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Throughout the years, scholars and various Christians have taken the time to examine the words penned by the Apostle Paul in 2 Cor 12:1-13. Various interpretations have been attributed to this section of Scripture. Many questions have occupied the minds of many as they study this portion of Scripture. Questions such as: who was the person that was caught up to the third heaven? What is the third heaven? What were those inexpressible words that this person heard, and that were not lawful to utter? And has anyone gone to heaven already besides the Son of God? These questions have been the center of attention for many students of the Word. I am sure that many have wondered what the answer to these questions is. A careful analysis of the structure, genre, language, setting, and theological meaning can help us to understand what the Apostle Paul meant by these thought provoking words.

As we take the time to examine the answers to these questions, and the presentation of these very important factors which deal with an exegesis of the text, let us keep an open mind to evaluate the information that will be presented in this brief study.

With regard to the person that was caught up to the third heaven, some have suggested that this person is a reference to the Apostle Paul, while others believe that this person could be Apollos, who taught in Corinth after Paul, or Jesus, or an anonymous friend¹

The phrase “I know a man in Christ” has given interpreters some difficulty. The Apostle Paul does not provide direct information as to who this person is; nevertheless, the majority of commentators believe this to be a reference to Paul himself. Notice what Paul Barnett commented with regard to v. 2, “Paul’s reply is curious. It is as if he is unwilling to identify

¹ See Margaret E. Thrall, *Commentary on II Corinthians VIII-XIII* (vol. 2 of *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistles to the Corinthians*; ICC 34; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 778f.

himself as the man who had the revelations. Thus he writes I know a man (verse 2), referring to himself not personally but impersonally; not in the first but the third person”² The various experiences with revelations the Apostle had in the past have forced some to argue that the person under consideration has to be Paul, and not some other person. William Baird made the following observation in relation to the various revelations Paul had experienced in the past,

On two occasions, Paul cites the experiences of revelation in support of his apostolic ministry. In Gal 1:11-17, he claims that he did not receive his gospel from a human source, but from a revelation of Jesus Christ. In 2 Cor 12:1-5, he boasts of visions and revelations, including a particular experience in which he was caught up to paradise. Both texts answer arguments of opponents, both support Paul’s apostleship, and both use the key term *Apocalypsis*. They differ, however, in content. One simply states that God revealed his son to Paul; the other describes a journey to the third heaven.³

The observation Baird makes could help us to understand who the man Paul knows is. From these experiences we can know for sure that revelations were not uncommon to the Apostle Paul. We would also do well to consider the comment made by Dr. David Stern, who commenting on 2 Cor 12:2, said the following:

I know a man, namely, myself, Sha’ul. Out of modesty he prefers to speak of himself in the third person when talking about his visions and revelations. That he is speaking of himself is clear from vv. 6b-7; so that when he says in v. 5, “About such a man I will boast; but about myself I will not boast,” it is as if Sha’ul were two persons (compare Ro 7:14-25); or, perhaps more accurately, it is that he is now completely objective about his experience and utterly unattached to it.⁴

Dr. Stern makes it clear that the person under consideration was the Apostle Paul, and not someone else. This point of view is taken by many scholars as well.

² Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians* (Illinois: IVP, 1988), 176.

³ William Baird, “Visions, Revelation, and Ministry: Reflections on 2 Cor 12:1-5 and Gal 1:11-17.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 651-62.

⁴ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Maryland: Jewish New Testament, 1992), 516.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

A careful analysis of chapters 10-12 will help the student of the Bible understand the structure of Paul's message in 12:1-13. Beginning in chapter 10 and all the way to chapter 12, we see how the Apostle has been presenting arguments in favor of his apostleship. There were some at Corinth who were questioning the authority and Apostleship of Paul. Among these there were some who claimed that Paul was very strong and weighty in his letters, but in person he was unimpressive, and his speech contemptible (10:10). By this kind of observation, these people were undermining the authority of Paul. He responds to this accusation by arguing that what they were in word by letters when absent, they were also in deed when present (v. 11).

