

Parson to Person
2 Corinthians 12
(Visions and Revelations – Part 1)

“It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—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. 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. Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. 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. 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. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ 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 (2 Corinthians 12:1–10).

Self Defense—Again!

Paul had been forced into “foolish boasting” regarding his authority by the Church at Corinth. The false teachers were distracting the believers and he (Paul) needed to protect them—even if at his own expense. His boasting was unnecessary, but Paul’s love for the Corinthians compelled him.

Visions and Revelations

When Paul continued his defense, he mentioned the fact that he had been the recipient of many visions and revelations from the Lord. These insights were part of the knowledge Paul communicated to the churches. Contained within these visions and insights was a mention of at least one of such nature that he was either unable or forbidden to communicate the details. It seems best to suggest that words would be inadequate to describe what he saw—and/or experienced.

I have a friend (Jack Parks) who had just such an experience—one I actually believe.

Unlawful?

We know that simply having an in- or out-of-body vision/experience was not in itself “[un]lawful for a man to utter”—for the apostle John saw many things recorded in the book of Revelation. (We might also fall back upon the many visions Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and others experienced.) However, whatever Paul saw begged for words. He said that his vision/experience was “*inexpressible*.”

Where It Happened

Paul wrote of his experience as seeing a vision of “*Paradise*”—and that it was in the “*third heaven*.” The “*third heaven*” is in the “*heavenly places*” (see Ephesians 2:6; 6:12).

On this, allow me to elaborate:

- 1) The “*third heaven*” is not the atmospheric heaven surrounding the earth (Genesis 1:20, Psalm 104:12).

- 2) The “*third heaven*” is not the expanse we call “space”—in which we view the sun, moon, stars, planets, etc. (see Deuteronomy 4:19, Matthew 24:29).
- 3) The “*third heaven*” is the dimension known to us as the spiritual abode of God, the angels, departed saints, demons and the Devil (see Daniel 2:28, Isaiah 14:12, Ephesians 2:6, 30; 6:12).

Therefore, we must note that “*Paradise*” is to be distinguished from the spiritual dimension of darkness in which one would find the Devil, demons, hell, the lake of fire, etc. “*Paradise*” is the dwelling place of God, light, good, the redeemed saints, etc.

Abraham’s Bosom and Paradise

Some theologians make the assumption that “Paradise” is one and the same as “*Abraham’s bosom*” (see Luke 16:22–23). They assume that “*Abraham’s bosom*” is a (formerly existing) spirit dimension “holding area” (see Luke 16:19–31) used as a place of rest until the resurrection of Jesus took place—therefore needed no more. However, it may be an associational/identificational place of comfort also known as “Paradise”/heaven—a (present) dwelling place of the redeemed (see Luke 23:43) where Jesus promised to take the crucified thief (said to be on His right). Simply stated, we do not know with certainty!

What we do know is that Paul saw things that he found inexpressible and therefore unlawful for a man to speak. Wow! Of that we would love to have a look. But wait, we will! All believers will see and know all that is promised.

Having Said That

Having said that, we return to the point: Paul was blessed with special revelation and a very special relationship with the Lord. And,

as he put it, *“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”* (vs. 7).

A Thorn in the Flesh

Many have surmised what that thorn might have been.

- 1) Some think it was his eyes (see Galatians 4:15, 6:11).
- 2) Some think it was his continual “battle” with his old nature/old man (see Romans 7).
- 3) Some think it was the many trials and persecutions he endured (see 2 Corinthians 11:23–28).
- 4) Few believe it was an actual demon—it may have been.

However, it seems best to interpret “a messenger of Satan” metaphorically, and therefore, it could even have been a person used by Satan, used to “buffet” him—“beat him in the face.”

In early pre-Christian life Saul was a married member of the Sanhedrin. Later, as a believer (in Jesus) he claimed to be unmarried. Therefore, his buffeting may have been the dark pain over the death of a spouse, or (imagine a thought you may have never considered) his still living ex-wife (see 1 Corinthians 7:7, 15). That is a topic of interest, for sure.

It’s all speculation—as God has not revealed that to us in the Scriptures. Whatever it was, God has chosen to keep that information illusive for the moment. What we do know is that God used Paul’s *“thorn”* to keep him from growing in pride or in the praises of man—*“lest [he] should be exalted above measure.”*

And You—Me?

I am sure that we all have some *“thorn.”* In each of us, God will use *“it”* for his purposes in glory. Pastors in particular seem to need

a “*thorn*.” We who serve in the public eye, especially when given great favor with God and man, may tend toward pride and the abuse of power if not kept in check by the Lord.

May He use whatever it takes to keep us usable! Amidst our trials, God’s grace is sufficient to keep us, use us, work through us.

Love you all,
Pastor Paul