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***Who is real? Who is phoney? In Christian circles, this can be determined against the backdrop of spiritual reality. At Corinth, many of the believers had come to believe that spiritual reality was defined by spiritual power and this meant the individual possessed special access to God through visions and direct revelations, among other markers. Thus authentic preachers of the Gospel must have these special 'powers' of access to God so they can demonstrate this special authority to the people. This way of thinking played into the hands of Paul's opponents among the house churches at Corinth. These individuals whom Paul labels as supposed 'super-apostles' and also 'messengers of Satan' claimed to have received special revelations about the Gospel that Paul didn't have. Consequently, they castigated him as not genuine and not blessed of God like they were. For a quick overview of them and their elitist ideas, read chapters ten through thirteen of 2 Corinthians where Paul takes them on vigorously.***

***Paul's counter argument to these false ideas of spiritual power and authority focused on his weaknesses. In arguing for his point, Paul went counter to the surrounding culture and also directly counter to the reasoning of his opponents at Corinth. Human weakness is the vehicle of demonstrating God's power, while human power stands as an obstacle to divine power and its display in the believer's life. This argument of Paul in 12:1-10 especially focused on physical health, or, more precisely, the lack of it as the vehicle of demonstrating the powerful grace of God that could sustain one through the harshness of life.***

***In a day of 'health and wealth' gospel perversion, Paul's point is overlooked by these purveyors of 'secular' religious experience. God wants you healthy and wealthy they claim, while in the process of 'fleecing' unsuspecting followers they are the main ones to get wealthy.<sup>1</sup> Such false preaching preys on the purely human aspirations of people to the utter neglect of the more important spiritual needs.***

***In such a day of twisted understanding, we need to hear Paul's word out of his own life experience.***



<sup>1</sup>For a good critique of the US preachers promoting this heresy, see the article on Brent Thompson at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=26217>.

***He has precious insights from God that the 'word of faith' preachers have completely missed.***

## I. Context

As is customary, we will draw upon previous studies in 2 Corinthians for much of the background material. New material will be developed to supplement and update the existing material.

### a. Historical

**External History.** In ancient letters, establishing the context for a passage often is of greater importance than with other types of scripture texts. This, mostly because a letter is comparable to listening to one side of a phone conversation (i.e., the letter writer). The more one knows about who's on the other end of the phone conversation (i.e., the letter recipient(s)) the easier it is to understand what the conversation is about, since the letter writer assumes many things are already understandable to those he originally was writing to. Second Corinthians makes many of these assumptions and thus presents some real challenges to clear understanding of Paul's words.

The issue of Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth raises both many aspects that are well understood, and a few that are less certain, based on the available information from both the letter itself, the Pauline letters in the NT, the book of Acts, and early church traditions.

Paul's [relationship with the Christian community](#) at [Corinth](#) began on the [second missionary journey](#) in the early 50s of the beginning Christian century, when his preaching of the gospel there led to the establishment of a number of house churches in this thriving town of several thousand people. Described in Acts 18:1-17; 1 Thess. 3:6-13; 1 Cor. 2:1-5; 1:13-17; 2 Thess. 3:1-5; 1 Cor. 3:5-10; 11:2, 23, 15:1; 2 Cor. 11:7-9, the church had its beginnings in the home of two Christians, Aquila and Priscilla, who probably had initiated a Christian witness prior to Paul's arrival. Sometime afterward Paul wrote a letter to the Christians there, which precedes the letter in the NT known as First Corinthians. 1 Cor. 5:9 contains an allusion to it (NRSV): "[I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons.](#)" Exactly when and from where this letter was written is unknown. The next segment of contact [[#s 3-7 in chart](#)] by Paul with Corinth came on the [third missionary journey](#) in the middle 50s of the first century. When Paul came to Ephesus on this trip, he spent a lengthy period of time there in ministry. During that time several contacts with the Corinthians took place. When information reached him about the situation among the Corinthian believers from members of



the household of Chloe and from a group from the church, the letter that we know as 1 Corinthians was written about 55 AD and sent to [Corinth](#) dealing with a variety of issues present in the church. Not long afterward Paul made a trip from Ephesus to Corinth that is not recorded by Luke in Acts to deal personally with some of the problems in the church, but he was unsuccessful in resolving the issues. 2 Cor. 2:1; 12:14; 13:1,2 allude to this visit. When he arrived back at Ephesus he penned a third letter to the Corinthians (see 2 Cor. 2:4; 7:8 for allusions to this letter), a part of which may possibly be contained in 2 Cor. 10-13 but most likely is lost. Titus was sent with this letter along with instructions to meet Paul somewhere in Macedonia to let him know whether the issues were resolved or not. After Paul left Ephesus, he went to Philippi etc. in Macedonia where he met Titus who had a positive report about the situation in Corinth. This provided the main reason for the writing of what we call 2 Corinthians. Titus then took the letter to Corinth ahead of Paul's arrival there on a third visit to the church described briefly in Acts 20:1-3. This would be the final time that Paul would see the Corinthians. About 50 years later the Corinthians surface again as the recipients of another letter. This time it came from the spiritual leader of Christians at Rome and attempted to resolve a fist full of problems plaguing the Corinthians community still. The letter is [1 Clement](#) and was written about 96 A.D.

The congregation reflected the enormous diversity that characterized the ancient city of Corinth, and that meant a lot of the problems that

were present in this diverse cultural, ethnic, and moral background. As a military retirement center as well as a busy commercial city with commerce from both sea and land, the city had segments of people from virtually all over the Roman Empire living there. This played a role in the Christian community struggling with many severe problems that covered the full range of ethical to doctrinal issues. Not the least of which was a significant difficulty of at least a segment of the Christian community in getting along with the apostle Paul. Some of the most direct, bluntest expressions ever penned by Paul are found in his Corinthian correspondence, especially in 2 Corinthians 10-13. We have more of what Paul said to this group of believers than we have to any other community of faith that he served. This in part, because the Corinthian church had so many problems and issues needing attention.

**Internal History.** Time and place markers

**b. Literary Genre.** 2 Cor. 12:1-10 comes as a part of the Body section of this letter to the Corinthians. Paul followed patterns of ancient letter writing in the core elements, but also used a great deal of creativity in adding his own personal touch to each of his letters.

Ancient letters were comprised of four basic elements:

*Praescriptio*  
*Proem*  
*Body*  
*Conclusio*

The *Praescriptio* identified who the letter was from (*Superscriptio*), who it was to (*Adscriptio*) and a bridge building greeting between the two (*Salutatio*). The *Proem* was a prayer of praise to God for the recipients and sometimes also an intercessory prayer for God's blessings on them. The *body* of the letter focused on the particular set of circumstances prompting the writing of the letter in the first place. The *Conclusio* finished the letter and could contain a variety of elements ranging for Author Verification, Greetings, Doxology, and Benedictio and others. Second Corinthians contains all these elements.

One important note is that the more formal letters like this one were actually written by a writing secretary, rather than by the designated sender in the *Superscriptio* section. We know the name of the writer of Romans, Tertius, but not the name of the individual who did the writing of 2 Corinthians. One is inclined to wonder if it may have been Silas (Latin, *Silvanus*), since he is identified in 1 Peter 5:12 as the one who did the writing of that letter

inside 12:1-10 are limited and vague. The passage revolves around Paul's contention with his opponents at Corinth in the mid 50s of the first century. These enemies of Paul in Corinth are inside the Christian church there, rather than non-believers, although Paul raises serious doubts about their salvation and genuineness as believers.



The other spatial reference has to do with locating the 'third heaven' which Paul then calls Paradise. The visionary nature of the reference raises doubts about whether it is spatial or metaphysical. Did this man travel to a specific location bodily or just mentally in a momentary trance? Paul's own recollection is unsure about whether the man was in or out of his body during the experience. Thus the identity of the 'third heaven' remains somewhat elusive.

from Peter. But the *Conclusio* of 2 Corinthians (13:11-13) makes no mention of the writing secretary.

Inside the passage a variety of literary forms are used in this highly polemical text. Verses 1-6a are often seen as aretology, the praise of a great man along with a Hellenistic deity. To be sure tones of Stoic aretology are present in these verses, but it is unclear whether Paul is adopting this literary device. If so, it may suggest the source of the reasoning of his opponents as Paul responds to them in terms they could well understand. But in verses 6b - 10 the apostle turns the argument in the opposite direction that would have been anticipated in Stoic praise of a great man. In verse 10, he draws upon an axiomatic saying as the foundation of his approach to ministry. Whether this was composed by Paul, or borrowed from existing Christian tradition is not clear, although the former is more likely.

Clearly the passage reveals highly creative use of existing Jewish and Greek literary devices in order to make a case for the apostle's viewpoint.

**Literary Context.** Of course, 12:1-10 comes as a part of the letter body, 1:12-13:10. More precisely, the passage is a part of a lengthy defense of Paul's ministry found in chaps. 10-13. Here a most vigorous defense of his right as a true apostle, called of God, is given. This comes in the midst of severe criticism of him inside the Corinthian church that raised doubts about his credentials. 12:1-10 stands as an important part of that defense in that the apostle nullifies the boasts of genuineness by his opponents and establishes his own.

## II. Message

**Literary Structure.** In the [Block](#) and [Semantic](#) diagrams of the Greek text, as well as the [Summary of the Rhetorical Structure](#), the technical aspects of the thought structure are set forth. A threefold division of the ideas in vv. 1-10 represents the best perspective on the text. That will serve as the basis of our study of these verses.

