and commending him as a true apostle.

B. He asked them to identify what he had done among other churches that he had not done at Corinth, for the others churches had accepted and commended him as truly an apostle of the Lord Christ.

C. The only difference he made with Corinth was to personally work for free, which he suggested as the reason for their neglect and disrespect of him (11:8).

D. He ironically and sarcastically asked them to forgive him for this horrible deed against them!

12:14 Behold, the third time I am ready to come to you; and I will not be burdensome to you: for I seek not yours, but you: for the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children.

A. Planning his third visit, he was not planning to take anything financial from them on this trip either.
1. Paul had only been in Corinth one time as of this writing, as he had stated earlier (II Cor 1:15).
2. How do we understand the third time Paul was ready to visit them? The sincere plans for a previous trip that had been scuttled for various reasons (I Cor 4:19; 11:34; 16:4-9; II Cor 2:2).
3. So sincere and strong were his plans to visit before now that he refers to it in context, thou it was only a desired and hypothetical presence based on his plans for that second visit (II Cor 2:2).
4. Therefore, we understand his first visit to establish the church (Acts 18:1-18), his second visit in plans that were not kept (II Cor 1:15; 2:1,12-13; 7:5-9), and his now present plan to visit them.

B. His purpose was not their financial remuneration, but rather their souls, which he intended to serve.
1. Paul, ever the godly example of a great minister of Christ, was not interested in their money.
2. Every true minister of Jesus Christ is far more interested in the souls of men than finances.
3. Paul here was providing a detailed expose on the covetous character of the false apostles.

C. Invoking a rule of godliness, Paul exalted his character by comparing himself to noble parents.
1. Solomon taught the same rule in wisdom – parents should give to children (Prov 13:22; 19:14).

2. And there are examples of this rule in the Old Testament (Genesis 24:35-36; 31:14-15).
3. Paul truly saw himself as the father of these converted Gentiles in Corinth (I Cor 4:14-15).

12:15 And I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved.

A. Here is Paul's heart and spirit, more clear proof than any miracle of his divine commission by Christ.
B. To be spent is to give all you have and have nothing left, and Paul was willing to do this very gladly!
C. As a good father, he promised to give them everything he had, though they had little love for him.
D. Not only do Christ's ministers not worry about financial concerns, neither do they about popularity.
E. Church members may also learn from this example that they should be willing to give and love, regardless of the response from the object of their affection and service.

12:16 But be it so, I did not burden you: nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you with guile.

A. Here is one of those places in the word of God where we carefully divide the sense (II Tim 2:15).
B. This verse must be understood as raising a false accusation by Paul's wicked enemies in Corinth.
    1. Paul has already stated that he did not take financial support from Corinth, so there is no reason for him to be redundantly repeating himself again (I Cor 9:1-19; II Cor 11:7-12; 12:13-15).
    2. He has already moved to the future tense, so there is no reason to repeat the past tense (12:15).
    3. If Paul wrote seriously of taking them craftily with guile, there is contradiction with the context.
    4. If Paul wrote seriously of taking them craftily with guile, there is profane heresy (I Thes 2:1-12).
    5. It is a travesty of Scripture interpretation and ministerial conduct to take these words literally as Paul's and propose that Christ's servants win men to the gospel by crafty deception. God forbid!
    6. There is nothing in this verse or in the context near or far about gospel or any other salvation.
    7. What is the preceding context? Paul's financial dealings with the church at Corinth (12:13-15).
    8. What is the following context? Paul and Titus's spirit in not taking from Corinth (12:17-19).
    9. In this text, Paul raised a further false accusation by the false teachers of his covetousness.
    10. The words regarding his craftiness and use of guile are their words charging him with theft.
    11. Though he had not financially burdened them personally, which was thoroughly known by all in Corinth, yet he had used craftiness in sending other men to extract monies for his personal use.
    12. The most important key to understanding any text is context. See the next verse for instruction!
C. What is meant by, "But be it so"? These are Paul's words granting agreement about not taking from them, but introducing their additional slander. We might say in such a form of arguing, "So we agree," or, "You will grant me," or, "But for sake of argument."
    1. The context has already stated seriously Paul's lack of burden to the Corinthians (12:13-14).
    2. It would be redundant and nonsensical to repeat it here in this context with the following verses.
    3. Paul accepted their agreement that he had not burdened them AND their further false charge.

4. These words cannot refer backward to the previous verse but rather forward to a new slander.
5. He has so thoroughly established the fact of not being a burden that he cannot be restating it.

D. What is meant by, “Nevertheless”? It is a further false charge after accepting his lack of burden.
1. They had to admit that he had not been a financial burden in Corinth, for he took nothing.
2. But, opposed to that admission, they were charging him with gaining funds through subtlety.
3. The word nevertheless sets the two halves of this verse in contradistinction the one to the other.
4. Why in the world would Paul seriously say he had not burdened them financially but had taken from them financially through crafty guile? Any such interpretation is foolish and profane.

E. The accusation is simple: Paul had not taken anything, but he had sent others to get funds for him.
1. While not taking any support personally, which they admitted, Paul was preparing an end run.
2. He had sent Titus and/or others to gather funds that he could divert for his own personal gain.

12:17 Did I make a gain of you by any of them whom I sent unto you?