In the structure of the text, we also find the word "boast" being used by Paul some 16 times (10:8, 13, 16, 17; 11:10, 12, 16, 17, 18, 30; 12:1, 5, 6, 7, 9). Those who question the Apostleship of Paul were boasting of many things; whence Paul argues that we should not boast, but only in weakness (11:30). In chapter 11, the Apostle presents some arguments to defend his authority and Apostleship. For example, in verses 1-2, he appealed to the love he had for the brethren at Corinth. In verses 3-4 he expressed his concern about Satan taking advantage of them. Then, in verses 5-6 he argued that he is no less than the rest of the Apostles. In verses 7-9 Paul presents the argument that he preached the gospel to them without any charge, but that he had taken funds from other churches in order that he could preach the gospel to them, and others. It could very well be the case that those who attacked the Apostleship of Paul were charging the Corinthian brethren money for preaching to them; nevertheless, this is only a speculation. In verses 10-15 Paul presents an accusation on those who were false Apostles of Christ. In verses 16-30 the Apostle tells the brethren at Corinth how much he has suffered for the cause of Christ, and for preaching to them. He is boasting in his weakness and sufferings. Maybe this was something the other false apostles were not doing. In verses 30-33, Paul uses God as his witness

to show that he is not lying concerning the things he is saying. He also continues to tell the brethren at Corinth that he had indeed suffered in various places.

In chapter 12 Paul narrates the revelations he had experienced, and the thorn in the flesh with which he struggled. In this chapter he also speaks about his contentment in suffering on behalf of the brethren at Corinth. This chapter can be divided in the following manner: In verses 1-6 he speaks about the vision of the man who was caught up to the third heaven, then verses 7-9 he makes reference to the thorn in the flesh which had the purpose of keeping him away from exalting himself. In verse 10 he tells them how content he is to suffer for Christ's sake. In verses 11-12 Paul reminds them again that he is not inferior to the rest of the Apostles, since he performed the same signs of a true Apostle. In verses 13-21 we see how Paul tells them that he is willing to be spent for their souls. In this same section he also lets them know that he did not take advantage of them by any means.

Therefore, concerning the structure of the passage that entails our examination, I submit to you that the things discussed in chapter 12:1-13 began in chapter 10, and it ends in chapter 12. The structure of the information found within these three chapters confirms this to be the case. Let me suggest to you the following outline which deals with 2 Cor 12:1-13

The structure of the text divided in outline format helps us to understand the flow and the train of thought of the Apostle Paul with regard to why he is saying what he is saying. As was stated before, personally, I believe the train of thought begins in 2 Cor 10 and it moves onward to chapter 12. The visions and revelations found in chapter 12 constitute a part of the defense Paul presents on behalf of his Apostleship. Therefore, these three chapters must be connected with each other so that we can glean the full thought Paul is trying to convey.

OUTLINE OF 2 CORINTHIANS 10-12

- I. Paul defends himself and his Apostleship (10:1-18).
 - 1. By appealing to the meekness & gentleness of Christ (10:1).
 - 2. By appealing to his own meekness and boldness (10:1).
 - 3. By facing with courage those who regard them as sinful (10:2).
 - 4. By describing the method by which we as Christian fight (10:3-6).
 - 5. By arguing that he belongs to Christ (10:7).
 - 6. By appealing to the authority Christ gave him (10:8-9).
 - 7. By appealing to his consistency in conduct (10:10-11).
 - 8. By not comparing himself with those who have no understanding (10:12).
 - 9. By boasting within the sphere which God apportioned to him (10:13).
 - 10. By reaching out to the Corinthians (10:13-14).
 - 11. By appealing to the growth of the Corinthians (10:15).
 - 12. By appealing to the labor he has done in the Lord (10:16-18).
- II. Paul continues to defend his Apostleship (11:1-33).
 - 1. By appealing to the forbearance of the Corinthian brethren (11:1).
 - 2. By appealing to his contribution on their conversion (11:2).
 - 3. By establishing the danger of being deceived by Satan (11:3-4).
 - 4. By arguing that he is no less than the other Apostles (11:5).
 - 5. By appealing to his knowledge (11:6).
 - 6. By appealing to his generosity in preaching the gospel to them without charge (11:7-9).
 - 7. By appealing to his love for the brethren at Corinth and his suffering (11:10-12).
 - 8. By warning them about the false apostles and servants of Satan who deceive them (11:13-15).
 - 9. By boasting in his foolishness (11:16-20).
 - 10. By arguing that he is no less than the others (11:22).
 - 11. By reminding the brethren at Corinth how much he has suffered on their behalf and for the cause of Christ (11:23-33).
- III. Paul's Visions and the Thorn in the Flesh as Paul's continuation of his defense for his Apostleship (12:1-21).
 - 1. Paul claims visions and revelations as proof of his Apostleship (12:1).
 - 2. Paul's description of the visions (12:2-6).
 - a. The man who experienced the vision (12:2).
 - b. The time when this took place—fourteen years ago (12:2).
 - c. The manner by which the vision was experienced—whether in or out of the body (12:2).
 - d. The place where he traveled—to the third heaven (12:2).
 - e. The One with the accurate knowledge—God knows (12:2-3).
 - f. The synonym for the third heaven—Paradise (12:4).
 - g. The experience described—heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak (12:4).
 - 3. Paul's attitude in regard to the vision (12:5-6).
 - a. Paul will boast for the man who experienced this vision (12:5).
 - b. Paul will boast on his own weakness (12:5).
 - c. Paul does not boast like others do (12:6).

