

# Background and Interpretation of 2 Cor 12:9

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Paul's second missionary journey (A.D. 49-51) involved groundbreaking events, including the spread of Christianity to the European continent. After his monumental speech at the intellectual center of Athens, Paul proceeded to Corinth, a cosmopolitan port city known for its depravity. There he spent eighteen months fruitfully establishing its first Christian congregation (Acts 18:1-17), although not without opposition. When the Jews of the Corinthian synagogue rejected the message of Jesus, Paul emphasized outreach to the Gentiles. As the proclamation of Paul resulted in many Corinthians believing and being baptized (Acts 18:8), the Jewish leaders of Corinth brought Paul before the Roman proconsul Gallio. The proconsul dismissed their charges, upon seeing that they involved religious matters of no concern for the Roman Empire. Paul then spent many more days in Corinth, after which he slowly made his return to Antioch, thus ending the second missionary journey.

Paul's subsequent interaction with the Corinthian Christians was both tumultuous and painful. During his third missionary journey (A.D. 52-55), Paul received word from a family in Corinth (1 Cor 1:11) and from Timothy, who had visited the congregation (1 Cor 4:27; 16:10), that an array of problems had arisen. Factions had developed in the congregation, an emphasis on human wisdom, immorality, prideful opposition to Paul's proclamation, lawsuits among the Christians, abuse of the Lord's Supper, and doubt about the resurrection. It appears that Paul made a "painful visit" (2 Cor 2:1) and wrote a "previous letter" (now lost, 1 Cor 5:9) to address the situation. Then early in A.D. 55 he penned the letter of 1 Corinthians, which details the turmoil in the congregation and Paul's vehement words to address it. It appears that he then wrote an "anguished letter" (now lost, 2 Cor 2:4), which had some desired effect of leading to repentance (2 Cor 7:6-8). With apparent resolution of some problems but with the painful continuation of others, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians later in A.D. 55 before winter. He subsequently paid a winter visit to them (A.D. 55, 56), during which he also authored the epistle to the Romans (Acts 20:1-2; 1 Cor 16:5; 2 Cor 1:16; 13:1).

The book of 2 Corinthians, along with Galatians, is one of the most autobiographical letters of Paul in the New Testament. The letter is personal and heartfelt, as he lays bare his sentiments of care and concern for the Corinthians. A large portion of the letter involves Paul's defense of his apostolic office among them. Paul's main concern is that rejection of his apostolic ministry means rejecting his proclamation of Jesus Christ. It seems that a group of alleged "Super-Apostles" had arisen among the congregation. They touted their superior Jewish heritage to advance their impressive, legalistic message above Paul's proclamation of Christ crucified. They additionally misconstrued various actions of Paul to discredit him and selfishly attract the Corinthians to themselves. Specifically, they denounced Paul as illegitimate, since his personal presence among them was weak, while he employed bold words in his letters (2 Cor 10:10). They said Paul cannot be trusted, since he promised to visit but has delayed (1 Cor 15:24). They claim a superior knowledge beyond Paul (10:5; 11:6). Moreover, since Paul declined compensation while among the Corinthians, Paul's detractors view this as an indication of being an inferior apostle (11:7-11).

Paul's response to these alleged "Super-Apostles," which comprises the core defense of his apostolic office, provides the immediate context for our theme text of 2 Cor 12:9. Paul emphasizes that he is in no way inferior to these false teachers. Although not skilled in speaking, Paul excels in the divine knowledge that he proclaimed to the Corinthian congregation (11:5-6); in contrast, these opponents lack understanding (10:12). Paul equals the detractors in Hebraic heritage and provenance from Abraham (11:22). Rejecting compensation was done to avoid burdening the Corinthians, not a sign of an inferior office. Rather, the offerings of other congregations enabled Paul to work among the Corinthians (11:7-11). Paul's delay in visiting the Corinthians indicates not untrustworthiness but a desire to spare them pain (1:23-2:2). Paul culminates his defense by stating he is a better servant of Christ (11:23a).

