

Staying on Course Spiritually

(2 Corinthians 12:1-10)

Once we are saved, Satan has lost that battle, but the spiritual war is not over. He works overtime, both externally and internally, to get us off course spiritually. Therefore, let's consider **two** vital keys for staying on course spiritually.

Reject fascinating stories about visions and revelations (12:1-6).

Satan works externally through false teachers to get us off course spiritually. Many cults and false religions begin with a man claiming to have a vision or revelation from God. At age 40, Muhammad, who lived from 571 AD to 632 AD and was the founder of Islam, retreated to a cave where he claimed to have received revelations from God. He is considered by Muslims as the restorer of an uncorrupted, original, monotheistic faith of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.

The Quran (Koran) is the religious text of Islam, and Muslims who are adherents of Islam. They believe the Quran represents the pure, verbatim word of God. They also believe it was gradually revealed to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel over a period of 23 years. Muslim tradition says God sent the Quran through Muhammad because the Christian Bible had been changed through the centuries.

Do you believe an omnipotent, all powerful God would allow His Word to be corrupted? What does Jesus say in Matthew 24:35?

This means the words of Jesus contained in the New Testament are true and will remain uncorrupted for all eternity. The same God who inspired the Bible will keep it pure, and no power in hell can change it. We also read in Psalm 119:89 that God's Word is *firmly fixed in the heavens*.

Apparently, the false teachers at Corinth were captivating the believers with stories about visions and revelations they claimed came from the Lord. Therefore, Paul writes: *I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it* (12:1a-b). Then, in the last part of that verse, what do we find out is the subject of his continued boasting?

Paul challenges the false teachers' claims of superior apostleship by recounting two visions that surpass any they have related to the Corinthians. He writes that he knows *a man in Christ* who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven (12:2). Later, in verse seven, he makes it clear the man to whom he is referring is himself.

The word *heaven* in the Bible can refer to one of three heavens. The first is earth's atmosphere (Gen. 1:20, 26). The second is space, which contains the stars and planets (Gen. 1:1, 14). The *third heaven* is the dwelling place of God, which is called paradise (Lk 23:43). What does Jesus say about the third heaven in Revelation 2:7c-d?

Paul doesn't know if he was in his body or out of it. He doesn't know whether his body or just his spirit was taken to heaven (12:2b, 3b). He just knows he was *caught up into paradise* (12:3a). The word translated *caught up* (HARPAZO, har-pa'-zo) is the same verb used to describe the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. It refers to being quickly snatched away, not to gradual ascending.

The word translated *paradise* is of Persian origin and means "walled garden." It refers to the gardens of Persian kings and nobles. The greatest honor a Persian king could bestow upon one of his subjects was to allow him or her to walk with the king in the royal garden in close companionship. To Persians, the word *paradise* expressed the sum total of blessedness and honor.

While in the third heaven, Paul *heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter* (12:4). It's important to notice Paul only writes about what he *heard*, not what he saw. Listening to God and obeying Him are far more important than anything we can see in heaven.

In his first epistle, John tells us what we will be when Christ appears has not yet been shown to us. However, we know that when He appears, *we will be like Him* and see Him as He is (1 Jn 3:2). What does John write in 1 John 3:3?

The glimpses we have of heaven in the Bible are to strengthen our faith and promote holy living, not to fascinate or satisfy our curiosity. Therefore, Paul was not allowed to tell what he saw in heaven, only what he heard.

Such an experience could have caused Paul to become swollen with pride, if he had dwelled on it. However, he writes, *On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses* (12:5). Unlike past and modern false prophets, Paul wants to turn attention away from his *visions and revelations* to his weaknesses. This alludes to his "thorn in the flesh" he will write about in verses 7-10.

Also, Paul wants the emphasis to be on Christ, not visions and revelations. Immature Christians have always been fascinated with the spectacular. That's why the believers at Corinth had been wrecking their church with the abuse of spiritual gifts. In contrast, Paul is determined to stick with the Gospel (1 Cor. 2:2).

Paul continues, *though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth* (12:6a). In other words, if Paul wanted to boast, he would not be a fool because he would be telling the truth about his experience in the third heaven. However, he will not do so. Why, according to the last part of verse six?

Paul understands it is impossible to verify visions people claim to have.

To stay on course spiritually, **reject fascinating stories about visions and revelations**. Second ...

Retain the proper perspective on problems (12:7-10).

Satan not only works externally but also internally to get us off course spiritually. He does this by leading us to have the wrong perspective on our problems.

Paul explains, because of *the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh* was given to him. It was to remind him of his limitations and to keep him *from becoming conceited* (12:7). Paul doesn't specify what the *thorn* is, but many scholars think it is probably poor eyesight. In Galatians, Paul writes about a *bodily ailment that was a trial to the Galatians* (Gal. 4:12-14). Then, he writes the Galatians would have gouged out their eyes and given them to Paul, if they could (Gal. 4:15b).

Because the *thorn* is a hindrance to his ministry, Paul pleads with the Lord three times to take it away (12:8). However, what does the Lord tell him (12:9b)?

In other words, God's *grace* empowers Paul's ministry, not his own abilities or health. Although Paul's prayer request is denied, the Lord assures him *divine power is made perfect in weakness*. Christ's power in our lives is best revealed in our weaknesses. God uses our weaknesses to teach us to depend on Him. Paul has learned this lesson so well he will boast about his weakness.

This is one of the most important lessons in the Christian life. The greater our weaknesses, the more we will experience God's power in our lives. In weakness, we learn *we can do all things through him who strengthens us* (Philip. 4:13).

Instead of continuing to plead for the *thorn* to be taken away, Paul accepts God's answer. What does he write in the last part of verse nine?

Only in Paul's weaknesses can Christ's power *rest* upon him. The word translated rest (EPISKENOO, ep-ee-skay-no '-o) means "to spread a tent or tabernacle over." It is the idea of camping inside the tent of Christ's power. Therefore, only in our *weaknesses* is the power of Christ fully revealed in our lives.

Paul totally accepts the answer and writes, *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* (12:10). Paul will follow Christ no matter what, trusting His power, not his own. No doubt one of the original disciples had told Paul the words of Christ recorded in Matthew 10:38. Personalize and write this verse below:

Having the right perspective on problems is a vital component of **staying on course spiritually**.

To stay on course spiritually, **reject fascinating stories about visions and revelations and retain the proper perspective on problems**.

However, you can't stay on course spiritually until you first get on the right course by receiving Christ as your personal Lord and Savior.