

Dr. Ayo Adewuya, 2 Corinthians, Session 13, 2 Corinthians 12, Foolish Boasting and Heavenly Visions

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This is Dr. Ayo Adewuya in his teaching on 2 Corinthians. This is session 13, 2 Corinthians 12, Foolish Boasting and Heavenly Visions.

We continue with our study in 2nd Corinthians, and we come to chapter 12.

We want to remind ourselves that in the last session, we did say that that entire section begins from chapter 12, verse 1, and runs up to verse 10. That is the section that contains the foolish boasting, boasting of Paul. But then we've already looked at it in chapter 11, and we ended up looking at the credentials of the apostle.

The false teachers at Corinth boasted of their special experiences in which the Lord appeared to them. You see, their claim must have impressed the Corinthians, making them wonder if Paul could measure up to the intruders. So, the chapter continues Paul's boasting that started in the previous one, but then it contains more because Paul will go on to show the power of grace, of God's grace, both in his life and his ministry.

As we mentioned earlier, Paul frequently spoke about grace in 2nd Corinthians in various places. He recognized that the believer has nothing to boast of apart from what he or she receives from the Lord. God's grace was what made Paul's hardship and constant suffering bearable.

And we need that grace today. Paul begins the second phase of his foolishness of boasting with an introduction to the theme of visions and revelations. So, the chapter is basically about foolish boasting and heavenly visions.

Compelled by the situation to boast involuntarily, which you see in verse 1 of chapter 12, boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable. But I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. So, he moves from the description of his sufferings for Christ's sake to an account of a heavenly experience granted to him.

Paul does this perhaps because such experiences significantly influence the boasting of his opponents. In this chapter, particularly in verses 1 to 6, Paul places his great ecstatic experience and revelation ironically between the great humiliation of his hurried escape from Damascus, which he referred to that he was led down by a basket. Sometimes, I wonder how big that basket was or probably how small Paul himself was.

You see, the basket must have been very big, or Paul was actually not big. Well, maybe that's why some people say Paul means little. But you don't see the humiliation that is involved in all that.

And then, you see, he mentioned that. And, of course, after that, he sees this revelation. After the revelation, he exhibited the thorn in the flesh, his unrelieved weakness as exhibited by the thorn in his flesh.

So the thrust of the accounts, as Paul tells them, is that Paul's strength as an apostle comes through the admission of his own weakness for the sake of the power of Christ in his life. Again, when you look at chapter 12, verses 1 to 10, there are noteworthy and remarkable differences between verses 1 to 6 and 7 to 10. For example, in verses 1 to 6, Paul describes his experience in the third person about an unnamed person because he says, I know a man in Christ.

But then he narrates verses 7 to 10 in the first person using personal pronouns I, me, mine. You see, the first narrative in 1 to 6 is very opaque. It's an opaque description about which Paul seems unable to speak.

He couldn't describe it. And then the second is a specific declaration about which he speaks openly. And he even quotes Christ verbatim.

So you see, there's a difference between the two accounts, 1 to 6 and 7 to 10. The question then is, what exactly was Paul's rhetorical intent? I think the answer to that is clear. It is to unmask the boast of his opponents before the Corinthians.

Are the intruders boasted all the more because of Paul's thorn? Or did they ridicule him because of Paul's thorn? It's either they have been mocking him. Paul seems to play the role of the wounded healer. He himself is a healer, but he's wounded.

He's unhealed himself in the interest of others. He was a man who had a thorn in the flesh, and he went about in the power of God ministering to the needs of others, and he himself remained unhealed. Beginning from verse 1, the apostle feels that he must boast.

He must continue to boast, but then he does it with great reticence. You see, most often in the New Testament, the impersonal verb dei implicitly suggests that what must be done is God's will. So that's the word that Paul uses here.

His opponents and the church have left him no alternative. I must go on boasting, but then he quickly adds that if I boast, there's actually nothing to be gained. It's not profitable.

There is nothing to be gained. Paul then moves quickly to a new theme. He said, I will go to visions and revelations from the Lord, and here Paul talks about the Lord.

