

**TRIUMPHALISM,  
SUFFERING, AND  
SPIRITUAL MATURITY:  
AN EXPOSITION OF  
2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-10  
IN ITS LITERARY, THEOLOGICAL,  
AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT**  
[Abbreviated by Ted Hildebrandt, for NT Lit courses use]

DANIEL L. AKIN  
Criswell College, Dallas, TX 75201

John E. Wood has aptly stated,

Let it be said at once that II Corinthians fills much the same place in the New Testament as does the book of Job in the Old. It is a letter written by one whose heart has been broken by the many intolerable burdens heaped on him: a man struggling with a recalcitrant church and a malignant foe. If in Romans and Galatians we see the apostle 'proclaiming' the cross with might and main, in II Corinthians we see him 'bearing' the cross, and bearing it triumphantly.<sup>1</sup>

*Theological context*

Within 2 Cor 12:1-10 and its immediate context several important theological motifs are present which assist us in our exposition. These include the development of a weakness Christology, the foundation of apostolic authority, a rebuke of an over-realized eschatology, the Christian life, and the proper place of boasting. This latter subject is related to practical theology, yet it is an equally significant concern of the apostle. We shall briefly comment on each of these in final preparation for our analysis of 12:1-10.

(1) *Weakness Christology*. In 2 Cor 12:1-10 Paul reluctantly "boasts" about visions and revelations though he finds little benefit in such activity. Though he has been "raptured into Paradise" and heard, ἀρρητα ῥήματα, "unutterable utterances," he could not and would not boast in his present self (vv 2-5) after the manner of his opponents. He could legitimately boast (he would be telling the truth), but he "refrained," φείδομαι, because his authority rested in his public, consistent words and witness, and not in the ecstatic experiences of a previous day (vv 6-7a). His thorn in the flesh was an instrument of instruction concerning the sufficiency of divine grace (7b-9a). Further, Paul learned (paradoxically, yes!) that at the center of the Christian life was the principle that perfection (maturity) comes through weakness, power through humility. This principle itself is grounded in a weakness Christology (cf. 13:4), and is that which gives validity and significance to 11:23-33, and counteracts the mindset and claims, of the interlopers at Corinth. Where the opponents of Paul presumed a Christology only of δύναμις, "strength," the apostle rightly operated within the scope of a Christology of ἀσθενεία, "weakness."<sup>19</sup> M. Harris

<sup>18</sup> Forbes, "Comparison," 552; cf. also Carson, *Triumphalism*, 16-27.

<sup>19</sup> Spittler, "The Limits of Ecstasy," 266.

provides a helpful and balanced perspective of this spiritual principle when he states, "Both weakness and power existed simultaneously in Paul's life (note vv 9b, 10b), as they did in Christ's ministry and death. Indeed, the cross of Christ forms the supreme example of 'power-in-weakness'."<sup>20</sup> Thus it is in the context of a weakness Christology that Paul understands and builds his theology of Christian apostleship and, indeed, the Christian life.

(2) *The Foundation of Apostolic Authority*. The basis of Paul's apostolic authority, as we see, is closely related, indeed rooted in his weakness Christology (as is his rebuke of over-realized eschatology and the proper exercise of boasting). Martin summarizes the perspective of Paul when he says,

Paul's weaknesses--whether exhibited in his suffering for the Gospel or centered in the thorn in the flesh--have been his criteria for true apostleship. He has entered into the fray, not in order to boast of his own achievement, but to boast of his weakness. By doing so he has offered the Corinthians an alternative to the opponents that harass him. The alternative is strength-based-on-weakness, a theme no doubt foreign to the opponents of Paul, but one that expressed the heart of his Gospel of a crucified Lord. . . . His weakness is the power of the crucified.<sup>21</sup>

In this same vein Forbes adds,

For Paul apostolic authority is the authority of the Gospel itself, mediated through the apostle. Since the Gospel is the message of the 'foolishness' and 'weakness' of God himself (I Corinthians 1:18-25), the apostle, if he is such at all, embodies that foolishness and weakness. That is to say, his life and work bear the marks of the death of Christ: the physical sufferings and the social stigmata which we find enumerated in the 'catalogues of humiliation.' The pattern is not confined to the apostle, but it is preeminently exemplified in him. His congregations are to imitate him in his 'weakness' as he imitates Christ. Apostolic authority, the embodiment of the power of the Gospel in the person of the apostle, is the eschatological power of God, which is characteristically revealed 'in weakness'. This is what his opponents, in their arrogance, have forgotten.<sup>22</sup>

Forbes identifies, I believe, the crux of the matter when he comments on 12:8-9 by saying, "This then, is why Paul will not boast of anything except his 'weakness,' his humiliations and sufferings: they are to him the surest marks of his commendation by the suffering Messiah."<sup>23</sup> Spittler adds his affirmation to these observations when he comments:

<sup>20</sup> Harris, *II Corinthians*, 347.

<sup>21</sup> Martin, *II Corinthians*, 394.

