

Paul's Foolish Boasting
2 Corinthians 12:1-6
Part Four

If you are here this morning and consider yourself a true servant of Christ, then we must understand that we are not in this world to satisfy our fleshly whims but rather to carry out a mission that we have been given by Christ. And where do we find this mission detailed for us? We find it detailed for us in **Matthew 28:19-20**.

In these two verses Christ, speaking to his disciples, outlined for them their mission and the future mission of every other disciple. And what did He say? **“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, (20) teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”**

This is our mission and this is what we are here to do, both individually and corporately. So hopefully this is what we are doing.

So, what should we expect as we do this? Should we expect health, wealth and prosperity? No, we should not expect these things, rather we should expect something that would be more consistent with what Christ experienced as He pressed forward in the mission that was given to Him by His Father. And what did He experience? He for the most part, as He pressed forward in the mission that had been given Him by His Father, experienced suffering.

So should we as Christ's followers expect anything different as press forward in the mission that He has given us? No! How could we? The world is still hostile toward God and toward His Son. Therefore we must be prepared and thus willing to suffer deprivation, discomfort and perhaps even pain as we seek, as a servant and representative of Christ, to do His will and work.

Now some professing Christians might be turned off by the prospect of suffering? But hopefully this will not be the case with us. And why is this? It is because our suffering, no matter what that suffering might be, provides us a great opportunity to manifest the grace and the power of God as we

righteously endure those sufferings thus testifying to others and to ourselves that we are His followers.

And hopefully this particular truth will again come alive for us this morning as we continue on in our study of **2 Corinthians**. So where are we in respect to our study?

Paul, in **2 Corinthians 10:12-18**, had contrasted the improper boasting of his opponents with his own proper boasting.

After this Paul then went on in **2 Corinthians 11:1** to surprisingly, even shockingly, declare to the Corinthians his intent of doing something very similar to his opponents in this matter of boasting.

But before he did it, before he actually engaged in this very similar kind of boasting, he felt it was necessary to defend his decision to do this very thing lest the Corinthians, in misunderstanding the reason for his boasting, would be tempted to see boasting “**according to the flesh**” as a good thing, which of course in Paul’s mind would have been a terrible thing for them to conclude if that was in fact their conclusion.

So in order protect them from this conclusion, Paul felt compelled to defend his intention to engage in this very similar kind of boasting. And where did we find Paul doing this? We found Paul initially defending his intention in **2 Corinthians 11:2-15**, which was then immediately followed by a similar repeated defense in **2 Corinthians 11:16-21**.

So after Paul had defended his intention to boast in a similar way as his opponents in an attempt to protect the Corinthians from his opponents, he then went on to do so. And where do we find Paul in this epistle engaging in this kind of boasting? We find him engaging in this kind of boasting, that he considered to be “foolish,” in the latter half of **2 Corinthians 11:21** all the way through **2 Corinthians 12:13**, which brings us to the text we are now studying and to the question that we are now seeking to answer.

So, what is that question? What did Paul’s foolish boasting focus on in 2 Corinthians 11:21-12:13? So this is the question that we are now seeking to answer. And what was the first thing we saw that Paul’s foolish boasting focused on?

Paul's foolish boasting focused on his heritage (2 Corinthians 11:21-22). And where did we see this? We saw this in the latter half of **verse 21** and **verse 22**.

And what was the second thing that we saw Paul's foolish boasting focused on? Paul's foolish boasting focused on his sufferings as a servant of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:23-33). So where did we see this? We saw this initially in **2 Corinthians 11:23-29** where Paul gave to the Corinthians and to us a very extensive list of various sufferings that he had to endure on behalf of others for the sake of the gospel and the mission that he had been given.

And why did Paul do this? Paul believed that the mark of a true servant of Christ was the willingness to suffer for those he was sent to reach as a representative of the crucified Christ. This is why he gave such an extensive list of sufferings that he had suffered.

So why would a true servant of Christ be so willing to suffer such things over such a long period of time as Paul did? We found that answer last week as we began to consider **verse 30**.

So, what did Paul say in **verse 30**? **“If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness,”** or in other words to my sufferings.

But now let me ask you this question. Why would Paul, if he had to boast, boast in his sufferings? The answer to this question can be found in **2 Corinthians 12:9** where Paul declared to the Corinthians power is perfected in weakness, or in other words power is perfected in the midst of sufferings.

