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Proper 9 • 2 Corinthians 12:1–10 • July 5, 2015

Exegetical Notes

If one has been preaching through 2 Corinthians with the lectionary, then the isagogical issues have been addressed, including the question of the number of letters and visits to the Corinthian congregation (discussions are available in commentaries and summarized in most study Bibles). This lesson skips ahead to chapter 12, where we find Paul defending his apostleship, but many of the earlier themes lie in the background, such as “fixing our eyes on the things unseen” (4:18), living not for oneself, but in the

new creation, by God's grace (5:15–17). Paul has begun to “boast” in his hardships in chapter 6, and now he addresses such boasting as so much foolishness. But, if he “must,” then he will turn attention to our human weakness and the power of God in Christ.

Chapter 12 continues the thought of chapter 11, as he “must” (δε) continue boasting (kaucomai appears thirty-two times in the NT, twenty of which are in 2 Corinthians and ten of which are in 11:16–12:10). But Paul continues to boast about all the “wrong” things. He is clearly defending himself against both false apostles and the claims that he was not a true apostle, but instead of engaging in the same one-upmanship, his “foolish” boasting (if he must [again, δε]) “shows his weakness” (, 11:30).

Chapter 12 includes two chronic interpretative problems, neither of which is easily resolved. The first is the *rapture* referred to in verses 2–4, which, though his modesty in boasting couches it in the third person, is something Paul himself has experienced. Whatever it is, this is not a reference to his Damascus road experience (which would have occurred more than fourteen years earlier); perhaps the reference is to his time after his conversion, in Arabia or Tarsus. In the background are claims of others to “super-revelations” of some kind, and instead of relating his encounter with the risen Christ (a point already made in 1 Cor 9:1–2), in 2 Corinthians he substitutes the lowly narrative of escaping Damascus in a basket (11:30–33). Here in chapter 12 he mentions almost in passing a revelation that could have been used to great effect in his boasting, but he dismisses it as “not the kind of thing to boast about.” Similar is his handling of charismatic gifts in 1 Corinthians 14:17–19 paraphrased as, “I can speak in tongues more than all of you, but it’s no big deal.”

The use of the third person may not simply be modesty; it may suggest that this experience is beyond the actual Paul as sinner-saint, but of a person “in Christ” (v. 2, cf. Gal 2:20), which is a far greater credential than even a “super” (or “not-so-super”) apostle. Of such a man, but not himself, Paul will boast (v. 5). Unlike the apocalypse journeys of intertestamental accounts, Paul claims an anonymity and uncertainty as to what actually happened (repeating “whether in the body or not, only God knows”) so as to downplay the specifics.

If Paul does speak about himself, in the flesh, he does so by highlighting the weakness of the famous “thorn” (, stake, splinter, pointed stick?—though likely not in any way an oblique reference to crucifixion). This is the second interpretative problem, and one should avoid getting lost in speculation about the specifics; we have already noted that Paul does not. Again, the vagueness and generality is part of the point: whatever it was (or could be for others), even as an “angel/messenger of Satan,” his prayers for relief were answered in the negative, three times no less (a sense of completion with echoes of Jesus’s prayer in Gethsemane. One notes also the reference to the “third heaven” in v. 2 and the impending third visit in v. 14).

If this affliction was a messenger of Satan, what was the message? The temptation is real in every age: “if God doesn’t show his power over this my affliction, then he’s not good enough to be my god (or I’m not good enough to be his person).” Having in one’s body a messenger of Satan is also a contrast to the godly angels that usually accompanied the claims of the super-apostles on their apocalyptic journeys into the

heavens and around the heavenly throne. Again, against such claims, Paul’s “angel” is satanic; a reminder of the weakness of the sinful flesh, reminding him of the struggle of our earthly lives, even “in Christ” but too easily against Christ.

The argumentation leads to the climactic claim of vv. 9–10, which is the likely focus and theme of the sermon: God’s answer to prayer is this: God’s power is made “perfect” (= completed) in Paul’s weakness. The final line is a piece of the great reversal: when we are weak (in ourselves), then we are strong in Christ.

Homiletical Thoughts

One may well use this text to take on the pervasive perversion of “happiness gospel” and a false theology of glory so endemic to a Christianity driven by worldly values. Paul’s own “prayer testimonial” is focused on how God answered his prayer. He did *not* deliver him of his affliction, and instead turned him to a more profound understanding of grace and power. It is not about how God fixes our problems but how he gives us a new way of evaluating life and valuing reality as “new creation” people in Christ.

But the new creation does not free us from the old—if already, then also not yet. And even among those within the body of Christ, things can go very badly indeed, between the members and against the apostolic authority. Even after two visits and anticipating a third, this congregation remains a troubled and divisive mess.

To such all-too-familiar issues of Christian life together, Paul moves in a direction opposite that of simply claiming a power and authority “better than” anyone else in order to sort things out. He notes that, in the end, he can make no claims on God (as should no others, either), and that any “boasting” must be grounded in weakness and humility, even as the cross itself is a sign and reminder of our sin and lack of any claims at all before God. In a practical sense, “conflict resolution” starts with the humility of confession and repentance, *coram deo* and then *coram* one another.

But beyond conflict resolution lies a whole new way of defining reality, not by might or by power, or even by spiritual gifts or by healings, or by how God answered my prayer my way, but by the cross and resurrection in which the old has passed away and the new has come (5:17). God’s strength comes down in weakness; he identifies with the lowly; he rises to the power of life through death. God’s answer to prayer is his strength in our relationship with Christ. This is a value system and reality completely dependent on God’s goodness and grace, and on his definitions of life and peace, which are ours already in Christ.

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