<sup>22</sup> Forbes, "Comparison," 22.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

"The opponents authenticate their apostolic authority by pneumatic demonstration; Paul paradoxically accredits his own authority by a recital of weakness, thus aligning himself with his Lord who was crucified from a position of *astheneias* (13:4)"<sup>24</sup>

(3) *Correcting Overrealized Eschatology*. The triumphalism of Paul's opponents, as well as their apparent preoccupation with ecstatic experiences, gives evidence of an over-realized eschatology in Corinth. Contrasting Paul's paradise vision with the mystery religions, Lincoln makes an important point which applies also to Paul's enthusiastic, existential, eschatological opponents:

In distinction from the mysteries, for Paul this experience of heaven had no soteriological function as a rebirth elevating him to a higher existence. There is no hint that he looked at it as the point of arrival in his search for salvation or as that which produced a oneness with the divine and a share in God's immortal being. Rather it came to him as someone who was already a 'man in Christ', and that he was granted such an extraordinary personal assurance of the reality of the heavenly dimension through vision and revelation was purely of grace.<sup>25</sup>

Concerning Paul's mystic experience recorded in 12:2-4, Stewart notes,

Even in the apostle's own career, it was quite exceptional. This was not the level on which he habitually lived. The rapture and ecstasy came and passed. . . . Paul himself--this is the point to be emphasized--would have been the first to recognize and insist that such experiences form only a comparatively small part of the soul's deep communion with God in Christ. . . . It was in the daily, ever-renewed communion, rather than in the transient rapture, that the inmost nature of Christianity lay.<sup>26</sup>

Verse 12:6 embodies the essence of Paul's thinking on this issue when he informs the Corinthians that it is his present and continuous public life and proclamation (note the use of the present tense) which is his critical concern, and also his criterion for vibrant and genuine Christian experience.

(4) *Legitimate boasting in the Christian life*. McCant points out that Paul's

'Boasting in weakness' is a parody of boasting and is thus ironical. Under no circumstances does Paul wish to engage in what Plutarch calls *πειραυτολογια* (Paul uses *καυχῆσις*); it is not pleasing to the Lord (11:17).

<sup>24</sup> Spittler, "The Limits of Ecstasy," 262.

<sup>25</sup> Lincoln, "Paul the Visionary," 217.

<sup>26</sup> J. Stewart, *A Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, Reprinted 1975) 161-62.

Since it is forced on him, he will boast 'inoffensively;' and unwittingly he is consonant with Plutarch's rules for avoiding the offensiveness of self-praise.<sup>27</sup>

McCant goes on to show that while Paul's use of "boasting" is consistent with the principles set forth by Plutarch, such may be only coincidence. He further adds more importantly that one should not neglect the OT as a possible source for the apostle's ideas and methods in this area.<sup>28</sup> Having laid this contextual foundation, McCant proceeds to identify in 2 Corinthians 10-13 aspects of boasting which may properly be termed "principles of Paul's theology of boasting." McCant argues that though Paul does not systematize them, he does indeed advocate certain and specific principles for boasting (*καυχῆσις*), a word which in its various forms appears 24 times in 2 Corinthians, 19 alone in chaps. 10-13, five in 12:1-9. Note the following observations.

McCant's summary statement of these principles of boasting is an echo of our prior conclusion concerning the primacy of Paul's "weakness Christology" and the theology of the cross. He states, "Boasting in 'weakness' and 'in the Lord' finds its foundation in Paul's Christology and theology of the cross."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> McCant, "Paul's Thorn," 558-59; cf. Plutarch, *Moralia*, "On Praising Oneself Inoffensively").

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 560.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

## II. *Exposition of 12:1-10 "Glorying about Revelations to His Soul and a Thorn for His Flesh"*<sup>31</sup>

Alford notes that there is no break between this chapter and the last.<sup>32</sup> Especially is 11:22-33 significant to the passage, for it, along with the "thorn in the flesh" (12:7-10) pericope, serves to sandwich the paradise rapture in a context of weakness, thereby de-emphasizing via structural context the importance of this ecstatic experience. Price notes that "Basically, the thrust of the 'pronouncement story' constituted by II Corinthians 12:1-10 is that the blessing of God comes only on the heels of adversity, not in the midst of ecstasy."<sup>33</sup>

Spittler structurally divides the text into five units: v 1, introduction of subject; vv 2-4, the paradise/third heaven rapture; vv 5- 7a, character and grounds for boasting; vv 7b-9a, the *σκόλοψ* and its persistence; and vv 9b-10, strength in weakness.<sup>34</sup> We will adjust this analysis slightly in our exposition.

### 1. *Spiritual ecstasy: the paradise rapture (12:1-6)*

*Verse 1.* "I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord." Paul continues his ironic boasting, and states that it is morally necessary for him to do so (*καυχᾶσθαι*, pres. inf.), even though such boasting is not expedient or beneficial (*οὐ συμφέρον μὲν*).<sup>35</sup> The idea seems to be that such activity is not becoming of the apostle, and that it is not profitable for the Corinthians. Such action is not the best avenue of spreading and defending the gospel, and Paul would prefer not to boast at all.<sup>36</sup> Yet as Barrett says, "It is not expedient to boast, but it might be even more inexpedient not to boast."<sup>37</sup> Thus Paul moves to "visions and revelations from the Lord." In our text "visions" and "revelations" are interchangeable terms, and only a minor distinction between the two is warranted. A revelation may or may not be via a vision, and a vision may or may not be a revelation; Plummer notes

<sup>31</sup> Plummer, *A Critical Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 336.

<sup>32</sup> H. Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament* (4 vols; Grand Rapids: Guardian, 1976) 2.708.

<sup>33</sup> R. M. Price, "Punished in Paradise: (An Exegetical Theory on II Corinthians 12:1-10)," *JSNT* 7 (1980) 34.

<sup>34</sup> Spittler, "The Limits of Ecstasy," 262.

<sup>35</sup> Being aware of several textual variants in this passage, the author feels that it is beyond the scope or intent of this paper to deal with them. In most cases we will follow the UBSGNT 3rd ed. and NIV.