So whose power is perfected in the midst of our weakness or in the midst of our sufferings? It is not our power that is perfected but Christ's power that is perfected, as we in the midst of our sufferings are able to endure those sufferings in a godly and righteous way.

So now, can we see why Paul declared to the Corinthians that if he had to boast that he would boast in his weakness? He said this because he believed that his sufferings on behalf of others and as a representative of the crucified Christ provided him a great opportunity, by his righteous response to those sufferings, to manifest the grace and the power of Christ in the midst of those sufferings.

So after Paul made this very important declaration in **verse 30** he then went to speak of incident of suffering that he had experienced at the very beginning of his ministry, an incident that apparently pictured for Paul, at that very early stage of his ministry, what he should expect as he continued to press forward in the ministry that God had been given him. And did that incident that he put forward to us in **2 Corinthians 11:30-33** and that he had experienced in any way dissuade him from pressing forward in his ministry? No, it did not. He continued to press forward, and suffered all that he had just listed in **2 Corinthians 11:23-29**.

So, what was the next thing that Paul's foolish boasting focused on? Paul's foolish boasting focused on visions and revelations (2 Corinthians 12:1-6).

Let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 12:1-6** and see if this is not so. **“Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. (2) I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. (3) And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows— (4) was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. (5) On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. (6) For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.”**

So did Paul in these verses boast of visions and revelations? And the answer would be absolutely! But even though it is clear that he in these verses boasted of visions and revelations, he also in these verses made it clear that it was not his visions and revelations that marked him out as true servant of Christ but rather what marked in out as a true servant of Christ was his weakness, or in other words his sufferings that he was willing to endure on behalf of others as a representative of the crucified Christ.

So now let us begin our examination of these verses beginning with **2 Corinthians 12:1** and see if this is not so. So how did Paul begin this verse? **“Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable.”** This way of introducing his new focus of boasting was very similar to the way he

introduced his last focus of boasting in **2 Corinthians 11:30**. In other words, Paul in the very beginning of **2 Corinthians 12:1** is again reminding the Corinthians that though this kind of boasting that he is now engaging in may be presently necessary in order to protect them from his opponents, that he considered this kind of boasting in and of itself pure foolishness, which he conveyed by referring to it as **“not profitable.”**

And why didn't he consider this kind of boasting that he was now engaged in as **“not profitable?”** Paul considered the foolish boasting that he was now engaged in as “not profitable” because it neither established his authority as an apostle nor contributed to the building up of the church. This is why he did not consider such boasting profitable.

So after establishing for the Corinthians how unprofitable he believed the kind of boasting that he was now engaged was, he then went on to introduce his new focus in terms of this very kind of boasting that he had just declared to be **“not profitable.”** And what was his new focus?

Let us continue to read the verse. And what does it say? **“Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.”** So, what is Paul's new focus in respect to his foolish boasting? Visions and revelations!

Obviously his opponents had been boasting of such things, and even though Paul knew that these boasts were false the Corinthians obviously didn't. Paul therefore decided at this point in our text, in his ongoing battle with his opponents over the souls of the Corinthians, to counter his opponents' boasts with his own boasts in regard to the very thing in which they had been falsely boasting, which was what? **“Visions and revelations!”**

So did Paul actually have **“visions and revelations”** supplied to him by the Lord? What did Paul say? **“Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go to visions and revelations of the Lord.”** Paul in boasting of visions and revelations did not have to make up these things on the fly. He had actually been given **“visions and revelations”** from God Himself. So do we see any indication of this in the Scriptures? And the answer would have to be yes!

Six of Paul's visions are recorded for us in Acts 9:12; 16:9-10; 18:9; 22:17-18; 23:11 and 27:23-24. And several of his "revelations" are recorded for us in Galatians 1:12; 2:2 and Ephesians 3:3.

When "visions" are referred to, the emphasis is on what is supernaturally "seen." When "revelations" are referred to, the emphasis is on what is supernaturally "uncovered" in respect to truth. Not every revelation in the Scriptures involved a "vision" for sometimes there was only a voice heard, but invariably every vision involved some kind of revelation, or in other words some kind of supernatural uncovering of truth.

So where did Paul go from here in our text? Paul, in **2 Corinthians 12:2-4**, writing in the third person, presented one single example from his own personal experience that he believed fell under the heading of "visions and revelations" So let me now read these verses. **"I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. (3) And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows— (4) was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.**

So there we have it. Paul, writing in the third person, presented to the Corinthians this one singular example from his experience that he felt fell under the heading of "visions and revelations."

