

A MINISTRY FOR HUNGRY SAINTS

IN THIS WORLD, WE EXPERIENCE SUFFERINGS: BUT GLORY IS COMING

SECOND CORINTHIANS

✝ II CORINTHIANS

An overview of the Book of Second Corinthians, by Given O. Blakely

Lesson #47

COMMENTARY ON: 12:1-10

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-4

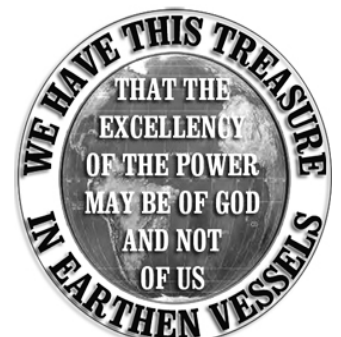
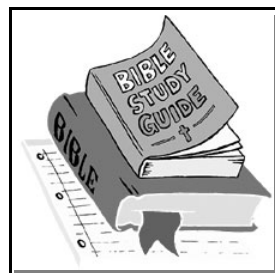
"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God."

REVELATIONS AND A THORN

What happens when the Lord vouchsafes an abundance of truth to an individual – when an "abundance of revelations" are given to a person for distribution among the sons of men? Is he vaulted to a place of worldly prominence? Does the road become smooth for him, so that it is visibly apparent that he is especially blessed by God? Some people are led to believe this is the case, but they are wrong. Paul stands as the incontrovertible evidence of the effect of much truth upon the flesh, or the natural constitution of man. The insight into God's eternal purpose that was given to Paul is unparalleled. When it comes to the comprehension of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, and the appointed means of appropriating it, he has no peers. Yet, there was absolutely no way this could be confirmed by Paul's appearance or worldly status.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:1-2

"For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. for in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven"



Since May, 1993, a ministry instituted for the encouragement of believers in Christ



The Epistle of Second Corinthians

Lesson Number 47



A MINISTRY INITIATED IN MAY 1993, AND DEDICATED TO BUILDING THE FAITH AND ENHANCING THE HOPE OF THOSE WHO ARE WORKING OUT THEIR OWN SALVATION WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING.

TRANSLATION LEGEND: **AMPLIFIED** or **AMP** = Amplified Bible, (1965), **ASV**=American Standard Version (1901), **BBE**=Bible in Basic English (1949), **DRA**=Douay-Rheims (1899), **ESV**=English Stand Version (2001), **IE** = International English, **ISV** = International Standard Version (1967), **JPS** = Jewish Publicatcion Society (1917), **KJV**=King James Version (1611), **LIVING** = Living Bible (1971), **MONTGOMERY** = Montgomery's New Testament (2001), **MRD** = Peshitta-James Murdock Translation (1852), **NAB**=New American Bible (2002), **NASB**=New American Standard Bible (1977), **NAU**=New American Standard Bible (1995), **NIB**=New International Bible, **NIV**=New International Version (1984), **NJB**=New Jerusalem Bible (1985), **NKJV**=New King James Version (1979), **NLT**=New Living Translation (1996), **NRSV**=New Revised Standard Version (1989), **PHILLIPS** = J B Phillips New Testament (1962), **PNT** = BISHOP'S New Testament (1595), **RSV**=Revised Standard Version (1952), **TNK**=JPS Tanakj (1985), **Webster**=The Webster Bible (1833), **WEYMOUTH**=Weymouth's New Testament (1903), **WILLIAMS** = William's New Testament (1937), **TNK** = JPS Tanakh (1985), **TYNDALE**=Tyndale's Bible (1526), **WYCLIFFE**= Wycliffe New Testament (1382), **YLT**=Young's Literal Translation (1862).

LEXICON LEGEND: **FRIEBERG**=Friberg Lexicon, **UBS**=UBS Lexicon, **LOUW-NIDA**=Louw-Nida Lexicon, **LIDDELL SCOTT**=Liddell Scott Lexicon, **THAYER**=Thayer's Greek Lexicon

AN EPISTLE WRITTEN TO A CHURCH THAT WAS MOVING AWAY FROM ITS CARNALITY, YET LACKED MUCH INSIGHT. HERE IS A STRONG APPEAL TO PERFECT HOLINESS IN THE FEAR OF THE LORD.