4. The thorn in the flesh (12:7-9).
 - a. The purpose of the thorn—to keep me from exalting myself (12:7).
 - b. The plea to have it removed—I entreated the Lord three times (12:8).
 - c. The answer to the plea—my grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness (12:9).
 - d. The Apostles response—I will rather boast in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me (12:9).
5. Paul's contentment in the midst of suffering and for the sake of Christ (12:10).
 - a. In weakness.
 - b. In insults.
 - c. In distress.
 - d. In persecutions.
 - e. In difficulties.
6. Paul's argument on his behalf (12:11-21).
 - a. He should have been commended by the Corinthians (12:11).
 - b. He is no less than the other eminent Apostles (12:11).
 - c. The same signs of true Apostles were performed by Paul (12:12).
 - d. Paul was not a burden to them (12:13).
 - e. He has taken care of them like a father does his children (12:14).
 - f. He is willing to be spent for the sake of the brethren at Corinth (12:15-17).
 - g. He has not taken advantage of them (12:18-19).
 - h. Paul points out some of the sins of the brethren at Corinth (12:20-21).

AN EXAMINATION OF THE GENRE AND LANGUAGE

With regard to the genre and language the Apostle Paul employs in chapters 10-13, it is important to notice the way Paul conveys his arguments in favor of his Apostleship. As stated earlier, the word “boast” appears some 16 times in chapters 10 through 12 (10:8, 13, 16, 17; 11:10, 12, 16, 17, 18, 30; 12:1, 5, 6, 7, 9). According to the Strong's concordance, this word denotes the act of boasting, glorying, having joy, or rejoicing. The word can be used in a good or a bad sense. The Apostle uses this word to apply it to him, as well as those who were boasting in a bad sense. His boasting or rejoicing for the things he had done was in a good sense, which is, approved by God.

The kind of writing we find here in these three chapters could be called argumentative language as well as a personal letter style, since the Apostle Paul presents various arguments in this letter which have the purpose of providing proof of his Apostleship. He presents several

reasons why the Corinthian brethren should accept him as he is, an Apostle of Jesus Christ who is no less than the other eminent Apostles. Among those reasons are the work he has done for the sake of Christ and the brethren, the sufferings he has experienced in his life, and the various admonitions concerning his authority as an Apostle. Dr. Martin, in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, made the following statement, “Second Corinthians 12:1-10e is a polemical argument within his larger argument of chs. 10-13 concerning apostolic authority”⁵ Notice how this same author summarizes what really constitutes an apostolic authority,

In 12:1-10, we have a mosaic of literary devices that yields an interesting picture. In this passage Paul is answering a criticism from his opponents, namely, that he boasts little, and even when he boasts, it is only of weakness. Paul’s reply is to engage in an *ad hominem* argument. He will presently meet the opponents on their own level and then, in a masterful way, show that it is his ministry, not theirs, that is of God.⁶

Dr. Baird suggests that 2 Cor 12:1-5 belongs to a section of the Corinthian correspondence (2 Corinthians 10-13), often identified as the “severe” or “sorrowful letter.”⁷

The other part we must notice in chapter 12 is how Paul makes use of apocalyptic language when he makes reference to the visions and revelations found in chapter 12. The reference to the man in Christ being in or out of the body in the third heaven, that is, paradise, helps us to see the kind of language Paul uses here. First of all, the phrase “a man in Christ” without any doubt denotes a person who has been baptized into Christ (e.g. Gal 3:27). The only way how a person can get “into Christ” is by being immersed in water (Rom 6:3-4; Acts 2:41,

⁵ Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Word Biblical Commentary 40; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1986), 390-91.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 390.

⁷ William Baird, “Visions, Revelation, and Ministry: Reflections on 2 Cor 12:1-5 and Gal 1:11-17.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 651-62.

47). The phrase “in Christ” is found many times in the writings of the Apostle Paul. In every instance, it denotes a Christian, and not a non-Christian.

