

CHAPTER 12

In this chapter the apostle proceeds in maintaining the honour of his apostleship. He magnified his office when there were those who vilified it. What he says in his own praise was only in his own justification and the necessary defence of the honour of his ministry, the preservation of which was necessary to its success. First, He makes mention of the favour God had shown him, the honour done him, the methods God took to keep him humble, and the use he made of this dispensation (v. 1-10). Then he addresses himself to the Corinthians, blaming them for what was faulty among them, and giving a large account of his behaviour and kind intentions towards them (v. 11 to the end).

2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-10

THE APOSTLE'S RAPTURE

Here we may observe,

I. The narrative the apostle gives of the favours God had shown him, and the honour he had done him; for doubtless he himself is the man in Christ of whom he speaks. Concerning this we may take notice,

1. Of the honour itself which was done to the apostle: he was *caught up into the third heaven*, v. 2. When this was we cannot say, whether it was during those three days that he lay without sight at his conversion or at some other time afterwards, much less can we pretend to say *how* this was, whether by a separation of his soul from his body or by an extraordinary transport in the depth of contemplation. It would be presumption for us to determine, if not also to enquire into, this matter, seeing the apostle himself says, *Whether in the body or out of the body, I cannot tell*. It was certainly a very extraordinary honour done him: in some sense he was caught up into the *third heaven*, the heaven of the blessed, above the aerial heaven, in which the fowls fly, above the starry heaven, which is adorned with those glorious orbs: it was into the third heaven, where God most eminently manifests his glory. We are not capable of knowing all, nor is it fit we should know very much, of the particulars of that glorious place and

state; it is our duty and interest to give diligence to make sure to ourselves a mansion there; and, if that be cleared up to us, then we should long to be removed thither, to abide there for ever. This third heaven is called paradise (v. 4), in allusion to the earthly paradise out of which Adam was driven for his transgression; it is called the paradise of God (~~Rev~~ Revelation 2:7), signifying to us that by Christ we are restored to all the joys and honours we lost by sin, yea, to much better. The apostle does not mention what he saw in the third heaven or paradise, but tells us that *he heard unspeakable words*, such as it is not possible for a man to utter such are the sublimity of the matter and our unacquaintedness with the language of the upper world: nor was it lawful to utter those words, because, while we are here in this world, we have a more sure word of prophecy than such visions and revelations. ~~2~~ 2 Peter 1:19. We read of the tongue of angels as well as men, and Paul knew as much of that as ever any man upon earth did, and yet preferred charity, that is, the sincere love of God and our neighbour. This account which the apostle gives us of his vision should check our curious desires after forbidden knowledge, and teach us to improve the revelation God has given us in his word. Paul himself, who had been in the third heaven, did not publish to the world what he had heard there, but adhered to the doctrine of Christ: on this foundation the church is built, and on this we must build our faith and hope.

2. The modest and humble manner in which the apostle mentions this matter is observable. One would be apt to think that one who had had such visions and revelations as these would have boasted greatly of them; but, says he, *It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory*, v. 1. He therefore did not mention this immediately, nor till *above fourteen years* after, v. 2. And then it is not without some reluctancy, as a thing which in a manner he was forced to by the necessity of the case. Again, he speaks of himself in the third person, and does not say, I am the man who was thus honoured above other men. Again, his humility appears by the check he seems to put upon himself (v. 6), which plainly shows that he delighted not to dwell upon this theme. Thus was he, who was not behind the chief of the apostles in dignity, very eminent for his humility. Note, It is an excellent thing to have a lowly spirit in the midst of high advancements; and those who abase themselves shall be exalted.

