

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Some people in the church today are preoccupied with visions and revelations. It was the same in Paul's day. It was this kind of situation which prompted Paul to talk about a vision he himself had experienced 'fourteen years' before.

Summary

In 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Paul continues in his reluctant boasting, moving from the heights of mystical exaltation to the depths of human weakness.

1. Mystical Exaltation vv 1-6

The account is given here in the third person (**2 Cor 12:3**), but it is clear that the apostle is relating his own experience (**2 Cor 12:7**). Paul received the vision not because of his elevated status, but simply as 'a man in Christ' (**2 Cor 12:2**). He had been so overcome that he had no clear recollection of his state of consciousness (**2 Cor 12:3**). Such details were no important.

Where did he go?

First, he was 'caught up to the third heaven' where God manifests His presence (**12:2**). Secondly, the apostle also calls his destination 'Paradise' equated with heaven in the Scriptures (**2 Cor 12:4; cf Luke 23:43; Rev. 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19**).

This word derives from a Persian word which means a king's walled garden.

Paul could not and would not give details to satisfy idle curiosity.

First, nothing more could be said because he was lost for words (**2 Cor 12:4**). Secondly, Paul was also told that 'man may not utter' what he had experienced (**12:4**). Though he would be 'speaking the truth', Paul notes that he would refrain 'so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me' (**2 Cor 12:6**).

2. Cast Down to the Depths vv. 7-10

Paul was afflicted by a 'thorn in the flesh' (**2 Cor 12:7**). We cannot be certain what this was. It may have been a situation that caused acute inward distress, or an illness that left him in excruciating pain but it was serious enough to disrupt his ministry.

The "thorn in the flesh" was at one and the same time, 'a messenger of Satan' (**12:7**) and something that was 'given' to him (most agree by the Lord).

This touches upon the mystery of God's sovereignty. God does not simply overrule the actions of the evil one: rather He foreordains and works through them without at any time being the author of sin. E.g. Joseph (**Gen 50:20**); the crucifixion (**Acts 2:23**). Re Paul's 'thorn in the flesh,' this perspective shows us that the devil was using it to try to bring him down, to undermine his effectiveness. God was using the same affliction, which He had given to prevent Paul from 'becoming conceited' (**12:7**).

We are under no obligation to pretend that pain, whether the outward pain of the body or distress of soul, is anything other than very real.

The obsession with blessings relating to this life, such as physical well-being and material prosperity, flies in the face of biblically informed reality.

Paul did get an answer to his repeated petition for the thorn to be removed. The suffering and weakness continued as sharp as ever, but God sent more grace (**12:9**). When God's people are in the direst extremity, when troubles crowd in on every side, what they need most is for God to stand by them and pour out his grace, and that grace is seen to greatest effect when we ourselves are at the end of our resources. There is no need for the Christian to pretend. For Paul, the pain was real. Being more than a conqueror (Rom. 8:37) is not a matter of acting a part and pretending that misery and sorrow can be brushed off. Grace is not as kind of heavenly anesthetic. Nevertheless, grace is able to overcome the worst that sin and Satan can do. Consequently, Paul had learned from experience to be content and that God had used him most when he was at his lowest ebb (**2 Cor 12:10**). To sum up thus far, Paul has effectively silenced his critics by laying down a challenge: 'Are you willing to live like me? I do not like pain and discomfort as much as the next man, but if going through with it can make me into the kind of man God will use, I am ready for it.' What about you Christian?

3. Challenging Applications

In both his exaltation and his being cast down, Paul is a great challenge to us all. With respect to his vision, his reticence stands out almost as much as the overwhelming nature of the vision itself. Whilst we may yearn for a similar experience of blessedness and joy, we ought to give serious thought to two questions: First, could God trust us with such experiences? Might there be a danger that we would end up talking about it afterwards in a way that drew attention more to ourselves than to the greatness of God? Secondly, are we ready for what might follow? If God used this time of extraordinary blessing to prepare Paul for years of suffering, perhaps we ought to take a deep breath before asking for something similar.

With respect to Paul's discovery that the grace of God was sufficient to help him endure his 'thorn in the flesh', Christianity in our day and generation has many more people like Paul's opponents: brash, playing to the gallery, enjoying the limelight, wanting a platform to occupy and a group of people to dominate. Who follows Paul, cheerfully embracing difficulties and sufferings, confident in the knowledge that the strength of Christ is most evident when we are at our weakest?

How we regard our suffering fellow-believers? If they are an embarrassment to us and we would sooner identify with Christian success stories, perhaps we resemble Paul's opponents more than the suffering apostle himself.