A. This text tells us in what sense we are to understand the previous verse – a new slanderous charge.

B. Paul’s wicked enemies in the church at Corinth were accusing him of getting monies out of the church through the men that Paul sent to help him and serve the church.

C. Should we assume a positive or negative answer to this question? Interpretation must answer it.
1. We assume a negative answer by virtue of 12:18 and the overall context of Paul’s character.
2. Consider that a negative answer contradicts Paul in 12:16, if he is speaking literally of himself.
3. If we assume a positive answer, in order to match 12:16, then we have Paul admitting theft.

D. Paul’s answer to the false accusation of 12:16 is clear and simple. You know I did not gain by them.

12:18 I desired Titus, and with him I sent a brother. Did Titus make a gain of you? walked we not in the same spirit? walked we not in the same steps?

A. How did Paul desire Titus? Back in Philippi? You supply the ellipsis. I desired Titus to visit you.
1. Paul had desired Titus to go to Corinth and help them toward finishing the collection (8:6).
2. It is a horrible shame to read and hear those with a literal, straitjacket hermeneutic that have little ability to understand verses like this where the figure omits words that must be supplied!

B. When Titus came to help the Corinthians, they sent him back with great joy toward Paul (7:4-16).

C. Titus had the very same sacrificial and serving practices as did Paul, both in spirit and actions.

12:19 Again, think ye that we excuse ourselves unto you? we speak before God in Christ: but we do all things, dearly beloved, for your edifying.

A. Do you think we are carefully defending our character out of mere interest in promoting ourselves?

B. Do you think we are carefully defending our character out of merely a response to false accusations?

C. Paul reminded them that first of all he spoke before God in Christ, by Whom he would be judged.

D. Paul reminded them that his purpose from first to last had been their edification, not their funding!

12:20 For I fear, lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not: lest there be debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults:

A. Having heard of the slanders from Corinth, Paul was afraid of the sins he would find in the church.
   1. He desired to find a church in holiness, which would allow him to show the meekness of Christ.
   2. If he found them otherwise, then they would find him undesirable – bringing apostolic judgment.

B. From the false accusations, pompous posturing, and other sins of the false apostles and teachers, Paul was afraid of finding a real mess in the church at Corinth.
   1. What did Paul fear? Drug use? Abortions? Drunkenness? Rock music? Fornication? Heresy?
   2. Debates! This is the cantankerous and implacable sin of unnecessary and unlearned wrangling about words to no profit without proper respect to the man of God or the word of God.
   3. Envyings! The puffed up resentment of teachers against Paul's position of apostolic leadership.
   4. Wraths! When nothing else will work in an argument, there is always the tool of getting angry.
   5. Strifes! Battles, feuds, cliques, and petty wars among the teachers themselves and against Paul.
   6. Backbitings! Talking to the damage of those who are not present, which is the sin of murder.
   7. Whisperings! Spreading by innuendo or whispers information about another that harms him.
   8. Swellings! Puffed up arrogance that causes men to be bloated with pride and beyond reason.
   9. Tumults! Commotion of a multitude; public disturbance; disorderly or riotous proceedings.

C. It is important for us to fully appreciate the category of sins that Paul condemned here.
   1. Rather than sensational sins that so many can imagine and focus their hatred against, these are the sins that infect many churches where pastor, deacons, and people feud, fight, and backbite.
   2. God hates among other things the man that sows discord among the brethren (Proverbs 6:16-19).
   3. Maintaining the unity and peace of a church is a primary goal for everyone (Eph 4:3; I Cor 1:10).

12:21 And lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and that I shall bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness which they have committed.

A. Here is a second category of sins that Paul feared in Corinth beyond those of disunity and feuding.

B. While excluding and restoring the public fornicator, it appears the false teachers had allowed much more extensive carnal living on the part of the Corinthian church, which fits the character of the city.

C. How would God humble Paul among the Corinthians by having sinners of the sort described here?
   1. It is a shame to a minister when he applies his talents to convert a man and finds him deep in sin.
   2. There were not just a few with the possibility in this church, for Paul wrote the word "many."
   3. Instead of coming in joy, he would be reduced to bewailing (lamenting) their sinful condition.
   4. After having boasted to others of the great work in Corinth, he would be humbled by their lives.
   5. The work of discipline, for a parent or for a pastor, is not the glorious work of praise and reward.

D. Here are sins that are not opposed much in the seeker sensitive and contemporary craze of today.

1. Uncleanness! Here is a broad category of moral or sexual impurity that includes fornication, but is broader than just fornication. In our world we can think of pornography, movies, jokes, etc.
2. Fornication! Here is the specific sin of sexual intimacy with someone other than your spouse.
3. Lasciviousness! A broad category of undisciplined conduct that is lewd, lustful, or wanton.

Conclusion:

1. There is a heaven, for Paul went there. We now grasp his glorious comparisons with eternal glory (4:17-18).
2. There is a way to approach afflictions, which will come in a believer's life (12:7-10; Jas 1:2-4; Rom 5:3-5).
3. There are two categories of sins all churches must hate – warring disunity and worldly lasciviousness.
4. Can you learn personally from the humility, patience, and selfless giving of our beloved brother Paul?

For Further Study:

1. The sermon outline, "Forgotten Sins," which defines many sins in this chapter and others misunderstood in Scripture.
2. The sermon outline, "Why Bad Things Happen to Christians," which limits the causes to four categories of reasons.