Many scholars raise exegetical questions, and one of the exegetical questions raised in this particular place is the force of the genitive of the Lord. Is it a subjective genitive indicating the source of the revelations as from the Lord, or is it an objective genitive designating the content of the visions and revelations as being of the Lord? The New American Standard Bible leaves the question open. I will go to visions and revelations of the Lord.

It just leaves it that kind of ambiguity. So, does Paul mean both or either/or? It's difficult to decide, but I personally think that maybe he had both in mind. Maybe he had both in mind, and I don't think that should be a major focus.

I mean, the major focus is on the revelation itself, where he says I saw something that I cannot tell whether it's from the Lord or about the Lord. It really doesn't matter because it's still the same effect. It's still in the same predicament.

He cannot tell what he saw. He had a revelation. Whether it's about the Lord, whether it's just from the Lord, he still had a revelation that goes beyond the revelation that his opponents have had.

The argument for the objective genitive points to other instances where apocalypses is followed by a genitive. Paul's revelation at the time of his conversion was an example. Most commentators, however, take the genitive as subjective.

But like I said, there's not a great difference. I mean, we just leave that all alone. And then he talks about visions.

Another problem is about visions and revelations. Visions are revelations. The latter is the broader term, a more significant word, is more significant than visions.

Not all visions reveal something, and not all revelations require visions. Again, not all visions reveal something, and not all revelations require visions. Here, in verses two to four, Paul indicates that he saw the vision, and it seems as if Ralph Martin argues that the vision is a source of the revelation.

The singular noun revelation was an important word for Paul in connection with his call and with his commission. You see that in Galatians chapter one, verse 12, and chapter two, verse two. It was an apocalyptic event for Paul, marking the turning or dawning of the end of the age.

That's what apocalyptic is all about. But his use of the plural here probably gives it a general or topical force since it feels it is appropriate to report only one such experience. So, with a kind of hesitancy, Paul now speaks of an ecstatic experience.

Remember that in Corinth, the Corinthians were usually prone or inclined to overlay the significance of such manifestations. We see that in 1 Corinthians chapter 14, one to five, where Paul was talking about the gift of the spirit. Of course, this experience is not comparable to his revelation encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

Perhaps it is more in continuity with his experiences recorded in 1 Corinthians chapter 14, but then he was very hesitant. Now, we should learn a lesson from that. The reticence or the hesitancy with which Paul speaks of his extraordinary religious experience is instructive for us.

He deliberately discounts it as an argument and describes any such use of it as boasting. It is irrelevant as a validation for his ministry. We need to be very careful of that.

It is irrelevant as a validation for his ministry. I have known ministers in the thought, I mean, in the majority world who will say, well, this is what he revealed to me, and that becomes the basis of their ministry. I know a particular one in Nigeria several years ago, I happened to interpret for him while I was back at home, and he said the law revealed to him a snake and all that, and he saw the snake, and that was the beginning of his ministry, and hundreds of thousands of people follow him.

I'm sure you want to ask how you interpreted for him. We wanted to reach out to him, and therefore, the way to reach the members of his church was to bring him. Since he came, thousands of people came in, and therefore, we were able to reach him. And, of course, we let him speak for about 15 minutes, so I interpreted for him; he didn't do much damage; people knew what we believed, and we knew what we wanted to do because I'm sure you are likely to ask that question. If he saw a snake, does it mean you approve of his ministry? No, I did not, and I do not.

But I'm simply saying that there are people who come up with different revelations and all that, and they make that the basis of their ministry. We need to be very careful, very careful, as careful as we can be. Paul does not belittle religious experience; we need to understand that, but he always attempts to keep it in proper perspective and balance.

You see, the other extreme is for believers to say, well, no visions anymore, no revelations anymore, God can't do it again. I think that's another extreme. Paul does not discount religious experience, and rather, he keeps everything in proper perspective and balance.

You see, the yardstick of all ecstatic experiences and emotional demonstrations is whether they proclaim Jesus as Lord, or in other words, whether they build up the church. If they don't proclaim Jesus as Lord, and they do not build up the church, then something must be wrong. Then, verses two to four give two parallel descriptions of the heavenly journey.

I mean, you find verse two, and then verses three to four. Some take this as two distinct accounts, but it's not. Some see Paul's report as merely a fictional literary construct, like the accounts of heavenly raptures in the Jewish apocalypses.