### a. Boasting, v. 1

## Greek NT

### 12.1 Καυχᾶσθαι

δεῖ, οὐ συμφέρον μὲν,  
ἐλεύσομαι δὲ εἰς ὅπα-  
σίας καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις  
κυρίου.

**NASB**  
1 It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

**NRSV**  
1 It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

**NLT**

1 This boasting is all so foolish, but let me go on. Let me tell about the visions and revelations I received from the Lord.

**Notes:**

These statements introduce the entire passage, as well as allude to the previous discussion in chapter eleven. In the preceding discussion Paul had asserted the intensity of his devotion to the Corinthians, and consequently he was willing to indulge in some 'foolishness' (cf. 11:12) in order to seek a favorable response from the Corinthians about what they should believe and do as Christians. He would not surrender them over to his enemies who had a twisted version of the Gospel and were doing the believers great spiritual harm in their teachings. These people claimed spiritual authority on the basis of superior spiritual visions and revelations. At the beginning of this discussion in chapter ten Paul claimed these men were judging by "human standards" (cf. 10:2-3), but that he did not operate by human standards. Therefore their insistence upon superior spiritual insight to his was in reality a 'human standard' and not a divine standard. In the background of this stands the non-Christian religious and philosophical traditions of the century. To possess superior wisdom one had to have experienced spiritual experiences that were extraordinary and went way beyond the usual level. Or so their reasoning went. The Corinthian enemies of Paul had simply adopted these surrounding standards as the measuring rod of Christian experience and wisdom. With their ecstatic experiences of tongues etc. they were convinced they possessed more insight



than did Paul, and that their insight was superior to his.

Paul's retort to this false reasoning was to focus on first his special relation to the Corinthian church as its spiritual father (chapter 11<sup>3</sup>), and secondly on his weaknesses as the secret to divine power (chapter 12).

In his role as spiritual father to the Corinthians he vigorously claimed equal, if not superior insight, to these 'false apostles' who were lambasting Paul to the Corinthians (11:3-6). As spiritual father he came to help and provide for them, not to fleece money from the Corinthians as evidently were these 'super apostles' (cf. 11:7-15).

They had boasted of superior credentials but none even began to measure up to those Paul had (cf. 11:16-29). In the final pericope (cf. 11:30-33), Paul stated his intention to boast about weak-

<sup>24</sup>"I wish you would bear with me in *a little foolishness*"  
(2 Cor. 11:1a, NRSV).

<sup>3</sup>Compare 11:2, “I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (NRSV).

nesses and gave as an example his escape from King Aretas at Damascus shortly after his conversion.

Thus the first two statements of 12:1 -- “It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it” -- bring that previous section to a close with his declaration of the unproductiveness of boasting.<sup>4</sup> It ultimately accomplishes nothing, but in Paul’s case was made necessary because of the influence of these false teachers over the Corinthians. Paul felt compelled to answer their claims with evidence that both exposed the falseness of their claims and the legitimacy of his claim as a divinely called apostle who possessed the true gospel message.

The third statement in verse one -- “I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord” -- suggests one of the major, if not the primary, areas where these false teachers claimed superiority to Paul. The topic of “visions and revelations” (ὄπτασις καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις) evokes uneasy reaction from most modern readers. What kind of *hokus polkas* is this? Ralph Martin (WBC, *Ibid.*) provides helpful insight here:

ἐλεύσομαι δὲ εἰς ὄπτασις καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις κυρίου, “I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.” If our assessment of 12:1b is correct, then Paul retains some embarrassment as he writes these words to the Corinthians. As a rule, Paul does not brag about his visions from the Lord. We must not let the several references in the Acts of the Apostles lead us to think otherwise about Paul (18:9, 10; 22:17–21; 23:11; 27:23, 24; of interest to the Corinthians may have been the vision at Corinth, in which Paul is strengthened by the Lord in a vision [ὄραμα; Acts 18:9] to stay in the city;

<sup>4</sup>For Paul, boasting is of no advantage in and of itself. Filson is correct to note that Paul is attempting to show the Corinthians that they are wrong to see good in the boasting of the false apostles (405). If this last point is true, then the words “of no advantage” — if taken literally — do not reflect the total meaning of Paul. True, the apostle expresses his distaste for boasting by uttering these words. Nevertheless, he also senses that desperate situations call for desperate measures (Filson, *ibid.*). Possibly Paul has the same ambivalent emotions in his approach to boasting as he did when he wrote the painful, or severe, letter (2:4; 7:8). When Paul constructed the severe letter, he did so with much apprehension. Moreover, he was unsure of the outcome, for he might have been totally rejected by the Corinthians. Likewise, he cannot, with exactness, measure the outcome of his boasting. Yet, he feels it is a necessary evil. As Barrett writes, “It is not expedient to boast, but it might be even more inexpedient not to boast” (306). There may be a touch of irony in 12:1b, especially as at v 6 Paul will acknowledge that he is speaking only “as a fool.” [source= Ralph P. Martin, vol. 40, *Word Biblical Commentary : 2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 387]

yet it remains true that for Luke Paul is both a great miracle worker and a suffering figure who is by no means rescued through miracles: see Jervell, “The Signs of an Apostle,” 85). Hughes is right in appreciating the event of 12:2–4 as possibly the “most intimate and sacred” of all Paul’s religious experiences (428). Yet, Paul has been forced to share this event, and this sharing is accomplished through boasting (12:11).

To be more specific, Paul is using the *ad hominem* form of argumentation. He has already set down that the purpose of his boasting is to highlight his weaknesses (11:30). In 12:1 the apostle is reporting that boasting will help no one. Yet, Paul feels that he must take his opponents head-on if he is to convince the Corinthians that he remains the true apostle. In short, Paul shows that he too has revelations and visions. (The use of the plural ὄπτασις, “visions,” and ἀποκαλύψεις, “revelations,” suggests that Paul’s original intention was to delineate several visionary experiences [Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 72], but perhaps his reluctance to boast of such experiences led him to limit his “list” to only one.) He received “special” revelations. These revelations were understood by Paul as gifts from God (κυρίου is *gen. auctoris*). They were not given in order to authenticate his apostleship. Paul never uses his visions and revelations as signs to promote himself as “somebody special.” (Bruce thinks that, in addition to confronting the position that the false apostles had visions and revelations, Paul may also be addressing the accusation that his ministry was based on an illusory vision, namely, the experience on the Damascus Road [246] in contrast perhaps to the “super-apostles.”)

Paul’s opponents could have leveled the charge against Paul that his lack of “visions” was proof that he was not a true apostle. But lack of frequent reference to visions and revelations is not grounds for concluding that Paul had little or no experience in this realm (Lincoln, “Paul the Visionary,” 205). Rather, we have argued that Paul’s reluctance to speak of visions stems from his desire to avoid drawing too much attention to himself. Paul proceeds with the account of his vision only with some embarrassment.

ἐλεύσομαι, “I will come,” is the future of ἔρχεσθαι: εἰς, “to,” helps to demonstrate the direction in which Paul’s thinking is going. Though Paul is against boasting, nevertheless he comes to visions and revelations of the Lord. We may note that there is not a great difference between ὄπτασις, “vision,” and ἀποκάλυψις “revelation.” They are interchangeable terms (so Michaelis, *TDNT* 5:352, 353, who notes how at 12:7 Paul speaks only of

ἀποκαλύψεις, “revelations”). The two words may be taken from the opponents’ vocabulary (so Baumgarten, *ibid.*, 137; perhaps they point to the “realized eschatology” of the gnosticizing opponents at Corinth; they may have claimed their experiences as the highest form of ecstasy, perhaps associated with glossolalia; so Schmithals, *Gnosticism*, 209–11). The latter word, ἀποκάλυψις, crops up frequently in his writings. Several times in eschatological contexts Paul employs this word (Rom 2:5; 8:19; 1 Cor 1:7; cf. 2 Thess 1:7, but in a way different from here; Bultmann, 220). Also, it is used in reference to his conversion (Gal 1:12), as well as to a special revelation that preceded a journey to Jerusalem (Gal 2:2). From this, it is apparent that “revelation” is of wider importance to Paul than “vision” (Denney, 346). But we should not press this too far (Barrett, 307). Plummer perhaps captures the flavor needed when addressing the subject of visions and revelations, for he remarks that not all visions reveal something and not all revelations require visions (338; see also Tasker, 170). But we should note that in 12:1 Paul appears to be saying that the vision of 12:2–4 is a source of revelation. (It is interesting to note, however, that 12:9 was probably a direct revelation, without the aid of a vision [Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 72].)

This last point is seen from the construction in [εἰς] ὀπτασίας καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις κυρίου, “visions and revelations of the Lord.” Most scholars view this genitive as subjective, not objective (Barrett, 307; Plummer, 338; Bruce, 246; Tasker, 169, 170; Bultmann, 220; Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 73; see also Zmijewski, *Der Stil*, 327, 328, “a genitive of origination,” also see 330, 331; Georgi, *Die Gegner*, 298, n. 1, tries to see a distinction between Paul’s use of κυρίου and the opponents’ understanding; for him “the Lord” gave the revelations, whereas they took κυρίου as genitive of possession related to their transformation into Christ’s image [2:18] like a glorification). That is, more than likely Paul is speaking of visions and revelations given by the Lord rather than visions that see the Lord. But Lincoln is right to warn against too sharp of a distinction here (“Paul the Visionary,” 205, 206). The author of the visions could also be the object of them (see also, Hughes, 428, n. 97; Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975], 414, n. 88, who argues that the genitive of 12:1 may have been deliberately ambiguous so that both thoughts are to be included).