II. The apostle gives an account of the methods God took to keep him humble, and to prevent his *being lifted up above measure*; and this he speaks of to balance the account that was given before of the visions and

revelations he had had. Note, When God's people communicate their experiences, let them always remember to take notice of what God has done to keep them humble, as well as what he has done in favour to them and for their advancement. Here observe,

1. The apostle was pained with a thorn in the flesh, and buffeted with a messenger of Satan, v. 7. We are much in the dark what this was, whether some great trouble or some great temptation. Some think it was an acute bodily pain or sickness; others think it was the indignities done him by the false apostles, and the opposition he met with from them, particularly on the account of his speech, which was contemptible. However this was, God often brings this good out of evil, that the reproaches of our enemies help to hide pride from us; and this is certain, that what the apostle calls a thorn in his flesh was for a time very grievous to him: but the thorns Christ wore for us, and with which he was crowned, sanctify and make easy all the thorns in the flesh we may at any time be afflicted with; for *he suffered, being tempted, that he might be able to succour those that are tempted*. Temptations to sin are most grievous thorns; they are messengers of Satan, to buffet us. Indeed it is a great grievance to a good man to be so much as tempted to sin.

2. The design of this was to keep the apostle humble: *Lest he should be exalted above measure*, v. 7. Paul himself knew he *had not yet attained, neither was already perfect*; and yet he was in danger of being lifted up with pride. If God love us, he will hide pride from us, and keep us from being exalted above measure; and spiritual burdens are ordered, to cure spiritual pride. This thorn in the flesh is said to be a messenger of Satan, which he did not send with a good design, but on the contrary, with ill intentions, to discourage the apostle (who had been so highly favoured of God) and hinder him in his work. But God designed this for good, and he overruled it for good, and made this messenger of Satan to be so far from being a hindrance that it was a help to the apostle.

3. The apostle prayed earnestly to God for the removal of this sore grievance. Note, Prayer is a salve for every sore, a remedy for every malady; and when we are afflicted with thorns in the flesh we should give ourselves to prayer. Therefore we are sometimes tempted that we may learn to pray. The apostle *besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from him*, v. 8. Note, Though afflictions are sent for our spiritual benefit, yet we may pray to God for the removal of them: we ought indeed to

desire also that they may reach the end for which they are designed. The apostle prayed earnestly, and repeated his requests; he besought the Lord *thrice*, that is, often. So that if an answer be not given to the first prayer, nor to the second, we must hold on, and hold out, till we receive an answer. Christ himself prayed to his Father *thrice*. As troubles are sent to teach us to pray, so they are continued to teach us to continue instant in prayer.

4. We have an account of the answer given to the apostle's prayer, that, although the trouble was not removed, yet an equivalent should be granted: *My grace is sufficient for thee*. Note,

(1.) Though God accepts the prayer of faith, yet he does not always answer it in the letter; as he sometimes grants in wrath, so he sometimes denies in love.

(2.) When God does not remove our troubles and temptations, yet, if he gives us grace sufficient for us, we have no reason to complain, nor to say that he deals ill by us. It is a great comfort to us, whatever thorns in the flesh we are pained with, that God's grace is sufficient for us. Grace signifies two things:

[1.] The good-will of God towards us, and this is enough to enlighten and enliven us, sufficient to strengthen and comfort us, to support our souls and cheer up our spirits, in all afflictions and distresses.

[2.] The good work of God in us, the grace we receive from the fulness that is in Christ our head; and from him there shall be communicated that which is suitable and seasonable, and sufficient for his members. Christ Jesus understands our case, and knows our need, and will proportion the remedy to our malady, and not only strengthen us, but glorify *himself*. *His strength is made perfect in our weakness*. Thus his grace is manifested and magnified; he ordains his praise out of the mouths of babes and sucklings.

III. Here is the use which the apostle makes of this dispensation: *He gloried in his infirmities* (v. 9), and took pleasure in them, v. 10. He does not mean his sinful infirmities (those we have reason to be ashamed of and grieved at), but he means his afflictions, his reproaches, necessities, persecutions, and distresses for Christ's sake, v. 10. And the reason of his glory and joy on account of these things was that they were fair opportunities for Christ to manifest the power and sufficiency of his grace

resting upon him, by which he had so much experience of the strength of divine grace that he could say, *When I am weak, then am I strong*. This is a Christian paradox: when we are weak in ourselves, then we are strong in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ; when we see ourselves weak in ourselves, then we go out of ourselves to Christ, and are qualified to receive strength from him, and experience most of the supplies of divine strength and grace.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:11-21

PAUL'S EXPOSTULATIONS

In these verses the apostle addresses himself to the Corinthians two ways:

