
2 Corinthians

Lesson 14

“2 Corinthians 12”

Objective: To explore the ancient text of 2 Corinthians in order to understand more fully and completely the call of God for us today as we seek to live out our lives in service to the Kingdom of God, to His glory, His Honor and His will. These ancient texts can challenge us, and inspire us, to live life more fully as participants in God’s story of redemption and love. At the core, the hope and desire for doing this study is that we will be continually transformed more fully and completely into useful instruments in the hands of God for bringing His message of love and compassion, and life to every creature.

Materials: The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate. It is also our hope that each person will bring to the discussion and class times the things that God has placed upon their heart through their unique journey as people seeking the face of God and the life He seeks to bring.

Procedures

1. To explore biblically and logically what matters most to God in order to understand how we are to live. This will entail exploring the background of these texts in order to understand more fully their intended meaning for their original target audience.
2. We will also seek to explore how these ancient texts, addressed to ancient peoples, should, and must challenge us today in our walk of faith and obedience to the will of God.

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 - 3.** We intend in each instance to offer some practical suggestions as to how the call of God, through His Apostle, Paul, calls us to live our lives in such a way as to reflect our confident hope and expectation in the power of God. We seek the face of God.

In chapter 12, Paul continues his defense against his rivals, the false apostles. In this part of his defense, he continues with the boasting he began earlier; even though he describes it as “not profitable” (οὐ συμφέρον μὲν). In spite of him saying that it is not profitable he still says that it is necessary. Why is it necessary? Likely, it is necessary because the things he is going to mention now are things his opponents are somehow trying to use in order to drive a wedge between Paul and the believers of Corinth and Achaia. The kinds of things Paul chooses to boast about are likely chosen to counteract things being said by Paul’s detractors. Paul is here still very much here in the mode of a caring and concerned father, anxious for the welfare of his children in the faith. It is likely that the false apostles have been bragging about their visions and revelations and so it has become necessary for Paul to speak of his.

In his account, Paul indicates that there are multiple visions and revelations, but he only recounts one here. In verse 2, Paul begins his account by saying that he knew a person who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Some scholars have thought that Paul here was talking about someone other than

himself, while most scholars have concluded that Paul is indeed talking about himself. He says he was caught up into the third heaven. The idea of “layers” in heaven appears in other New Testament texts such as Ephesians 4:10¹ and 2 Peter 3:5, 7.² Jewish scholars had different thoughts regarding the layering of heaven, including some who thought that the “third heaven” was the highest level of heaven. It appears that Paul fits into this category of thinkers.³ Certain highly respected rabbis, in the time of Paul, practiced what is called *merkabah* contemplation. This is when someone would focus their attention intently upon the visions recorded in Ezekiel chapter 1 and 10, which records visions of the Throne Chariot of God.⁴

Rabban Joḥanan b. Zakkai, one of the greatest Jewish scholars at the time of the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 30-90), taught *merkabah* contemplation to some of his most favored students.

¹ **He, the very one who descended, is also the one who ascended above all the heavens, in order to fill all things.** NET.

² **For they deliberately suppress this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water.⁷ But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, by being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.** NET.

³ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2009), pp. 223 -224.

⁴ J. W. Bowker, “Merkabah” Visions and the Visions of Paul,’ *Journal of Semitic Studies* (1971) 16:2, pp. 157-173.

There was a restriction placed on this type of contemplation among the rabbis due to the extreme danger associated with this endeavor. The danger arises because of the general Biblical warning that no man shall see God and live (Exodus 33:20), and in particular because anyone who approaches holiness, or the holy, in an unclean state is in dire danger of death. It is highly probable that the majority of rabbis practiced this type of contemplation at the time of Paul. This was considered to be a higher form of education for the rabbis and reserved for those who were considered to be the elite among this group.⁵ This was considered a credential of spirituality, with this even becoming a type of grading system among certain rabbis. If you were truly an upper level rabbi then you practiced successfully *merkabah* contemplation. This is likely what the false apostles were telling the people of Corinth about, and touting this as a credential of their superiority over Paul.