It may be assumed that the opponents gloried in their transcendental experiences of “visions and revelations,” though Windisch (368) is disposed to deny this (“it is nowhere *here* indicated that

the opponents also can boast concerning such visions”). But Schmithals, *Gnosticism*, 209, is certainly correct to answer this denial, by pointing out that Paul’s tack is not different from the one adopted in 11:22, 23; i.e., the comparison is “they—I too” or “they—I all the more.” The difference, however, lies in the climax of the pericope, in v 9 where divine power in human weakness will be claimed as the “sole basis of the apostolic existence” (Baumgarten, *ibid.*, 144), i.e., in a word from the Lord, not in a vision sent by the Lord. This is Paul’s response; thereby he reduces the visionary experience to a revelation with a “word-of-God” character.

What relevance do these statements of Paul have for us today? Do Christians still have visions and revelations? Or, is this something that was limited to the apostles, and thus ceased with the death of the last apostle? To be sure, differing viewpoints on this will surface in contemporary discussion. That God still communicates to His people is beyond question. And this may come through dreams that believers have.<sup>5</sup> But two critically important cautions must be exercised: 1) Any supposed direct revelation from the Lord WILL NOT contradict what God has declared in scriptures. 2) Such revelations from God must always play a minor, rather insignificant, role in our religious understanding. In our text, Paul is very reluctant to even mention having had them. They always stood secondary, even before a New Testament scripture came into existence. Historic Christianity has consistently stressed the primacy of scriptural revelation over any other means. The Protestant interpretive principle of *sola scriptura* implies clearly that all other claims of religious understanding must be judged by scripture, and, if found in contradiction to scripture, they must be rejected as false.

#### Another limitation of visions and revelations

<sup>5</sup>*Visions and revelations*: the precise distinction, if any, which Paul intended between these two words is not clear. Nearly all interpreters consider these terms to be synonyms in this verse. Paul does not use the word *vision* elsewhere in his writings. And the only other New Testament writer to use it is Luke (1.22 and 24.23). The word for *revelations* is found more frequently, notably at 1 Cor 1.7 and Rev 1.1. It is repeated in verse 7 of this chapter. The two terms may have to be translated by a single word or expression in some languages. But one African language has attempted to retain two separate items by using two verbal expressions: “matters that the Lord Jesus showed me as a dream and secrets he made known to me in my heart.” [source = Roger L. Omanson and John Ellington, *A Handbook on Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians*, UBS handbook series; Helps for translators (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 216.]

is their tendency to promote boasting of superior spiritual experience. This was the case with the false apostles at Corinth. Paul countered with boasting only hesitatingly and in full realization that such religious experience proved nothing. At the heart of visions and revelations is a focus on the self and what the individual possesses, rather than on God. The claim that they came 'from the Lord' is only to legitimize them. This Paul clearly saw, and tried to convince the Corinthians that such an attitude stood in the way of Christian humility and authentic experiencing of divine power in daily living. Visions and revelations do nothing to bring God's grace and presence to bear on life's problems and challenges. And that is far more important!

In very subtle ways that often go unrecognized

Satan tempts believers into thinking that they have achieved extraordinary spiritual accomplishment. The outward experience of 'visions and revelations' is a major channel of temptation and deception of sincere believers seeking something better. To have such experiences logically seems that one should be more spiritual as a consequence. But the reality lies in another direction completely. The claim for such experience is virtually always false and has little or nothing to do with God, and everything to do with self deception wrought by Satan himself as the prince of light. The tragic consequence is religious elitism and arrogance in which such Christians consider themselves better and more spiritual than everyone else. Paul had a better way that God had taught him out of his own life experience.

## b. Visions and Revelations, vv. 2-4

### Greek NT

12.2 οἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ πρὸ ἐτῶν δεκα-  
τεσσάρων, εἴτε ἐν σώμα-  
τι οὐκ οἶδα, εἴτε ἐκτὸς  
τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα,  
ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν, ἀρπαγέντα  
τὸν τοιοῦτον ἕως τρίτου  
οὐρανοῦ. 12.3 καὶ οἶδα  
τὸν τοιοῦτον ἄνθρωπον,  
εἴτε ἐν σώματι εἴτε  
χωρὶς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ  
οἶδα, ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν, 12.4  
ὅτι ἡρπάγη εἰς τὸν παρα-  
δείσον καὶ ἤκουσεν  
ἄρρητα ῥήματα ἃ οὐκ  
ἐξὸν ἀνθρώπῳ λαλῆσαι.

### NASB

2 I know a person in  
Christ who fourteen  
years ago was caught  
up to the third heaven  
— whether in the body  
or out of the body I do  
not know; God knows.  
3 And I know that such  
a person — whether in  
the body or out of the  
body I do not know;  
God knows — 4 was  
caught up into Para-  
dise and heard things  
that are not to be told,  
that no mortal is per-  
mitted to repeat.

### NRSV

2 I know a person in  
Christ who fourteen  
years ago was caught  
up to the third heaven  
— whether in the body  
or out of the body I do  
not know; God knows.  
3 And I know that such  
a person — whether in  
the body or out of the  
body I do not know;  
God knows — 4 was  
caught up into Para-  
dise and heard things  
that are not to be told,  
that no mortal is per-  
mitted to repeat.

### NLT

2 I was caught up  
into the third heaven  
fourteen years ago. 3  
Whether my body was  
there or just my spirit,  
I don't know; only God  
knows. 4 But I do know  
that I was caught up  
into paradise and heard  
things so astounding  
that they cannot be  
told.

### Notes:

This second subunit of material focuses on an unnamed individual's being caught up in a vision/revelation experience. The identity of this individual is a major focus of modern research.

The literary parallelism of the two depictions of this individual are helpful to note, as Ralph Martin (WBC, *ibid.*) has explained:

v2

a) αἶδα ἄνθρωπον ἐν Χριστῷ

b) πρὸ ἐτῶν δεκατεσσάρων

c) εἴτε ἐν σώματι οὐκ οἶδα

d) εἴτε ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα

e) ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν

f) ἀρπαγέντα τὸν τοιοῦτον

g) ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ

h) ---

vv3, 4

a) καὶ οἶδα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἄνθρωπον

b) ---

c) εἴτε ἐν σώματι

d) εἴτε χωρὶς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα

e) ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν

f) ὅτι ἡρπάγη

g) εἰς τὸν παράδεισον

h) καὶ ἤκουσεν ἄρρητα ῥήματα

Two distinctive elements, one in each parallel, provide additional elements. In the first one, Paul indicates that it was fourteen years earlier when this experience took place. This would place the experience in the middle 40s toward the begin-

ning of Paul's work with Barnabas in Antioch.<sup>6</sup> The second distinctive element is in the second parallel and indicates that when caught up into Paradise the individual "heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat." The remaining elements are repeated in the second parallel from the first, and include the following:

1. Paul knew 'a man' / 'such a man.' The use of the Greek verb οἶδα here rather than γινώσκω, may signal distancing of himself from this man's experience.

2. Whether the man's experience was 'bodily' or 'visionary' Paul does not know. Such an important detail as this Paul dismisses as largely unimportant. A further distancing of himself from

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<sup>6</sup>With the date of A.D. 44 in mind, it appears we can rule out every other visionary experience of Paul recorded in the NT. His conversion on the Damascus road, an experience that apparently Paul was more than willing to rehearse (at least from Acts 9:3–19; 22:6–10; 26:12–18), certainly took place long before A.D. 44. We can also dismiss the event of the trance Paul fell into described in Acts 22:17–21, for in this account the Lord in a vision came to Paul. We read nothing there of Paul being "caught up to the Lord" (Denney, 347, 348). Events that surely were later than A.D. 44 are the vision of the Macedonian man entreating Paul to come and help (Acts 16:9) and the vision he had in Corinth (Acts 18:9–10; Hughes, 430). The period of "fourteen years" found in Gal 2:1 is probably only coincidental and has nothing to do with 2 Cor 12:2 (see J. Knox, *Chapters in the Life of Paul* [New York: AbingdonCokesbury Press, 1950] 78, n. 3).