I. He blames them for what was faulty in them; namely, that they had not stood up in his defence as they ought to have done, and so made it the more needful for him to insist so much on his own vindication. They in manner compelled him to commend himself, who *ought to have been commended of them* v. 11. And had they, or some among them, not failed on their part, it would have been less needful for him to have said so much on his own behalf. He tells them further that they in particular had good reason to speak well of him, as being *in nothing behind the very chief apostles*, because he had given them full proof and evidence of his apostleship; for *the signs of an apostle were wrought among them in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds*. Note,

1. It is a debt we owe to good men to stand up in the defence of their reputation; and we are under special obligations to those we have received benefit by, especially spiritual benefit, to own them as instruments in God's hand of good to us, and to vindicate them when they are calumniated by others.

2. How much soever we are, or ought to be, esteemed by others, we ought always to think humbly of ourselves. See an example of this in this great apostle, who thought himself to be nothing, though in truth he was not behind the greatest apostles so far was he from seeking praise from men, though he tells them their duty to vindicate his reputation so far was he from applauding himself, when he was forced to insist upon his own necessary self-defence.

II. He gives a large account of his behaviour and kind intentions towards them, in which we may observe the character of a faithful minister of the gospel.

1. He was not willing to be burdensome to them, nor did he seek theirs, but them. He says (v. 13) he had not been burdensome to them, for the time past, and tells them (v. 14) he would not be burdensome to them for the time to come, when he should come to them. He spared their purses, and did not covet their money: *I seek not yours but you*. He sought not to enrich himself, but to save their souls: he did not desire to make a property of them to himself, but to gain them over to Christ, whose servant he was. Note, Those who aim at clothing themselves with the fleece of the flock, and take no care of the sheep, are hirelings, and not good shepherds.

2. He would gladly spend and be spent for them (v. 15); that is, he was willing to take pains and to suffer loss for their good. He would spend his time, his parts, his strength, his interest, his all, to do them service; nay, so spend as to be spent, and be like a candle, which consumes itself to give light to others.

3. He did not abate in his love to them, notwithstanding their unkindness and ingratitude to him; and therefore was contented and glad to take pains with them, though *the more abundantly he loved them the less he was loved*, v. 15. This is applicable to other relations: if others be wanting in their duty to us it does not follow therefore that we may neglect our duty to them.

4. He was careful not only that he himself should not be burdensome, but that none he employed should. This seems to be the meaning of what we read, v. 16-18. If it should be objected by any that though he did not himself burden them, *yet, being crafty, he caught them with guile*, that is, he sent those among them who pillaged them, and afterwards he shared with them in the profit: "This was not so," says the apostle; "I did not make a gain of you myself, nor by any of those whom I sent; nor did Titus, nor any others We walked by the same spirit and in the same steps." They all agreed in this matter to do them all the good they could, without being burdensome to them, to promote the gospel among them and make it as easy to them as possible. Or, this may be read with an interrogation, as utterly disclaiming any guile in himself and others towards them.

5. He was a man who did all things for edifying, v. 19. This was his great aim and design, to do good, to lay the foundation well, and then with care and diligence to build the superstructure.

6. He would not shrink from his duty for fear of displeasing them, though he was so careful to make himself easy to them. Therefore he was resolved to be faithful in reprovng sin, though he was therein *found to be such as they would not*, v. 20. The apostle here mentions several sins that are too commonly found among professors of religion, and are very reprobable: *debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults*; and, though those who are guilty of these sins can hardly bear to be reprovd for them, yet faithful ministers must not fear offending the guilty by sharp reproofs, as they are needful, in public and in private.

7. He was grieved at the apprehension that he should find scandalous sins among them not duly repented of. This, he tells them, would be the cause of great humiliation and lamentation. Note,

(1.) The falls and miscarriages of professors cannot but be a humbling consideration to a good minister; and God sometimes takes this way to humble those who might be under temptation to be lifted up: *I fear lest my God will humble me among you.*

(2.) We have reason to bewail those who sin and do not repent, to *bewail many that have sinned, and have not repented*, v. 21. If these have not, as yet, grace to mourn and lament their own case, their case is the more lamentable; and those who love God, and love them, should mourn for them.