Why would he do this? Why would he share only the one example and why would that one example be written in the third person? I believe both of these factors communicate to us how incredibly reluctant he was to speak of his own personal experiences when it came to various visions and revelations, believing that such an activity, as we have already discovered, was in and of itself **"not profitable."**

So, what do we learn from this one example? And what is the answer to this question? The answer is "not much" and for a very good reason. Paul wanted the Corinthians to evaluate him only on the basis of what they could see and hear from him directly, not on the ground of personal reports made by him concerning what he may have seen or heard in respect to "visions" and "revelations."

But even though we do not learn much or anything about what he saw or heard while experiencing what he experienced in this one example he put forward, we do learn a few things. So, what are those things?

We learn that when Paul experienced whatever he experienced, it fourteen years earlier (2 Corinthians 12:2). Isn't this exactly what we learn from **2 Corinthians 12:2**? This is exactly what we learn. What did he say? **“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago.”** This would have placed it sometime between A.D. 42-44. During this time Paul was most likely in or around Tarsus or Antioch, prior to his first missionary journey with Barnabas (Acts 9:29-30; 11:25-26; Galatians 1:21). So, what else do we learn?

We learn that when Paul experienced whatever he experienced, he did not know whether or not he experienced it “in the body” or “out of the body” (2 Corinthians 12:2-3). We see Paul making this comment both in **2 Corinthians 12:2** as well as in **2 Corinthians 12:3**. So why was this thought important? We don't really know other than to say that whether he was “in the body” or “out of the body” it didn't make a great deal of difference to Paul. Rather what was important to him was the fact that fourteen years earlier that God had caught him, or in other words had snatched him up into an incredibly glorious place. And where did God take him? This brings us to the next thing that we learn about his personal experience.

We learn that when Paul experienced whatever he experienced, he found himself “in the third heaven,” or in other words “in paradise” (2 Corinthians 12:2,4). So, what does this communicate? The Judaism of Paul's day could view the heavenly realm as consisting of various number of levels (e.g. three, five, seven, or ten). In this case, the parallel between the “third heaven” referenced in **2 Corinthians 12:2** and “paradise” which Paul referenced in **2 Corinthians 12:4** would indicate that Paul's reference to the third heaven was a reference to the highest spiritual realm where one encounters the very presence of God, or in other words “heaven.” This is where Paul was “caught up” to, this is where he was “snatched away” to.

So, what happened there? We can only imagine! Why? This leads us to the last thing we learn. We learn that when Paul experienced whatever he experienced, he was forbidden to speak about the things that he saw and

heard (2 Corinthians 12:4). Let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 12:4** and see if this is not so. He said that he heard **“inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.”** So why were these words that he heard in the “third heaven” “in paradise” in the heavenly abode of the eternal God described as **“inexpressible?”** Was it because these words were unintelligible or because of any inferiority in Paul himself as a mediator. No! It was because God forbade him to speak of them. This is why Paul described these words as **“inexpressible.”** And why was this so important?

By doing so, God ensured that the basis of apostolic authority, or Paul’s apostolic authority, would not be based on “visions and revelations,” which God, as well as His apostle, would have considered inconsequential in determining who as a false apostle or a true apostle.

So if Paul’s apostolic authority was not going to be determined by visions and revelations, then what was his apostolic authority to be determined by? Paul believed that his willingness to suffer on behalf of others as representative of the crucified Christ was the essential mark of a true apostle. This is why he was determined to boast only in his weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:5).

Let us look at **2 Corinthians 12:5** and see if this is not so. **“On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses.”** This is very similar to what Paul said in **2 Corinthians 11:30**.

And then how did he conclude this thought? He concluded this thought in **2 Corinthians 12:6** by saying, **“For if I do wish to boast** (or in other words if I wish to boast in regards to my visions and revelations) **I will not be foolish** (and why would he say this? Let us continue to read...), **for I will be speaking the truth.** But then what does he say? **“But I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.”** In other words, he does not want to set up, by words or actions, any false standard of measure other than the one he is now boasting in which is his **“weaknesses.”**

If we profess to be servants of Christ, may we, by the grace of God, be willing to suffer in order to serve those to whom we have been sent, so that

we might, through our willingness to suffer, prove that we are in fact servants of Christ.