



2 Corinthians 12:1-13:14

Taught at our Sunday evening service, 10th April 2022 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: Colossians 2:1-10

Good evening. Let's pray.

Introduction

Over the last 9 weeks we've been working our way through Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, and hopefully we've understood and seen that the issues he addressed are as relevant for us as they were for them - for like that church, we too live in a culture full of idolatry, where sin is encouraged, and where those problems end up affecting, even infecting the church.

Overview of 2 Corinthians

Tonight, we'll conclude our study of this book, having last week got as far as the end of chapter 11 which places us in the final section of this book that is focussed on Christian guarding - that is, the need to be sure in our faith, protecting ourselves from that which would pull us into false teaching and dodgy theology.

- Chapters 1 to 7 - Christian living
- Chapters 8 to 9 - Christian giving
- Chapters 10 to 13 - Christian guarding

Overview of chapter twelve

And here tonight in chapter 12, we'll see four or so topics that we can summarise as:

- Visions & revelations (v1-6)
- A thorn & grace (v7-10)
- Reluctant boasting (v12-13)
- Not yours, but you (v14-21)

Overview of chapter thirteen

Then in chapter 13, we'll see four more topics or thoughts from Paul:

- Firmness (v1-4)
- Examine yourselves (v5-6)
- Gentleness (v7-10)
- Become complete (v11-14)

Chapter twelve

So let's, then, take a look at chapter 12. We read in verse 1...

2 Corinthians 12:1

It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord:

Paul is saying, "it's not profitable, but necessary for me to underline that it is God who has called me to this ministry, who has enabled me in it, and ultimately who this ministry is for. Not to build my ego, but to build your faith in *Him*. That you wouldn't follow after those who want you to follow *them*."

And he continues...

2 Corinthians 12:2-4

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

Who's this talking about? Paul. But, so reluctant is he to boast in any way, that he doesn't use his own name. But he does tell us about the time in which this occurred, 14 years earlier, which would take us to the time that he was stoned outside Lystra. We read of that situation in Acts chapter 14:

Acts 14:19-20

Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.

And he says here in 2 Corinthians, that he doesn't know whether he was in the body, or out of it - in other words, he didn't know if he was dead, or alive. And we don't know. And while many I trust believe he died and rose there at Lystra, even Paul wasn't sure - and he was there. So I think the important conclusion, is not whether he was dead or alive, but that Paul didn't believe in the idea of soul sleep, that our souls somehow sit in the grave. Rather, as Paul previous wrote in chapter 5 "while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord." which means the moment a believer dies they are with the Lord.

In the case of this vision that Paul describes, he speaks of being caught up to the third heaven, being into the very presence of God, as opposed to the first heaven which is our atmosphere, and the second heaven which is space.

And there, in the third heaven, Paul sees what? We don't know. Paul intentionally didn't say. Why? Because there were not human words sufficient to describe what he saw. And this is a super important attitude to note, for there are many who will try and tell you about their special revelation from God. How they have seen or heard unique things that they have to tell you, and that you must to listen to. But Paul didn't write books, go on tour, or launch a YouTube channel. No, he didn't dare utter a single word.

And I urge you, be exceptionally careful when anyone comes to you saying they have heard something direct from God. Be Yes, God will speak to us in our own situations. He'll speak to us in our prayer times if we take the time to pray and listen - and that's a wonderful thing. But when someone starts broadcasting and boasting about something they've heard, you MUST compare it with scripture, for the Holy Spirit will NEVER contradict Himself.

In the case of Paul, it seems he didn't mention this experience for fourteen years, and only then to say he couldn't describe it. And he writes:

2 Corinthians 12:5-6

Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me.

That is, he was only boasting in what God had done, not what he had done. And rather than the focus be on what he'd seen, his only boasting of self was in his weaknesses. Many of which we looked at last week in the final 11 verses of chapter 11.

2 Corinthians 12:7

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

So, far from this being something with which Paul could use to promote himself, he is saying that something was put in his life to keep him humble.

