

***Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians:
"The Essence of God's Working Under Grace Is Explained"***

Review: "Are We Really Seeing Paul as the Lord Saw Him?"

***Do we know Paul as Christ knew him? Do we love Paul as Christ loved him?
Those are serious questions for us all. Are We Really Seeing Paul as the Lord
Sees Him?***

- ***Seeing Paul Correctly Demands That We Know his Enemies Well***
 - ***Paul's Enemies Were Distinguished by Their Boasting According to the Flesh***
 - ***While Paul Was Distinguished by his Boasting According to the Lord's Evaluation***
- ***Paul's Chosen Example of his Boasting Is his Deliverance From Damascus***
- ***Paul Is Distinguished by his Boasting According to the Lord's Evaluation***
 - ***As we saw so well last time, Paul was compelled in these verses here to share his testimony again with the Corinthians who in fact knew him so well, to remind them again of what they should not need to be reminded of:***

2 Cor. 11:21-29

21 I speak as concerning reproach, as though we had been weak. Howbeit whereinsoever any is bold, (I speak foolishly,) I am bold also.

22 Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I.

23 Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft.

24 Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one.

25 Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep;

26 In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;

27 In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.

28 Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.

29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?

- ***But then he summarizes his ministry with one more mark of distinction***, “Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?” ***Nothing else can be added except what he concludes the section of the letter with:*** “If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities.” ***That explains it all, doesn’t it? Well, he then adds a final note to be lodged in our minds forever:***
- ***Paul’s Chosen Example of his Boasting Is his Deliverance From Damascus***
 - ***To conclude the chapter, Paul then adds what was for him a (or should we say, “the”) crowning event, a mark to distinguish his ministry above many others:*** “In Damascus the governor under Aretas the king kept the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desirous to apprehend me: And through a window in a basket was I let down by the wall, and escaped his hands.”
 - ***And so he writes, concerning himself, but with application to all of us: It is the essence of grace working in the hearts of his people, that Christ suffered for us and paid the penalty for all of our sins. And we are chosen therefore to suffer also for him. AS A MARK OF TESTIMONY OF HIS ABOUNDING GRACE, EVEN IF WE NEED TO BE LET DOWN A WALL IN A BASKET! WE LITTLE ONES ARE BASKET CASES OFTEN, RIGHT? Amen and amen.***

Our Outline Today: “The Essence of God’s Working Under Grace Is Explained”

- ***Paul Boasts in Another and Not in Himself — Except in his Weaknesses***
- ***In the Flesh Paul Possessed Only Thorns as his Detractors Saw Him***
- ***Paul Boasts in God’s Work of Grace in Him, his Weaknesses Made Strong***
- ***Paul Is Coming to Corinth and Shall Minister in Corinth as the Lord Wills***

I. Paul Boasts in Another and Not in Himself — Except in His Weaknesses:

[READ] 2 Cor. 12:1-5

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

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

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

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

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

- ***It is through this “figure of another man besides himself” that Paul begins this section. “Why?” is a good question but if we use the scripture itself for the answer it can be seen here in these verses, as these here are given as his explanation.***
- ***“It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord”: It was the miraculous appearances of the Lord to Paul and his teachings that had authenticated his apostleship and ministry, convincing both himself and others of that fact. And that was not all, for others had experienced miracles here on this earth and the Lord had given signs for Israel before as an expected blessing of his covenant relationship. But there was something else the apostle felt obligated to mention:***
- ***“... caught up to the third heaven ... into paradise”: This was more special indeed, being caught up into paradise and even unto the edge of the third heaven even! Most remarkable!! No wonder he had to write of it using this foil of “a man he knew”. He knew him all right, for he was that man himself.***
- ***“Unspeakable words”, “not lawful for a man to utter”: No wonder Paul now could not write more about it. For doing so would be unacceptable to the Lord, it would be “unlawful” even, or “inappropriate”. So writing more would have been simply the wrong thing to do, he writes without saying more about it. Let’s continue though as Paul seemed to have said enough descriptively about what had happened earlier and now wanted to provide teaching regarding it relevant to the challenge at hand.***
- ***The key words here are these: “Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.” The language is figurative but the meaning is clear. Paul determined to boast only in his weaknesses or infirmities. This was the glory of God’s abundant grace might be revealed and that was his constant desire. But he had to learn of the Lord’s love and grace to be able to testify of that here as he does. And we do to. Let’s learn more by moving to the next section.***

