

Study 13: Chapter 12

Introduction

Paul continues his “folly” and flippant approach to his accusers. He presents irrefutable evidence of his credentials, and then reminds the Corinthians that he will not be afraid to set things in order when he comes to them personally.

Body of the Study

Visions and Revelations

Paul’s “infirmities”

The undisputable evidence

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Conclusions

Putting things in order with the visit

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *From the examples that Paul gives in this chapter and the previous one, Can we expect that life as a faithful christian will be “a bed of roses”? What are the things that characterised faithfulness in Paul’s life? What application can we make for ourselves?*
- *What was accomplished by Paul’s persistent prayer for the removal of his thorn in the flesh? How can we make application of these things in our lives?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 13 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 13: Chapter 12

Introduction

Paul continues his “folly” and flippant approach to his accusers. He presents irrefutable evidence of his credentials, and then reminds the Corinthians that he will not be afraid to set things in order when he comes to them personally.

Body of the Study

Visions and Revelations

Since Paul’s enemies, the Judaisers, were boasting about their self-importance, Paul plays along with such “folly” for a little bit. In the end, such is not profitable – to the Judaisers it just goes to show up their lack of credibility, and for Paul (if such boasting was genuine) it would show up an un-Christlike spirit. Paul had the genuine credibility, but did not boast about it, whilst the Judaisers did not have the credibility and were boasting as if they did have some.

Paul speaks about *visions and revelations* that he had received, but he speaks in the “third person” [The first person is *me, I* etc; the second person is *you*; the third person is *they*]. He does this so as not to glory in his own experiences.

The visions occurred 14 years before the time that Paul wrote. The letter was written in late AD 57, and so the visions must have occurred in AD 43. This places it at the time of Paul’s ministry in Antioch (Acts 11: 26) or perhaps during the visit to Jerusalem (between Acts 11:30 and 12:25).

Whether the visions occurred like many of the others revealed in scriptures, Paul is not sure. In many cases, they were visions that appeared in the night, or in dreams (c/f Acts 16:9; 18:9-10; 23:11). In this case, Paul does not know whether it was an *in body* or *out of body* experience, but that is not important “...whether in the body or out of the body, I cannot tell, God knows...” (2:12:2,3).

In the visions, Paul is caught up into the *third heaven*. The first heaven is the dwelling place of the birds of the air (birds of the heavens), the second heaven is where the stars and planets are, and the third heaven is the dwelling place of God. He describes this place as “Paradise” (2:12:4), and there he heard things which he is unable to describe.

McGarvey¹ says:

“While here he had heard words which it was not lawful for him to try to interpret by the insufficient and consequently misleading worth of earth. He tells of this event, but it was an honor so much above his deserving that he avoids even such a method of telling it as might be construed to be boastful.”

Paul’s “infirmities”

If Paul was to boast about anything, it would be about his weaknesses (infirmities KJV / NKJV). Paul had some kind of physical weakness, which is usually considered to be poor eyesight. [He tells the Galatians, that “...if it were possible, they would have plucked out their own eyes and given them to him...” (Gal 4:15), and writes about the “...large letters that he has written with his own hand...” (Gal 6:11). Further, for most of his letters – even the shorter ones except Galatians – Paul uses a scribe, and then writes a short greeting in his own handwriting at the end. All of the above suggest poor eyesight, and whilst it is just speculation, it fits the evidence.]

¹ McGarvey JW & Pendleton PY “Commentary on Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans” Gospel Light Publishing Co, Delight Arkansas p 235
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At first it seems strange that Paul would want to boast about his weaknesses! But his weaknesses remind him of his humanity “...lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me...” (2:12:6 NKJV). As an apostle, Paul was a special person, had a special work, and consequently received special revelation. It was conceivable that he would become proud, puffed up, and exalted by the multiple revelations that he had received. As a result, he was given a special weakness to keep him humble. “...Lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure...” (2:12:7 NKJV)

Paul had prayed three times to the Lord to remove this *thorn in the flesh* but the answer was “no”. This shows us that whilst the apostles were able to work miracles to heal others, they were unable to apply the healing to themselves, or use the miracles for their own benefit. Of course, whilst the performing of the miracle was done through the apostles (and others who had been given the power), the power of the miracle came from God, and in most (all?) cases it is preceded by prayer and petition that the Lord would grant it. In the case of Paul, the answer was “no”. (eg see Acts 9:40; 28:8)

The Lord’s answer to Paul’s prayer is “...My grace is sufficient ... My strength is made perfect in weakness...” (2:12:9). The Lord knew that Paul could live with the infirmity, and that it would continue to remind him of his humanity and his dependence on God. If we have everything, then we think that we don’t need to rely on God for anything. For this exact reason, the gospel often flourishes where people are poor and have nothing, but is hindered by a society that has become rich.

The Judaisers had (apparently) been saying that the things Paul suffered were evidence of the fact that God was not with him. However, Paul clearly shows that that is not the case, and in fact the contrary applies. Because of his weaknesses, Paul is able to say “...when I am weak, then I am strong...” (2:12:10)

The undisputable evidence

The Corinthians should have had absolutely no doubt as to Paul’s credentials. But instead of defending him when the Judaisers had arrived, they had bent to them and (some of them) were now questioning Paul. In fact Paul “...ought to have been commended by you...” (2:12:11). They knew Paul and whilst the Judaisers were self-proclaiming their authority and pre-eminence as apostles, Paul reminds them that “...although I am nothing, yet I am not the least bit behind the most eminent apostles...” (2:12:11).