However, the capstone of Paul's argument for his apostolic legitimacy and superiority is, by human reasoning, quite paradoxical, although paralleling the Christ whom he serves. Just as the glory of Christ is ironically found in his suffering (Jn 12:23), so also Paul declares his apostolic legitimacy becomes particularly apparent in his suffering for Christ and the Church. Paul claims superiority above his opponents, since he is a servant of Christ "with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death" (11:23). Thereupon, Paul details an astounding list of hardships, which seem difficult to survive. Toward the end of the list, he apparently brags about these hardships: "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (11:30, ESV).

Paul then recounts a matter that culminates with our theme text of 2 Cor 12:9. According to Paul, a man was brought into the glorious divine presence and given heavenly revelations. Although initially referencing these events in the third person, Paul is obviously speaking about himself. Transitioning to the first person, Paul says: "So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated" (2 Cor 12:7, ESV).<sup>1</sup> In Greek literature the word "thorn" (σκόλοψ) occurs both in a literal and figurative sense, here referring figuratively to a cause of great vexation.<sup>2</sup> Since Paul speaks of this matter being "in the flesh" (τῇ σαρκί), it may refer to some sort of chronic health problem. Although many biblical scholars have tried to be more specific regarding the issue, the text simply does not provide more precise information. Paul refers to this ailment as a "messenger of Satan" (ἄγγελος σατανᾶ). In the present age, God allows the devil a limited domain that God, as here, intends for ultimate benefit (e.g. Job).

Although Paul had previously listed events of great suffering and turmoil (11:23-30), the text does not state that he asked the Lord for reprieve. Now, possibly showing the degree of hardship from this "thorn in the flesh," Paul here says, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me" (12:8, ESV). Paul then receives the impactful response: "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you,..." (12:9a). The tense of the Greek verb "said" (εἶρηκέν) is noteworthy in the context. Whereas the simple past tense would more typically occur, Paul employs the perfect tense, which indicates a past action with ongoing effect. Thus, the spoken words of Christ continued to ring in Paul's ears with significant, blessed effect. The word "grace" here (χάρις) refers to the unmerited favor of God

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek verb translated in the ESV as "elated" is likely better understood in context as "to have an undue sense of one's self-importance." BDAG, s.v. ὑπεραίρω.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek noun refers "orig. 'anything pointed' such as a '(pointed) stake', then someth. that causes serious annoyance *thorn, splinter*, etc., specif. of an injurious foreign body." BDAG, s.v. σκόλοψ.

through the saving work of Jesus Christ (e.g. Rom 5:2; 1 Pet 5:10).<sup>3</sup> This grace abundantly fills Paul's need, since it not only grants salvation, but it also prevents misled human arrogance and focuses one's hope and trust in Christ. Accordingly, the text continues with the Greek word "for" (γὰρ) to explain the sufficiency of this grace: "...for my power is made perfect in weakness, so that the power of Christ may rest on me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Therefore, Paul's contentment does not consist in life events going easily and pleasantly for him. So also the sufficiency of God's grace does not involve life events being directed according to human wisdom. Such ease, pleasantries, and focus on human priorities would result in misguided trust and focus on self. God's grace is sufficient and provides contentment for Paul because of its connection to Christ. Ironically, Paul indicates, when one is weak from a human point of view, one is strong from a Christian point of view. For when one cannot cling to what unstable human wisdom values, one clings by faith to what truly brings strength and stability.

Earlier in 2 Corinthians Paul elaborates upon this paradoxical treasure that we have in Christ. Paul refers to our mortal bodies and life through the metaphor "jars of clay." The summation of the text recalls our baptismal connection to Christ's death as also to his resurrection (cf. Rom 6:1-4), where the resurrected life is our present and ultimate reality: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (2 Cor 4:7-10, ESV).

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<sup>3</sup> See BDAG, s.v. χάρις, 3b.