

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

2 CORINTHIANS 12-13

The “selfie” has been around for a while, but it went viral in 2004 when the iPhone 4 first introduced the front-facing camera. Suddenly, it was easy for everyone to take a picture of themselves, and in essence, let the world know what they were doing. [Hashtag #me.](#)

But long before selfie technology was invented, the false teachers in Corinth were also boasting of their exploits. *Paul boasted too, but there was a difference.*

The false teachers boasted in tangible successes.

Whereas when Paul spoke of his credentials and the proof of his calling, he pointed not to the *stars in his crown*, but to *scars on his body* - all that he suffered for Jesus' sake. The proof of His legitimacy was his scars!

The false teachers in Corinth would've snapped selfies riding in their limo, or preaching in designer sneakers, or addressing packed auditoriums, or laying hands on the sick, or collecting offerings, or posing with celebrities...

Whereas Paul's selfies were quite different...

Look at Paul's Instagram... he's in the middle of the ocean, in the midst of a shipwreck, sharks circling, [#spreadingthegospel](#)... or he's holding his camera out from a pile of stones after he'd been brutally pelted, [#rockn4jesus](#)... or he snaps a selfie in chains behind prison bars, [#prisonagain](#)... or he's at a riot caused by his preaching, [#stillworthit](#)... or he relaxes after another of his missionary journeys, [#ministryisnot4sissys](#)...

Paul proved his sincerity not by outward trappings of ministerial success - but by pointing to his scars!

In fact, he drops a verbal selfie on us at the end of Chapter 11. He boasts of a strange experience at the beginning of his ministry - *his humiliating escape from Damascus*. He ignited so much opposition that he was forced to exit the city at night over the wall in a basket.

What a *letdown!* Paul began as a “*real basket case.*”

Yet, he also experienced a real *pick-me-up*. He was *let down in a basket but caught up into heaven*. And in Chapter 12, Paul continues boasting... *of his God-given revelations and the thorn that accompanied them*.

Verse 1, “*It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast.*” In other words, “*The boasting that I’ve been doing is not something I like to do, but it’s necessary.*”

Paul would rather talk about Jesus *than himself*. But these attacks from his critics demanded a defense.

He says, “*I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord...*” Again, at the end of Chapter 11, Paul spoke of beatings, and stonings, and imprisonments. Now he goes from *collisions to visions!* He was *beat-up for the cause of Christ, but picked-up by Christ Himself*.

Understand, Paul was a mystic. He relied on spiritual illumination. He lived with his feet firmly planted on the ground, but he kept his head and heart in the heavens.

It reminds me of the day the king's son was born.

The king ordered his royal gardener to go to work cultivating the most magnificent flower ever grown. It would be his son's gift to his bride when the time came for the boy to marry. The gardener began many years of experimentation and cross-breeding until he finally developed his masterpiece - *the Rainbow Rose*. On the day of their wedding, the couple visited the royal garden for the bride to pick out her rose, but when she stooped before the Rainbow Rose she picked the rose beside it - an ordinary flower. The gardener was stunned. *What was wrong? How could she pick a common flower over his masterpiece?*

It turns out the new queen had discovered the Rainbow Rose's one flaw - *it had no scent*. Everyone else was so enamored by its beauty that they ignored its imperfection. *But the queen hadn't - she was blind.*

And in the same way, Paul was **not** so enamored by what his eyes saw - not so caught up in the physical and tangible - that he missed *the scent of God's Spirit*.

He was sensitive to the whispers of the Holy Spirit.

On countless occasions, Paul was given divine guidance and supernatural assistance... *On the day he was converted, he saw the Lord on the road to Damascus... At Troas, he saw a vision of a man from Macedonia calling for him to cross the Aegean Sea and preach the Gospel... During the storm at sea, an angel appeared to Paul with assurance and instruction...*

Certainly, we need to read our Bible for guidance.

But God confirms and even augments His Word through

supernaturally-discerned whispers. Recall, in 1 Kings 19, God spoke to Elijah in “a still, small voice.”

Be critical of dreams, visions, angelic appearances, *but be open to them*. Don't just look, *but smell as well*.

Paul tells us in verse 2, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago...” Paul is so uncomfortable talking about himself that he speaks in the third person. This was a common way among Hebrew rabbis to deflect glory.

“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.” Here, Paul elaborates on one of the spiritual experiences God provided him.

Since we're uncertain as to when Paul penned 2 Corinthians, it's impossible to pinpoint 14 years earlier...

