

Glimpsing Heaven

Staying True to the Gospel

By Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas

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Bible Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10
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First Presbyterian Church
1324 Marion St
Columbia, SC 29201

Website: www.firstprescolumbia.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia

Gracious God and ever blessed Father, we thank you for the happiness that the Gospel brings into our very souls and pray now as we turn to the Scriptures together that by the Holy Spirit you would come and speak to us, speak, Lord, because your servant is listening. And we ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now, turn with me to 2 Corinthians 12 and you'll find it in your pew Bibles on page 970, and on your behalf let me thank the N. for all the work that they do in making the junior choir and primary choir sound so exquisitely beautiful.

2 Corinthians verses 1 through 10. Paul is addressing an issue which we won't go into this morning, some super-apostles, as he calls them, in Corinth who are boasting about dreams and visions and revelations that seemingly they've had and so Paul begins or continues a theme that actually began in the previous chapter. Chapter 12, verse 1,

1 I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. 3 And I know that this man was caught up into paradise--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- 4 and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. 5 On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses-- 6 though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. 7 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

10 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.

Now many of you, I'm sure, are familiar with a book and more recently a movie, "Heaven is for Real," written by Todd Burpo, about his son, Colton Burpo, who as a four year old visited heaven while anesthetized for an appendectomy. The father wrote this book and it has sold over 10 million copies and more recently a movie directed by no less a figure than T. D. Jakes. Then some of you will know another book, "The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven," written by Kevin Malarkey, sold I think around 2 million copies, or so. The boy, Kevin Malarkey's son, Alex Malarkey, was almost killed in an automobile accident and in the immediate aftermath in a coma made, so the book claims, multiple trips to heaven and the book records what he saw and heard. Then some of you will recall that last year, or maybe the year before, it was the end of 2015, Kevin Malarkey confessed that he had made it all up and evangelical publishers were embarrassed because they had made a lot of money selling this book.

And what do we make of it? And I have no idea what to make of it and there can be a dozen explanations and more, none of which imply that they actually went to heaven and back. The point is that both books contain material that are clearly unbiblical and that's the problem because the only foundation for certainty and knowledge that we have is the word of God and it's not our experience or anybody else's experience. That's why I think the Apostle Paul here is reluctant to tell you about some of the experiences that he has seen and heard. He says, "Fourteen years ago," this is in that period between Tarsus and Antioch when he was in Syria about which we know very little, and he's obviously talking about himself although he uses the third person, and he says he saw things and he heard things that it wasn't lawful for him to utter and instead he goes on to talk about his weaknesses.

So let's talk about weakness this morning and I would have you learn five lessons this morning. So lesson 1: that suffering may be difficult to accept. So Paul tells us about a thorn in the flesh. We don't know what this thorn in the flesh was. He calls it a messenger of Satan. And some people think it has something to do with his eyesight because in Galatians he says, "see in what large letters I have written to you," and he may have just been speaking metaphorically but he may have also been speaking more matter-of-factly and accurately because he couldn't see. But I think the point is that we don't know what the thorn in the flesh is and that's because this passage becomes applicable to you and to me no matter what the trial may be. And Paul tells us that his immediate response to this trial is to pray that God would take it away. Three times he prayed that God would take it away.

Now again, we're not told whether this was just three prayers or, more likely, seasons of prayer, perhaps seasons of prayer where he devoted some concentration to this particular issue and perhaps preceded it with a period of fasting or something of that nature, but the point is that his instinct is immediate spiritual instinct on the onset of trial and pain and difficulty of something that he did not want, was to ask the Lord to take it away. And I

want you to hear that this morning because there are those who suggest that the measurement of godliness and maturity in spiritual discipleship is that when trial comes you immediately acquiesce to it. That is the sign of spiritual maturity, that you don't complain about it, that you don't ask that it be taken away, but you see it as the Lord's provision and just accept it.

Well, the problem with that is that that's not what Paul did, and more importantly, the problem with that view is that that's not what Jesus did in the garden of Gethsemane when increasingly the cost of what it meant to be the Mediator dawns upon him now in a fullness perhaps that it had not dawned upon him before and he cries out in agony before the Lord, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me!" Now I know he goes on to say, "Not my will but yours be done," but halt for a second on the fact that his immediate question to the Lord was, "Lord, is there not some way that you can take this away?"