Others take it as a self-parody of heavenly journeys and healing miracles. But what Paul does is to expose the absurd pretension of his rivals. Most interpreters judge it to be a serious account of a real and personal religious experience of the apostle.

I'm not sure there's any other way to understand it than his experience because he said, I knew a man. In this account of ascending to heaven, Paul speaks in this order. The person involved is a man in Christ.

The time it occurred was 14 years ago. The circumstances in the body or out of the body, I do not know. Its destination is caught up in the third heaven.

That's the way sequentially it goes. A man in Christ, 14 years ago, in body or out of body, I do not know, and caught up into the third heavens. I know a man in Christ.

Let's begin with that. To speak of himself is simply a Christian in union with Christ, a human being overwhelmed by a gracious moment in the divine presence of Christ. This is very, very important.

Paul here says, look, I can't explain this. It leaves unexplained why it retains the first-person perspective in verses 7 to 10. Maybe if we know the Socratic tradition, which says that one must not boast about oneself, but if necessary, this may be done by someone else.

So, you wonder why Paul says, I know a man in Christ, and he does it in the third person. If necessary, be done by one else. So, Paul was just using such a way of description.

Then, 14 years ago, attempts were made to identify the 14-year event with a previously mentioned event, but sincerely, none was convincing. The best that can be said is that it occurred during Paul's activities in Syria and Cilicia, around 43 AD. Beyond confirming the fact of this experience, Paul probably dated it only to draw attention to his long silence about it.

I have kept quiet about it because there was no reason to tell anybody, but now that these people are boasting of whatever experiences they have, I think I need to let everybody know that I also had visions and revelations, but I don't go around boasting like they do. You see, this is Paul still making the false apostles to look foolish. Third, there is ambiguity in the circumstances of his experience.

He said in the body or out of the body, I do not know. Well, that also brings a lot of interpretive judgments that vary. Paul stresses his ignorance as compared with God's knowledge.

The apostle does not know how or whether he was actually transported up to the third heaven. Was this merely a visionary experience, or was his body transported to paradise? He concedes only God knows. I do not know.

You see, why Paul gives such a brief and enigmatic description is open to speculations, and therefore, it is less he said too much. He just kept quiet and left it at that, and sometimes I think it's wisdom for us as believers to stop where the Bible stops and just say that's the much we know. I mean, that's the much Paul tells us, and if he tells us that, we can't, there's no way for us to figure it out, so we just leave it as, okay, Paul, if Paul himself said he did not know, well, how do we know? He was caught up into the third heaven.

I mean, it was done by somebody else. This is what we call a theological passive, which is done by God. God is the unnamed actor.

Paul, the one who suddenly ascended into the third heaven, was swiftly caught up into the third heaven, and here Paul is now boasting. In verses three and four, since Paul dates it only once, he must be describing the same revelation now enhanced by repetition. He said, I know that this man, whether in the body or apart from the body, I do not know.

Though he was not sure whether it was in or out of the body, he was caught up to the third heaven or paradise, verses two and four. There, he had inexpressible words, which are not allowed to be repeated. Paul interrupts his account of this experience to say that he will boast of this man's experience, but he will not boast of himself except his weaknesses.

For though he will desire to glory, he will not be a fool, and though indeed he will speak the truth, but he refrains from speaking more about his translation to heaven, lest anyone should think of him more highly, or think of this man more highly for what they see in his conduct or what they hear from him. You see, unfortunately, Paul, don't let me say unfortunately, let me back up. Paul, unlike many preachers in the 21st century, knows that validation as God's minister does not come from one's self-commendation, endorsement, or from otherworldly and ecstatic experiences.

He wants people to evaluate him according to the observable facts of his life and ministry, his obedience and faithfulness in proclaiming the gospel, not by his account of esoteric experiences. His reference to division is for the purpose of showing the reason of one of his most humbling experiences, his continuing thorn in the flesh that that messenger of Satan which befits him constantly. Paul says I was given a thorn in the flesh so that I will not boast.

You see, this thorn irritated him so much that he prayed three times for his remover, but God did not grant this request. We must learn an important lesson here. God did not chastise or rebuke Paul for asking again and again.