Now, concerning the word “paradise” we can say that this word makes reference to a place far beyond this earthly life. This word was used by Jesus in Luke 23:43 to make reference to the Hadean realm where the thief on the cross, and Jesus went. The word “paradise” in apocalyptic language denotes the Hadean realm or heaven where God’s abode is found. This word, according to the Greek-English lexicon by Louw-Nida, it denotes a dwelling place of the righteous dead in a state of blessedness, generally equated with heaven. They go on to say that this word in some languages has been translated by a borrowed term, but more often than not it is rendered by an expression which is roughly equivalent to ‘that wonderful place’ or even ‘that wonderful place in heaven.’

The word for “caught up” according to Thayer’s Greek Lexicon comes from a Greek word which denotes the snatching out or taking away. According to the grammar, this verb is found in the third person singular, passive voice. The passive in the Greek denotes an action being performed on the subject. In this case, the person who went to the third heaven was taken there. Once he was there, the text says he heard words which man is not permitted to speak. Why was this, the case? The text does not provide enough information as to arrive at an explicit answer. Dr. Hodge made the following comment with regard to this part of the text,

“The communications made to the apostle he was not allowed to make known to others. The veil which conceals the mysteries and glories of heaven God has not permitted to be raised. It is enough that we know that in that world the saints shall be made perfectly holy and perfectly blessed in the full enjoyment of God forever”⁸

⁸ Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 283.

Concerning the use of the third person “I know a man” Dr. Gorman made the following statement, “At a glance, it seems likely that Paul is simply trying to distance himself from the description since he does not intend to boast about it”⁹ Dr. Furnish believes that Paul is following in the convention used in other ancient accounts of heavenly journeys for which the use of the third person then becomes a kind of “self-transcendence” from which to narrate the story¹⁰ Others have suggested that Paul simply chose not to speak in the first person just to avoid boasting about his experience.

THE SETTING OF THE TEXT

With regard to the setting of the text under consideration let me suggest that 2 Cor 12:1-13 constitutes a part of the arguments Paul uses to defend his Apostleship. We have seen under the structure of the text how in chapter 10 through 12 the Apostle begins to defend his authority as an Apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul spends much of his time in these three chapters dealing with his opponents who were questioning his authority and work as an Apostle of Jesus. These people were questioning his motives, attitude, and style of the letters he has written.

Let us remember that the Christians at Corinth were experiencing many struggles within the congregation. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he dealt with many of the issues that were affecting the life of this congregation. As we can see within the text, there were those within the congregation that were questioning the exhortations given by the Apostle Paul. This kind of attitude prompted the Apostle to present some arguments in favor of his Apostleship during the writing of his second epistle, as we know it. As we have seen in this paper, Paul makes reference to his work ethics, his kind attitude towards the Corinthians, his sufferings,

⁹ Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 257-58.

¹⁰ Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians: Translation, Introduction, Notes and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 32A; New York: Doubleday, 1984), 544.

knowledge of God's Word, generosity in preaching the gospel without charge, visions and revelations, and many other arguments to establish his authority as an Apostle of Christ.

In the setting of our text under consideration we see how some were boasting about visions and revelations. Paul goes on to say that he also, has seen visions and revelations for which he is not willing to boast, as others have done so. The information found within these three chapters (10-12) is completely different from the rest of the letters Paul writes to Christian churches. In the other letters of which we have record, we do not find the Paul defending his authority as an Apostle of Jesus Christ. We may briefly mention the letter to the Galatians as one in which Paul, in part, defends his Apostleship. The nature of the other letters is completely different to the one we have under consideration.

It is believed that Paul had not visited Corinth for a period of three years. Because of his absence, some had come to the point in which they denied that Paul was an Apostle of Jesus just like the other Apostles were. As we have seen before, he actually defends the point that he is no less than the rest of the eminent Apostles (see 2 Cor 12:11).

The text under consideration in my opinion constitutes just one part of the entire literary work of the Apostle Paul. It is just a section where the Apostle is simply defending his Apostleship before the Corinthian brethren. After examining the rest of the two letters Paul writes to the saints at Corinth, we realize that the defending of his Apostleship is but just one part of the entire literary work. Only in these three chapters (10-12) does Paul write with regard to his authority. The rest of the content focuses on other matters pertaining to their faith and relationship to God.