It could've been toward the end of his preparation for ministry in his hometown of Tarsus... Or during his stay in Antioch before launching his first missionary journey... Or on that journey in the town of Lystra...

Remember, Lystra was the scene of Paul's stoning.

In Acts 14, an angry mob pelted Paul with rocks and left him for dead. Notice, how he describes his state at the time of the vision... “*whether in the body... or out of the body I do not know...*” In other words, *I'm not sure if I was dead or alive*. This could've happened at Lystra.

What we know for sure is that early in Paul's ministry God prepared him with this vision. God knew that to withstand fierce persecutions on earth, Paul would need a profound sense of the glories of heaven.

Paul says he was *“caught up.”* This is the same Greek word used to describe the rapture. *Could it be that God arranged a mini-rapture for Paul?* His body was whisked off to heaven then brought back?

Or he could've been transported spiritually, while his body was left in limbo - under a pile of stones. This could've been a true *out-of-body experience*.

What impressed Paul though was what he saw and heard. God gave him a glimpse of *“the third heaven.”*

Heaven number **one** is the earth's atmosphere.

Heaven number **two** is outer space. But *“the third heaven”* is out-of-this-world! It's a spiritual dimension. Paul was caught up into God's presence - His throne.

Modern technology enables man to travel to the first two heavens on his own, but no one can reach the third heaven without God's transport and His permission. Apparently, God took Paul to heaven.

And Paul repeats his astonishing testimony in verse 3, *“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.”*

I love the word Paul uses here to describe God's throne-room. *“Paradise”* is a Persian word which refers to *“a walled garden.”* Wealthy desert sheiks would dig deep wells; then import luscious flowers, shade trees, and spice bushes to

plant around the spring. Then they enclosed it all within a wall. It was a private oasis. And this is the picture the Bible paints of heaven.

Jesus told the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with Me in Paradise.” Jesus saw heaven as an oasis.

Forget about heaven as a sterile, white hospital corridor - a barge of fluffy clouds floating in thin air...

No! heaven is a garden. It's full of lush greenery, thick shade, cool streams, delicious fruit, tantalizing smells. Tahiti and Hawaii combined can't touch it.

Heaven will be a new and better Garden of Eden!

It's mind-boggling to realize Paul was given the same privilege as the first man, Adam - he walked with God in the garden. He heard mysteries explained by God Himself. Paul had literally been to heaven, *yet he had remained silent about it for fourteen years...*

And this is the real miracle - Paul's restraint!

He didn't jump on the talk-show circuit, or publish a book, or launch a website... “paradise.org.” Nor did he use his heavenly experience in his fundraising letters.

What Paul saw and heard at the throne of God was *too sacred, too holy*, to try and put into earthly words.

And this is what makes me suspicious of pompous preachers today who claim similar experiences.

If the Apostle Paul remained silent about heaven for 14 years - if he felt that feeble, human language could never do heaven justice - *who do people think they are today, to flaunt*

their visions and revelations?

When you really see the glory of God, you're hushed. You are speechless. God, takes your breath away!

It reminds me of the 85-year-old couple, who were married 60 years. They both were in good health mainly due to the wife's interest in diet and exercise.

When they reached heaven, Peter took them to their luxurious mansion. As they *"oohed and aahed,"* the old man asked Peter how much all this was going to cost him. *"It's free,"* Peter replied, *"This is heaven."*

In addition, their home was on a championship golf course. The man asked, *"What are the green fees?"* Again Peter replied, *"This is heaven, you play for free."*

Next, they went to the clubhouse and saw a lavish buffet. *"How much to eat?"* Peter was getting impatient with the fellow, *"Don't you get it! In heaven it's free!"*

It was starting to seep in when the old man asked, *"Where are the low fat and low cholesterol tables?"*

Peter lectured him, *"That's the best part... you can eat as much as you like of whatever you like and you never get fat or sick. This is heaven."* Well, *that was it!*

The old man went off in a rage - angry with his wife.

After Peter calmed him down, he asked what was wrong... He turned to his wife of 60 years and scolded her, *"This is all your fault. If it weren't for your blasted bran muffins, I could have been here ten years ago!"*

When we arrive in heaven, we won't long for anything we've

left behind on earth. *Heaven will be heavenly.*

We may never be given as vivid a picture of heaven as Paul, but God reveals our future glory in His Word.

For **He knows before we begin our ministry, we need a vision of how it will end.** It's hard to endure the *rigors* of serving God without a view of its *rewards*.

