

Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1-13

Title: Vision, Thorn, and Signs

Truth: Paul offers three more credentials proving his apostolic authority.

Date/Location: Sunday August 30, 2026 at FBC (revised from 11/5/2006)

Introduction

Paul continues his uncomfortable boasting in order to put the false teachers in their proper place in the eyes of the Corinthians. He has a lot of qualifications that those teachers do not have, but he has not majored on them in his relationship with the Corinthian church up to this point in order to keep the focus on Christ. Now, he is sharing these boast-worthy things so that the focus will *stay* on Christ and get off of the false apostles. They questioned his authenticity and by so doing attempted to lead the church astray.

What Paul is doing here is giving the church three more reasons to accept his apostolic authority and teaching. They center on God and God's work in Paul, not in Paul himself.

I. The Heavenly Vision, v. 1-6

A. This was a capstone experience, atop of all of the other revelatory activity that Paul had. He uses the phrase "such a man" to refer to himself in the third person. We know it is a self reference from a remote vantage point because Paul is the only one who could have known the details of the vision recorded here, and he is the one with the thorn in the flesh to keep him humble about this very vision. But he used that third person way to refer to himself because he was embarrassed about having to boast like this. He does not really want to boast about himself or his accomplishments, for that is really nothing. That is all what God had accomplished through him. He would only boast in his weaknesses because in so doing he would bring glory to God, who carried him through those weaknesses.

B. So far, he has boasted about his expert knowledge (11:6), his no-cost preaching (11:7), his ethnic background (11:22), and his ministerial trials (11:23-29). Now, he is going to boast about his **visions** and **revelations** from God. Visions for the purpose of divine revelation. Such things have happened only at rare times in history

and mostly to prominent figures such as Abraham or Moses or Ezekiel or Daniel or Peter or Paul.

- C. A **vision** is something seen in a dream (Dan. 2:19), a day-time trance (Acts 10:10), or something otherwise “seen” with the mind’s eye. Its origin is supernatural. The term emphasizes *how* the information is received. **Revelation** is a broader term, including visions, but it also includes other forms of disclosure from God such as direct speech. It emphasizes the content of *what* is received.
- D. Paul received many visions—Acts 9:3, 9:12, 16:9, 18:9, 22:17, 23:11, 27:23 (on the Damascus road, the Macedonian call, encouragement in Corinth, instruction to leave Jerusalem, encouragement in Jerusalem, and encouragement just before being shipwrecked. Paul was no stranger to this way of getting information from God. He learned of God’s program for the church in this age through these means (Eph. 3:5).
- E. Details concerning this most notable vision are as follows.
1. Time of the Vision, v. 2a. The vision occurred 14 years before the writing of 2 Corinthians, about 42 or 43 AD. This would put it during the so-called “silent years” of Paul’s life from AD 37-46 which he spent in Syria and Silicia (Gal. 1:21). Paul’s missionary journeys started about AD 47, well after this vision occurred. The vision did not occur when Paul was stoned, supposedly to death, in Acts 14:19-20.
 2. Uncertainty as to Bodily State of the Vision, v. 2b, 3b. Two times the apostle tells us that he did not know if the vision occurred while he was in his body or outside of it. It did not really matter to him, for he understood that even if he did not know, God knew. This is a good point to remind ourselves that while so-called “out of body experiences” are claimed by many people, we must be suspicious when people make them out to be infallible, guiding events in their lives. Often these experiences occur during traumatic events or near-death experiences which would tend to put the person’s mind into a shocked or stressed state where it would do strange things. Such experiences must not take the place of the Bible but be subjected to the Bible.

Not even the apostle Paul knew whether he was inside or outside of his body, and he had experienced many revelations from God, so he was no neophyte at this stuff.

3. Certainty as to Location of the Vision, v. 2c, 4a. Even though the mechanism for conveying the vision was obscure, the message communicated was not obscure at all. What Paul saw and heard, he understood.

In the vision, he went up to the third Heaven, also called Paradise. The verb here is the same used in 1 Thess. 4:17 regarding the rapture—Paul was caught up into Heaven (cf. Matt. 13:19; John 6:15, 10:28-29, Acts 8:39, Jude 23). Luke 23:43 records Jesus' words to the repentant thief that they would be together in Paradise later that day. Paul tells us that he was caught *up* to paradise, in the third heaven at the time of his writing. We are taught thus to think of Heaven and Paradise as *up* instead of *down*. Believers who die go there to be with the Lord.

4. Nature of the Message, v. 4b. It seems that Paul would have *seen* some things in this vision. But the text calls out specifically that Paul heard words. These words had two characteristics. First, they were inexpressible. This means unspeakable or too sacred to speak about. Second, they are “unlawful for a man to speak.” This carries the notion of not being permissible.