However, Paul does not leave them there without the evidence to support what he says (as if the evidence that he has already presented is not enough!). The undisputable evidence comes from the things that Paul did “...the signs of an apostle...” [One of my favourite sermon outline is taken from this verse, and I have preached it over 50 times]. It is evident from what Paul says here, that there were signs that showed whether the person was really an apostle or not – and those signs are revealed in the “...signs and wonders and mighty deeds...” (2:12:12).

That Paul was able to not only perform the signs and wonders and mighty deeds (as he did on many occasions), but he was also able to pass on the ability to do so to others. Whilst many people – those who had been given the gift – could perform miracles, they couldn’t pass the ability on to anyone else. Only the apostles could do that. Paul had given the gifts to (many of) the Corinthians, and so they should have had no doubt about him.

In contrast however, the Judaisers had not such powers. They were false apostles (2:11:13) and could not have had the powers of a true apostle. Even if they had received the gift to perform miracles (but couldn’t pass them on), the miracle was performed by God, not the worker, and was a sign that God was with the person. In the case of the Judaisers God was ***not*** with them. The miracles were given as a sign to confirm the word (Mk 16:20), so that Study of Corinthians by Graeme Offer

when people saw the miracles that were done, they would listen to the things that were spoken (Acts 8:6).

Paul had not regarded the Corinthians in any way as “...inferior to other churches...” the only difference was that when he was there he did not take wages from them and he was “...not burdensome to them...” (2:12:13 NKJV). The Corinthians ought to have known better!

The third visit

Paul says that he is about to visit them “...for the third time...” (2:12:14), although there is some dispute whether he is saying this will be *his third visit*, or the third time *he had intended to come*.

Most translations lead to the former “...Now I am ready to visit you for the third time...” (NIV). Many writers believe that during Paul’s prolonged stay in Ephesus, that he made a short visit across to Corinth. If that was the case, then Luke does not mention it, and neither does Paul (except by the implication contained here). The problem is that the state of the church in Corinth (as we read about in the first letter) does not fit a church as Paul would have left it. Yet, he writes the first letter to Corinth from Ephesus to set things in order. The first letter could not have been written just after Paul had made a visit there, since he knows about the things that are going on in the church because of what had been reported to him.

Likewise, if Paul had written the first letter, and then come for a visit shortly after, then he would not have defended his actions the way that he did earlier in the second letter (2:1:23) nor would he have needed to give instructions concerning the wayward brother (2:2:7).

So, we are left unsure of the second visit, and so a third *intention* is perhaps more likely, and some translations have “...this is the third time I have planned to come to you...” (2:12:14 McCord)

Conclusions

When Paul comes, he did not intend to take support from the Corinthians on this occasion (just as he had refused on previous occasions). Paul was their spiritual father, and as such he had the responsibility to ensure that his spiritual children were nurtured and looked after. The burden of responsibility lay on him to feed them, not on them to look after him. “...After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children...” (2:12:14 NIV)

The Judaisers might accuse him of taking money from the Corinthians in the form of the contribution for the poor saints in Jerusalem, and that he had so by craftiness, not being willing to come and from them for himself.

Paul’s response to this is to ask just who it was that came and took advantage of them? “...Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent you?...” (2:12:17). Titus and another brother with him were sent by Paul, and had reported back on the situation in Corinth. Titus was now being sent back with the second letter. It would be hard for them to make any false accusation against Titus, when he was right there to defend himself, and the brethren had already shown a positive response to his coming to them (2:7:13-16).

So, if Paul had taken anything from the Corinthians, the only way that he could have achieved it was through the actions of Titus! Furthermore, Paul and Titus were of the same mind in the things that they did. “...I urged Titus to go to you and I sent our brother with him. Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not act in the same spirit and follow the same course?...” (2:12:18)

Putting things in order with the visit

The church was split. Most of the brethren had accepted Paul, and what he taught, and had embraced Titus when he came as Paul's envoy. However there were some who were still hard lined to the Judaisers. Paul has presented strong evidence in the letter to establish his credentials as a true apostle, and to expose the Judaisers as false apostles. The Corinthian faction that was supporting them needed to repent, and have nothing further to do with the Judaisers. But, what was Paul going to find when he came?

"...For I fear, when I come, I shall not find you as I wish ... (but rather will find what I don't want)... and you will see the side of me that you won't want to see..." (2:12:20).

In fact, Paul expected to find amongst them the very sins that he had reproved them for in this and the first letter *"...contentions (1:6:7), jealousies (2:11:19,22), outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions (1:1:11), backbitings, whisperings, conceits (1:8:1,2), tumults..." (2:12:20 NKJV)*

Whilst Paul would rectify the matters and put them in order, it would not be done out of a haughty spirit, but would happen with great sorrow *"...I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented..." (2:12:21 NKJV)*. These people continue in their sinful practices of *"...uncleaness, fornication, licentiousness..." (2:12:21)*