Paul continues in verse 5, “Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities.”

A humble Paul was far more comfortable discussing *his low points* when he had to cry out to God than he was *his high points* when God spoke revelation to him.

“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.” Paul was leery of inflating his pride.

He would've never gone down this path of boasting had the Corinthians not doubted his ministry.

And God knew of Paul's very human tendency to become proud and puffed up. This is why God guarded against it - verse 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.”

Notice, Paul doesn't actually identify his “*thorn in the flesh*.” *But all kinds of theories have been advanced...*

For me, the most plausible is that of an infectious eye-disease that flared up on him from time to time - *especially when he moved into warmer climates.*

It could be that the blinding light on the road to Damascus weakened his eyes, and he picked up an infection which caused his eyes to scab over.

When Paul writes to the people of Lystra and their neighbors, the Galatians (4:15), he speaks of their love toward him. *They would've plucked out their own eyes and given them to Paul if it had been possible.*

In Galatians 6:11, he talks about the large letters with which he had written his letter - possibly another indication that he was having a problem with his vision.

The Greek word translated "*thorn*" means "a stake or dagger." A person suffering from trachoma develops a puss over the eye that causes the lashes to become brittle, and at times even dig into the eye. If you've ever had a scratch on your cornea, you can imagine the pain. It feels like a knife or a *thorn* thrust into the eye.

All we know for sure about Paul's thorn is that it didn't go away. He writes in verse 8, "Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me." Remember Jesus prayed three times in the Garden of Gethsemane for the cup to pass from Him. Perhaps Paul was modeling Jesus' prayer.

"And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

With a spiritual blessing comes a tendency towards pride. To safeguard against it, God will often plant a thorn in our lives to keep us humble. It's a reminder of how desperately we need God. It's painful but worth it.

A thorn keeps driving us to our knees.

Even though Paul prayed three times, God refused to remove the *thorn*. A weakened Paul learned that the greatest strength was found not in himself, but in God's sufficiency. Paul's thorn kept him dependent on God's all-sufficient grace in a way he never would without it.

Roy Campanella was an All-Star catcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers before he lost the use of his arms and legs in a terrible car accident. Roy was paralyzed.

But Roy Campanella had an amazing attitude.

He was inspired early in his recovery by a plaque hanging on the wall of a New York City hospital.

Countless times Roy rolled his wheelchair past that plaque. One day he stopped to read it, then he read it again. Here's what was engraved on the plaque...

"I asked God for strength, that I might achieve. I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey... I asked for health, that I might do great things. I was given infirmity, that I might do better things... I asked for riches, that I might be happy. I was given poverty, that I might be wise... I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men. I was given weakness, that I might feel the need for God... I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life. I was given life, that I might enjoy all things..."

I got nothing I asked for - but everything I had hoped for. I am, among men, the most richly blessed."

And this was the attitude of the Apostle Paul. Rather than grow mad that God had failed to remove his *thorn in the flesh*,

Paul learned to view it as a gift from God.

He rejoiced in his weakness, knowing that it was an opportunity for God to demonstrate His strength.

Paul finishes his thoughts on his thorn in verse 9, “Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

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.”

We are always stronger leaning on the Lord than we are standing tall and proud in our strength.

Verse 11, “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.”

The Corinthians should've appreciated Paul - instead they had forced him to boast and extol his own merits.

The foolish Corinthians had been proud of the wrong teachers. They exalted phony men of God. **They called them "eminent apostles," literally "super apostles."**

Yet in no way were they superior to Paul. Paul saw himself as a *nobody*, but God made him a *somebody*.

Verse 12, “Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds.” While Paul was in Corinth, he'd worked miracles among them. The Corinthians had seen God confirm Paul's apostleship.

“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!**” Here, Paul's pen drips with sarcasm. The only thing the *"super apostles"* did that Paul didn't do was take the Corinthian's money.

Paul is saying, *"Forgive me for not ripping you off."*

While in Corinth, he'd worked a secular job and taken financial support from other churches, so he could minister free-of-charge to the Corinthians. Paul didn't want pleas for money to cast a cloud over his motives.

Verse 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.**” Paul is again coming to Corinth, and like before he's not after their money - just their hearts. He loves them and wants them to love Jesus!

Realize, there are two approaches to ministry...

Some pastors feel the congregation exists for them. They'd never say it or admit it, but in a thousand subtle ways it gets communicated... **The church is there to build the pastor's dreams and finance his empire.**

Whereas, there *are* pastors who serve and love the people. They exist for the congregation, not vice versa.