You know, sometimes people say, well if you pray and you pray the second time, it means you don't believe. If you pray and you believe only once, that's good enough. Well, God did not tell Paul to stop talking.

He asked the first time, the second time, the third time until God said, don't worry about it. I've answered your prayer, but the answer is not necessarily what you want. But I answered your prayer all the same.

God did not chastise or rebuke Paul for asking again and again. But then, once Paul had a sense of God's answer, he stopped asking. Although his request was denied, his prayer was answered.

His request was denied, but his prayer was answered. You see, God tells us to ask until our joy is full, until our joy is full. Nevertheless, there's a time when we must accept God's answer and rely on his strength for weakness.

God told him, my grace is sufficient for you. From his suffering and the Lord's denial, Paul learned two reasons for the thorn. One is to keep him humble.

Twice, he said that it was given to him, let's be exalted above measure. It was to be a continual reminder of who and what he was and how dependent he was upon the Lord. Whatever the thorn was, the other reason for it was to keep him in a state that would allow the Lord to walk effectively through him.

In answer to Paul's prayer, the Lord assured him that his will be enough for him and that his power is perfected in this fear of human weakness. Paul's life and ministry are a proof of this glorious fact. The very essence of Christian life and service is Christ living and walking through us.

As we abide in him, he produces the fruit. We interrupt his bearing fruit in our lives by attempting to do what he alone can do. Paul boasts in his weaknesses and takes pleasure in his woes.

There are several lessons we can learn. Now, I know the question you are probably waiting to ask me is: what is Paul's thorn in the flesh? Before I explain anything, let me give you my answer. I do not know.

I do not know. There are various possibilities. When he was writing in Galatians, he said he had written these large letters with his hand, which made some people conclude that he had eye problems.

And others in association with Joshua, where Joshua told the children of Israel, if you marry among the people, there will be thorns in your flesh and thistles in your eyes. I've argued that maybe Paul had an unbelieving wife, and that's a fulfillment of Joshua. That's also a speculation.

Others suggest that Paul says if I am insane if I have a malady, it must have been a mental problem. Those are possibilities. But I can tell you this for sure.

I do not know. But there are some things I know about the thorn in the flesh. So let me tell you what I know.

Number one, God allows thorns. God allows thorns. Nowhere has God promised the believer a smooth flight to heaven.

It is not unrealistic and unscriptural, but it is also wrong to assume that a Christian will have no troubles in this life. Afflictions are a part of life. Thorns or adversities reveal what we think about ourselves.

At times, trials and troubles are necessary tools for shaping our character into a more Christ-like image. Without adversity, we will be too quick to praise our own accomplishments and advancements. You know, immediately, the words of David come to our mind.

He said it's good that I've been afflicted. How could somebody say that? It's good that I've been afflicted so that I can know your way. In that time, he said it twice.

Therefore, our trials help to keep our egos under control. That I can tell you about thorns. Let me tell you something again about thorns.

At least as clear in 2 Corinthians 12, a thorn is not a punishment either for past or present sins. There are those who suggest that Paul was afflicted either because of his pre-conversion life, his persecution of believers, or due to some present sin in his life. That has no scriptural warrant or justification.

When God forgives us, he forgives us. He does not punish us again for the sins we have committed in the past. Yes, admittedly, some people, maybe before their conversion, have done something, and maybe as a result, got drunk, had an accident, and had one hand amputated.

Now, you don't suddenly grow the second hand after you get saved or born again. You still have only one hand. But that's not a punishment.

Not at all. It is something that happened to you that you just have to live with. A thorn is not a punishment for past or present sins.

Number three. This is what I know about thorns. God has a purpose in thorns.

Although we may not realize it, adversity reveals what we truly think about God. Sometimes, we get angry at God for our troubles, and other times, we excuse him altogether for having nothing to do with it. The fact that God did not remove Paul's thorns is not an indication of God's weakness or God's non-involvement.

Rather, it shows that it fulfills his purposes. Lastly, this is what I know about thorns. God has power over thorns.