It is important to remember, that in the case of *merkabah* contemplation that the main purpose of the contemplation was not necessarily to produce visions at all, but to attend exegetically

⁵ J. W. Bowker, "Merkabah" Visions and the Visions of Paul,' *Journal of Semitic Studies* (1971) 16:2, pp. 157-173.

to particular parts of scripture. However, in fact, such contemplation did often lead to esoteric speculation not only with regard to the passages from Ezekiel, but also in regard to the narrative of creation. Within Judaism, over time, there would come to be a whole class of literature associated with this type of contemplation. Because both Ezekiel, and the creation account, were scripture they had to be interpreted simply because of the fact that they were actually a part of scripture; it was necessary for an attempt to be made to understand them. However, it appears that this contemplation was at times so intense that it led to the contemplative practitioner “seeing again” the vision, particularly that of the throne chariot of God. This certainly did not happen on every occasion that a person contemplated on these passages, but it could happen if a person were particularly holy, well trained, and skillful. It was also thought to be necessary, that in order to have such abilities one had to be a direct descendent of Abraham, because he, the “father of the faithful” was also one who was taken up into paradise, according to tradition. Such visions became a sign of extreme faithfulness on

the part of the one who saw such a vision among those in Pharisaic Judaism.⁶

From all that we know, there is certainly every reason to suspect that Paul, due to his training, and his orthodoxy, he would likely have been trained in such a manner so as to undertake *merkabah* contemplation. As a matter of fact, the way Paul phrases some claims about himself, such as that he was deeply and thoroughly trained, and that he was indeed a true descendent of Abraham it may be that in part these were some of the things he was alluding to by such talk. It is known that Paul had at least 8 visions that are spoken of in the New Testament.⁷ It clearly appears that visionary experiences were by no means unusual for Paul. Bowker suggests that the visions of 2 Corinthians 12, and the road to Damascus experience (Acts 9:3-9) arose from a base of *merkabah* contemplation. He compares the visions of Paul with a

⁶ J. W. Bowker, "Merkabah" Visions and the Visions of Paul,' *Journal of Semitic Studies* (1971) 16:2, pp. 157-173.

⁷ The vision on the road to Damascus, the vision of Ananias (Acts 9:12); the vision of the Macedonian man (Acts 16:9 ff.); in Corinth (Acts 18:9-10); Jesus in the Temple (Acts 22:17-21); Jesus during the night (Acts 23:11); the angel in the shipwreck (Acts 27:23-26); the experience described here in 2 Corinthians 12:1-7). There was also of note the promise of Acts 26:16 and the discussion of the resurrection appearances Galatians 2:11 ff.

number of accounts of this type of vision recorded by the rabbis and finds significant similarities.⁸

One of the comparisons is with a dream of Joḥanan who also speaks of the third heaven. This detail has been noted by other scholars before Bowker. Another thing is that often physical journeys were considered to be particularly suitable opportunities for such contemplation; such as Paul's journey to Damascus in order to persecute the church there. A trance-condition was often associated with such visions as is suggested in 2 Corinthians 12:3; in Acts 9:8 ff., 22:11, 26:12-18 (note Paul appears to be the only one who hears the voice on the road to Damascus) and the condition of blindness may also be a condition associated with a trance (Acts 9:9). Paul may have been like other rabbis, who, when they would travel on the road would reflect on the opening vision of Ezekiel. Such a thing may, in part, be the explanation for why we see such a sudden and dramatic reversal in Paul going from persecuting the church to becoming its great advocate and proclaimer.⁹ If Paul was contemplating on this particular passage

⁸ J. W. Bowker, "Merkabah" Visions and the Visions of Paul,' *Journal of Semitic Studies* (1971) 16:2, pp. 157-173.

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from Ezekiel and expecting perhaps an angel to answer him, you can imagine his surprise to hear the voice of Jesus, the very one who he is persecuting answering from the throne of God. This certainly would have induced a dramatic affect in one so devoted to God.