One suggestion for the occasion of the experience described in 12:2–4 is that it transpired while Paul was in Antioch (Hughes, 430, 431; Denney, 347). We read that Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch a whole year (Acts 11:26). There is possibly a connection seen between the ecstatic experience (cf. 12:2–4) and the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas as missionaries (Acts 13:2, 3; so Allo, 304; Windisch, 369, 370). Perhaps in some small way, Paul related to the Christians at Antioch that he had received a vision at the hand of the Lord. Bruce only allows that we simply have a reference to an obscure period between the time when Paul was sent to Tarsus (Acts 9:30) and the meeting with Barnabas at Antioch (Acts 11:26; this can possibly be reconstructed from Galatians where Bruce places the visionary experience of Paul between Paul's departure for Syria-Cilicia [1:21] and his second postconversion visit to Jerusalem [2:1], [Bruce, 246]; some strange proposals have been made to argue that Paul's spirit left his body at his stoning [Acts 14:19], or that he was one of the prophets mentioned in Acts 11:28, 29). All in all, we are better to recognize just how much conjecture is involved and agree with Denney that there is nothing that we know of the apostle with which we can identify his experience of 12:2–4 (347). [source = Ralph P. Martin, vol. 40, *Word Biblical Commentary : 2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 387.]

the experience.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> εἴτε ἐν σώματι οὐκ οἶδα, εἴτε ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ οἶδα, ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν, "—whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know, only God knows." As Paul is relating the experience of "this man" (namely himself) he breaks his thought and inserts a parenthesis. It is as though Paul catches himself and wants to make a sudden (albeit too short) reference to the event of his vision. Barrett remarks in some detail that the words of this parenthesis are not without reason (308, 309). That is, there was a reason why Paul makes a statement concerning being "in" or "out of the body." On the one hand, Paul does not want to give an indication that he thinks the body is inherently evil. We saw this in our discussion of 5:1–10, where Paul sought to show that the whole person is involved in salvation, both body and spirit. In other words, Paul was probably well aware of the Corinthian-gnostic view that a religious experience was invalid unless it happened while one was out of the body (Philo wrote of Moses as having laid aside his body, *Somn.* [1:36]). On the other hand, it could be that Paul was not intending to deny that one could have an "out of body" experience. Bultmann suggests that Paul's use of "body" (σῶμα) shows that the apostle left open the possibility of the soul's leaving the body for an encounter with the spiritual world (*Theology* 1:203). Elsewhere, Bultmann, in his commentary, 221, has a different idea to explain the expression: Paul is thought of as viewing his experience at a distance, as though he were simply an onlooker. Cf. Käsemann, *ibid.*, 55: "to distance oneself from the event as reported." Such a "distancing" may also be seen in the contrast "I do not know ... God knows" (Zmijewski, *ibid.*, 337).

Paul may be relating his ignorance of his state at the time of this event (Denney, 347, 348). He simply is not sure whether he went to the "third heaven" in body or in spirit (this may suggest that Paul was alone at the time, for if others had been with him, they could have answered the question of whether or not his body remained in this world; see Plummer, 342). To say that ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν, "only God knows," may be an attempt by Paul to state his ignorance of the matter. Because he refrains from giving an opinion one way or the other his opponents cannot totally reject his boasting. By not eliminating the possibility that Paul could have remained in the body, he avoids undercutting the validity of his other visions. Moreover, it was not uncommon to boast of having come into bodily contact with the divine (Jewett, *Anthropological Terms*, 278). Also, by leaving the door open to an "out-of-the-body" experience, he affirms his teaching of 5:1–10 that there is existence for the soul apart from the body, and that this existence is "one of perceptive consciousness" (Hughes, 431). This latter point no doubt would have caught the attention of the opponents. To have an out-of-the-body experience would have satisfied some Corinthians (Jewett, *ibid.*). As we shall see, Paul never explains in detail this event. Thus, Paul may have carefully constructed the parenthesis of 12:2 (and 12:3) in order not to "prejudice" his account with either side (those wanting an "in-the-body" experience or those who seek an "out-of-the-body" one) by taking a stand on the issue (Jewett, *ibid.*). (See also Saake, *esp.* 405; also *NovT* 15 [1973] 154.) On the other side, Schmithals, *Gnosticism*, 211 (followed by Baumgarten, "Paulus," 143), sees great significance in

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3. God knew whether the experience was a bodily experience or a mental visionary experience. And that was what is important.

4. The man was ‘snatched up’ (ἀρπαγέντα / ἡρπάγη) in the experience. In other words, he didn’t initiate the experience himself. The Aorist passive voice use of ἀρπάζω, ‘to seize, snatch’, underscores the one time nature of the experience. God grabbed hold of the individual and lifted him up.

5. The man was taken up ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ<sup>8</sup>

the second phrase, ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος, suggesting that Paul considered it possible that he did not leave the body. Hence Paul is deliberately denying the central gnostic concern of dualism with its practice of a celestial journey apart from somatic encumbrance. There may be intended mockery here; in reply to his opponents’ certain belief in the soul’s heavenward ascent, Paul professes not to know. [source = Ralph P. Martin, vol. 40, *Word Biblical Commentary : 2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 387.]

<sup>8</sup>ἀρπαγέντα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ, “was caught up to the third heaven.” After the parenthesis, Paul completes his thought: “A certain man fourteen years before had been caught up to the third heaven.” The use of ἀρπαγέντα (aorist passive participle of ἀρπάζειν [the same verb ἀπάγειν is also found in v 4.]; such language reflects the idea of a “rapture of visions” [Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 81]; see *Apoc. Mos.* 37:5; also the idea of “catch up” is found in *Wisd Sol* 4:11; *Acts* 8:39; *Rev* 12:5), “caught up,” is limited in Pauline literature. It is only found in our present verse and in *1 Thess* 4:17, when Paul speaks of living Christians being caught up with Christ in the air. In Paul’s time it was not uncommon to hear of someone being “raptured” into heaven (see Lietzmann, 153; also Betz, *Lukan*, 38, 142, 169). Much of apocalyptic literature is the product of the seer being granted insight into truths that are in heaven (C. K. Barrett, “New Testament Eschatology,” *SJT* 6 [1953] 138, 139). Barrett makes out a case for this when he cites several sources that parallel Paul’s experience (309, 310). These sources are found in apocalyptic writings such as *1 Enoch* (39:3–4; 52:1), *2 Enoch* (7:1) and *3 Apoc. Bar.* (2:2). But we also come across mystical speculation in rabbinic literature. (cf. Bowker, “‘Merkabah’ Visions.” In *Hag.* 14b there are four men who entered into paradise: Ben Az-zai, Ben Zoma, Acher, and R. Akiba. Of these four only R. Akiba returned unscathed: see Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 14–19; also see P. Schäfer, “New Testament and Hekhalot Literature: The Journey into Heaven in Paul and Merkavah Mysticism,” *JJS* 35 [1984] 19–35; we shall see below that in *12:4* Paul describes his location as paradise, having changed the nomenclature from his earlier use of “third heaven.”) Not surprisingly Barrett reports that hellenistic mysticism contains a similar phenomenon as found in Plato (see *Republic* 10:614–21; see too Philo, *Migr. Abr.* 34–35; *De Spec. Leg.* 3:1–2). Thus, Barrett is right when he concludes that Paul’s rapture experience is not necessarily out of the ordinary. What is surprising is that Paul will soon depreciate the value of this experience (Barrett, 310).

What becomes a difficult question for scholars is one that centers on Paul’s intended meaning behind his use of

ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ, “to the third heaven.” A survey of extant literature does not really answer the question. The New Testament is relatively silent concerning the number of heavens in Jewish cosmology. We find in *Eph* 1:10 the plural οὐρανοί, “heavens,” but this does little to help us (Lincoln, “Paul the Visionary,” 213). It has been noted that the plural “heavens,” found in the New Testament, is probably the result of the Hebrew שָׁמַיִם, *šamayim*, “heavens,” which is dual in form. In *Psalms* 63:33 the psalmist describes God as riding upon the “heaven of heavens.” This verse has led Hughes (see 432–34), who builds upon Bengel, to hold that Paul’s reference to the third heaven is in line with the threefold division in the Old Testament (cf. *Neh* 9:6; *1 Kings* 8:27; *2 Chron* 2:6; 6:18; *Psalms* 148:4; also see C. R. Schoonhoven, *The Wrath of Heaven* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966] 64). In this threefold division there is the atmospheric heaven, a stellar heaven (or firmament) and the limitless, or spiritual, heaven, where God is located (Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 77, 78; Hughes, *ibid.*). If this evaluation is correct, then we could say that Paul ascended to the highest heaven. But this conclusion is not certain, for there were other conceptions of the number of heavens (Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, 381).

At the time of Paul and in Jewish antiquity, the idea of a sevenfold division of heaven was becoming popular. This concept can be found in *T. Levi* (3:1), *2 Enoch* (8–22) and *Asc. Isa.* (9). We also can locate the idea of seven heavens in rabbinic literature, such as the *Hag.* 11b (see *Pesiq. R.* 5; *Midr. Ps.* 92; *Abot R. Nat.* 37; *Pirqe R. El.* [154b]; see H. Traub *TDNT* 5:511–12). But three and seven are not the only numbers considered. The numbers *five* (see *3 Apoc. Bar.* 11:1, “And taking me from this, the angel led me to the fifth heaven”) and *ten* (*2 Enoch* 20:3b, “and on the tenth heaven”) are also suggested as identifying the levels of heavenly existence. With these differing accounts before them, some scholars have suggested that we simply cannot know the number of heavens in Paul’s mind at the time of this writing (Bruce, 247; Filson, 405; see especially Barrett, 310, though he concedes that three seems a good possibility [Str-B, 3:531, 532]). Though certainty may remain beyond our grasp, it does appear probable that Paul had three heavens in mind.

