

## 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

The Apostle Paul arrived in Corinth alone. He soon found paid work and fellowship with a Christian business couple who had been expelled from Rome. He immediately began his evangelistic labours in the local synagogue. When joined by his two mission colleagues, Silas and Timothy, he was energised in his labours and hostility arose from the Jews. A church was formed. There was further hostility toward his work but Paul was strengthened by a vision when the Lord said to him, “Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city”. For the next eighteen months Paul taught the word of God among them and a strong church was established (Acts 18:1-11).

Humanly speaking there was no doubt that he was the founder of the church in Corinth. He had preached the gospel where it had not been preached before. He had funded his own ministry. He had persisted in spite of great opposition. He had performed signs, wonders and mighty works among them (2 Cor. 12:12). He even had a vision in which the Lord had spoken to him.

Nor was the founding of the church the end of his ministry to them. While “fighting wild beasts in Ephesus” establishing a church there, he was continuing his pastoral work in Corinth. With a series of, at least four letters and three visits by himself and his ministry colleagues, he was correcting doctrine, ordering church life and calling for Christian behaviour. And in the context of all of this, would you believe it, he was having to defend his authority as an apostle of Christ and pastor of the church.

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Some preachers had come claiming they had authority from the Jerusalem church leaders. Among the claims they made was a superior spirituality. Apparently they claimed to have had visions and revelations that were far superior to Paul's. Moreover they were greater orators than Paul and they had more powerful personalities and of course they should be funded by the church for their labours. How shall Paul respond to these false apostles with their claims of greater authority and new teaching?

In our twenty first century, with flashy travelling and television preachers who have such powerful personalities, such great abilities to present and who claim to be such worthy causes to support, what lessons can we learn from the apostle?

**Firstly Paul was forced to explain what the real situation was.**

Paul was not happy about doing this because it seemed to him that it could be construed as boasting of his own spirituality and this would only further the building of a culture of dependence on spiritual experiences rather than exercising faith in Christ. In fact he is so reticent in talking about his own spiritual experiences that he casts this experience in the story of "a man he knows". However the truth had to be stated.

The experience Paul chose to relate was one God gave Paul during his early ministry in Syria and Cilicia. It was very vivid. He still, even at the writing of 2 Corinthians, did not know whether it was a spiritual or bodily experience. He was caught up into the third heaven, into Paradise. He heard things that he cannot be repeated.

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His telling of this experience was a reluctant telling for the sake of those who need assurance that he is not inferior to these boasting, new preachers who have come to town. Because we have the Acts of the Apostles we know that Paul could have chosen to relate many such experiences. He could have mentioned the vision in the Jerusalem Temple after his conversion (22:17-21) or at Corinth (19:9-10) or at his last visit to Jerusalem (23:11) or on his voyage to Italy (27:23-24) or of Ananias coming to him (9:12) or of the Macedonian beckoning him to preach in Europe (16:9). And no doubt there were many more that God gave Paul that we don't have recorded in the New Testament.

We may well ask will he then not boast of anything? The answer comes immediately.

**Secondly Paul will boast of his weaknesses because they demonstrate the power of Christ.**

Paul had a couple of principles in mind when it came to boasting about spirituality. One was that he wanted people to judge him by the gospel they heard him preach and the life they saw him live as he conducted himself according to that gospel. He did not want them honouring him because of some exotic visionary experiences he might have had.

The other was that he had a "thorn in the flesh" which kept him from getting too elated about the visions he had seen. What that thorn in the flesh was, we don't know. Many suggestions have been put forward. Among the suggestions has been a pain in the ear or head, epilepsy, convulsive attacks, ophthalmia, malaria and attacks of depression. Whatever it was, it was a great hindrance to his physical well-being and could rightly be

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called a messenger of Satan. Paul, like his Master, had employed three seasons of prayer for the removal of this cup of suffering but the Lord said to him that his grace was sufficient for him and that God's power would be made perfect in his weakness. He therefore had decided that if he were going to boast about anything it would be about his weaknesses because when he was weak the power of Christ rested upon him.

### **Conclusion:**

If God has given us some assuring experience of himself then let's thank God for it but certainly never parade it around so that we will receive some kudos or special esteem. Rather let us boast of the Lord Jesus who died for our sins and was raised from death for our justification. In fact let us seek to do all things to bring glory to his name and not draw praise to ourselves.

The story has been told of the great eighteenth century preacher, George Whitefield that on the conclusion of a sermon he preached, a gentleman said to him, "That was a very fine sermon, Mr Whitefield". The preacher replied, "Yes I know. The Devil told me that before I got out of the pulpit." His desire was to win glory for Christ not himself.

Paul's refrain in his Corinthian letters is, "Let him who boast, boast in the Lord."