<sup>36</sup> F. Fisher, *Commentary on 1 and 11 Corinthians* (Waco, TX: Word, 1975) 424.

<sup>37</sup> Barrett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 306.

that except in the apocrypha, ὄπτασία, "visions" always points to a vision that reveals something.<sup>38</sup> The use of the plural "visions" and "revelations" may indicate that Paul intended to share several experiences of this type, yet the profitless nature of boasting led him to recount only one.<sup>39</sup> The word κυρίου should be viewed as a subjective genitive/ablative of source. The visions/revelations are "from the Lord" and not "of or about the Lord" (objective genitive). Harris points out that this interpretation is confirmed contextually by v 4, as well as the repeated use of the *divinum passivum* of vv 2, 4, and 7, where the unexpressed agent is God.<sup>40</sup>

Verses 2-4. "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows--was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell." "In solemn and subdued but rhythmical language, which reads as if it were the outcome of much meditation, and which suggests a good deal more than it states, St. Paul affirms the reality of his mysterious experiences."<sup>41</sup> Barrett's comments on these verses are crucial to a proper understanding of what Paul is attempting to accomplish. They serve also as a balanced perspective, and needed correction to some of the form-critical conclusions made popular by Betz. Barrett says,

Even when boasting of his own visions Paul is unwilling to do so directly, and tells his story as if it related to someone else, of whom he speaks in the third person. We may compare the occasional rabbinic use of 'this man' for 'I' ...There is a man who is a visionary, and this man is in fact St. Paul; but Paul would rather be thought of as the weak man, who has nothing to boast of but his weakness. Betz's account (pp. 84-92) of verses 2-4 as a parody of an ascension narrative (of which there were not a few in the ancient world) is full of useful parallels and of suggestion; it seems to me; however, that the passage has an inner motivation that makes it essentially independent of the parallels. Paul is not writing a literary exercise in a given style.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Plummer, *A Critical Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 338,

<sup>39</sup> Martin, *II Corinthians*, 396.

<sup>40</sup> Harris, *II Corinthians*, 397. See also R. V.G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Tyndale; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 169-70; Plummer, *A Critical Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 338; Hughes, Lincoln, and Martin suggest that the genitive may be intentionally ambiguous and therefore capable of either meaning or even both.

<sup>41</sup> Plummer, *A Critical Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 339.

<sup>42</sup> Barrett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 307.

Paul begins in v 2 by stating οἶδα ἄνθρωπον (perf. ind, intensive), He essentially repeats this in v 3. Indeed the word οἶδα is significant in vv 2-3, occurring seven times. Paul describes this man as ἐν χριστῷ, a favorite Pauline designation to describe the vital union of the Christian relationship between a believer and his Lord. This designation, along with the use of the third person, may be Paul's means of highlighting the sacred nature of the experience, or because he wants to maintain a distinction between the Paul who was granted this marvelous experience and the Paul who will only boast of his weaknesses (11:30).<sup>43</sup> To argue that "in Christ" means that in this experience the apostle was "swallowed up in Christ, so as almost to lose his own personality,"<sup>44</sup> is to read into the text more than is warranted. Indeed, Furnish seems to have the right idea when he says, "The phrase 'in Christ' may simply mean 'a Christian' (see e.g., Rom 16:7); or, more probably, it is used to identify this person (Paul) as one whose life has been transformed and made new through faith in Christ (cf. Rom 6:11; 8:1; 1 Cor 1:30 and especially 2 Cor 5:17)."<sup>45</sup>

Paul dates the experience as occurring approximately fourteen years from the time of writing, thus placing the event in the early 40s.<sup>46</sup> He states further that the kind of experience, whether pneumatic or somatic, is unknown to him. He repeats this thought with little variation in 3b, indicating his ignorance, but also his indifference as to the mode of the experience, That it actually happened is certain. The "how" of it is not of primary concern. Perhaps the apostle is purposely avoiding the endorsement of either a Jewish tradition which almost always presumed a somatic rapture in such experiences, or a Hellenistic tradition which almost always envisioned a pneumatic rapture in which the body and soul (ψυχῆ) were separated,<sup>47</sup> As far as identifying this vision with anything specific we know of the apostle, we agree with the unanimous consensus of scholarship that any such

<sup>43</sup> Kruse, *II Corinthians*, 201. For an excellent discussion of the use of the third person see v. P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984) 543-44.

<sup>44</sup> Plummer, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 116.

<sup>45</sup> Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 524.

<sup>46</sup> Hughes would argue for approximately A.D. 44.

<sup>47</sup> Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 525. For interesting, helpful, but also some bizarre ideas of Paul's ascension/rapture experience, I would direct the reader to J. L. Check, "Paul's Mysticism in the Light of Psychedelic Experiences," *JAAR* 38 (1970) 381-89, who evaluates Paul's experience in light of the psychedelic! J. W. Bowker, "Merkabah Visions and the Visions of Paul," *JSS* 16 (1971) 157-73. He isolates parallels to "merkabah visions," which are based upon meditation of the heavenly chariot of Ezekiel; Baird, "Visions, Revelation, and Ministry," identifies the vision in terms of apocalyptic genre, dismissing as unsupported the view that sees the vision in an OT context of the prophetic call.