The closing point of the preceding paragraph can be seen by Paul’s use of ἕως, “up to.” At first Plummer thinks that this “improper preposition” is not enough to prove that the third heaven is, in Paul’s mind, the highest (343, 344). But Tasker is correct to conclude (and Plummer later comes to a similar conclusion) that it would seem illogical for Paul to write of such blessedness if he were not in the ultimate heaven (171). That is, Paul would be open to the criticism that his vision and revelation were inadequate if the Corinthians believed there to be seven heavens and Paul only “journeyed” to number three. This argument was observed long ago by Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 2, 30, 7). Thus, logic dictates that ἕως, in all probability, was used by Paul to show that he—whether in the body or out of it—was raptured up to the highest heaven, namely, the third heaven. This conclusion is also supported in light of the use of ἕως, as found elsewhere in the New Testament. When used with the genitive, the preposition denotes “as far as” (Moule, *Idiom Book*, 85; *BGD*, 355). While one could argue that “as far as” does not say with certainty that Paul had reached

or εἰς τὸν παράδεισον. Here the ‘third heaven’ equals ‘Paradise.’<sup>9</sup> Although different terms are

the limit, our assumption appears to be the position with the least questions left unanswered. The use of ἕως in the New Testament (Acts 1:8; cf. *Ps. Sol.* 17:14) suggests that a limit had been reached. Also, in light of our preceding discussion, it seems that Paul needed to reach the zenith if he was to retain his credibility. Moreover, as we shall see in 12:4, the idea of “paradise” which is to be equated with the “third heaven” (Zmijewski, *ibid.*, 339, but denied by Prümm, *Diakonia* 1:650) suggests even more that Paul had reached the upper level. From our viewpoint, we see Paul as probably thinking of a threefold division of heaven. [source = Ralph P. Martin, vol. 40, *Word Biblical Commentary : 2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 387.]

<sup>9</sup>ὅτι ἡρπάγη εἰς τὸν παράδεισον, “that was caught up to paradise.” In this verse Paul has changed the aorist participle ἁρπαγέντα (12:2) to the aorist passive indicative of ἁρπάζειν, namely, ἡρπάγη. But we must make note of how both uses of the verb, as well as διδόθῃ, “give” (found in 12:7 as ἐδόθη, “was given to me”), reflect passivity on Paul’s part (the passive is also seen in 12:12, [κατειργάσθη]). We see that the agent of these passive verbs can be identified from their context as God. This use of the *passivum divinum* is important for understanding Paul’s thought. His boasting cannot glorify himself, for God is the hidden agent behind these things. He took Paul up to the third heaven, namely paradise, as well as placed a thorn in his life. God also works through Paul (12:12). This fits well with our earlier discussion. Paul is God’s apostle, for God has both proclaimed the message of reconciliation through the apostle (5:18–20), and ministered in service to the Corinthians through the same apostle. Now, however, he steps up the presentation because he is in a serious conflict with his opponents. So intense is this conflict that Paul shares an event in his life perhaps, up to this time, unknown except to the Lord and himself.

Paul states that he was caught up to παράδεισος, “paradise.” This word is probably Persian in origin, meaning an enclosure or a nobleman’s park. Both the Hebrew (פֶּרֶדֶס, *pardēs*; cf. Eccl 2:5) and the Greek (παράδεισος) languages borrowed the word. Not all literature places the paradise in the third heaven. Sometimes we read that it is found in the seventh heaven (*Asc. Isa.* 9:7; *Hag.* 12b). More likely, though, Paul considers the third heaven and paradise the same. Just such an equation is found in 2 *Enoch* 8 and in *Apoc. Mos.* 37:5 (see also J. Jeremias, *TDNT* 5:765–73). An interesting note is that the *LXX* renders the earthly Garden of Eden (גֶּן עֵדֶן, *gan edēn*) as παράδεισος (see Gen 2 and 3). The *OT* does not refer to the garden as the abode for the righteous after death or a final resting place for them. The development of the term is seen in apocalyptic literature (*T. Abr.* 20; 1 *Enoch* 60:7–8; 61:12; 70:4; 2 *Enoch* 9:1–42:3; *Apoc. Abr.* 21:6–7; see Windisch, 372, 373).

The word “paradise” occurs only three times in the New Testament. In addition to our present text, we find it in Jesus’ statement to the penitent thief (Luke 23:43) and in Rev 2:7 (“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is the paradise of God”). It appears certain that the paradise mentioned in Revelation

used by Paul, the designations are to the same place, Heaven, as Martin’s extensive discussion quoted in the footnotes demonstrates.

Who was this man? As Martin assumes along with the vast majority of modern scholarship, the individual alluded to here is most likely Paul himself. Why then would he describe the experience from a distancing third person ‘he’ perspective rather than from the first person “I”? The most obvious answer contextually to this question is that Paul sought to diminish the significance of this experience in contrast to the ultimate value being placed on such experiences by Paul’s opponents. His focus was on his weaknesses, not on dramatic religious experience that had no ministry value.

One should distinguish between Paul’s revelatory experience that he discussed frequently in his writings, and evidently preached about, as Luke stresses in Acts, from the kind of visionary experience described here. From his Damascus

and the paradise of our own text are one and the same. We might even link the paradise of Rev 2:7 with Rev 22:1–5, a description that reminds us of the paradise that was originally lost. The heavenly paradise of Rev 2:7 is located in the heavenly garden (Bruce, 247; cf. *T. Levi* 28:10; 4 *Ezra* 4:7–8; 3 *Apoc. Bar.* 4:8; *Hag.* 15b; *Gen. Rab.* 65). The mention of paradise in Luke 23:43 offers us no location, but there is no doubt that it refers to the gathering of the righteous after death (Bruce; see Origen, *De Princ.* 2.9, 6). Hughes suggests that Paul’s shift from “the third heaven” to “paradise” is for added information, that in this explication Paul discloses the nature of the third heaven (437). We are not privy to what Paul heard, as we shall see. Paul is granted the secrets of both the intermediate state and the glorious consummation (Lincoln, “Paul the Visionary,” 214; but since he cannot reveal the content of the vision described in 12:2–4, this may be why Paul is so hesitant to expound the state of the believer after death [see 5:1–10]). H. Bietenhard is too rigid when he concludes that Paul saw a vision of the world to come but not of the future (*Die himmlische Welt im Urchristentum und Spätjudentum* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1951] 167). We must not draw so sharp a distinction between the life hereafter and the future. Paul’s understanding of eschatology will not permit it. (See Lincoln, *Paradise Now*, 84, who interprets 12:1–10 as a form of realized eschatology. But the drift of the passage is more antienthusiastic and opposed to a presently fulfilled eschatology; see Baumgarten, *ibid.*, 146.) But we also must be cautious and concede that whatever teaching we have on these subjects (both the hereafter and the future), little has been related to us by Paul from the experience of 12:2–4. Whether because of being forbidden to speak by God concerning these things or because he was unable to translate heavenly thoughts into human language (see below), Paul shares no details with his readers. More pointedly the “inexpressible words” are a counterblast to gnosticizing secrets putatively revealed to the opponents. [source = Ralph P. Martin, vol. 40, *Word Biblical Commentary : 2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 387.]

road encounter with the risen Lord which Paul described to the Galatians as a revelation from revelation from God<sup>10</sup> to his writing to the Corinthians, the 'revelations' in Paul's discussion stress the gaining of information and spiritual insight to be share in ministry. But his depiction of the visionary experience in our text specifically emphasizes that no information came to him that could be shared in ministry. Thus this type of visionary experience only benefited the individual personally, and not the believing community. Paul had little interest in such religious experience. If what he experienced couldn't be used to enhance others, then it possessed little real value. And when such experience turned into a boast of spiritual superiority, Paul questioned seriously its validity.

*What applications to our day are possible from these verses?* A major insight here is the nature and value of different kinds of religious experience. Ecstatic religious experience is severely de-emphasized by Paul. It may have some spiritual value, but that is limited to the personal enrichment of the individual and provides no strengthening of the individual for ministry. In fact, it may threaten ministry orientation, since by its nature it calls attention inwardly to the individual and not to ministry obligations to others. If such experience tempts the individual to think that he is somehow better

than other believers because of his ecstatic experience, then such experience becomes destructive to the spiritual health of the individual. Even worse is when spiritual elitism especially based on ecstatic experience becomes a boast to be used for leverage over other people.

The servanthood motif in the teaching of Jesus and then in the apostles strongly argues against self-centered religious orientation. God comes to us not for our own benefit, but in order to equip us to minister to others. Our personal benefit is then derived through ministry, not through self focused religious experience.

Thus the tendency of many Christian groups, especially in the charismatic tradition, toward a self centered religious orientation is seriously called into question by Paul's insights and stance. Ecstatic religious experience lays on the very outer fringe of legitimate Christian experience, yet it is often made the center piece of Christian commitment. The Corinthians advocating this stance found in the apostle Paul a stinging critic who questioned the very legitimacy of their religious orientation. His criticism of this kind of orientation remains just as valid today as it was in the middle of the first Christian century.