----- Lexicon and Bible Translation Codes with Identification -----

REVELATIONS AND A THORN

² Cor 12:1 It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. ³ And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;); ⁴ How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. ⁵ Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities. ⁶ For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me. ⁷ And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. ⁸ For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. ⁹ And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong." (2 Corinthians 12:1-10)

INTRODUCTION

What happens when the Lord vouchsafes an abundance of truth to an individual – when an “abundance of revelations” are given to a person for distribution among the sons of men? Is he vaulted to a place of worldly prominence? Does the road become smooth for him, so that it is visibly apparent that he is especially blessed by God? **Now that Christ is enthroned at the**

right hand of the Majesty on the heavens, is worldly prosperity and carnal excellence the sign of Divine approval? There are some who teach that this is true – but is that really so?

ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND JACOB

It is true that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob possessed an abundance (Gen 13:2; 26:12-14; Gen 36:7). **Of course, the**

same could be said of Lot (Gen 13:5), Ishmael (Gen 21:18; 25:16-17), and Esau (Gen 36:6-7). When it came to riches, there was no significant distinction between Ishmael and Isaac, or Esau and Jacob. If the prosperity merchants are right, Ishmael should have been poor, for he was cast out of Abraham's house (Gen 21:6-21). Rather than being a rejected pauper, he beget twelve princes, and God

There are certain disadvantages to the flesh when a person is given much insight from the Lord– by Given O. Blakely

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made of him a “great nation”(Gen 17:20). If an abundance of “things” is an incontrovertible sign of the Lord’s blessing, then Esau certainly would not have prospered. It is written that God “hated”him (Rom 9:13). He is also said to have been “a profane person, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright”(Heb 12:16). Surely such an one will not prosper! Yet. He had “riches”(Gen 36:6-7), and when he was offered a gift by Jacob he responded, “I have enough, my brother; keep that thou hast unto thyself”(Gen 33:9).

PROMISES OF PROSPERITY TO ISRAEL

It is true that worldly substance and heath were promised to Israel IF they thoroughly and consistently kept the commandments of God, walking in all of His ordinances without flaw (Ex 15:26; 23:22; Lev 26:3-4; Deut 7:12-13). God promised them there would “not be a

male or female barren”among them. ALL disease would be taken away from them (Deut 7:14), and placed upon those who hated them (Deut 7:15). He said if they would “do”all the words of the covenant, they would “prosper in all”that they did (Deut 29:9). Moses reminded the people that God gave them “power to get wealth”(Deut 8:18). **Nowhere, however, did the Law promise riches to all of the people – nowhere.** Once it is mentioned that some among them could be rich (Ex 30:15). However, there was also reference to “the poor of thy people,” for whom special provisions were made by God (Ex 23:11; Lev 19:10; 23:22).

When God instructed Israel to destroy the idols of the people they conquered He said, “*thou shalt not desire the silver or gold that is on them, nor take it unto thee, lest thou be snared therein: for it is an abomination to the LORD thy God*”(Deut 7:25). He also spoke to them about the jeopardy of experiencing an increase of silver and gold. “*And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied; then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the LORD thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage*”(Deu 8:13-14). **It is inconceivable that God would feed such a propensity.**

Even when God spoke of a person made king over His people Israel, He solemnly commanded them, “*Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold*”(Deu 17:17).

The “prosperity” promised to Israel had to do with a surplus of the necessities – flocks, crops, and the likes. **Such promises were in perfect keeping with the nature of the Old Covenant, which did not say one word about eternity, eternal life, an eternal**

inheritance, or the necessity of believing God. It all had to do with life in the flesh. The Spirit summarizes the Old Covenant in these words: “*Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation*”(Heb 9:10).

Those, therefore, who take the promises of the Old Covenant (Deut 28:1-14), and offer them to those who are in Christ Jesus, have pulled them into the quagmire of “*this present evil world*” – the realm from which Jesus has “*delivered us*”according to the will of God our Father (Gal 1:4). **Is it possible that God would purpose for Jesus to deliver us from the world, only to send us back to it to obtain His blessing?** Who is so gullible as to embrace such utter nonsense?

THE NEW COVENANT IS UNIQUE

Although some people are led to believe “prosperity” and perfect soundness of health are guaranteed in Christ Jesus, they are wrong – willingly and seriously wrong! In fact, they must be dishonest to affirm such a thing, and give themselves over to telling lies.

The New Covenant has a greater glory than the Old Covenant (2 Cor 3:7-10). That glory includes “*better promises*”(Heb 8:6) – promises that primarily have to do with “*the world to come*”(Mark 10:30), not this world!