identification is nothing more than speculation. A popular view sometimes advocated is to identify this vision with Paul's stoning at Lystra where he was left for dead. Plummer says in this context "That he was caught up to heaven when he was lying apparently dead, after being stoned at Lystra (Acts xiv. 19) is a surprising hypothesis."<sup>48</sup> Fisher also notes that this view is "nothing more than conjecture."<sup>49</sup> If we are to be so bold as to set forth any theory, that to which Hughes alludes to seems as reasonable as any. He notes that a number of scholars (Allo, Zahn, Windisch, Plummer?, Bachmann, and Wordsworth) have been inclined to identify this experience with Paul's commissioning at Antioch as apostle to the Gentiles, immediately preceding his first missionary journey (Acts 11:26; 13:4).<sup>50</sup> Regardless of its identification, our text affirms that the experience was personal to Paul, and intended only for him, his edification and encouragement. Paul says of this experience that he was "caught up, raptured" (ἀρπαγέντα, v 2, ἠρπάγη, v 4) into the third heaven or paradise. The word ἀρπάζω is also used by Paul in 1 Thess 4:17 to describe the rapture of believers at the appearance of the Lord Jesus. The passive voice indicates that Paul was not the active agent of the experience but a passive subject. He was literally "snatched up" by the Lord himself. This is in keeping with his literary use of the third person, as well as his passivity throughout the pericope of 12:1-10. The phrase "third heaven" is the first of a number of hapax legomena in this text. While a great deal of attention has been given to this phrase as providing insight into the apostle's cosmology, for our purpose we find it wise to follow Calvin in his interpretation when he says, "He [Paul] is not here describing fine philosophical distinctions between the different heavens. . . . The number three is used as a perfect number to indicate what is highest and most complete."<sup>51</sup> Further, we see

<sup>48</sup> Plummer, *A Critical Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 341.

<sup>49</sup> Fisher, *Commentary on I and II Corinthians*, 425. Bowker ("Merkabah Visions," n. 2) points out that we know of at least eight visions of the apostle Paul (1) Damascus Road (Acts 9); (2) Vision of Ananias (Acts 9:12); (3) the vision of the Macedonian man (Acts 16:8); (4) encouragement at Corinth (Acts 18:9); (5) of Jesus in the Temple (Acts 22:17); (6) of Jesus during the night (Acts 23:11); (7) the angel in the shipwreck (Acts 27:23); (8) ascension into paradise (2 Cor 12: 1-4). To these we would add his vision to go up to Jerusalem (Gal 2:1-2)-

<sup>50</sup> Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 430-31. Cf- also Martin, *II Corinthians*, 399,

<sup>51</sup> J, Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, repr. 1973) 156. Barrett (*Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 310) follows Calvin, For expanded discussions see Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 432-34; Martin, *II Corinthians*, 401-2; Plummer, *A Critical Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 343-44.

in this account one unified vision not two visions, or one vision of two parts. The third heaven and paradise are semantically equivalent, but the word *παράδεισον* does inform us additionally of the apostle's conceptualization in this area.<sup>52</sup> The word "paradise" occurs in the NT only three times: (1) Luke 23:43, (2) our present text, and (3) Rev 2:7. A Persian word, it originally meant an "enclosure," and was used of a pleasure garden or park. Barclay says, "When a Persian king wished to confer a very special honor on someone 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."<sup>53</sup> Hughes notes that in the LXX *παράδεισος* is used for the "garden of Eden (Genesis 2-3)."<sup>54</sup> M. Thrall also points out that "paradise is spoken of as the abode of God in the Greek versions of Ezekiel (Ezek 28:13; 31:8). It was thought of by the Jews as the region where the blessed, after death, go to dwell with God until the final resurrection."<sup>55</sup> Thus, from a theological perspective, Paul's rapture experience took him to heaven, to the very presence of God. Lenski notes that the prophets sometimes described heaven in images drawn from Eden, and therefore heaven could be viewed as a "paradise regained."<sup>56</sup> A reading of Revelation 21-22 will readily confirm Lenski's thesis.

Paradoxically, Paul's vision gives us no sight into divine mysteries; his revelation no knowledge of heavenly truths. Paul simply related that he heard *ἄρρητα ῥήματα*. The word *ἄρρητα* is also a *hapax legomenon*, and the phrase itself an oxymoron. Kruse points out that "Paul's account of his rapture differs markedly from other such accounts from the ancient world both in its brevity and the absence of any description of what he saw."<sup>57</sup> Paul goes on to inform us that what he heard is *οὐκ ἐξὸν ἀνθρώπῳ λαλῆσαι*. Hughes says that this phrase may mean either "it is not possible" or "it is not lawful." He correctly argues the latter, seeing *ἔξεσται* appears in the NT an additional thirty-one times, and always it seems to have the meaning "it is lawful."<sup>58</sup> Hodge comments that the revelation to which Paul was

<sup>52</sup> See Hughes (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 435-39) for an excellent survey and discussion of the number of visions and the development, meaning and use of the word "paradise."

<sup>53</sup> W. Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (rev. ed. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 257.

<sup>54</sup> Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 436.

<sup>55</sup> M. E. Thrall, *The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 176-77.

<sup>56</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1937, repr. 1963) 1294.

<sup>57</sup> Kruse, *II Corinthians*, 204.

<sup>58</sup> Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 439, n. 119.

privileged was one he was not allowed to make known to others.<sup>59</sup>

Barrett adds that the language here is that of the mystery religions, but that it would be wrong to draw the conclusion that Paul was directly dependent upon them. He further notes that,

The idea of sealed revelations was already to be found in the Old Testament (Isa. 8:16; Dan. 12:4; cf, also 2 Enoch 17; Rev. 14:3). Paul's revelation thus falls into a familiar form-familiar no doubt at Corinth as a boast of Paul's rivals. Of this he too can boast; but as throughout these chapters, his boasting is twisted into an unusual form.<sup>60</sup>

*Verses 5-6.* "I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say."