<sup>10</sup>Cf. Gal. 1:16, ἀποκαλύψαι τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν ἐμοί

### c. Strength in Weakness, vv. 5-10

#### Greek NT

12.5 ὑπὲρ τοῦ τοιούτου καυχῆσομαι, ὑπὲρ δὲ ἑμαυτοῦ οὐ καυχῆσομαι εἰ μὴ ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις. 12.6 εἰάν γὰρ θελήσω καυχῆσασθαι, οὐκ ἔσομαι ἄφρων, ἀλήθειαν γὰρ ἐρῶ· φείδομαι δέ, μή τις εἰς ἐμὲ λογίσσεται ὑπὲρ ὃ βλέπει με ἢ ἀκούει· τὶ ἐξ ἐμοῦ 12.7 καὶ τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων. διό· ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι, ἐδόθη μοι σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί, ἄγγελος Σατανᾶ, ἵνα με κολαφίζῃ, ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι. 12.8 ὑπὲρ τούτου τρίς τὸν κύριον παρεκάλεσα ἵνα ἀποστῇ ἀπ' ἐμοῦ. 12.9 καὶ εἵρηκέν μοι, Ἄρκει σοι ἡ χάρις

#### NASB

5 On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. 6 But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, 7 even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. 8 Three times

#### NRSV

5 On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of *my weaknesses*. 6 But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, 7 even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. 8 Three times

#### NLT

5 That experience is something worth boasting about, but I am not going to do it. I am going to boast only about my weaknesses. 6 I have plenty to boast about and would be no fool in doing it, because I would be telling the truth. But I won't do it. I don't want anyone to think more highly of me than what they can actually see in my life and my message, 7 even though I have received wonderful revelations from God. But to keep me from getting puffed up, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to tor-

μου, ἡ γὰρ δύναμις ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ τελεῖται. ἥδιστα οὖν μᾶλλον καυχῆσομαι ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις μου, ἵνα ἐπισκηνώσῃ ἐπ' ἐμὲ ἡ δύναμις τοῦ Χριστοῦ. 12.10 διὸ εὐδοκῶ ἐν ἀσθενείαις, ἐν ὕβρεσιν, ἐν ἀνάγκαις, ἐν διωγμοῖς καὶ στενοχωρίαις ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ· ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατός εἰμι.

I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, 9 but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, 9 but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in **weakness**." So, I will boast all the more gladly of **my weaknesses**, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am content with **weaknesses**, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am **weak**, then I am strong.

ment me and keep me from getting proud. 8 Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. 9 Each time he said, "My gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may work through me. 10 Since I know it is all for Christ's good, I am quite content with my weaknesses and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

#### Notes:

In this third subunit of material, Paul comes to the main point of his entire discussion: strength in weakness. Here he returns to the emphasis on boasting, now that he has the issue of visions and revelations on the table.

Boasting about ecstatic religious experience, Paul says, is unimportant. He will do it but only as it relates to others. Instead, what Paul is most willing to do is to boast about his weaknesses: "On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses." (NRSV). One should note that the Greek preposition ὑπὲρ connotes not "about" this or that. Instead, it denotes activity designed to promote this or that. Thus Paul is saying "I will promote the other fellow" but "I will not promote myself." Then he qualifies the second statement with "except in my weaknesses" (ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις). Paul refuses to promote himself at the point of ecstatic spiritual experience. Utterly refuses! But then expresses a willingness to promote himself to the Corinthians on the basis of his weaknesses! In a secular world a person never advances himself by stressing his weaknesses! He gets ahead by espousing his strengths.

Thus Paul's stance here immediately calls attention away from himself and to God. His reluctance to even boast about weaknesses is reflected in his declaration made under oath: "But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even

considering the exceptional character of the revelations" (NRSV).

As an illustration of a weakness he mentions his 'thorn in the flesh' (σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί). His depiction of this issue is rather limited and somewhat vague. Consequently speculation over the details have abounded since the second Christian century into our day.

David Garland<sup>11</sup> provides a useful summary of this:

The exact nature of this "thorn in the flesh" has prompted much speculation.<sup>56</sup> Paul does not go into any detail in describing it because the Corinthians apparently were well familiar with what he meant. Some of their number or his competitors may have made it the object of their derision. The word translated "thorn" (*skolops*) occurs only here in the New Testament. It refers to something pointed such as a stake for impaling, a medical instrument, or a thorn. "Stake" would be a better translation, though "thorn" has dominated English renderings of the word.<sup>57</sup> The metaphor carries "the notion of something sharp and painful which sticks deeply in the flesh and in the will of God defies extracting."<sup>58</sup> In rabbinic literature the image is used to refer to something that causes pain, annoyance — something vexing — and does not especially refer to sickness or affliction.<sup>59</sup> In the

<sup>11</sup>David E. Garland, vol. 29, 2 *Corinthians*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1999), 507.

Septuagint the noun is used to refer to some kind of opposition (Num 33:55; Hos 2:6; Ezek 28:24). The phrase “in the flesh” seems to imply, however, that this thorn afflicts his physical body (a local dative, see 4:11; 10:2).<sup>60</sup> It may be the problem behind the criticism of his physical presence.

Most interpreters through the years have assumed that Paul alludes to some bodily ailment. This view is reinforced by Paul’s mention of a physical illness that detained him in Galatia and led to his preaching the gospel to them. He writes that his physical condition was a trial to them (Gal 4:13–14).<sup>61</sup> Assuming that this affliction was something that persisted, the suggestions range from a pain in the ear or head, to malarial fever, epilepsy, and solar retinitis.<sup>62</sup> To do and suffer all that Paul lists in 11:24–27, however, would rule out some chronic debilitating disease.<sup>63</sup> Martin states it well:

One wonders if a person who was so often on the “battlefield” could have been so physically weak and still have withstood the rigors of Paul’s life. ... Paul is one who must be seen as in robust health and with a strong constitution.<sup>64</sup>

Others have claimed that Paul suffered from some psychological ailment or distress, some personal anxiety or torment. Less incapacitating problems have been suggested such as depression over his earlier persecution of the church, a tendency to despair and doubt (so Luther, *Table Talk*, 24.7), or even sexual temptation.<sup>65</sup> Still others interpret the stake to refer to persecution or adversaries—the rise of the Judaizers, for example—who have dogged him throughout his ministry and now supposedly plague him at Corinth.<sup>66</sup>

Since Paul prays so fervently to have the stake removed, it was probably something that he felt interfered with his ministry. Marshall identifies it as a “socially debilitating disease or disfigurement which was made the subject of ridicule and invidious comparison.”<sup>67</sup> Paul’s speech has been the subject of the Corinthians’ criticism (10:10), and the stake could have been something that led to some kind of a speech handicap.<sup>68</sup> The “angel of Satan” could allude to the story of Balaam (Num 22:22–34) where the angel of the Lord gets in his way three times to prevent him from speaking and cursing the nation of Israel, against God’s will.<sup>69</sup> In the end we must accept the fact that we will never know for certain what Paul’s stake in the flesh was. We can only be certain that initially it caused him considerable annoyance.

The ambiguity about what Paul’s stake in the

flesh might be allows others to identify their own personal “thorns” with Paul’s and to appropriate the theological lesson.<sup>70</sup> Stakes in the flesh are not good, but they also are not bad because they may convey a word from God if we are attuned to hear it. What is important to Paul is the theological word-to-the-wise that his stake in the flesh provided him. It was a constant reminder of God’s grace and God’s power working through him.

The phrase “angel of Satan” is in apposition to the stake. Satan comes to bedevil him as an agent of testing. The verb “to torment” (*kolaphizein*, “abuse,” “batter”) implies humiliating violence—being slapped around; and the present tense suggests that it was persistent—something that happens over and over again. The same word is used for the abuse of Jesus in his passion (Mark 15:65; Matt 26:67), and by choosing this word Paul might connect his sufferings as an apostle with those of Christ.

Satan comes as God’s adversary to lure people away from God’s rule, or he comes as God’s proxy to implement trials God authorizes. The story of Job provides the foremost example of the latter.<sup>71</sup> Does this Satanic angel try to hinder the advance of the gospel in some way (see 1 Thess 2:18)? If so, Satan’s purposes are thwarted (see 2:11). What is sent to torment Paul is transformed by God into a means of proclaiming Christ’s power and grace. This surprising twist reflects the paradoxical way God defeats Satan.<sup>72</sup> God permits Satan to strike the apostle, but God turns the stricken Paul into an even greater instrument of his power. A proud, arrogant Paul would have only hindered the gospel’s advance. A humiliated, frail Paul, lead as a captive in God’s triumph, has accelerated the gospel’s progress so that the fragrance of knowing God spreads everywhere (see 2:14).

Although some of Garland’s points are not convincing, he does summarize the discussion quite well. The ongoing physical ailment seems the most likely of the possibilities. But whatever its precise nature, the point that Paul makes is that it hindered his ministry and caused him considerable difficulty. And it provided a constant source of temptation to him that sought to distract him from his commitment to Christ.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>From vv. 7–10 we may deduce that this σκόλοψ had certain characteristics.<sup>158</sup>

(1) It was given to Paul as a direct consequence of the revelations he received in paradise (καὶ τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων ... ἐδόθη μοι σκόλοψ, v. 7).

(2) It caused him acute pain (σκόλοψ), either physically or psychologically (τῇ σαρκί), which prompted him to seek its removal (vv. 7–8).

(3) He regarded it as simultaneously a gift from God  
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After three requests in prayer for healing, Paul heard God's answer as a no. God had something better than physical healing for Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" ( Ἀρκεῖ σοι ἡ χάρις μου, ἡ γὰρ δύναμις ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ τελεῖται). Contrary to human wisdom, God operates off a different principle. Human weakness provides Him the opportunity to demonstrate His divine power. When human limitations make it clear that certain things cannot take place purely out of human resources or abilities, God can step in to get the work done and thus make Himself known to people.

This lesson Paul learned out of experience and it changed his life. With this discovery of how God works in human existence, the apostle came to the conclusion: "So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." (NRSV). He could then legitimately boast of his weaknesses because they became points of revealing the power of God at work in his life. This enabled him to avoid frustration with hardships and to find contentment with them, knowing that in his weakness God's power was great in his life.