Even if Paul wanted to tell what he saw, he did not have the capability to talk about it, and he was not allowed to anyway. So, on two counts there is no way that we can know what Paul saw. And we must leave it that way. Speculation about what Paul saw and heard is folly. We cannot know what it was. Let us just humbly admit that and move on. 1 Cor. 2 tells us that people cannot know the things of God unless he tells us—and we cannot know even by guesswork and speculation! We do not and cannot know what the seven thunders in Revelation 10:3-4 said. We cannot know specifically what Jesus said to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27). Theological speculation is not very useful. Let us try to avoid it and instead focus on the things God has plainly told us (Deut. 29:29).

F. Paul may not have known for some time why exactly God gave him this vision. Now 14 years later it, the reason becomes more apparent—so that he can help the Corinthians be freed from their infatuation with the “super apostles.”

II. The Strength of Weakness from a Fleshly Thorn, v. 7-10

A. The Purpose of It. Paul also was aware that it was not only others that might begin to think he was more special than he was—he was in danger himself of getting a big head about this. After all, revelation and knowledge can puff up (1 Cor. 8:1-2). It was this pride that the Lord prevented Paul from getting. Sometimes God does what seems to be a bad or inconvenient thing in order to help us avoid a worse evil!

B. The Ultimate Source of It. God’s intervention came in the form of a “thorn in the flesh.” Paul says, “it **was given** to me.” The ultimate agent of this passive verb is God. The thorn is an unknown physical malady that was a chronic problem. It was a purposeful affliction because it reminded Paul of his inability, dependence, and mortality. It drove him to depend on God. Paul was driven by both inner affliction and outward trials to trust God (2 Cor. 1:9).

C. The Satanic Involvement in It. This thorn in the flesh is also called a messenger of Satan. It “buffeted” Paul—it beat him up. It was a serious problem. We know from other passages that Satan afflicts people sometimes (Job 2:5-6, Luke 13:16). God uses Satan as the intermediate agent to effect a good purpose! Satan does not work on someone without God’s permission. Note that Satan is limited (as in Job’s case) and cannot indwell a believer (1 John 4:4).

Note this truth: Satan is used by God (unwittingly?) for our good and sanctification. It is not that what Satan does is good, but God works all things together for good to those who love God (Rom. 8:28). It is like Eccl. 3:11 which says that God has made everything appropriate or fitting (beautiful) in its time. Some of those things in the list of 14 opposites are not “good” but can be used for good. Here, the good was to keep Paul humble.

D. Earnest Prayer, v. 8. At the point Paul received the thorn, he probably did not understand everything that he related in verse 7.

So, he prayed earnestly that God would remove the thorn. Maybe he asked God to take the thorn away so that his ministry would be easier and more effective. It is good to pray earnestly. Prayer in such cases is not sin even though the eventual answer is no. Paul asked God three times—probably three seasons of prayer, not just three times the same morning of one day. It is not a sin to ask God several times for the same thing. This is the message of Luke 18:1-8. We can do that while avoiding the use of vain repetitions as unbelievers do (Matt. 6:7).

- E. God's Answer, v. 9a. In Paul's case, the answer to the prayer was basically "No." Good prayer does not guarantee the removal of the problem! Do not be crushed when the answer comes back as a no.

Instead of directly saying "no," God said that His grace was sufficient for Paul. There was something better for Paul than the removal of the thorn. The rationale of God's answer is that divine power is displayed most obviously in the context of human weakness. This is because God's power is not alloyed with the arm of flesh; it is clear that it is God and not man accomplishing the work. But it is not just the *display* of power that we are talking about here. It is also the *quality* of the power. God's strength is perfected in the context of weakness. God can work more effectively through a weak, humble vessel than a strong, proud one. If Paul prayed to remove the thorn because it would help him minister more effectively, he could not be more wrong—its presence actually *helped* God's power to be more effective and his ministry to be more powerful, despite how it seemed.

- F. Application: When to Pray. We must continue to pray while the answer is still coming; but once it comes, we must accept it and not start whining to God. In this passage, God "said" in such a way that it was a final answer. There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it. In other words, there is a time when we ought to *stop* praying—once we know the answer! There is a way to pray with faith that does not get crushed when the answer does not come the way we hoped. In other words, we can pray in faith, knowing God hears, but we must leave the answer to God. It is possible that we are not praying in accord with what God ultimately wills for the situation

because we do not know or see everything that God does (James 1:6, 1 John 5:14-15).

G. Paul's Response, v. 9b-10

1. Boasting in Infirmary, v. 9b. The truth is "God's strength is made perfect in weakness." Once Paul got that truth, he did not grudgingly accept it. He gladly accepted it, so much so that he would glory before others about it. He knew that Christ's power would energize him and his service. Paul would rather take weakness with the power of Christ than no weakness and no power of Christ because he was so dedicated to the work of His Savior. It would be dangerous to go without Christ's power, and likewise dangerous to go without the weakness! He could glory in his weaknesses because of what that allowed Christ to do through him. And it is all about Christ anyway—not us!