While the word “eternal” is mentioned one single time in all of Moses writings – and that has reference to God Himself (Deut 33:27), it is mentioned repeatedly in reference to Christ and the covenant He is presently mediating. There is “*life eternal*”(Matt 25:46), “*words of eternal life*”(John 6:68), an “*eternal weight of glory*”(2 Cor 4:17), a resurrection body that is “*eternal in the heavens*”(2 Cor 5:1), God’s “*eternal purpose*”(Eph 3:11), “*eternal glory*”(2 Tim 2:10), “*eternal salvation*”(Heb 5:9)

Such promises were in perfect keeping with the nature of the Old Covenant, which did not say one word about eternity, eternal life, an eternal inheritance

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“eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12), “the eternal Spirit” (Heb 9:14), and an “eternal inheritance” (Heb 9:15).

None of these realities – not a

of His people.

- ☛ God will be their God.
- ☛ They will be God’s people.

The New Covenant is not a system designed for problem resolution. It is not a means to living successfully by the standards of this world. It is not about obtaining optimum interpersonal relationships with our peers. Financial security, domestic excellence, and dominion over circumstance may have some subordinate place in the salvation of God, but none of them were the reason for Christ’s death, resurrection, and enthronement

single one of them – was integral to the Old Covenant. None of them were promised by the Law. The High Priest mediated none of them. **What, then, would provoke someone who claims to be speaking for Christ, to direct people to associate earthly prosperity with the benefits of the New Covenant?** We have a breakdown of the New Covenant. It is most precise and to the point. It speaks in summary form, but the direction in which it is pointed is quite clear. This is the covenant that has been ratified by the blood of Jesus. It is the covenant that Jesus is presently mediating, and the one within which salvation in all of its aspects is experienced. Here is the summation according to Hebrews 8:10-12).

- ☛ God puts His laws into the minds of His people.
- ☛ God writes His laws upon the hearts

- ☛ They will not teach men, “*Know the Lord.*”
- ☛ Everyone within the covenant will know the Lord “*from the least to the greatest.*”
- ☛ God will be merciful to their unrighteousnesses.
- ☛ Their sins and iniquities will God “*remember no more.*”

These all have to do with ridding men of the guilt and power of sin, and fitting them for Divine fellowship and utility. Any approach to “the Christian life” and its benefits that does not precisely fit into this framework cannot possibly be true. The New Covenant is not a system designed for problem resolution. It is not a means to living successfully by the standards of this world. It is not about obtaining optimum

interpersonal relationships with our peers. **Financial security, domestic excellence, and dominion over circumstance may have some subordinate place in the salvation of God, but none of them were the reason for Christ’s death, resurrection, and enthronement.**

OUR TEXT

In our text, Paul will glory, or make his boast in the Lord. He will not boast of any financial security. He will not glory in the prosperity he may have enjoyed. He will make no reference to any successful organizations he has founded, academic excellence, or state of good health. Men may boast of these things, but Paul did not. Those are just the facts in the case.

Paul stands as the incontrovertible confirmation of the effect of much truth upon the flesh, or the natural constitution of man. **The insight into God’s eternal purpose that was given to Paul is unparalleled.** When it comes to the comprehension of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, and the appointed means of appropriating it, he has no peers. The revelations that he received from God are in a category by themselves. His wisdom in expounding the salvation that is in Christ Jesus is beyond all question superior and unique.

Yet, there was absolutely no way all of this could be confirmed by Paul’s appearance or worldly status. His health did not justify the claim to such grand illumination, nor did his financial condition or the general reception among men he experienced. He will not, therefore, boast after the manner of mere men, but as a true man of God. He will **not** view life as an unregenerate man, with no regard for the Kingdom of God.

WHEN IT IS NOT EXPEDIENT

“ 2 Cor 12:1a ***It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory.***”

Because carnal men are not able to follow in the path of godly thought, Paul is stationing mental sign posts to

clearly identify what he is doing, and why he is doing it. This tactic is the result of not being able to speak to the Corinthians “*as unto spiritual*” (1 Cor 3:1). **In a sense, he has been required to depart from the most profitable way in**

order retrieve the Corinthians. He must escort them back to the place where they see him as he really is – “*an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God*” (2 Cor 1:1). Their view of Paul had degenerated because of the erroneous teachers among

them. There were some who thought nothing of examining him (1 Cor 9:3), while others apparently were quite tolerant of them doing so.

However, as I have said before, the God of heaven is not at all tolerant of the rejection of those whom He sends. God sternly indicted Israel for exactly the same conduct that was found among the Corinthians, who had received a vastly superior message. Hear God as He thunders through Jeremiah.

☛ “Since the day that your fathers

turned unto Me the back, and not the face: though I taught them, rising up early and teaching them, yet they have not hearkened to receive instruction”(Jer 32:33).