A few weeks ago, my friend, Bob Laube, the pastor of CC Aiken SC graduated to heaven. I attended his funeral. One by one, the folks of his church stood and recounted examples of the sacrificial love he showed.

What an example of sincerity and a servant's heart. Bob had been forgiven much, and so he loved much.

And this was Paul's attitude. He writes, "For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children." As a father, I'm the one who scrapes, saves, and sacrifices for my kids - not vice versa. My kids will one day do the same for their kids. It's the parents that *lay up* and *pay up* - for their kids.

Which reminds me of the kids who chipped in to purchase their dad a Father's Day present. One of the siblings suggested, "Let's get dad a gift we all can get something out of?" So they bought him a wallet.

Christian service is equal to spiritual parenthood. It's about *what you can give*, not *what you can get*. A person gets involved in ministry because they're willing to spend their life to see other folks grow and mature.

This is why Paul continues, "And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls..." Paul would waste his life away - *exhaust his resources, burn his energy, sacrifice his health* - to see the Corinthians flourish.

And again, this is the heart of a true pastor. When you find a man like this, support him and follow him.

Yet that wasn't the Corinthians' attitude. Paul groans, "though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved." Like ungrateful children who were oblivious to the love of their parents, the church at Corinth took Paul's selfless and sacrificial ministry for granted.

It's sad that churches today make the same mistake.

Verse 16, "But be that as it may, I did not burden you."

Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you by cunning!” Did I take advantage of you by any of those whom I sent to you?” It was a rhetorical question. The answer was an obvious “No.” Paul was above-board in his dealings with the Corinthians. “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?” Not once did Paul or any of his pals mistreat them. “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.” The only motivation in Paul’s ministry was “*edification*,” or “the building up of the Corinthians.”

Verse 20, “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...” Paul is afraid that his next visit to Corinth is going to get ugly. He'll find them in sin, and be forced to administer a stern rebuke.

Here’s what he fears he’ll find... “lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults.”

This is the opposite of love. The Corinthians lacked love... and Paul may have to point that out in person.

The chapter closes, “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.” The word translated “*mourn*” refers to “mourning for the dead.” Paul doesn’t want his next visit to Corinth to be a funeral for a dead church.

Chapter 13 begins, “This will be the third time I am coming to you.” He’s preparing for this upcoming visit.

“By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established.” This is a quote of Deuteronomy 19:15. Under the Hebrew Law, two or three eye-witnesses were needed to convict a person of a crime. Paul is mounting his case against the Corinthians.

He’s heard of their rebellion, now he’s coming to see for himself. He’s saying, “Ready or not here I come...”

When he reaches Corinth, he’ll confront his accusers face to face and finally put an end to their lies.

“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...” This is a threat!

The word translated “*spare*” means “to spare in battle.” Paul is declaring war on the false teachers.

Verse 3, “Since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you.

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.” Paul was criticized for being *weak in appearance, unpolished in speech, unpretentious in mannerisms*. He wasn’t as flamboyant as his critics would’ve liked. His enemies mistook *gawdy* for *godly*.

And Paul straightens them out by pointing to Christ.

Jesus appeared weak. On the cross, He was the antithesis of what the world considers successful, pleasing, and pretty. He shattered worldly criteria. He proved that *physicality* can never measure *spirituality*.

And since appearances can be deceiving, Paul suggests that the Corinthians evaluate themselves...

Verse 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.” Here’s a truth, just because you call yourself a Christian doesn’t mean you are one!

Just because you attend church, and wear Christian T-shirts, and use Christian lingo, and play TobyMac, and quote verses - *it doesn't make you a Christian!*

Paul concedes some of the Corinthians were pulling the wool over people’s eyes - even fooling themselves.

Once a mom heard her little girl pray, “Now I lay me down to rest. I pray I pass tomorrow's test. If I should die before I wake, that's one less test I'll have to take.”

The truth is, it’s when we die that we receive our final grade. And it’s a “**pass or fail**” score. Either you embrace Jesus as Lord or you don’t. *You might resist Him or just ignore Him, but both receive failing grades.*

My mom sang in the choir and played the organ for our church before she ever committed her life to Jesus.

I recall one night at a revival meeting. Suddenly, the music stopped during the altar call. Mom had ceased playing and

walked to the altar in her choir robe.

She was heavily involved in our church, yet realized she wasn't a Christian. She became one that night.