Furnish sees here the essence of Paul's thinking with respect to his apostolic authority when he says,

Paul will support his apostleship only by boasting of his weakness (11:30; 12:5, 9b-10): while he is willing to record this one instance of a private experience, he is quite unwilling to claim it as an apostolic credential. . . . Paul does not want to be known as a 'visionary,' but only as a weak and suffering apostle. . . through whom God's incomparable power is disclosed (4:7-15).<sup>61</sup>

Spittler adds to this when he states,

The paradise pericope thus continues and sharpens--one may say consummates--the same argument as that of the *Peristasenkatalog* (11:21b-33): the physical hardships endured in the ministry and the skolops-tempered, superlative revelations of paradise are no mere quantitative proofs of apostolic superiority or even legitimacy. They rather function as qualitative inversions to a wholly new ground for kauchesis (cf. 11:30 with 12:5b and 12:9b).<sup>62</sup>

Spittler goes on to point out concerning the relationship of vv 2-4 to v 5 that,

It is precisely this esoteric disclosure in paradise (vss. 2-4) which illumines both the third-person character of vss. 2-4 and the force of vs. 5 which are interrelated. . . . By casting his (autobiographical!) report

<sup>59</sup> C. Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1859; repr. 1980) 28.3.

<sup>60</sup> Barrett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 311.

<sup>61</sup> Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 544.

<sup>62</sup> Spittler, "The Limits of Ecstasy," 262.

in the third person, Paul thus distinguishes his present self (the challenged apostle) from his ecstatic self ('14 years ago'). About his ecstatic self (*hyper tou toioutou*, vs. 5) he will not boast (except in the *astheneiais*). . . . Both Paul and his opponents experience ecstasy; the difference lies in the use they make of it. For Paul such experiences are *theo* (I Cor. 14:2 and II Cor. 5:13). For the opponents, ecstasy serves not only for propagandistic enticement, but as well for apostolic accreditation. Once again the issue of apostolic authority emerges: by his refusal to capitalize on the *arreta rhemata*, Paul rejects apostolic accreditation by ecstasy as well as the ecstatic conception of Jesus such a view presupposes.<sup>63</sup>

These observations inform our exposition of vv 5-6. Indeed, on behalf of such a one as the man described in vv 2-4, Paul will boast (though we might add he will not tell us anything about his experiences!). But of his present self only in his ἀσθενείαις will he boast (cf. 11:22-33; 12:7-10, and note again the strategic location of the paradise pericope). Paul is quick to inform us that if he chooses to boast he would not be a fool (ἄφρων), but would be speaking the truth (ἀλήθειαν). Yet to do so would not be expedient (drawing upon his opening statement in v 1), and indeed might be harmful. Religious experiences, no matter how wonderful, are not the basis upon which to establish apostolic authority or spiritual maturity. Furnish is quite correct when he says,

His apostleship cannot be demonstrated by a recitation of his other worldly experiences, but only by the effectiveness of his this-worldly service as an apostle. The effectiveness of this service, and thus the legitimacy of Paul's apostleship, is confirmed by what the Corinthians can 'see' and 'hear' of his human frailties (the point of this 'fool's speech') and of his apostolic work in establishing their congregation."<sup>64</sup>

So the apostle continues, φείδομαι ("I refrain"; pres. mid.) lest anyone εἰς ἐμὲ λογίσηται (note the word order; "to me reckons, accounts"; it is a commercial term) beyond what βλέπει ("he sees"; pres. ind.) or ἀκούει ("he hears"; pres. ind.). The significance of the present tense of these two verbs should not be minimized. Syntactically they probably function as present progressives, emphasizing the consistency of life demonstrated by the apostle. "Nothing should be reckoned to his account but what is self evident."<sup>65</sup> Short catches the flavor of what Paul wishes to communicate. In these verses Paul

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>64</sup> Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 546-47.

<sup>65</sup> J. Hering, *The Second Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* (London: Epworth, 1967) 92.

implies that there is a good deal more which he could say in defense of his position as an apostle, if he should adopt that line of argument. But he will not give a false impression, or ask people to judge of his authority by anything except the life he lives and the message he preaches. Nothing else will authenticate him as an ambassador for Christ.<sup>66</sup>

Paul says, "Examine my walk and words." Anything beyond this is not that on which apostolic authority or Christian maturity should be established.

## 2. *Personal difficulty: the thorn in the flesh (12:7-9a)*

*Verses 7 -9a.* "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.<sup>67</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'."

Chafin points out that the immediacy of the "thorn in the flesh" narrative following the paradise rapture is not accidental; Paul evidently believed that the two experiences were significantly related to each other.<sup>68</sup> Exegetically we have chosen to construct the phrase καὶ τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων prospectively with v 7 (following the NIV), and not retrospectively with v 6 (UBSGNT, 3rd ed.). The proper interpretive move is most difficult to determine, and scholars are divided over the issue. That equally good arguments can be made for either view should promote humility at this point of interpretation.

Plummer renders v 7 as, "And by reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations--wherefore that I should not be exalted overmuch. . . ." <sup>69</sup> "Exceeding greatness" translates ὑπερβολῇ from which we get our English word hyperbole. The word may be taken quantitatively "abundance" or qualitatively "excellence" of the revelations.<sup>70</sup> Martin also makes this observation and, though favoring the qualitative aspect, feels that a sharp distinction should probably not be made.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup> J. Short, *IB 5* (ed. G. Buttrick; Nashville: Abingdon, 1953) 406.