☛ And yet once more, **“I have sent also unto you all My servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them, saying, Return ye now every man from his evil way, and amend your doings, and go not after other gods to serve them, and ye shall dwell in the land which I have given to you and to your fathers: but ye**

sin had been “put away” (Heb 9:26), the devil had been “destroyed” (Heb 2:14), and the world had been “reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:18-20). Unlike the experience of Israel, the Corinthians had been “washed,” “sanctified,” and “justified” (1 Cor 6:11), and the Holy Spirit of God was within them individually (1 Cor 6:19), and among them collectively (1 Cor 3:16).

With all of those advantages, they had chosen to denigrate the messenger sent to them – an apostle who had been given unparalleled insight into the eternal purpose of God. They had thought nothing of doubting him, criticizing him, and questioning some of the pivotal points of his doctrine.

Was this something they had a right to do? Were there no consequences to their despicable and uncomely actions and attitudes? Did not Jesus say, “*He that heareth you heareth Me; and he that despiseth you despiseth Me; and he that despiseth Me despiseth Him that sent Me*” (Luke 10:16).

It is not possible to overstate the seriousness of the conditions in Corinth. Many there had developed a spiritually independent attitude, as though everyone in Christ was on an equal level, and were free to question the word sent to them by God. But this was not at all the case. Yet, because Paul was laboring for their souls, and not content to lose them to false teachers who were parading among them, he is stooping to pick them up, set them on their feet, and direct them in the right way. That is why he is speaking in this most unusual way. He is lisping to them in an infant speech.

NOT EXPEDIENT

“It is not expedient . . .” Other versions read, “not profitable,” NKJV “though it is not profitable,” NASB “Although there is nothing to be gained,” NIV “though it is not a good thing,” BBE “it is not of profit,” DARBY “Not that it does any good,” NJB “is all so foolish,” NLT “really, is not profitable for me,” YLT “It is not a profitable employment,” WEYMOUTH and “There is no good to be gotten from it,” WILLIAMS and, “No, I don’t think it’s really good for me,” PHILLIPS

Paul’s point is not that there is

God spoke, yet Israel did not hearken, hear, or incline their ear to Him. And how did God speak to them? Was it from heaven as He did in Sinai? Indeed not! It was through messengers – messengers that He sent – the holy prophets. He sent them “early,” in plenty of time to turn the people from their wicked ways.

came forth out of the land of Egypt unto this day I have even sent unto you all my servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them: yet they hearkened not UNTO ME, nor inclined their ear, but hardened their neck: they did worse than their fathers”(Jer 7:26).

☛ Again He speaks with unusual clarity. “*And thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the LORD; If YE WILL NOT HEARKEN TO ME, to walk in my law, which I HAVE SET BEFORE YOU, to hearken to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I sent unto you, both rising up early, and sending them, but ye have not hearkened”*(Jer 26:4-5).

☛ And again He speaks, “*Because they have not hearkened to My words, saith the LORD, which I sent unto them by my servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them; but ye would not hear, saith the LORD”*(Jer 29:19).

☛ And yet again, “*And they have*

have not inclined your ear, nor hearkened unto Me” (Jer 35:15).

God spoke, yet Israel did not hearken, hear, or incline their ear to Him. And how did God speak to them? Was it from heaven as He did in Sinai? Indeed not! **It was through messengers – messengers that He sent – the holy prophets.** He sent them “early,” in plenty of time to turn the people from their wicked ways. But the people gave them no heed, thus confirming that they had no heart for God Himself. In blistering language the Lord leaves no doubt about this. “*They hearkened not unto Me . . . if ye will not hearken unto Me . . . ye have not hearkened . . . they have not hearkened to My words . . . ye would not hear . . . they have turned unto Me the back . . . they have not hearkened . . . ye have not inclined your ear, nor hearkened unto Me!*” That is God’s response to Israel not giving heed to His holy prophets.

The situation is no different with Corinth. In fact, it is even more complicated. Unlike the times of Israel,

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absolutely no benefit in what he is doing, but that it is of no profit to him personally. He is not “tooting his own horn,” so to speak, or lifting himself up. He is rather making an effort to reach them in their fallen state. It was not his purpose to promote himself, but to ensure them that the message he had delivered was from God, and they were not at liberty to exchange it for some cheap substitute – “another Jesus,” “another Spirit,” and “another gospel” (2 Cor 11:3). From his own point of view, and so far as his own glory was concerned, this was a profitless exercise. What he is now establishing what had once been known and embraced by them. He is only bringing them back to something true – to a place they had once occupied.

FOR ME TO GLORY

“. . . for me doubtless to glory.”