So that's where you might be this morning. You're in the struggle. You're not on the other side. You're not in the place of peace and tranquility. Maybe you can sing that song that the children were singing this morning. "I'm happy because..." You're sad and grieved and heavy. Your heart is heavy. Your soul is heavy. You can't see the way ahead, it's just a fog and you're living, you're existing from hour to hour and as day passes day, the one thing that is on your mind is, "Lord, can you not take this away?" So you're in good company, then, because the greatest apostle in the New Testament, Paul himself was there, caught in the mess of life.

A thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan. Yes, he believed in God. Yes, he believed in the providence of God. Yes, he believed in the sovereignty of God, that nothing happens without God willing it to happen, but this was a messenger from Satan just as perhaps that issue that is before you right now is a messenger from Satan and he has you for a season in his cross-hairs and he's making sport of you and you're asking, "Lord, why is this? Why won't you take this away? We talked about this yesterday. Actually we talked about this the day before. Lord, we've been talking about this for a while now and it appears to me that you're not listening." Is that where you are? Then lesson 1 is you're in good company. You're in the very best of company. Suffering may be difficult to accept and, in a sense, that's okay. That's okay. Don't add to the problem by making yourself feel guilty that you're not ready to accept it yet. That's just making more trouble.

Lesson 2 and it comes hard on the heels of lesson 1 so don't forget lesson 1, but lesson 2 is: praying may have to stop. Again, I don't know how long Paul prayed or was this an expression of seasons of prayer, but somehow, some way, maybe by divine revelation, maybe by providence, maybe Paul just reasoned because of the circumstances, "It looks as though the Lord is not going to take this away." So he stopped praying about that issue.

A marriage has gone sour, there's been a divorce, they've remarried. Maybe it's time to stop praying for reconciliation then because it looks now as though it's past that. It's something else now. Maybe in a terminal sickness of some description you come to that place because doctors are telling you, you've been here hundreds and hundreds and

hundreds of times before and they're saying to you, "This is it, I think. We've done everything we can." And perhaps providence is now saying, "I'll stop praying, then, for healing. I'll just pray for strength that they might enter the gates of heaven with assurance and joy instead." I don't know how this comes, and it comes in different ways, in different circumstances, but there is a lesson here that sometimes praying may have to stop. I'm not here to tell you that praying may have to stop in your circumstances, that's something for you to work out, and if you're not convinced of that, then keep on praying until the Lord convinces you otherwise.

There were lots of reasons why Paul would keep on praying, aren't there? Because doesn't the Lord say, didn't Jesus say that the persistent prayer, the one who prays with persistence, you know, the unjust judge at midnight in Luke 18 who keeps knocking on the door and just to get some shut-eye, he says, "Okay!" But Jesus is not an unjust judge, he's altogether just. Our sovereign heavenly Father is full of justice so there was every reason for Paul to keep on praying but there may come a time when praying has to stop.

Lesson 3: providence is always purposive. There is always a reason to providence. Dr. Davis is going to start a wonderful series tonight on Lamentations. I don't think, I really don't think I've ever heard a series of sermons on Lamentations. It has, of course, that wonderful section in chapter 3 that everybody knows and the choir sings a beautiful rendition of it, "A time for this and a time for that." But tonight we're going to start a series on Lamentations for a few weeks and I think it's Lamentations 3, I meant to look it up between these two services because I did this in the first service, so I'm speaking from memory. I think it's Lamentations 3:33 and it says, at least in the King James version it says, "The Lord does not afflict willingly." He doesn't do things whimsically. He doesn't do things for no good reason. There's always a reason. There's always a purpose and Paul tells you here what the purpose was, it was clear to him what the purpose was. It's not always clear what the purpose is but for Paul in this particular instance, it was clear: it was to keep him from becoming prideful. It was to keep him from becoming conceited. He had seen all these extraordinary things and to keep him humble God sent a thorn in the flesh.

Now, there may be all kinds of reasons why God has sent a trial into your life other than just to keep you humble, and sometimes we just don't know, do we? Like Job, God didn't tell him why. Even at the end of the book, even though I think Elihu has brought something into the narrative about trials being educative, but still we're not given a specific reason why this trial came into Job's life and maybe that's what it is for you and you have to endure this trial in the darkness without the certainty of an explanation, without the reassurance of a narrative that explains why it is that you're passing through this trial. But there's a lesson here and the lesson is this, there's always a reason even if you don't know what that reason is. And it's not important that you do know what that reason is, what's important is that you trust him.