What was it? Again, we're not sure - though some suggest it was a physical condition; ranging from recurring migraines to problems with his eyesight (the latter thought possibly born out by how the Galatians were willing to give him their own eyes, and how he writes to them saying "See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!" in Galatians 6:11)

But regardless of what the thorn was, what we know for certain is Paul's reaction to it, for he writes:

2 Corinthians 12:8

Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

And don't you feel like that at times? I know I do. How one trial or challenge feels too much, and how I plead with God to take it away. To do something about it. Yet, what I find is that I learn. I often learn something about myself - about my heart, my attitude - but I also learn about God. And Paul continues by giving us God's response to him:

2 Corinthians 12:9

And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Wow - Paul didn't *want* the thorn in the flesh. But knowing that God's strength would be made perfect in that weakness, he says "bring it on!". Maybe that reminds you too of a song Steven Curtis Chapman wrote some time ago, which said:

Now, I don't want to sound like some hero
'Cause it's God alone that my hope is in
But I'm not gonna run from the very things
That would drive me closer to Him
So bring it on
Steven Curtis Chapman - "Bring it on"

As with Paul, God will make His strength perfect in our weaknesses. He'll draw us to Him in the midst of trials. That's what we read in James chapter 1:

James 1:2-4

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing

But note that it is *this* completeness that we're aiming for. Not the absence of trials. And when we're under stress, or we're suffering physically, or our relationships are hard (or non-existent), we are not to turn to drink or such thing, but to turn to the God of all comfort.

Paul writes:

2 Corinthians 12:10

Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

For Christ's sake is key. When we let Him have His way, rather than seeking our own. God isn't asking us to enjoy these things because they are enjoyable, no, no. He's offering us something better than the absence of our trials.

Now Paul writes:

2 Corinthians 12:11-13

I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong!

Paul should have been encouraged by this church, and equipped by them. But somehow the lack of burden he placed on them, caused them to think he was less committed to them. But a wrong conclusion that was. He writes...

2 Corinthians 12:14

Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children.

What an example to follow - that we would be more interested in others, than interested in what we can get from them. That's the kind of love our pastor was talking about this morning in our study of John's gospel. And we should assess all we do in light of this.

And as a side note, lest anyone get the wrong idea about children not laying up for their parents, this does not absolve children of responsibility to their parents. The rest of scripture, including Paul's letters, is quite clear on that.

But Paul continues:

2 Corinthians 12:15

And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.

That is, it's no guarantee that people will love you back. It wasn't Paul's experience, but like him, if we're really doing it selflessly, it shouldn't stop us loving others well.

2 Corinthians 12:16

But be that as it may, I did not burden you. Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you by cunning!

Paul did not take from them. And it seems here, that he quotes his critics who claimed that even though he was not charging the Corinthians, he had a devious plan to set them up for what he could get from them. So he says...

2 Corinthians 12:17-19

Did I take advantage of you by any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus, and sent our brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in the same spirit? Did we not walk in the same steps? Again, do you think that we excuse ourselves to you? We speak before God in Christ. But we do all things, beloved, for your edification.

That is, whether Titus or I, we did everything that you might be taught, encouraged, and built-up in Christ. Our aim was not to beat you up, nor fleece you. Simply to feed you. And to care for you. We had no hidden agenda, but simply an aim - that you would live in a way that pleases God.

And how that should be the aim of all pastoral ministry - that people in their churches would live in a way that pleases God. Here, Paul once again expresses his concern about the Christians in Corinth...

2 Corinthians 12:20-21

For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults; lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced.

Paul's saying "If I turn up and you've not dealt with sin in the church and in your lives, I'll need to spend my time dealing with that - and surely that's not what you want either?!"

"Therefore, don't be found doing these things when I arrive - whether ungodly attitudes, wicked desires, sexual immorality, or even the thought of it. Rather, let me find you have turned your back on all that is ungodly- pursuing Jesus with all purity of mind and body."

This is the same heart that Paul had for all Christian's everywhere. Including you. And including the Ephesians to whom he wrote:

Ephesians 5:1-4

Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.

Chapter thirteen

I think it's clear from all we've already read in this letter, that Paul didn't want to find any Christians living an ungodly lifestyle - not because he didn't want the hassle of correcting them, but because he genuinely wanted them to please God, for their own sakes!

However, if correcting them was the only way to accomplish that, then he was willing. And that's how Paul starts this last chapter of this letter. We read...

2 Corinthians 13:1

This will be the third time I am coming to you. "By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established."

Quoting Deuteronomy 19:15, Paul points to the law of interpreting Scripture. Every doctrine must be proved by at least two or three scriptures to be accepted as truth and binding upon Christians. That nothing be taken out of context. Personally, I suspect that this was to point out that Paul had scripture on his side, so to speak. It wasn't that he was trying to convince people to live how *he* wanted them to live, but how Christ wanted them to live.

Verse 2...

2 Corinthians 13:2-3

I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time, and now being absent I write to those who have sinned before, and to all the rest, that if I come again I will not spare— since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you.

