

While we often extract parts of this chapter for devotional blessings, we must keep in mind Paul's purpose in answering his critics and proving his apostolic calling. In the previous chapter he has decided to recount those things that show his infirmities, that Christ might receive the glory; this he does in this chapter. In fact, you may find in this chapter four proofs of Paul's apostleship.

I. HIS REVELATIONS FROM CHRIST - 12:1-6

The "man" Paul is talking about here is, of course, himself. Imagine being able to keep a thrilling experience like this secret for 14 years! (Imagine, too, bearing 14 years of suffering!) Certainly Paul was given divine revelations that no other man saw or heard. He was God's chosen instrument to reveal to the world the mystery of the church (note carefully Acts 26:16). The "third heaven" is paradise, the very heaven of the presence of God. What Paul heard from God, we do not know. Paul himself said nothing about this experience lest any Christian start honoring him more than he ought. What humility!

God would not have given these revelations to Paul if he were not his chosen servant. As he argues in Gal. 1:11ff, the truths he taught came directly from God, and not second-hand from another apostle.

II. HIS THORN IN THE FLESH - 12:7-10

We do not know what this thorn was, but the best suggestion is an eye ailment. Paul was supernaturally blinded when converted (Acts 9:9), and it is possible that some weakness remained even in later years. Gal. 4:15 and 6:11 ("with what large letters") suggest eye trouble. This would have been a trial to Paul both physically and emotionally, and could honestly be called a thorn (stake) in the flesh. (Sometimes prisoners were impaled on stakes and left to die a horrible death.)

The presence of this thorn was proof of his heavenly experience related in 1-7; for God gave him the thorn (what a gift!) to keep him from getting proud about his great experiences in the Lord. The enemies at Corinth had been accusing Paul of being weak (see 10:1 and 10, 11:6 and 29), and now he admits that he is weak, but that his weakness is a gift from God. The very weakness they accused him of was actually an argument for his apostolic authority!

There are several very practical lessons to be learned from Paul's thorn experience:

1. Spiritual blessings are more important than physical. Paul thought he could be a better Christian if he were relieved of his weakness, but just the opposite was true. Faith healers who preach that sickness is a sin have a hard time with this chapter!

~~2. Unanswered prayer~~ does not always mean the need is not met. Sometimes we get a greater blessing when God does not answer our prayers! God always answers the need even though it seems He is not answering the prayer.

3. Weakness is strength if Christ is in it. Read I Cor. 1:26-31 for proof; remember Gideon's pitchers, David's sling, and Moses' rod.

4. There is grace to meet every need. Grace enabled Paul to accept his weakness, glory in it, and take pleasure in it! What spiritual growth! Paul knew that his weakness would bring glory to Christ, and that is all that mattered. See II Cor. 4:7.

III. HIS APOSTOLIC SIGNS - 12:11-18

Paul is not exalting himself when he claims to be second to none of the

apostles; he is simply defending his office. Note that Paul lists several "signs" that proved his apostleship, starting with patience! We expect him to mention miracles and wonders, but not patience! Yet it was Paul's steadfast endurance under trial that gave evidence that he was divinely called and commissioned. (See chapter 4.)

He mentions, too, his attitude toward money. It can be stated as an accepted fact that the servant's attitude toward material things indicates his spiritual life and outlook. A true servant of Christ cannot have a love of money. Paul reminds them that he and Titus proved their sincere love for the church in the way they supported themselves and generously helped the Corinthians.

Miracles and signs alone are no proof that a man is sent from God; for Satan himself has miraculous credentials (see II Thess. 2). When a man's life and motives are pure, then we can trust his miracles; but when his life is not right, his miracles cannot be of God.

#### IV. HIS COURAGE TO DEAL WITH SIN - 12:19-21

"You will see how weak I am!" writes Paul. "I would rather you start cleaning up the church now," he advises. "If you wait for me to do it, you'll see how humble I can be in the hands of the Lord!"

When the hireling sees the wolf coming, he runs away (John 10:13); but the true shepherd stays and protects the sheep. Paul was not about to run away. He even goes so far as to name the sins that were rampant in the church. Though they had taken care of the offender mentioned in I Cor. 5, there were other sins now that needed attention. "A little leaven" had indeed leavened the whole lump (I Cor. 5:6)!

There are two types of sin mentioned here: the social sins (20) and the sexual sins (21). There were both Elder Brothers and Prodigal Sons in the membership, and both needed to repent. What began as factions in I Cor. 1:10 had now grown into debates and strifes and tumults! Satan was in command, for God is never the author of confusion. False teaching always leads to false living.

This chapter might well serve as a test for Christian servants. While none of us receives special divine revelations today, we all must be in contact with God and receiving our messages from Him. We all must have grace to endure suffering. There dare not be any love of money or any fear of man that would hinder us from dealing with sin. May God help us to be the kind of servants that God can commend and bless!