*How does this relate to us today?* Quite clearly it underscores the danger of validating people, especially spiritual leaders, by worldly standards. The quest for power among preachers in our time is unbelievably strong and passionate. Consequently, vehicles that connote power are passionately sought after: wealth with status symbols of our day like personal corporate jets, extravagant homes and dress etc. Included in this list are absolute power over churches, significant influence and an instrument of Satan (v. 7).

(4) It was a permanent condition (implied by the two presents, ὑπεραίρωμαι and κολαφίζῃ [v. 7], and by the negative divine response to his three requests for its removal [vv. 8–9]), yet its exacerbations were intermittent (implied by τρίς, v. 8).

(5) It was humbling, for it was designed to curb or prevent spiritual arrogance (ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι) over the extraordinary nature of the revelations received (v. 7).

(6) It was humiliating, comparable to receiving vicious blows about the face (ἵνα με κολαφίζῃ, v. 7).

(7) It caused Paul to feel weak (vv. 9–10), yet the weakness it caused was an object of boasting (v. 9; cf. v. 5) and a source of pleasure (v. 10).

[source = Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 827.]

over political leaders, -- just to name a few. But these reflect the style of Paul's enemies at Corinth and mirror the same falseness and twisting of the Gospel that the Corinthian false teachers message did.

We must disavow the standards of the world and instead crave the ways of God. And God's ways aren't man's ways!

God seeks out weaknesses among people in order to demonstrate the superiority of His power. When it comes to the validation of a preacher's message, check out his priorities. If he is defining his ministry by the standards of the world, then he has no true Gospel to offer people. See whether he has discovered the secret of Paul that when we are weak then -- and only then -- are we genuinely experience power that comes from God.

**Greek NT**

12.1 Καυχᾶσθαι δεῖ, οὐ συμφέρον μὲν, ἐλευ-  
 'σομαι δὲ εἰς ὀπτασίας  
 καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις κυρι-  
 'ου. 12.2 οἶδα ἄνθρωπον  
 ἐν Χριστῷ πρὸ ἐτῶν  
 δεκατεσσάρων, εἴτε ἐν  
 σώματι οὐκ οἶδα, εἴτε  
 ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος οὐκ  
 οἶδα, ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν, ἀρπα-  
 γέντα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἕως  
 τρίτου οὐρανοῦ. 12.3  
 καὶ οἶδα τὸν τοιοῦτον  
 ἄνθρωπον, εἴτε ἐν σώ-  
 ματι εἴτε χωρὶς τοῦ σώ-  
 ματος οὐκ οἶδα, ὁ θεὸς  
 οἶδεν, 12.4 ὅτι ἡρπάγη  
 εἰς τὸν παράδεισον καὶ  
 ἤκουσεν ἄρρητα ῥήματα  
 ἃ οὐκ ἐξὸν ἀνθρώπῳ  
 λαλῆσαι. 12.5 ὑπὲρ  
 τοῦ τοιούτου καυχῶμαι,  
 ὑπὲρ δὲ ἐμυνοῦ  
 οὐ καυχῶμαι εἰ μὴ ἐν  
 ταῖς ἀσθενείαις. 12.6  
 ἐὰν γὰρ θελήσω καυχή-  
 'σασθαι, οὐκ ἔσομαι  
 ἄφρων, ἀλήθειαν γὰρ  
 ἐρῶ· φείδομαι δέ, μὴ τις  
 εἰς ἐμὲ λογίσσεται ὑπὲρ ὃ  
 βλέπει με ἢ ἀκούει· τί ἐξ  
 ἐμοῦ 12.7 καὶ τῇ υπερ-  
 βολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων.  
 διό ἵνα μὴ υπεραίρωμαι,  
 ἐδόθη μοι σκόλοψ τῇ  
 σαρκί, ἄγγελος Σατανᾶ,  
 ἵνα με κολαφίσῃ, ἵνα  
 μὴ υπεραίρωμαι. 12.8  
 ὑπὲρ τούτου τρίς τὸν  
 κύριον παρεκάλεσα  
 ἵνα ἀποστῇ ἀπ' ἐμοῦ.  
 12.9 καὶ εἰρηκέν μοι,  
 Ἄρκεῖ σοι ἡ χάρις  
 μου, ἡ γὰρ δύναμις  
 ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ τελεῖται.  
 ἥδιστα οὖν μᾶλλον  
 καυχῶμαι ἐν ταῖς  
 ἀσθενείαις μου, ἵνα  
 ἐπισκηνώσῃ ἐπ' ἐμὲ  
 ἡ δύναμις τοῦ Χρισ-  
 τοῦ. 12.10 διὸ εὐ-  
 δοκῶ ἐν ἀσθενείαις,  
 ἐν ὕβρεσιν, ἐν ἀνάγ-

**NASB**

1 It is necessary to  
 boast; nothing is to be  
 gained by it, but I will  
 go on to visions and  
 revelations of the Lord.  
 2 I know a person in  
 Christ who fourteen  
 years ago was caught  
 up to the third heaven  
 — whether in the body  
 or out of the body I do  
 not know; God knows.  
 3 And I know that such  
 a person — whether in  
 the body or out of the  
 body I do not know; God  
 knows — 4 was caught  
 up into Paradise and  
 heard things that are  
 not to be told, that no  
 mortal is permitted to  
 repeat. 5 On behalf of  
 such a one I will boast,  
 but on my own behalf  
 I will not boast, except  
 of my weaknesses. 6  
 But if I wish to boast,  
 I will not be a fool, for  
 I will be speaking the  
 truth. But I refrain from  
 it, so that no one may  
 think better of me than  
 what is seen in me or  
 heard from me, 7 even  
 considering the excep-  
 tional character of the  
 revelations. Therefore,  
 to keep me from being  
 too elated, a thorn was  
 given me in the flesh,  
 a messenger of Satan  
 to torment me, to keep  
 me from being too  
 elated. 8 Three times  
 I appealed to the Lord  
 about this, that it would  
 leave me, 9 but he  
 said to me, "My grace  
 is sufficient for you, for  
 power is made perfect  
 in weakness." So, I  
 will boast all the more  
 gladly of my weakness-  
 es, so that the power of

**NRSV**

1 It is necessary to  
 boast; nothing is to be  
 gained by it, but I will  
 go on to visions and  
 revelations of the Lord.  
 2 I know a person in  
 Christ who fourteen  
 years ago was caught  
 up to the third heaven  
 — whether in the body  
 or out of the body I do  
 not know; God knows.  
 3 And I know that such  
 a person — whether in  
 the body or out of the  
 body I do not know; God  
 knows — 4 was caught  
 up into Paradise and  
 heard things that are  
 not to be told, that no  
 mortal is permitted to  
 repeat. 5 On behalf of  
 such a one I will boast,  
 but on my own behalf  
 I will not boast, except  
 of my weaknesses. 6  
 But if I wish to boast,  
 I will not be a fool, for  
 I will be speaking the  
 truth. But I refrain from  
 it, so that no one may  
 think better of me than  
 what is seen in me or  
 heard from me, 7 even  
 considering the excep-  
 tional character of the  
 revelations. Therefore,  
 to keep me from being  
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 a messenger of Satan  
 to torment me, to keep  
 me from being too  
 elated. 8 Three times  
 I appealed to the Lord  
 about this, that it would  
 leave me, 9 but he  
 said to me, "My grace  
 is sufficient for you, for  
 power is made perfect  
 in weakness." So, I  
 will boast all the more  
 gladly of my weakness-  
 es, so that the power of

**NLT**

1 This boasting is  
 all so foolish, but let  
 me go on. Let me tell  
 about the visions and  
 revelations I received  
 from the Lord. 2 I was  
 caught up into the third  
 heaven fourteen years  
 ago. 3 Whether my  
 body was there or just  
 my spirit, I don't know;  
 only God knows. 4 But  
 I do know that I was  
 caught up into paradise  
 and heard things so as-  
 tounding that they can-  
 not be told. 5 That ex-  
 perience is something  
 worth boasting about,  
 but I am not going to do  
 it. I am going to boast  
 only about my weak-  
 nesses. 6 I have plen-  
 ty to boast about and  
 would be no fool in do-  
 ing it, because I would  
 be telling the truth. But I  
 won't do it. I don't want  
 anyone to think more  
 highly of me than what  
 they can actually see  
 in my life and my mes-  
 sage, 7 even though  
 I have received won-  
 derful revelations from  
 God. But to keep me  
 from getting puffed up,  
 I was given a thorn in  
 my flesh, a messenger  
 from Satan to torment  
 me and keep me from  
 getting proud. 8 Three  
 different times I begged  
 the Lord to take it away.  
 9 Each time he said,  
 "My gracious favor is  
 all you need. My pow-  
 er works best in your  
 weakness." So now I  
 am glad to boast about  
 my weaknesses, so  
 that the power of Christ  
 may work through me.  
 10 Since I know it is

καις, ἐν διωγμοῖς καὶ στενοχωρίαις ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ· ὅταν γὰρ ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατός εἰμι.

Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

all for Christ's good, I am quite content with my weaknesses and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.