God could remove the thorns if he chooses to. In Paul's case, God chose to demonstrate his power, not by removing the thorn, but by doing something greater, by giving grace that was sufficient to bear it. So that's all I can tell you about Paul's thorn in the flesh.

Now, Paul moves away from that in verses 11 to 21, and he talks about commendation and trust. In verse 11, he says, I have become foolish. You yourselves compelled me.

Actually, I should have been commended by you. For in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.

For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong here for this thought time. I'm ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you. For I do not seek what is yours, but you.

For children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, I might be loved less, but be that as it may, I did not burden you myself.

Nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit. Certainly, I've not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I've sent to you, have I? I have all the titles to go, and I send the brother with him. Titles did not take any advantage of you.

Did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps? All this time, you've been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it's in the sight of God that we've been speaking in Christ and all for your upbuilding, beloved. For I am afraid that perhaps when I come, I may find you to be not what I wish.

I may be found by you to be not what you wish, that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances. I'm afraid that when I come again, my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality, and sensuality that they practice. So, Paul almost apologizes again for his boasting in verse 11.

He said, well, it has to be done. That's why I did it. The Corinthians should have commended him, for they knew well his apostleship.

They knew him very well, but they failed him by listening to his critics and some of them by following his critics. Because the Corinthians did not take his side, he was forced in his own defense to commend himself. He asked forgiveness if he has treated them as being inferior in verse 13.

As Paul indicates his readiness to make a third visit to Corinth, he's still determined not to be a financial burden to his readers. That's what we see in verse 14. If the Corinthians thought that Paul was after their money, they were totally wrong.

He will continue his previous financial policy of not receiving gifts from them. His motivation is this. He not only wants to silence the false charges of his enemies but also to show the purity of his love for the Corinthians and his desire to promote their spiritual well-being.

Then, in verse 15, driven by paternal godly love, he will very gladly spend and be spent for them. You see, the Corinthians' failing love for Paul does not lessen his own love for them. The less they loved him, the more he loved them.

In fact, he loves them more abundantly. His love for his readers is so great that he willingly imposes upon himself the discipline of self-deprivation and of earning his own way, which the financial policy he has started for himself requires. This means that Paul has to get along and do with less and walk with his hands more in order to keep body and soul together.

But for Paul, it's a small price to pay for the edification and the upbuilding of his spiritual children in Corinth. This same spirit of sacrifice motivated Christ, his master, to become poor so that others might be made rich in him. Paul follows Christ's model as the master.

If anyone suspects the purity of Paul's motive and the propriety of his conduct, they should study his record. That's what he says in verse 16. A malicious lie that is being whispered by his foes is this, though it should not be considered that it was not a financial burden to the Corinthians, yet being cunning, he caught them with God.

The unsuspected Corinthians took his bait by agreeing to raise an offering for Jerusalem, intending to pocket this money for himself. That's what they were saying. In reply, the apostle asked his readers if he had taken advantage of them by anyone whom he had sent to them.

Did he not and his associates walk in the same spirit and steps, conducting themselves with the same motive and procedure? A review of the facts will point to the integrity of his friends and himself. Do the Corinthians misunderstand why Paul writes the way he writes? He is convinced that they do. They think he's excusing or defending himself when he answers the false charges of his enemies and vindicates his apostleship.

That's what we see in verse 19. But he does not feel answerable to them at all but is answerable to God in Christ. He is the Lord's apostle and must give an account of stewardship to him.

He assures his readers that all that he's doing is for the purpose of edifying them. Since his image has been distorted by the lies and innuendos of his opponents, he seeks to correct all that for their well-being, not for his own sake. Only as their confidence in his apostleship is restored can he rescue them from certain ruin.

Having assured his readers that he does all things for their edification, Paul flexes his apostolic muscles with a warning and an appeal. With misgivings, he fears that when he goes to Corinth, he will not find them in an acceptable spiritual state or be found by them in an acceptable mood. He fears that he will find strife, jealousy, slander, evil, and whispering; that is, he will mourn for many who are still unrepentant of their sins.

So, at the end of the day, he tells them that, look, all that has been happening is because of you. I have boasted because of you, not because of any other reason, and you need to know that whatever I have done is for your sake. And I'm coming for the third time.

Make sure that all is well and all is right before I come.

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