The association of Ezekiel 1 and 10 with the voice of Jesus would have provided a totally coherent context for Paul's dramatic conversion. Bowker concludes that there are enough points of contact between what we know of Paul's visions and those of other *merkabah* mystics to conclude that Paul indeed practiced *merkabah* contemplation as an ordinary consequence of his highly extended Pharisaic training.¹⁰ The things such as speaking of "paradise" (παράδεισον), being "in the body, or out of the body," hearing things that "no mortal" is permitted to repeat are exactly the type of things that we find in other accounts of rabbis undertaking *merkabah* contemplation. The conventions that were in place at the time Paul was writing suggested that telling a story like the one told in 2 Corinthians 12, in the third person, was advantageous when such a story might be heard as a form of self-

¹⁰ J. W. Bowker, "Merkabah" Visions and the Visions of Paul, *Journal of Semitic Studies* (1971) 16:2, pp. 157-173.

promotion. This experience apparently had happened fourteen years earlier, but this is the first time that he recounts such an experience to his audience at Corinth. Those fourteen years of silence would seem to underscore Paul's reluctance to boast in such things.¹¹

Paradise, in the time of Paul, might be a reference to the Garden of Eden, a place of peace above the earth, or the place where God dwelt and cares for those He has chosen. Paradise also came to have apocalyptic overtones with there being the expectation that the first paradise would reappear at the end of this period. Such a notion of an existing, but hidden, paradise may lie behind what Paul says in verse 4. Additionally, the third heaven and paradise are linked in some ancient Jewish literature such as the *Apocalypse of Moses*¹² and *2 Enoch*.¹³ If all of this is the case, then Paul is claiming to have been transported into the highest, and currently hidden, realm of God. In some first-century circles

¹¹ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, p. 223.

¹² 38:1-2, 4-5.

¹³ 8:1, 7-8.

this would have been considered the greatest of such experiences possible.¹⁴

Such an experience could certainly have elevated Paul's authority among those who were impressed by such things. It seems highly likely that the Corinthians were among those who were impressed by such experiences. Paul appears to be reluctant for them to be impressed by things such as these and actually appears to downplay the significance of such experiences. Paul seems to focus on the unknown elements within these visions and thus to be attempting to focus their attention upon the mysteriousness of God, the otherness of God rather than elevating the person experiencing these visions. Whenever we, as human beings, are reminded that God is God and we are not, that God is the creator, and that a person is the creature (in other words created by the creator) then there is no choice except for humility to ensue. In the midst of boasting, and what could be a form of triumphalism swirling about we find Paul seeking to evoke God's mystery and its subsequent call for humility instead of focusing human on the human element of such experiences.¹⁵

¹⁴ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 223-224.

¹⁵ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 224-225.

Paul's next phrase (verse 5) can seem confusing and disorienting to us. We must however remember the context and what Paul is trying to accomplish here. If Paul were simply trying to outdo his opponents by having a greater ecstatic experience than they did, we would not have verse 5, or Paul talking about engaging in foolishness. It is clear that Paul believes that founding his authority, and that of the Gospel message on such grounds is not only foolishness, but also undesirable. Had he chosen to found his authority upon such visions he would have recounted such experiences very differently than he did here. They would indeed have been recited as foundational to his authority, which was exactly what Paul's opponents were claiming by recounting such experiences to the Corinthians as proof that they should be followed over and above Paul.

Paul, however, makes it clear at verse 5 that he will not boast, except in his "weakness" (ἀσθενείας). He continues in verse 6 saying that if he wished to boast, he would not do so as a "fool" (ἄφρων) thus indicating his assessment of his opponents, they are fools. He indicates that he does not boast in such revelations in order that people will not think more of him than

they should. He does not want the focus to be upon him, he wants that focus to be upon God and upon the good news that he has come to proclaim on behalf of God. He desires to be seen as the unworthy, weak, and humble instrument of God, nothing more, and nothing less. The focus is totally different. He even indicates that there is a temptation on his part to boast in the great and magnificent things that God has revealed to him.

At verse 7, Paul indicates that he has been given a thorn in the flesh in order to keep such a temptation from becoming a reality. He indicates that he has a “messenger of Satan” (ἄγγελος σατανᾶ) sent to torment him and to keep him from becoming arrogant (ὑπεραίρωμαι). To say there is virtually endless speculation with regard to what Paul’s thorn in the flesh is, is not in any sense an understatement. We as human beings have endless curiosity and sometimes that curiosity so enthralls us as to cause us to miss the focus here. Whatever Paul’s thorn in the flesh was, apparently the Corinthians were already very much aware of it. There was no need for Paul to name it for them. No matter how much we today speculate regarding Paul’s thorn it is

nothing but speculation, and it certainly is not crucial for us to identify the thorn in order to understand Paul's point here.