As a kid, I was baptized three times thinking I was a Christian - yet I'd never surrendered my will to Jesus...

It can happen. We *profess* but don't *possess*. Sadly, hell will be shoulder-to-shoulder with church-folk.

I read of a young man who enrolled in a graduate school, but when the officials sent off for his college transcripts, there was a mix-up. People at the college recalled the young man. He'd been quite popular on campus, but there was no record of him being enrolled.

His file showed no classes, no credits, no grades.

When they contacted him to clear up the confusion, he confessed. He'd taken the money his parents sent for his four years of college but had never officially enrolled. He went to class but audited the courses.

He attended college, yet never was truly a part. And I'm afraid that's exactly what we're going to find out about a lot of people in the church one day. They attended class but were never truly enrolled. ***Are you auditing the Christian life?*** If so, you'll get no credit!

It's been calculated by the time a person finishes college they have taken over 2600 tests and quizzes.

But there's one more exam we all need to take.

“Examine your heart!” - test your faith to see if Christ truly dwells in you. This is the most vital test you'll take.

And by putting together several Scriptures - Romans 8:9, 1John 3:14, 1John 2:29, and 1John 5:4 I've constructed an SAT test - **a salvation acquisition test.** Here are four questions you can ask yourself...

First, do you sense the Holy Spirit's presence in your life? Is there an inner witness inside your heart?

Second, do you love other believers? Is there an outer witness - a camaraderie with God's family?

Third, do you practice righteousness? What God *puts in* eventually wiggles its *way out*. A cleansed heart ends up producing a changed and purified life.

And **fourth, are you overcoming the world?** Have you gained a newfound motivation and reason for living that helps you resist temptation and take a stand?

If you're in Christ, the answer to all four questions will be **"yes!"** Not that we're *perfect*, but we're *progressing*.

It's difficult to live the Christian life without knowing for sure that you are one! God wants us to examine our hearts so we'll have an assurance of our salvation.

Paul adds, **"But I trust that you will know that we are not disqualified."** He hopes that his visit provides both him and the Corinthians evidence of each other's faith.

"Now I pray to God that you do no evil, not that we should appear approved, but that you should do what is honorable, though we may seem disqualified." In essence, Paul will take no joy in saying **"I told you so."**

Paul would love for the Corinthians to take heed to his

letters and there be no carnality among them when he comes. He would be happy to appear wrong.

“For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth. For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong.” Paul didn’t mind looking weak if it meant the church was strong. It was not about *him*, but *them*.

“And this also we pray, that you may be made complete.” The word translated “*complete*” means “*fully fitted, thoroughly equipped*.” Paul wants them to have everything they need to live victoriously in Jesus.

And this is God’s desire for us.

Verse 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.” This letter had enabled Paul to say hard things to the Corinthians.

Often, “*in-person*” encounters become too emotional and spontaneous and words get said that shouldn’t.

But via letter, Paul was able to write clearly, and the Corinthians could digest his rebuke, before responding.

Verse 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.

Greet one another with a holy kiss.”

It’s interesting, Professor Michael Christian of Boston College has authored two books on kissing. But since the release of his second book, “*The Art of Kissing*,” the good

professor says his love life has gone downhill.

Christian explains what's happened to him, "Now when I kiss a woman, she usually responds, "You wrote the book on kissing and that is the best you can do."

Oh, the problem with being an expert!

In his books, Christian says there are about 25 different types of kisses. I'm not sure if Michael Christian includes the "*holy kiss*" in his list, but Paul tells the rest of us *Christians* to greet each other with "*a holy kiss.*"

Once, I had a man tell me that what first attracted him to church was all the hugging that went on. He walked around the room and hugged all the good-looking women... That kind of hug is **NOT** a *holy hug*!

In Paul's day, a kiss was a cultural greeting like a handshake today. Perhaps, if Paul were writing to us, he'd say, "Greet each other with a holy handshake."

The point is to exchange warm, sincere greetings, not overtures weighted down with ulterior motives.

Expressions of acceptance and togetherness are needed reminders. Christians shouldn't take each other for granted. The fact we're all here, still serving the Lord, needs to be celebrated!... *Just keep it holy!*

Paul finishes his letter, "*All the saints greet you.*" The believers in Macedonia were sending their best.

"*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.*" Notice, the reference to the Trinity, all three members of the

Godhead join to conclude this letter.

God ends with a blessing - *may the Savior's grace, the Father's love, the Spirit's presence* - be with you all!

May we live every minute of every day in all three!