

Worksheet #11: 2 Corinthians 12:1–13

Summary: Paul begins chapter 12 by describing two personal experiences which he mentions nowhere else in his epistles. He desires to undermine his opponents by employing the same rhetorical devices that they had used among the Corinthians with seductive effect. This seems to be the main reason why he claims that boasting is not profitable (12:1, 6). In the first paragraph (12:1–6), he describes a vision which he had “fourteen years ago” of “the third heaven” (12:2). Then in 12:7–10, he describes his resultant experience of the “thorn in the flesh” that he received “lest I be exalted above measure” (12:7). All of this is to drive toward the central point that, contrary to the practices of his opponents, Paul made it a practice to boast in his “infirmities” and weakness rather than in his own glory and achievements (12:10). With this in mind, Paul descends from his boastings in 12:11, reminding the Corinthians that they should have recognized that his ministry among them was genuine.

Abbreviated Outline¹ (current passage in bold):

- I. Introduction (1:1–11)
- II. Paul’s Relationship with the Corinthians (1:12–2:11)
- III. Paul’s Defense of his Ministry (2:12–7:16)
- IV. The Collection for the Believers in Jerusalem (8:1–9:15)
- V. **Paul’s Renewed Defense of his Apostleship (10:1–13:4)**
 - A. The Tone of Paul’s Appeal (10:1–11)
 - B. Divine Commendation of Paul’s Ministry (10:12–18)
 - C. Danger of the False Apostles (11:1–15)
 - D. Paul’s Sufferings (11:16–33)
 - E. **Paul’s Visions and Revelations (12:1–10)**
 - F. **Paul’s Miracles (12:11–13)**
 - G. Paul’s Final Defense (12:14–13:4)
- VI. Final Exhortations (13:5–12)
- VII. Closing (13:13)

¹ Adapted from Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, The Cross, and The Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Academic, 2009), 484.

Interpretation: *Read through the passage, and then review and make notes under the questions below.*

1. In describing his vision, Paul says that this experience occurred “fourteen years ago” (12:2). Apparently, the Corinthians had not heard of this vision before. What does this tell us about Paul’s main focus in his preaching?
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2. Why does Paul only refer to himself indirectly (12:2–5) when describing his vision of the third heaven?
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3. What does Paul see as the primary effect of boasting (12:6)?
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4. Why does Paul not tell us what the “thorn in the flesh” was, aside from describing it as “a messenger of Satan to buffet me” (12:7)?
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5. What is the lesson that Paul received from the Lord in response to his prayers regarding the thorn in the flesh (12:9)? How do we see this truth expressed in Paul’s approach to ministry throughout the book of 2 Corinthians?
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6. What is Paul’s attitude toward weakness (12:10)? How does this contrast with a “martyr’s complex,” whereby Christians pursue failure and difficulty as their chief end?
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7. How does Paul evaluate himself compared to the other apostles (12:10)?
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8. What is the one difference between Paul’s ministry in Corinth and his ministry among other churches (12:13)?
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Application: *Take time to reflect on the implications of this passage for your own life today.*

9. What does this passage mean for your walk with the Lord?
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10. How does this passage challenge the way you think about situations in daily life? What should you do about that?
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