<sup>67</sup> Unfortunately the NIV text omits at this point the repetition of ἵνα μὴ ὑπερ-ἀίρωμαι. It receives a [C] reading in the UBSGNT 3rd ed. It is our judgment that the phrase is a part of the original text. Therefore we have an example of inclusio or framing in v 7 which heightens the significance of "the thorn in my flesh, the messenger of Satan to torment me," as a necessary means of keeping Paul humble.

<sup>68</sup> K. L. Chafin, 1, *II Corinthians* (Communicators Commentary; ed. L. J. Ogilvie Waco, TX; Word, 1985) 289.

<sup>69</sup> Plummer, *A Critical Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 347.

<sup>70</sup> Short, 407.

<sup>71</sup> Martin, *II Corinthians*, 410.

Paul proceeds to tell us that the paradise vision had the potential for promoting spiritual pride and arrogance. Therefore, "in order (ἵνα introduces the first of three purpose clauses) that he might not lift himself up improperly (ὑπεραίρωμοι pres. mid. sub.)," there was given to him a thorn for his flesh. The middle voice seems significant in indicating self exaltation. This same word is also used by Paul in 2 Thess 2:4 with respect to the "man of lawlessness."

He was given a σκόλοψ τῆ σαρκί. We have again an example of the *passivum divinum*, for it is clear that God is the hidden agent who is operative behind the scenes. Paul therefore sees the "stake, thorn" (σκόλοψ is also a *hapax legomenon*) as originating in God. He proceeds in the text to further identify this σκόλοψ as a messenger of Satan whose purpose is (1) continually to buffet (pres. tense) him (cf. Matt 26:67 of literal physical blows inflicted upon Jesus during his passion), and (2) for the purpose of keeping him humble. "Messenger of Satan" is a personification of the σκόλοψ.<sup>72</sup> "Thorn in my flesh" is capable of two interpretations. If rendered "in the flesh" (locative of place), it becomes likely that a physical disability is in mind. If it is interpreted "for the flesh" (dative of disadvantage), then "flesh" may be referring to the sin nature or creaturely weakness.<sup>73</sup> It is our view that the former of these two options is the better interpretation.

The question of primary interest is, of course, "What was the thorn?" Anyone familiar with 2 Corinthians is well aware of the extensive discussion on this subject.<sup>74</sup> Our own position is that Paul suffered physically from a severe ophthalmic difficulty. This seems reasonable in light of Gal 4: 13ff; 6:11. This view is one we hold tentatively, recognizing the objections to it, as well as the apparent growing popularity and the defensibility of the thorn as being some type of persecution.

Paul, in the OT tradition of Job, sees Satan as the instrument of suffering in God's hand, accomplishing an end for him that is bene-

<sup>72</sup> M. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (4 vols.; McLean, VA: MacDonald) 355; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (5 vols; Nashville: Broadman, 1931) 4.365.

<sup>73</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *II Corinthians* (Broadman Bible Commentary; ed. C. J. Allen; Nashville: Broadman, 1971) 72.

<sup>74</sup> In the commentaries see the extensive discussions of Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 547-50; Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 442-46; Plummer, *A Critical Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 348-51; Plummer, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 140-45. Journal articles dedicated to this subject include M. L. Barre, "Qumran and the 'Weakness' of Paul," *CBQ* 42 (1980) 216-27; McCant, "Paul's Thorn," 550-72; T. Y. Mullins, "Paul's Thorn in the Flesh," *JBL* 76 (1957) 299-303; P. Nisbet, "The Thorn in the Flesh," *Exp Tim* 80 (1969) 126; D. Park, "Paul's ΣΚΟΛΟΨ ΤΗ ΣΑΡΚΙ: Thorn or Stake (II Cor. XII 7)," *NovT* 22 (1980) 179-83; R. Price, "Punished in Paradise," *JSNT* 7 (1980) 3.'3-40; N. G. Smith, "The Thorn that Stayed," *Int* 13 (1959) 409-16.

ficial (cf. Rom 8:28-30). This does not prevent him however from petitioning the Lord "three times" (we take this literally contra Calvin) to remove him ἀπ' ἐμοῦ (ablative of separation). The word τούτου we take as masculine, and therefore referring to the messenger of Satan. However making a fine distinction at this point seems unnecessary.

It is here that Paul reveals a revelation from the Lord, rather than in the paradise pericope which is contextually related to "visions and revelations" in 12:1-4. Concerning καὶ εἶρηκέν ("But he said to me" perf. tense), Vincent says, "A more beautiful use of the perfect it would be difficult to find in the New Testament."<sup>75</sup> God has spoken in the past, and that revelation continues even now to ring in the apostle's ears. The word order of what follows is again significant: "'Suffices' [pres. ind.] to you the grace of me. For the power [implied: 'my power'] in weakness is perfected" (τελείται pres. pass. ind.).

