

1. From the context in this epistle we learn that the Corinthian Christians had compared Paul with the false teachers who had come to them. In comparison to them, they said, Paul was inferior. As in the case with the Galatian Christians (see Gal. 1-2) Paul defended <sup>his</sup> apostleship. He insists that with reference to his apostleship he is NOT inferior. In fact, says he, he is superior to the itinerant preachers who came to Corinth.
2. In vs. 2-5 Paul distinguishes "two persons" within himself. In vs. 2-4 he speaks of that person who had received revelations directly from God. Fourteen years before he wrote this epistle he was snatched up to the third heaven, which he calls "paradise" in vs. 4, the very word Jesus used of heaven at Lk. 23:43. It was so wonderful, he says, that he did not know whether he was or wasn't in his body. There he heard utterances which no man is allowed to speak, he says. Then in vs. 5 Paul distinguishes the two persons in himself. The person who was caught up to paradise will boast. But, Paul, apart from these <sup>is</sup> visions can boast only in his weaknesses. This <sup>is</sup> a great comfort to us. We are not apostles. We have not received special visions. Therefore we have nothing of which to boast. But we are sinners like Paul. In that sense we cannot boast except in our weaknesses, a great paradox.
3. The precise translation of vs. 6 is as follows: "Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say." Paul could say more about his being carried up to paradise, the third heaven, but he chooses not to. He wants to be judged by his actions and words. One Lutheran commentator says here: "He wants the facts of his laborious and painful life in the service of the Gospel to speak for themselves. . . . A true servant of Christ does not seek honor for himself, does not want to base the reputation he enjoys upon his own statements, but upon that which every right-minded person sees in him and hears of him. His one effort is always, in word and deed, to prove himself a faithful servant of Christ." The Lord wanted Paul to remain utterly humble and wanted no one to think more highly of Paul than what he saw of Paul in actual contact with Paul.
4. Because of the abundance of these revelations and especially the time he was caught up to paradise, lest Paul would exalt himself, God gave him a thorn in the flesh. What this was we do not know but it was a constant irritation which buffeted him like a boxer. After a vision of paradise now God sends him a messenger of Satan as He sent to Job, chapter 2. Sinful human beings love to glory in spiritual experiences and brag about them. That is dangerous for us and others.
5. Satan was in the thorn. Three times Paul begged God to have Satan let Paul alone. We are reminded of Jesus in Gethsemane, Mt. 26:44; Hebr. 5:7-8. Jesus learned obedience. Both Jesus and Paul learned to say: "Thy will, not mine, be done."
6. In vs. 9 Paul preserves the very words of God's answer: "My grace is all you need. For strength is brought to its goal in weakness." Paul answers by saying either that he would rather boast about his weaknesses than complain about them or that he would rather boast about his weaknesses than about his visions.
7. What is Paul saying in vs. 9? Paul is simply talking about confessing his sins and confessing his Savior. To be effective, pastors need to be humble. And this means to be contrite about sins and confident about what Christ did. This is true of all Christians. It is attractive.
8. If you refuse to admit and confess your utter weakness you will never know what it means to be strong in the Lord. Satan and godless men bring insults, persecution and calamities into my life. But, whenever I am weak, then am I strong. Human weakness provides the opportunity for divine power. Read Hebr. 12:4-11.

Theme: THE KIND OF BOASTING WHICH THE LORD DESIRES

Introduction: At I Cor. 1:31 Paul says: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" and at 3:21 he says "Let no one boast in people." That summarizes it. When sinful people boast of themselves and their experiences they hurt themselves and others. But when they boast only in the Lord and what He has done for man they walk the way to everlasting life and are beneficial to others. Our text is a good example of this.

I-He Does Not Want Us To Boast Of Our Experiences

A-Even though the experiences are from God. God gave Paul special visions and revelations so that he could do his work. God revealed the truths which are found in Paul's Epistles. He says that he was caught up to the third heaven, the highest heaven. He says that he was caught up to Paradise, the very presence of God. The experiences were more than human words can describe. God wanted Paul to use these experiences humbly in his work for other people.

B-It is dangerous to boast about them. Paul gives two reasons:

1-Twice in vs. 7 he mentions that there was danger that he would become puffed up with pride. The visions were God-given gifts. But to boast about them would have filled Paul with pride. He would have lost his faith and soul. We see that happening today too. God gives an individual a special gift which is to be used in the Lord's service. But the individual boasts rather than use the gift humbly and with all glory to God. That is very, very dangerous.

2-Paul did not want anyone to form an estimate of him which went beyond the evidence of his own eyes and ears. Vs. 6. People observed Paul by what he did and said. That is always the way people observe each other. In word and deed a Christian must always prove himself a faithful servant of the Lord. Anything that goes beyond that creates suspicion and uneasiness. And that is why Paul refrained from talking about his visions and revelations. He wrote down what God wanted him to write and said no more. In all other respects he confessed himself an unworthy forgiven sinner.

II-He Wants Us To Boast Only In The Lord

A-Because of what He has done for us. This is stated in the words: "My grace is sufficient for you." The word "grace" here is used in *the* sense of saving grace as at Eph. 2:10 "By grace you are saved through faith and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." It is the forgiveness of sins, the gift of Jesus Christ. Nothing can separate us from this love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. We can live forever without our experiences but we cannot be saved without the saving grace of God in Christ.

B-Because of what He has done in us. There are times when we do not understand the ways of the Lord with us. The Lord sent Paul a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble. Paul begged the Lord three times to remove this thorn in the flesh. But the Lord said: "No, it is for your good. In this way My strength is brought to its goal in your weaknesses." The thorn made Paul very conscious of his weaknesses. It made him lean heavily on the grace of God. It gave him no time to think about his wonderful spiritual experiences. Finally Paul began to see that the thorn was for his good, not for his evil. The Lord Jesus had a similar experience. When He was in the Garden of Gethsemane He begged the Lord to take the cup of suffering from Him. But the Lord refused. The cup of suffering saved the whole world.

C-Because it prepares us to deal with other people properly. Paul says in vs. 6 that he refrained from boasting about his visions lest he would make himself uninviting to others. And then he speaks about the thorn in the flesh. Likewise we should thank the Lord for making us inviting to others, people who confess their sins and unworthiness before men and God, humble people who attract others to Christ.

Conclusion: Learn from Christ and Paul that humility is the way of the Christian and that it attracts others to Christ and us.