Paul wishes to recount that he has been given this thorn in order to remind him to be humble and to focus his attention where God wishes for that attention to be focused. Paul says, at verse 8, he prayed three times for this thorn to be removed, but in verse 9, the answer he received is, "My grace is enough." For Paul this answer was more than sufficient and he indicates that the power of God is in fact made perfect in weakness. Because of this, Paul would "boast" all the more in his weakness, since in this way the focus was taken off of him and placed on God (verse 9). Paul understands that any, and all, strength just like any, and all, of everything else ultimately comes from the same source, God. In all of this argument Paul continues to press for them to have this very different view of the world that focuses on God, and the grace of God, rather than upon human strength, human institutions, and human values as to what is important. He wishes to reorient their compass to point to God, and God alone, as the source of all that is worthy of honor, praise, and boasting. Therefore, Paul will boast in his weakness in order that focus may be placed where it truly

belongs, in God, the creator, the savior, and the hope for something better than what can be obtained in our present reality through our feeble efforts and power.

Verse 11, begins with Paul sounding a note of repentance for his foolishness for boasting in the way that his opponents have boasted. He indicates that he was actually driven to this because of their (the Corinthians) failure to do what should have been their duty; they should have stood up for him and not been silent. He indicates, after all, he is not inferior (ὕστερησα) to these “super-apostles” (ὑπερλίαν ἀποστόλων). He ends verse 11 with what some consider to be a bit of sarcastic hyperbole, that likely repeats one of the accusations made against Paul by his opponents. It may also be the case that he is saying that he is nothing and that Christ is everything. Criticism always hurts, but it usually hurts even more when it is not true. Though Paul works through these issues they still hurt.

At verse 12, Paul reminds his audience that the signs of “the apostle” (τοῦ ἀποστόλου) were indeed present when he proclaimed to them the Gospel message. One of those signs was “endurance” (ὑπομονῆ) which was described in terms of “all

endurance.” The word that Paul uses here for “endurance” is used at key moments in New Testament writings to encourage those that believe to hold on to their faith in the midsts of opposition and trials. In Luke 8:11-15 Jesus explains the meaning of the parable of the sower. Here the seed that bears good fruit is that which holds fast and retains a good heart with “endurance” (ὕπομονή). In the apocalyptic discourse of Luke, Jesus warns in 21:12-19 that his followers will be arrested, persecuted, betrayed, hated, and even killed. Here he tells his disciples that by “endurance” they will gain they souls. James (5:7-11) writes regarding the need for patience and says, “Indeed we call blessed those who showed “endurance.” The writer of Revelation describes Rome and his oppressive powers as a “beast from the sea” in chapter 13. Because of the great power of the beast many will come to worship him, but those who do will suffer the fate of the beast. Here then “is a call for the “endurance of the saints” (13:10).¹⁶

In 1 Corinthians 1:22 Paul is critical of Jews who demand signs in order to prove the message of the cross and yet here he

¹⁶ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 230-231.

uses it as evidence of an apostle. Perhaps it is the case that it is the demanding of a sign that is the problem. Perhaps it is the case that there is a difference when the purpose of the miracles is to bring healing and liberation for others rather than to show off. It is almost certain that Paul expects the audience to know that Paul's signs point to God rather than being seen as an elevation of the man. However Paul intends them to perceive the signs that were done before them, he expresses that they were actually done and that they (the Corinthians) witnessed them.¹⁷ At verse 13, he comes back once again to an issue that obviously was a major problem for the Corinthians and that was the issue of not taking support from them. He, perhaps sarcastically, pleads with them to forgive him for not taking support from them.

At verse 14 Paul indicates that he is about to come to them a third time and that he does not intend to burden them with his support this time either. He casts his reason for not taking support in terms of the parent child relationship indicating that it is the parents who should "lay up" for their children and not the children who should "lay up" for their parents. Here he indicates,

¹⁷ Mitzi L. Minor, *2 Corinthians*, pp. 231-232.

like a good parent, that he is more than happy to spend for his children, and indeed to be “spent.” Paul sets his refusal to accept support in terms of loving them more, rather than, as I am sure it was being cast by the false apostles that he somehow loved them less and his refusal of support demonstrated this. Paul indicates that this is not only false, but the opposite of the truth. Evidently Paul’s detractors had been indicating that he was deceitful. He then reminds them not only of his behavior, but also of the behavior of Titus whom he had sent. In no way, has Paul, or have his companions acted in any way other than honorably.