While Betz sees in this section a miracle or wonder story (parody) that interestingly contains no miracle (such an observation we would think would lead him to question the soundness of his identification of literary form), the insights of McCant and also Tasker seem more promising. They point out a number of parallels between Jesus (especially his garden/passion experience) and Paul. (McCant following Betz does, however, call this a "parodic healing story!"<sup>76</sup>). Building upon and expanding their insights, we would not suggest Paul consciously modeled this narrative after the experience(s) of our Lord. However, the "weakness Christology" we see developed so clearly in 2 Corinthians, as well as the "suffering servant motif," which surfaces so often in the NT would certainly be influential for our apostle's self-understanding of his position and mission. Those who follow the Lord Jesus can expect that they will in many situations and circumstances relive the mission, and even passion of the Savior.<sup>77</sup>

#### "Parallels between Jesus and Paul in the Context of Affliction"

Jesus	Paul
(1) Jesus faced a cross (σταυρός) an instrument of death.	Paul faced a thorn/stake (σκόλοψ), possibly an instrument of death (2 Cor 12:7).
(2) Three times Jesus prays "Let this cup pass" (Mark 14:35f).	Three times Paul prays for the removal of the thorn (2 Cor 12:8).

<sup>75</sup> Vincent, *Word Studies*, 356.

<sup>76</sup> McCant, "Paul's Thorn," 571.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*; Tasker, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 178.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| (3) Jesus receives an answer to his prayer different from his initial request. | Paul receives an answer to his prayer different from his initial request.                                      |
| (4) Jesus prayed, "Not my will but thine. . ." (Luke 22:42).                   | Paul receives a word from the Lord (an oracle?), "For you my grace is sufficient."<br>(2 Cor 12:9)             |
| (5) Jesus is crucified. (Mark 15:24)   | Paul receives no healing.<br>(2 Cor 12:9).   |
| (6) Jesus was rejected by "his own." (John 1:11).                              | Paul's "own" church (the Corinthians) apparently were on the verge of rejecting him<br>(2 Cor 10:14; 12:7-10). |
| (7) Jesus was raised from the dead "by the power of God."<br>(Mark 16:1).      | Paul will live with Christ "by the power of God"<br>(2 Cor 13:4).  |
| (8) Jesus was rejected as Messiah.   | Paul was rejected as an apostle.   |
| (9) Jesus was the suffering servant.   | Paul was a suffering servant apostle.  |
| (10) God saved a world through a Christ crucified in weakness.                 | God reached a world through an apostle daily crucified in Christ in weakness.                                  |

The comments of Furnish are well taken and to the point when he says,

the apostle is directed to understand his affliction as part of that weakness in and through which God's powerful grace is operative. It is clear that from Paul's point of view the 'decisive demonstration of the truth' of this oracular pronouncement is Christ himself, 'crucified in weakness' but alive 'by the power of God' (13:4a, cf. I Cor. 1:17-18,22-24). This is why weakness is the hallmark of his apostleship, because he has been commissioned to the service of the gospel through the grace of this Christ--a grace whose power is made present in the cross. Paul therefore does not, like the Cynic and Stoic philosophers of his day, strive to transcend his weaknesses by dismissing them as trifling. Nor does he, like them, hold to the ideal of self-sufficiency, striving to limit his needs and therefore his dependency on others. Rather, precisely by accepting his tribulations as real weaknesses he is led by them to acknowledge his ultimate dependence on God (cf. 1:8-9). Thereby his weaknesses--not just the frailty which inevitably characterizes his creaturely status, but the adversities and afflictions he has had to bear as an apostle--have become a means by which the incomparable power of



God is revealed (4:7-15). The oracle he now quotes is therefore but a special formulation of the gospel itself: salvation, one's only true sufficiency, is by God's grace and in God's power (cf. 3:5, 8:9; Rom. 1:16).<sup>78</sup>

3. *Supernatural sufficiency: The power of Christ overshadowing (12:9b-10)*

*Verses 9b-10.* "Therefore will I boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why for Christ's sake I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Furnish summarizes the essence of this final section of 2 Cor 12:1-10 when he states,

Having cited the oracle (v. 9a), Paul goes on in vv. 9b-10 to show how it applies to him, and therefore how it supports what he has been doing in this 'fool's speech.' Three sentences express essentially the same point in three different ways. ...The apostle says that he has now stopped praying for relief from the thorn in the flesh. Now, instead, he boasts of his weaknesses, including that specific affliction, because now he understands them not as Satan's work but as the operation of the grace of the crucified Christ. . . grace that constitutes the power of Christ.<sup>79</sup>

ἤδιστα οὖν μᾶλλον καυχῆσομαι ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις "Most gladly therefore (because of the Lord's reply) will I rather glory in my weaknesses (than pray that they may be removed). The order of the words is important."<sup>80</sup> Also, this is the last use of καυχῆσομαι in this epistle. Barrett points out that μᾶλλον is not to be taken with ἤδιστα, and that it is awkward that no direct comparison is expressed.<sup>81</sup> Lenski I think demonstrates that though the grammar may be cloudy, the thinking of the apostle is clear, especially when we construct it with what follows: ἵνα ἐπισκηνώσῃ ἐπ' ἐμέ ἡ δύναμις τοῦ χριστοῦ "in order that may rest or tabernacle upon me the power of Christ."

The superlative ἤδιστα is relative: 'very gladly,' 'with exceeding gladness'. Μᾶλλον is distinct, 'the more,' 'rather,' since Paul had received this word from the Lord, which showed him the great value of all his weaknesses for the Lord's purpose. . . . All that he had said in 11:30 and 12:5 about his making only the weaknesses his boast, all that at first sounds so paradoxical and incomprehensible in these statements, is now perfectly clear.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 550-51.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 571.

<sup>80</sup> Plummer, *A Critical Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 355.

<sup>81</sup> Barrett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 317.

<sup>82</sup> Lenski, *Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 1306.

