

As we saw previously, Paul takes some time in the latter part of chapter 11 and the early part of chapter 12 to offer two final defences of his ministry. He struggled to see how these defences would have any real benefit (12:1), but he was seemingly compelled by a minority of remaining sceptics to do this (12:11). This minority demanded that he compare his credentials with those of the super-apostles, and while he remained unconvinced that such boasting would benefit anyone, he nevertheless stooped to do so.

In 11:16–33, he compared his Jewish pedigree and calling as a servant of Christ to the super-apostles. The one noticeable difference was that, while the super-apostles inflicted suffering on others, he—like Christ—was willing instead to endure suffering.

Now, in 12:1–13, he goes on to address the matter of ecstatic experiences. The super-apostles seem to have placed a great deal of emphasis on their professed ecstatic experiences, whereas Paul remained largely silent in this regard. But now, to concede to the demands of the enquiring Corinthians, Paul reluctantly speaks of his own ecstatic experiences.

We know from the book of Acts that Paul was no stranger to visions and revelations, but here he zones in on one particular vision he had received, some fourteen years before, which was seemingly more impressive than all others he had received. Luke does not write of this vision in Acts. Evidently, Paul had never shared this experience with anyone. “Fourteen years ago” would place this experience after his conversion on the Damascus Road, but prior to him joining with Barnabas in Antioch in Acts 11:15–26. This took place, then, during the ten-or-so “silent years” between Paul’s conversion and his labour with Barnabas at Antioch. Outside of the present text, we know little of this period in his life, other than the fact that he spent time in Arabia, Damascus (Galatians 1:17), and Tarsus (Acts 11:25).

### Paul’s Vision (vv. 1–6)

There is a lot of mystery in these verses—not only for us, but even for Paul. He writes of “a man in Christ” who, “about fourteen years ago” had a glorious experience in which he was “caught up” to a place that he variously describes as “the third heaven” and “paradise.” He himself is not sure whether this “man in Christ” was transported to this place “in the body” (i.e. physically) or “out of the body” (i.e. in a vision). The “man in Christ” was forbidden from relating exactly what he experienced there (v. 4). Paul was willing to boast about that man’s experiences, but not about his own, for his weaknesses were far more compelling than any ecstatic experiences he might have. He didn’t want people to think more highly of him than they ought.

#### TO THINK ABOUT

Rather than immediately bowing to the professed ecstatic experiences of the super-apostles, Paul counters with an experience of his own. He does not immediately deny the profession of the super-apostles but shows that their experiences should not be accepted as authoritative without question. There are many today who profess to have similar experiences. What is the best way to assess and address professions of ecstatic experiences today?

As he describes this vision, Paul writes as if he is speaking of someone else. It becomes clear in v. 7, however that he is writing actually of himself, because the result if the vision is that God gave him a thorn in the flesh to prevent him from becoming conceited.

Paul doesn’t give a great deal of detail as to the specifics of this experience, for he was forbidden from doing so (v. 4). We want to be careful of speculating. It is clear, however, that this was a quite extraordinary vision, even as far as visions go. In fact, the experience was so vivid that Paul was not sure if it was a vision of “paradise” (“out of the body”) or whether he was physically transported there (“in the body”).

There is very little biblical evidence to help us determine the location to which Paul was transported in his vision (or physically, perhaps). This is the only time that “the third heaven” is mentioned in the Bible, and its parallel—“paradise”—is mentioned only two other times (Luke 23:43; Revelation 2:7). There are varying opinions on how we should understand the terms “the third heaven” and “paradise,” and it is difficult to be conclusive.

Some think that “the third heaven” was Jewish lingo for heaven, God’s dwelling place, and that Paul was therefore, like John in Revelation 4, transported in his vision to God’s throne room. Others suggest that, since “paradise” is used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) for the “garden” of Eden, where the tree of life was located, and that the tree of life is again found in “paradise” on the new earth (see Revelation 22:2, 14, 19), Paul’s vision was one of the future rather than of God’s throne room. It is difficult to know for sure, given the limited biblical insight we have into the matter. Figuring out the details is beside the point, however. The point is that Paul was as much the recipient of ecstatic visions as the super-apostles claimed to be.

Verses 5–6 see, initially confusing if Paul is indeed writing of a vision that he had himself received. He is willing to boast “of this man” but not “on my own behalf,” which seems to suggest that he is writing of someone else. His point comes into clearer focus, however, when you understand that he paints himself in vv. 1–4 as a passive recipient of the ecstatic experience, whereas the super-apostles seem to have been boasting in their active ability to have ecstatic experiences. Paul was willing to “boast” as one who had not sought and yet had received an ecstatic experience; he was not willing to boast as one who had the ability to produce ecstatic experiences at will.

#### TO THINK ABOUT

There are some in Pentecostal or Charismatic churches who place such a high value on ecstatic experiences that Christians are made to feel almost guilty if they do not have them. How do Paul’s word here help you evaluate such theology? Is it possible that someone somewhere today might still be a passive recipient of an ecstatic experience from the Lord?

### Paul’s Thorn (vv. 7–10)

While the super-apostles boasted in their experiences, Paul was given a “thorn in the flesh” specifically to keep him from boasting. He did not want others to evaluate him too highly for his vision (v. 6), for he did not do so himself. He begins writing now in the first person because there was no danger of his reputation being artificially enhanced because of the thorn!

#### TO THINK ABOUT

How could Paul at the same time describe this thorn as being given by God and yet being a messenger of Satan? Is this not a contradiction?

While he begged for the Lord to remove the thorn, God’s reply was that his grace was sufficient for Paul. God’s grace was adequate precisely because “divine power finds its full scope and strength only in human weakness—the greater the Christian’s acknowledged weakness, the more evident Christ’s enabling strength” (Harris). This lesson gave Paul the willingness that he needed to boast in his own weakness.

### Paul’s Authority (vv. 11–13)

Paul’s defence of his ministry is now over. He reminds the Corinthians that he had been coerced—less by the super-apostles’ foolish boasting and more by the Corinthians’ folly in believing the super-apostles. While they should have been rushing to his defence, they instead believed and promoted the lies being told by Paul. Their refusal to commend him was frankly inexcusable.

If anyone ever had reason to walk away from a ministry, Paul had reason to walk away from Corinth. Instead, he maintained his integrity in ministry and gently reminded the Corinthians that he desired and laboured for their good. He could with a clear conscience say that he had done nothing to burden them.

Even though he had been God’s instrument, Paul uses passive language to describe “the signs of a true apostle” that were performed among them. This again highlights that it was God’s work, not his own—and therefore he had no real reason to boast, as the super-apostles did. Unlike his critics, he did not claim personal credit for “the signs of a true apostle” that were performed among them, and he did not in any way “burden” them financially.