So lesson 3: providence is always purposive. Lesson 4: God's grace is always sufficient. God's grace is always sufficient. Now, you remember Dr. Ferguson used to say there is no such thing as grace, like a commodity, and his grace and you can pick it up and you

can drop it here, you can go to church and you can pick up some grace and you can take it home with you. There is no such thing as grace, all we have is Jesus and he is gracious. So what does this text mean when it says, "My grace is sufficient for you"? You have Jesus and you have a relationship with Jesus. He's your older brother. He's your prophet. He's your priest. He's your king. He's your friend who sticks by you, comes close to you, who intercedes for you, who helps you, who comforts you, who nourishes you, who feeds you. Ah, but the problem is that you can't sometimes see him, can you, because of the mess?

So on Friday, Hodges, David Hodges, took me on a road trip to the PD region of South Carolina. This is a fabulous extraordinary state and I've seen things in the last few years that I would never have seen, as I did on Friday. So we were in search and the children up here will know all about this, and you must feel some sympathy for them, because he was looking for a gravestone and a very specific gravestone belonging to Evan Pugh. Now, Evan Pugh was a Welshman in the Revolutionary period so the 1760s, and he was in Pennsylvania for a while and then came down to South Carolina and was a Baptist minister. He learned surveying from George Washington. Incredible, this Welshman would learn surveying from George Washington. And he was buried. There was a mile marker on the road that said that he was buried in about, I don't know, a mile, a half a mile from this marker, but there was no road, at least no road you'd want to go on to get to wherever this grave was. And we drove for a while, got out of the car, walked. We were in the woods. I mean, we were in the woods, so much so that you were bending branches back and growth, and then we came to what looked like a fenced in area. There were trees everywhere. And still we couldn't find this grave and then all of a sudden Hodges begins with his feet, he says, "I think it's here," and he begins to move away leaves, a foot worth of leaves and pine straw, and all of sudden you heard something solid and there it was, Evan Pugh. He was buried right there in the middle of the woods and who would know except Hodges? I told you I would do this.

Sometimes it's like that with Jesus, isn't it? He's there all along but you can't see him, you can't find him because of the mess, because of the growth, because of the weeds. There's a lesson here. God's grace is always sufficient. Run to Jesus this morning. Whatever your trial, whatever your difficulty, whatever thorn in the flesh, run to him because his arms are always open ready to embrace you, ready to lift you into his arms and carry you, if need be. Always. He'll never say no. That's all you need.

Do you know this hymn, it's a modern hymn song,

"He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;
To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.

"His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary known unto men;

For out of His infinite riches in Jesus
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.

"When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

"His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again."

God's grace is sufficient.

A fifth lesson: we are to glory in tribulation. This is the hardest lesson of all. This is a tough one, we are to glory in tribulation because when I am weak, then I am strong. Suffering can do a lot of things. There were three crosses on Calvary. One was atoning. One was sanctifying and saving. And the other was hardening. Trials can harden you, my friend. Yes, it can. It can make you bitter and angry and callused and cynical and there is a path from trial that leads down that road and Paul is saying, "Look to Jesus for a minute," and when you look to Jesus, there's another path and it leads to glory. It leads to glory because you follow a crucified Savior.

Do you remember that story that C. S. Lewis tells in "Mere Christianity" about laborers who come and they start messing with your house and you're doing a little bit of extension work and then all of a sudden there's just a mess everywhere and all of a sudden you can see the sky because when Jesus comes to your house, he intends not to make a little extension here and there, he intends to build a mansion because he intends to live in it himself. So there may be a mess just now, there may be a trial, a messenger of Satan, but it's all part and parcel of God's preparation of you and me for glory and for a mansion.

So where are you this morning? Have we trials and tribulations? Is there trouble anywhere? You should never be discouraged. Take it to the Lord in prayer. Maybe you haven't come to that place of tranquility and peace just yet, and that's okay, so in the middle of the storm, keep looking to Jesus because you'll find grace to help in time of need and grace that is always sufficient. May God minister to you, some of you in particular this morning, who need this passage like you need fresh air.

Father, we thank you. Thank you for the Scriptures. Thank you for their honesty. Pray now for one another. Our hearts are burdened for brothers and sisters here who find themselves in difficulty of one kind or another, with family, with friends, with jobs, with marriages, with themselves, they are at war with themselves, a troubled mind and a troubled psyche, a messenger of Satan. Father, we pray in your sovereign good pleasure, grant a season of relief and peace and tranquility even if that means the trial continues

for a while. And for those who face the conclusion that the trial is here to stay, grant to them especially a peace that passes all understanding and that rests in your sovereign gracious disposition toward your people. And hear us, Lord, for Jesus' sake. Amen.