Plummer points out that ἵνα ἐπισκηνώσῃ is a "bold metaphor, which may possibly be intended to suggest the Shechinah 'that the strength of the Christ may tabernacle upon me.'<sup>83</sup> The word ἐπισκηνώσῃ is the third *hapax legomenon* in the pericope.

Paul concludes with a summation in v 10. Paul again includes a "catalog of hardships," the second such listing in the "fool's discourse" (cf. 11:23b-24). This listing is much shorter and more generalized. Paul says he is "well pleased, continually delights" (εὐδοκῶ pres. ind. progressive) in his weaknesses. The question as to whether power through weakness is to be understood revelationally or ontologically or both is addressed at length by Martin and especially O'Collins.<sup>84</sup> In our view the last idea is preferred, the thought being, "Under circumstances of 'weakness' something happens (power intervenes), and both Paul and others become aware of this new development."<sup>85</sup>

Verse 10. "When I am weak, then I am powerful" is a gnomic climax to 12:1-10. Paul has exposed his whole ministry for all to observe, and he invites others to draw strength from his experience(s). Whenever the Lord's servants humble themselves and acknowledge their shortcomings, insufficiencies, and weaknesses, the power of Christ can flow through them and manifest itself.<sup>86</sup> "For whenever I am weak, then powerful I am."

### III. Conclusion

Baird states,

What do these exegetical observations imply for Paul's understanding of revelatory experience as ground for ministry? Negatively, they indicate that Paul refuses to found his ministry on private, ecstatic religion--even though he can claim religious experiences of that sort. At the same time II Corinthians 12 does say something positive about ministerial authority. Paul, after demonstrating the vanity of boasting in visions, says, 'on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses' (vs. 5). This weakness is epitomized by the experience of the thorn, and the revelation which that experience provided was crucial. In that revelation, the power of Christ was perceived to work in weakness. Paul's ministry, with its long catalog of weaknesses (II Cor. 11:24-29), was designed to conform to God's way of working (I Cor. 1:23-24)--as power in weakness. Paul refrains from boasting in visions, so that no one may credit

<sup>83</sup> Plummer, *A Critical Commentary on Second Corinthians*, 355. Also see the discussion of Martin, *II Corinthians*, 421.

<sup>84</sup> Martin, *II Corinthians*, 421-23; cf. G. O'Collins, "Power Made Perfect in Weakness: II Cor. 12:9-10," *CBQ* 33 (1971) 528-37.

<sup>85</sup> O'Collins, "Power Made Perfect in Weakness," 528.

<sup>86</sup> Martin, *II Corinthians*, 423.

me with more than one sees or hears from me' (II Cor. 12:6). In other words, Paul's ministry is accredited by the public credentials of his suffering service.<sup>87</sup>

Unfortunately, much of Christendom in 1989 is not far removed from the mindset of the Corinthians in A.D. 55-57. Theologically and practically we, like they, need to rethink biblical criteria for characteristics which exemplify spiritual maturity, personally and ecclesio-logically. Bruner speaks to what Paul would desire that we learn not only from 2 Cor 12:1-10, but indeed the entire Corinthian corpus. He states,

The Corinthian letters are a sustained attempt to formulate what Luther called a *theologia crucis*, a theology of the cross. God's way of working in the world--to men an inefficient way, and thus a proof of its divinity--is the way of weakness. The crucified Christ himself is this way's classic content; the cross its classic form; the struggling church (and church member) its classic sphere. Men are saved by believing this content and serve by assuming this form in this sphere. But hidden in the cross and weakness (corporate and individual) and revealed in the church to faith is resurrection power. When. . . weak, then. . . strong. (II Cor. 12:10)<sup>88</sup>

Though some might deem a practical word as inappropriate for a theological journal, the insights of Carson within this context seem a fitting conclusion to our study. Seeking to glean practical and vital truths from these chapters, truths which will challenge and strengthen the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, Carson offers the following observations by way of contemporary applications/significances.

(1) We should learn something of the very nature of Christian leadership. Little is more important in our day when promoting self under the guise of promoting Christ has become both commonplace and indeed an advocated practice.

(2) We should discover the root of evil wedded to worldly boasting and its relationship to the self-centeredness and pride which lies at the heart of all sin. Modern "Christian" success stories and formulas often reveal more about prideful triumphalism than the humble way of the Saviors cross which fosters holiness, character, maturity, and understanding in the sacred truths of the Christian faith.

(3) We should seek to emulate the model of Christian maturity Paul exemplifies. Service, humility, conviction, and spiritual depth are the characteristics that should be our priorities, our goals.

<sup>87</sup> Baird, "Visions, Revelation, and Ministry," 661.

<sup>88</sup> F. D. Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970)

(4) We should be reminded that Christians individually and corporately are responsible for the styles of leadership they follow and honor. The reality that Christian leaders are responsible before the Lord for their conduct and teaching is equally balanced by the truth that the members of the Christian community are responsible before Christ for choosing what and whom they will follow.

(5) Finally, we should remember again that the early church like the modern church was no paragon of perfection. They, like us, were those whose allegiance was to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, but whose maturity and growth in his sanctifying grace often fell short of that which our Lord intends. Indeed we are never to lose sight of the reality of Scripture which reminds us that perfection will be experienced only in the Parousia.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Carson, *Triumphalism*, 27-29.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

The Criswell College  
4010 Gaston Ave.  
Dallas, TX 75246  
[www.criswell.edu](http://www.criswell.edu)

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: [thildebrandt@gordon.edu](mailto:thildebrandt@gordon.edu)