At verse 19, Paul questions what they think he has been doing, has he been defending himself before them? It is virtually certain that the Corinthians will have answered “yes” here. Paul then clarifies that indeed he has been defending himself, but not to the Corinthians, but to God. He has even used his defense in an effort to build them up not to gain points with them. Paul seeks to place the focus away from himself and upon his mission before God. That is central for Paul. He indicates at verse 20, that he fears that when he comes they may be disappointed in each other and Paul lays out what would disappoint him. He fears that there

may indeed be “quarreling, jealousy, anger and selfishness.” For Paul these would be signs that the grace of God has not effectively transformed them. Indications of the transforming power of God working in them would be the lack of these things as well as the turning from their lives of sin to repentance (verse 21) and changed actions on their part.

What would humble Paul, would be that if these things have not happened, and the transformation of the hearts of his children has not actually occurred upon his arrival. In this instance, Paul is not humbled by them, but before them, by God. Once again Paul tries to reorient their focus to be upon God. He wants their hearts and their actions to be directed toward how they should respond to God rather than focusing on human relationships, human wisdom, human accomplishments, and human reasoning. Paul seeks to turn their focus to God and to recognize His role in all that they have experienced and in the call for their continued transformation into true disciples of Jesus Christ. They are called to pursue God first, and foremost, and to continue to bear the image of God as has been demonstrated to them by Jesus Christ.

Synopsis

As Paul begins this chapter he states that it is necessary to boast, though he says nothing is to be gained by this boasting. He holds boasting and the foolishness of boasting in a tension. THIS IS perhaps due to the immaturity of his audience that have likely been impressed by the boasting of the false apostles. In order to draw them back to their senses, and to continue his efforts to reorient their compass Paul will engage in the type of boasting that these false apostles had been engaging in to the Corinthians. In this boasting, he recounts one of his great visions. This type of vision will have been the stock and trade of many rabbis who had undergone advanced training in the time of Paul.

Paul will go on to say that he had received a “messenger from Satan” in order to insure that he retained his humility. Even though he prayed three times for the removal of this thorn in the flesh the response of God was that, “my grace is enough.” Paul seeks to continue his message, that it is through human weakness, that the power of God is most powerfully, and perfectly displayed. In the midst of this, Paul has learned to be content with what most

would consider extreme negatives; things like “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.”

Paul indicates that he has been a fool in his boasting, but that he was actually forced into it by their (the Corinthians) lack of support for him. Since they would not stand up for him he had been forced, for their benefit, to do it. He reminds them of the signs that they had seen as a part of his ministry among them. Once again the issue of support arises and Paul once again says that he will not take support from them, though it is not because he does not love them. In fact, it is just the opposite he loves them so much, like a father, that he will not take support from his children.

Finally, Paul will challenge his audience to stop sinning and to live as they should so that he will not be humbled before them by their failure to respond to the Gospel message appropriately. In all of this section, Paul seeks to reorient his audience toward God and to see the world in a different way than they had previously. He challenges them to be transformed by the grace of God into the image of Christ, as true, humble disciples in order to fulfill their destiny as image-bearers of God.

Questions

1. What are some things that you see people boasting about?
2. Why do people boast?
3. What is the focus of most boasting?
4. Why do you think Paul boasts in his weakness?
5. What are some things that should keep people humble?
6. Why do you think humility is important in our relationship with God?
7. Why do you think the grace of God is enough for Paul?
8. How would you define grace?
9. What are some examples, in your life, where you have seen grace exhibited in powerful ways?
10. Why do you think Paul is “content” with “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ”?
11. How is Paul strong when he is weak (verse 10)?
12. What does it mean to be a “fool”?
13. What is an apostle?

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14. Why do you think parents sacrifice for their children?
 15. What are some ways that people take advantage of others?
 16. What are some things that you fear for your children? Why?
 17. Why do you think Paul associates the continuation of sinful behavior with him being humbled (verse 21)?
 18. How would you define sin?
 19. How do you think God defines sin?