## Greek NT Diagram

- 1 <sup>12.1</sup> **Καυχᾶσθαι δεῖ,**  
 2 **οὐ συμφέρον**  
     μέν,  
     δὲ  
 3 **ἐλεύσομαι**  
     εἰς ὀπτασίας  
         καὶ  
     ἀποκαλύψεις κυρίου.
- 4 <sup>12.2</sup> **οἶδα ἄνθρωπον**  
     ἐν Χριστῷ  
     πρὸ ἐτῶν δεκατεσσάρων,  
     εἴτε ἐν σώματι  
 5 **οὐκ οἶδα,**  
     εἴτε ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος  
 6 **οὐκ οἶδα,**  
 7 **ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν,**  
     ἄρπαγέντα τὸν τοιοῦτον  
     ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ.
- 8 <sup>12.3</sup> καὶ  
 8 **οἶδα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἄνθρωπον,**  
     εἴτε ἐν σώματι  
     εἴτε χωρὶς τοῦ σώματος  
 9 **οὐκ οἶδα,**  
 10 **ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν,**  
 10 <sup>12.4</sup> ὅτι ἥρπάγη  
     εἰς τὸν παράδεισον  
     καὶ  
     ἤκουσεν ἄρρητα ῥήματα  
     ἃ οὐκ ἐξὸν ἀνθρώπῳ λαλῆσαι.
- 11 <sup>12.5</sup> ὑπὲρ τοῦ τοιούτου  
 11 **καυχῆσομαι,**  
     δὲ  
     ὑπὲρ ἑμαυτοῦ  
 12 **οὐ καυχῆσομαι**  
     εἰ μὴ ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις.
- 13 <sup>12.6</sup> γὰρ  
     ἐὰν θελήσω καυχῆσασθαι,  
 13 **οὐκ ἔσομαι ἄφρων,**  
     γὰρ  
 14 **ἀλήθειαν ἐρῶ·**  
     δὲ  
 15 **φείδομαι,**  
     μή τις εἰς ἐμὲ λογίσηται  
         ὑπὲρ ὃ βλέπει με  
     ἢ  
     --- ἀκούει [τι]  
         ἐξ ἐμοῦ  
         καὶ  
     τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων.
- 12.7

- διό  
ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι,  
16 **ἐδόθη μοι σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί,**  
ἄγγελος Σατανᾶ,  
ἵνα με κολαφίζῃ,  
ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι.
- 12.8 ὑπὲρ τούτου  
τρὶς  
17 **τὸν κύριον παρεκάλεσα**  
ἵνα ἀποστῇ ἀπ' ἐμοῦ.
- 12.9 καὶ  
18 **εἴρηκέν μοι,**  
Ἄρκεϊ σοι ἡ χάρις μου,  
γὰρ  
ἡ δύναμις ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ τελεῖται.
- οὖν  
ἥδιστα  
μᾶλλον  
19 **καυχῆσομαι**  
ἐν ταῖς ἀσθενείαις μου,  
ἵνα ἐπισκηνώσῃ ἐπ' ἐμὲ ἡ δύναμις τοῦ Χριστοῦ.
- 12.10 διό  
20 **εὐδοκῶ**  
ἐν ἀσθενείαις,  
ἐν ὕβρεσιν,  
ἐν ἀνάγκαις,  
ἐν διωγμοῖς καὶ στενοχωρίαις ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ·  
γὰρ  
ὅταν ἀσθενῶ,  
τότε  
21 **δυνατός εἰμι.**

## Semantic Diagram

	1-----	1	Impers Verb						Καυχᾶσθαι δεῖ
I--	A--	2-----	2	(Pres	---	Ind	3	P	αὐτὸ) (ἐστὶν)
				δὲ					
	B-----	3	Fut	Dep		Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) ἐλεύσομαι
	1-----	4	Perf	Act		Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) οἶδα
	A--	i-----	5	Perf	Act	Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) οὐκ οἶδα
		a--							
	2--	ii-----	6	Perf	Act	Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) οὐκ οἶδα
II--									
	b-----	7	Perf	Act		Ind	3	S	ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν
				καὶ					
	1-----	8	Perf	Act		Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) οἶδα
	B--								
		a-----	9	Perf	Act	Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) οὐκ οἶδα
		2--							
		b-----	10	Perf	Act	Ind	3	S	ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν
		a-----	11	Fut	Dep	Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) καυχήσομαι
	1--			δὲ					
		b-----	12	Fut	Dep	Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) οὐ καυχήσομαι
	A--			γὰρ					
		a-----	13	Fut	---	Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) οὐκ ἔσομαι
		2--		γὰρ					
		i-----	14	Pres	Act	Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) ἐρῶ
		b--		δὲ					
		ii-----	15	Pres	Dep	Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) φείδομαι
III				διὸ					
	1-----	16	1 Aor	Pass		Ind	3	S	σκόλον ἐδόθη
	B--2-----	17	1 Aor	Act		Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) παρεκάλεσα
				καὶ					
	3-----	18	Perf	Act		Ind	3	S	(ὁ κυριος) εἰρηκέν
				οὖν					
	1-----	19	Fut	Dep		Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) καυχήσομαι
	C--			διὸ					
		a-----	20	Pres	Act	Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) εὐδοκῶ
		2--		γὰρ					
		b-----	21	Pres	---	Ind	1	S	(ἐγώ) εἰμι

### Summary of the Rhetorical Structure

This pericope falls into either two or three subsections. The issue relates to how the first set of statements (#s 1-3) are taken. Clearly they form a topic 'header' which introduces a new subject to Paul's discussion in the letter. Their broader scope, involving the use of the verb *Καυχᾶσθαι* that is reproduced consistently throughout the pericope and the mentioning of his intention to discuss *ὀπτασίας καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις κυρίου*, favors the header introducing the entire pericope, rather than just statements 4-10.

The first subsection, #s 1-3, introduce the pericope around two emphases: *Καυχᾶσθαι* and *ὀπτασίας καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις*. *Καυχῆσις* is necessary, declares Paul, but is also not *συμφέρον*. In spite of its lack of productivity, Paul indicates that he will go on to talk about *ὀπτασίας καὶ ἀποκαλύψεις κυρίου*. Thus we know that the issue of visions and revelations (from the Lord) are coming up next.

In the second subsection, #s 4-10, he refers to a person he knew who fourteen years earlier<sup>1</sup> who was caught up in visions and revelations. Repeatedly in two sets of disclaimers, #s 4-7 and 8-10, Paul indicates little detailed knowledge of the situation with this man. The contrast in both sets is whether the man in his visions was *ἐν σώματι* or was *χωρὶς τοῦ σώματος*. Paul says he doesn't know; only God knows which state the man was in. The step parallelism of the two sets focuses on what little information Paul did remember. In the first instance, he did know that the man *ἀρπαγέντα τὸν τοιοῦτον ἕως τρίτου οὐρανοῦ*. And in the second set the man *ἤρπάγη εἰς τὸν παράδεισον καὶ ἤκουσεν ἄρρητα ῥήματα ἃ οὐκ ἐξὸν ἀνθρώπῳ λαλῆσαι*. The 'third Heaven' in the first set is identified as 'Paradise' in the second set. The most notable aspect of this is the length that Paul goes to distance himself from such experiences. He has not personally had such experience, and doesn't think it profitable (*συμφέρον*) to have them. He only mentions his acquaintance with this other person because he is under attack by his opponents at Corinth for not having had such experiences (cf. 12:11-13).

In the third subsection, #s 11-21, Paul indicates that he can only 'boast' about the experience of others when it comes to visions and revelations (# 11). As for himself, he chooses to 'boast' in his weaknesses instead (# 12). When it comes to 'boasting' in weakness he is no fool (# 13), as might be popularly thought. Rather he is speaking what is true (# 14). But he chooses to refrain from much boasting so that people will not have an inflated opinion of him even given the exceptional nature of revelations (#15).

In light of this beginning disclaimer, Paul chooses one weakness to recount (#s 16-21): his 'thorn in the flesh' (# 16). The precise nature of it is only defined as a *σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί, ἄγγελος Σατανα*. This rather vague description has promoted endless speculation over what it was precisely. Paul's depiction only stresses that it was physical in nature and that it served as a tempting messenger from Satan. Paul was more interested in how God used this defect. Two purpose clauses (in # 16) define the basic intention behind God giving him this 'thorn': *ἵνα με κολαφίζῃ* and *ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι* (repeated twice for emphasis). The thorn both tormented Paul, and kept him from an over inflated ego.

Three times, Paul says, he asked God to remove it (# 17), and the answer came back from Heaven, 'No, it will stay' (# 18): *Ἀρκεῖ σοι ἡ χάρις μου, ἡ γὰρ δύναμις ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ τελεῖται*. Through God's grace Paul found God's strength in his own weakness (now defining the *σκόλοψ* as *ἀσθένεια*).

His conclusion (*οὖν*)? Paul would gladly boast in weakness (# 19) so that *ἵνα ἐπισκηνώσῃ ἐπ' ἐμὲ ἡ δύναμις τοῦ Χριστοῦ*. In light of his personal discovery of the divine secret of 'strength in weakness' Paul then took pleasure in all kinds of weaknesses (# 20): *εὐδοκῶ ἐν ἀσθενείαις, ἐν ὕβρεσιν, ἐν ἀνάγκαις, ἐν διωγμοῖς καὶ στενοχωρίαις ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ*. This posture was based (*γάρ*) on the principle (# 21) that Paul espouses: *ὅταν ἀσθενῶ, τότε δυνατός εἰμι*. His strength was not his own; it was not physical. Rather Paul's strength came from God and Christ, and was most active in his life through his own weaknesses.

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<sup>1</sup>With 2 Corinthians being written about 56 AD, this would go back to the early 40s when Paul was either still at home in Tarsus prior to going to Antioch, or after he had joined Barnabas at Antioch.