Paul was willing to deal with sin, willing to have the tough conversations. Why? Because he didn't like the Corinthians? No - because he loved them, and wanted to present them as a chaste virgin to Christ, as we read last week. And furthermore, he was willing to let Christ use him.

2 Corinthians 13:4

For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you.

That is, it wasn't a question of Paul turning up and having an argument with them about how to live. But rather him turning up with the authority of God and His Word, to correct, rebuke and exhort where necessary. And while some viewed Christ as weak in that He was crucified, evidently He was not weak in His resurrection. Neither will Paul be weak in applying His Word.

And so he writes:

2 Corinthians 13:5

Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified.

The worst thing is to think you're saved, and not be. To be one of those who will say Lord, Lord - but to whom Christ will say "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"

This happens - Todd Friel is one such example, for he was studying to be a pastor when he realised that he wasn't even a Christian! (he is now).

Like sleeping in a garage doesn't make you a car. Neither does going to church make you a Christian. Last week I mentioned there are some ministers standing in pulpits who are not Christians. But the same is true, desperately sadly, of many churchgoers.

So what are we to do? We are to examine, or scrutinise ourselves. To see if we are in the faith - to see if we really are reliant on Christ for our salvation. To see if we have that assurance of faith. We are to test ourselves - to be honest about where we stand. Because while we may be able to convince others that we are Christians, by saying the right words, by going to church, by keeping our language clean, we will never convince God that we know Him if we don't.

If that describes you today - see the pastor or elders afterwards, or get in touch with us. We will gladly talk to you, and pray with you. But more important than that, get on your knees before Christ.

Examine yourself. Test yourself.

In verse 6 we read...

2 Corinthians 13:6

But I trust that you will know that we are not disqualified.

That is, Paul has taken inventory of himself. He's done this self-examination, and knows that he is in the faith.

And now, he pleads for them to take the gentle option, rather than wait for firmness when he visits. He writes:

2 Corinthians 13:7

Now I pray to God that you do no evil, not that we should appear approved, but that you should do what is honourable, though we may seem disqualified.

Again, it is their good, not his own ego, that Paul wants to build.

2 Corinthians 13:8-9

For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth. For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. And this also we pray, that you may be made complete.

What a demonstration of character this is, that Paul wants their good. For them to be strong and in no need of correction - even if it leaves him in weakness. This isn't a man with a private jet!

Rather, his desire, his prayer, is that they would be made complete.

2 Corinthians 13:10

Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness, according to the authority which the Lord has given me for edification and not for destruction.

That is, it's better for everyone if those who are sinning correct themselves, using God's Word, without Paul needing to deal with them.

Correction is not a part of ministry I relish, which is probably a good thing! But it may well be necessary at times - pray for me, and pray those who watch over you as the Bible instructs. I think it's preferable for everyone that pastoral ministry can focus on instruction, rather than correction.

2 Corinthians 13:11

Finally, brethren, farewell. Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Paul comes back to this idea of being complete - he first mentioned this in v9. But what does complete mean? Well it doesn't mean married. "You complete me" might be a great movie line, but it's poor theology. We are not complete in other people. We talk of our other halves, but reality, we are only ever, and can only ever be complete in Christ.

He is our comfort, our hope. He is the one who brings unity, who gives peace, and enables us to live peaceably. And it is only because of what He has done, in restoring our relationship with the Father, that we can be complete in Him, as we were designed to be.

We read this warning in Colossians:

Colossians 2:8-10

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

Back in 2 Corinthians...

2 Corinthians 13:12

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Not literally. Guys, this is not permission to go kissing all the ladies in the church. But speaks volumes of how welcoming we should be. It's the principle here. Do you greet one another at all? Let it start with us.

2 Corinthians 13:13

All the saints greet you.

This wonderful relationship between churches. It should be like this!

2 Corinthians 13:14

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

This speaks of Grace (Charis). Love (Agape). And fellowship (Koinonia). Wow - if only we grasped these things with both hands. As a church, and as individuals.

Summary

As a quick reminder, in these last two chapters we've looked at

- Visions & revelations (12:1-6)
- A thorn & grace (12:7-10)
- Reluctant boasting (12:12-13)
- Not yours, but you (12:14-21)
- Firmness (13:1-4)
- Examine yourselves (13:5-6)
- Gentleness (13:7-10)

- Become complete (13:11-14)

Application questions

There is nothing more important than to examine yourself to see if you are in the faith or not. If you are, then consider how much your walk pleases the Lord in the light of what the Bible says. If you are not, do something about it!

- Are you in the faith?
- Is your walk pleasing to God?

Let's pray.