Attitude is everything here. Paul is not saying weakness with a bad attitude leads to Christ's power. The correct attitude is necessary in the equation to really have Christ's power resting upon us. If we mope around about our problem, we will not be useful to Christ at all.

2. Taking Pleasure in Infirmary, v. 10. Not only does Paul boast, but he also takes pleasure in such weaknesses. He expands his view now from internal weakness that prevents pride and enables Christ's power. Now he also includes external problems (reproaches, needs, persecutions, distresses). Paul welcomes them for the sake of Christ. They are not good in themselves, but if endured for Christ in His service and for His message, they enable His power to be demonstrated.

- H. Out of weakness then comes strength. How opposite the world's view. But isn't that how God operates? (Matt. 18:4, Luke 18:14, 1 Cor. 3:19, Mark 10:42-45). We must adjust our thoughts to the way God does things.

III. The Signs of an Apostle, v. 11-13

Paul says that he made a fool of himself because he felt so awkward talking about his ministry, particularly in light of 10:12. However, it was necessary for him to do this to rescue the Corinthians from

false teaching. They ought to have given him high marks and resisted the false apostles coming into their midst. There are three reasons why they should have done this.

A. He is no Less than the So-Called Super-Apostles, v. 11.

One way to understand the text is that the “chief apostles” refers to the apostolic pillars in the church such as Peter and John. But in 11:5, we saw that a similar phrase was sandwiched in a context concerning false apostles—those who had infiltrated the Corinthian church—and we suggested that this phrase “super apostles” was actually Paul’s way of sarcastically comparing himself to them. That being the case, Paul is simply comparing himself to them and saying they don’t have anything on him—he has the revelatory knowledge (11:6), the ethnic background (11:22), the resume of trials (11:23-33), the revelations (12:1-6), and, we will see next, the gift of doing miracles (12:12).

Even though this is true, Paul admits that he is actually nothing. His personal merit is not what brought him to the point where he is—that is due to God’s work. Paul said that he was the least of the real apostles (1 Cor. 15:8-10), that he was the least of the saints (Eph. 3:8), and that he was the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). But he acknowledged God’s work in him. Thus, he avoided seeing himself as a total worm because of his calling from God. We are nothing in one sense, but our position in Christ and the blessed things He has done for us and to us keep us from complete self-despair. So, we should avoid both extremes: arrogance and worm-theology.

B. He is an Apostle Because He Has the Signs of an Apostle, v. 12.

The word *signs* refers to miracles done by Paul (Acts 19:11). A miracle is a direct intervention of God into history, time, nature, etc. Normally, God works providentially through secondary means, in accordance with what we observe to be the laws of nature. However, sometimes God steps in directly to do something special (creation, the Noahic flood, the miracles in Egypt, crossing of the Red Sea, the provision of manna, the resurrection of Jesus, regeneration, etc.) The Bible assumes that God can work miracles in the world. The worldly presupposition against the supernatural

has no place in the Christian's thinking. God *is* able to intervene directly in the world!

Paul considers miracles from three angles. The “sign angle” refers to those things that authenticate (cf. Heb. 2:3-4); wonders are that which evoke awe in the observer; and mighty deeds display divine power. They are sufficiently uncommon to be good signs: if everyone did them, they would be normal! Miracle workers are actually quite rare in Biblical history—Moses, Elijah and Elisha, Jesus, and the apostles, and that is about it, over thousands of years of history. God does not just do miracles all over the place.

C. He is No Less an Apostle Because of His Refusal of Support , v. 13

Paul's refusal to take support was, for some reason, a problem throughout his relationship with the church. After a proper explanation, though, it should not have been a continuing sore spot. Paul even sarcastically asks the church to forgive him for not taking their money—this was the only way he treated them worse than other churches. But even the sarcasm was for an edifying purpose: to make sure they knew that it did not take away from Paul's apostolic status.

Conclusion

Notice the apostle's humble self-evaluation despite all these credentials of apostolic authority: “I am nothing.” Despite many visions and a visit to Heaven, and Christ working in Him to strengthen him in the face of the thorn in the flesh, and the miraculous signs, he considered himself nothing. The thorn had produced its intended effect, to keep him humble.

Let us follow that pattern, dear friends. We have experienced nothing like Paul did, so if he is nothing, we are less than nothing! Maintaining this attitude helps us when God calls us to serve others, love others, and even to suffer for the Lord.

Notice how Paul downplays the vision and the signs of an apostle. Those sorts of things most captivate people today, but they are not the focus. The focus is on the middle section: God's power in the midst of human weakness. Our weakness highlights God at work in us. And *that* is boast-worthy!

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