THEOLOGICAL MEANING

As I begin to present the theological and practical meaning of the text, let me first suggest some of the interpretations that have been offered regarding the phrase “the third heaven.” After dealing with this part of the text, then I will move to a practical aspect of the meaning of this portion of Scripture with regard to how we can apply it to our daily lives. Let us notice what some have said concerning the phrase “the third heaven or paradise”

Dr. Barrier suggests that the descriptive elements in the story, such as “the third heaven” and “paradise,” have been justly interpreted as coming from the Merkabah texts.¹¹ On the other hand, Dr. Hodge argues that some have considered the assumption that Paul used language intended to conform to the ideas of the Rabbins who taught that there were seven heavens. Nevertheless, he argues that there is no evidence that the Jewish writers, whose works are still extant, were prevalent at the time of the apostle, and that there is no evidence that the sacred writers adopted those opinions.¹² Dr. Stern says that the third heaven is not the air (the first heaven) or the sky where the stars are (the second heaven), but the “place” where God is, a spiritual realm.¹³ Let us also consider the words of Dr. Tabor on this very subject,

Paradise is the goal of the journey, and it is the highest goal one could claim, something one could call “extraordinary,” and over which one could easily become elated (2 Cor. 12:7). He reports it in a two stage journey, which accounts for the parallel structure. He has been to the third heaven, yes, but beyond that, he has entered Paradise. And it is there, in Paradise, before God’s throne, that he hears things unutterable. This interpretation seems to best fit the structure and content of the report¹⁴

¹¹ Jeremy W. Barrier, “Visions of Weakness: Apocalyptic Genre and the Identification of Paul’s Opponents in 2 Corinthians 12:1-6,” *Restoration Quarterly* 47 (2005): 33-42.

¹² Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 282.

¹³ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Maryland: Jewish New Testament, 1992), 517.

¹⁴ James D. Tabor, *Things Unutterable: Paul’s Ascent to Paradise in Its Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Contexts* (Studies in Judaism; Lanham, Md.: University of America, 1986), 115.

These are but a few of the various interpretations of the text people have suggested throughout the times, that is, with regard to the meaning of the phrase, “the third heaven or paradise.” As stated before in this paper, the Apostle Paul had many revelations and visions in the past. In Gal 1:11-17 he mentions that the gospel he proclaimed was received by revelation of Jesus Christ, which obviously denotes an encounter through a revelation with the Savior. I have established that those who were first informed about this revelation and vision were the Corinthian brethren. The reason the Apostle made mention of this was to establish his authority as an Apostle of Jesus Christ. Those who claim to be Apostles of Jesus Christ were boasting before the Corinthians about their visions and revelations. The Apostle does not boast about his visions and revelations which we, without any doubt, know they were real. Let us remember that the Apostle is speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which makes his claim worthy to be accepted.

What did the first century Christians learn from the words the Apostle Paul penned in the setting under consideration? What can we learn from this information presented in this paper? Let me answer each of these questions for our benefit. There are many things the Corinthian brethren learned from the words of the Apostle Paul. One of those things was his attitude of humility as he refused to boast the same manner as those mentioned before. Paul kept a humble attitude no matter what the accusations against him were. The Apostle also took the time to clarify each of the accusations the Corinthian brethren were making against him. He answered all the arguments in a logical and comprehensive way. Paul also taught them to boast in weakness and not in things which are not worthy to boast about. The Corinthian brethren also learned how much the Apostle loved them. He showed how much he cared for them by appealing to a preaching that does not charge any funds. He also demonstrated his love by appealing to his

sufferings and love on their behalf. These were great lessons the early Christians at Corinth learned from the life of the Apostle Paul.

With regard to our application today, Christians also can learn several things from the passage that was examined. First of all, we can learn to provide a logical clarification of any accusation people may make against our own behavior. We always need to take the time to care about what others think of us. And, when the accusations are unjust, we need to explain to people that such accusations are not real, but attacks against our own way of life. We also learn to stay away from boasting about things that do not provide edification for others or ourselves.

Christians need to boast about what the Lord has done for us. In the overall context of the passage that was examined, we also learn about the need to be willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel, as well as for other Christians. What we do in life will determine what others will think about us. For this reason, we need to take the time to carefully consider what the Apostle teaches us with the information we have been privileged to examine.

As we conclude our examination of the passage at hand, let me suggest to you that the study of the structure, genre, language, setting, and theological meaning has helped us to better understand the passage under consideration. Paul has taught us several things that will help us indeed to become better Christians in the kingdom of God. We are thankful to those scholars who have taken the time to teach us the principles of interpretation that help each of us to better understand the biblical text. May we learn to appreciate their hard work!

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