II. In the Flesh Paul Possessed Only Thorns As His Detractors Saw Him:

- ***He continues now to explain that the Lord had brought some special trials into his life for this reason: “lest I should be exalted above measure” due to those previous events. In other words, trying circumstances had plagued Paul in his life and ministry which led Paul to respond in a most human way at some point, for he had cried out to the Lord for deliverance three times. It is not entirely clear what the trial was specially about, and we shouldn’t speculate. But it was a learning experience indeed for him as he writes here:***

[READ] 2 Cor. 12:6-8

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

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

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

- ***So the Lord had humbled his trusted servant in what might seem to us a dramatic way indeed. An instrument of satan had been sent to burden the apostle and this burden had persisted for some considerable time, it seems. Finally Paul cried out three times for deliverance. But the Lord’s response to his call was that he would leave the burden in place with explanation given here.***
- ***The reasons that burden was left are given here in detail:***
 - ***Regarding how Paul might think of himself: that he might think too highly of himself***
 - ***Regarding how others might think of him: that they might not esteem him as a mere man too highly***
- ***The point of it is that all might understand that the Lord God uses men in ways he chooses and that in the heart of it all is this fundamental principle, that our weaknesses are and will be used to magnify not our strength but the Lord’s. Therefore the bottom line here is that grace operates***
- ***In what way might this be normative to believers today? There are many applications to our lives, day by day and hour by hour.***

III. Paul Boasts in God's Work of Grace in Him, His Weaknesses Made Strong:

2 Cor. 12:9a And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in [or through, your] weakness...

- “My grace is sufficient for thee...”: ***This is a remarkable statement and we need to take note of it well. It is a statement of fact. The Lord is saying to Paul that he needs to learn something more about what the Lord God is doing. And what he is doing is right and good, even in the apostle's life at that time. This should be an example for us too. Right? What a difference it makes when we learn what Paul was learning. The Lord also explained his response further by adding “for my strength is made perfect in [your] weakness, [Paul].”***

In other words, the Lord was using Paul to communicate his working today “under grace” by manifesting that grace in Paul [through his weakness, of course] and using him also as an example for us.

The Lord did not relieve the apostle of this burden so that he might learn more about God's abundant grace and then be a testimony to others that they also might learn of that abundant grace through Paul's witness. Amen. And so he writes this concerning his response to this life transforming learning experience in these words, dwelling on the practical side of it. But to apply this in our living moment by moment demands more. This is where the rubber meets the road, isn't it? “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

2 Cor. 12:9b-10 ... Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

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

- ***What he is saying here in effect is that when the conviction of his heart was set in that manner, then the practical application necessarily followed. And so it should be for us as well.***

[READ] 2 Cor. 12:11-13

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

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

13 For what is it wherein ye were inferior to other churches, except *it be* that I myself was not burdensome to you? forgive me this wrong. 10

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

- *We are moving ahead nearer the end of the chapter in these verses:*

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

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

- *Paul is conflicted in his spirit. He does not want to boast in his apostleship and the many proofs of that which should have been so well known by all, but that his apostleship compels him to do exactly that considering the attacks he faced. He must highlight the signs, wonders, and miracles, what he refers to as the “signs of his apostleship” here. You will remember the many references also in the history of the Acts. But the gifts and offerings issue is still on his mind as the next verse indicates:*

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

- *Paul had ministered freely without obligations in Corinth. This was his free gift under grace empowering for them. But instead of being thanked for it, he sadly has been mocked and condemned by some. But as he had said before, he would boast in this and never cower in fear or be ashamed no matter what the false teachers might be saying.*

IV. Paul Is Coming to Corinth and Shall Minister In Corinth As the Lord Wills:

- *Well, as we reach the end of the chapter, we shall see that truth cuts both ways, it is a divider between the soul and spirit and a revealer of the thoughts and intents of the heart. So the apostle wants so very much to be a blessing and not a “burden”. But when the truth is not well received, it will be a burden and perhaps a great one indeed. Paul is concerned therefore, as he writes here, as to how it*

will go in Corinth, when this letter is received, and then when his visit there has been in the Lord's good timing, finally accomplished:

[READ] 2 Cor. 12:14-21

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- *Now we have reached the end of the chapter and the strongest affirmation probably anywhere of Paul apostleship. The false teachers had denied that and inserted themselves in his place in Corinth. The language is notable indeed:*
 - *First the positive: "Again, think ye that we excuse ourselves unto you? we speak before God in Christ: but we do all things, dearly beloved, for your edifying."*
 - *Now to the heart of the matter, his concerns: "For I fear, lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not: lest there be debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults:" These would all be the carnal manifestations of believers who were controlled by the flesh and not the spirit. But that is what would be expected as some had indeed turned against Paul and the spirit of truth and grace and were now dwelling in the realm of the flesh.*

Paul had good reason to “fear”, though his overall confidence in the Corinthians as stated earlier was so great.

- ***But “in Christ” the apostle knew what might be necessary in the case of continued rebellion and opposition there. His work as apostle would necessarily then be manifested... “And lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and that I shall bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness which they have committed.”***

But may it not be so! In that case the apostle knew how his apostleship would manifest itself. It would be through his weakness because Christ in him would transform his weaknesses into strength according to the fundamental principle of God’s working out his abundant grace into and through him. In a previous chapter here he had written of this thus:

[READ] 2 Cor. 10:7-11

7 Do ye look on things after the outward appearance? If any man trust to himself that he is Christ's, let him of himself think this again, that, as he is Christ's, even so are we Christ's.

8 For though I should boast somewhat more of our authority, which the Lord hath given us for edification, and not for your destruction, I should not be ashamed:

9 That I may not seem as if I would terrify you by letters.

10 For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.

11 Let such an one think this, that, such as we are in word by letters when we are absent, such will we be also in deed when we are present.

- ***I FIND THIS TO BE THE MOST COMPELLING OF EXHORTATIONS, INDIRECT, YES, BUT MANIFESTING GOD’S ABUNDANT GRACE IN ITS FULL GLORY. HE HAS CHOSEN TO WORK HIS STRENGTH OUT THROUGH WEAKNESS, IN PAUL AS OUR EXAMPLE — AND IN US. WE CAN ONLY WONDER WHAT THE SCENE WOULD HAVE BEEN LIKE IN CORINTH.***

AND PERHAPS WE KNOW NOW WHAT THE “THORNE IN THE FLESH WAS” TOO. IT WAS HIS SPEECH (A STUTTERER), HIS

EYES (WE CAN ONLY GUESS), AND PERHAPS HIS HEIGHT (PAUL MEANS SMALL!). BUT WE ARE ONLY GUESSING.

- ***The Corinthians must therefore take note. For otherwise they will be humbled for sure when he is humbled by the Lord before them in their presence. This is a sobering thought. Consider what it would have been like.***

Conclusion:

- ***What if we had received this letter? What might our response be if we were the Corinthians, if we were the recipients of this letter, today and now, such as it is? What would our response be?***
- ***But what about us today? Is Paul still our apostle? Is the Lord still working as he did then — under grace, with us Gentiles? Yes and AMEN! Indeed he is.***