Other versions read, “for me to boast,” NKJV “Boasting is necessary,” NASB “I must go on boasting,” NIV “it is necessary to boast,” NRSV “I must needs glory,” ASV “As it is necessary for me to take glory unto myself,” BBE “to rejoice,” GENEVA “I am boasting because I have to,” NJB “but let me go on,” NLT “I am compelled to boast,” WEYMOUTH “I am forced to boast,” MONTGOMERY and “but as I am obliged] to boast.” AMPLIFIED

The thing that was not profitable for him was glorying, or boasting in what

However, Paul will not point to something in which men would boast – something upon which a glorious worldly career could be built, or a noble institution founded. Already, he has drawn their attention to his sufferings and their

had happened to him. Because he had been so maligned, and his true person so obscured, he must once again remind them of how the Lord had worked with and through him.

However, Paul will not point to something in which men would boast – something upon which a glorious worldly career could be built, or a noble institution founded. Already, he has drawn their attention to his sufferings and their remarkable frequency and magnitude. That is not resume material! Now he will continue to glory in the very things men will do most anything to avoid! When he glories in a message given to him, it will be one that he is not able to relate to the people. You must see his most unique manner of boasting.

WHAT PAUL IS SAYING

Paul has just finished a remarkably lengthy section in which he

gloried in the experiences realized in his ministry (11:23-31). This was by no means an exhaustive list, nor was it intended to be. Now Paul abruptly terminates this kind of glorying, even though it is not at all attractive to those who do not live by faith. He will leave the matter of the extraordinary experiences of life in this world and move to a loftier kind of experience – an experience that cannot be found among those who live only for this world. Other people can be beaten, whipped, shipwrecked, abandoned, and in peril. But here is something worldly people could never experience. Here is something that is not even available to all of the people of God, much less those whose god is their belly, and who mind “earthly things.” Here is a distinction that cannot be matched by those who have criticized and maligned him, doubting his apostleship and questioning his doctrine. He will show how different he is from them.

ABOUT VISIONS AND REVELATIONS

“ 1b I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.”

To a spiritually minded people Paul could say, “If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise

in Christ by the gospel: whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power” (Eph 3:2-7). **However, he cannot speak with such liberty to the Corinthians!**

He had already confessed to them that he had been made an “able minister of the new testament” (2 Cor 3:6), confirming that in all manner of human experience, he had been “approved . . . as the minister of God” (2 Cor 6:4). However, he has not shared with them how Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, calling and commissioning him. He did tell them how

the Lord revealed the Lord’s table and its purpose to him (1 Cor 11:23-25). However, references to how he was instructed of the Lord have been very sparse. Now he will address this subject, but not as he did to other churches (Gal 1:15-16; Col 1:25-27). It will be in a very unique way.

VISIONS

“I will come to visions . . .” Other versions read, “but I will go on to visions,” NASB “but I will move on the visions,” NJB “Let me tell about the visions,” NLT “I will proceed to visions,” WEYMOUTH and “but I will just mention visions.” PHILLIPS

The word “visions” is an intriguing one. It comes from a word meaning, “a sight, a vision, an appearance presented to one whether asleep or awake,” THAYER “what appears to the mind by supernatural means, being seen,” FRIBERG and “an event in which something appears vividly and credibly to the mind, although not actually present.” LOUW-NIDA

A “vision” is a Divine

been rejected in Corinth, the Lord appeared in the night to Paul “by a **vision**,” saying to him: “*Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city*” (Acts 18:9-10).

Apparently this was by no means

hiding,” LOUW-NIDA

Something that is revealed existed before the revelation, but was hidden prior to that disclosure. In redemption, “revelation” has to do with opening up some aspect, or even an overview, of God’s “*eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Eph 3:11). **This has more to do with what God is doing than what is occurring among the sons of men.** If the essence of eternal life is “*knowing God*” (John 17:3), then it is of no particular benefit to disclose nothing more than the future of an individual, family, or nation. When things like this are revealed, such as in the case of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3), Israel (Isa 9:6-7), and kingdoms (Dan 2:31-44), **it is always because they relate to the purposes of God.**

Revelation never deals with mere novelty, or matters that appeal to human curiosity. Even in very practical matters, it may be interesting, and even arresting, to hear about an imminent famine that is about to touch Judea, but a revelation of it is in order that preparation might be made among the saints to send relief to their brethren made destitute by the famine (Acts 11:27-29). **A person who receives revelations from God is not intended to supply information to weather forecasters, economists, stock markets experts, and military strategists.**

Some general perceptions of revelation include the following.

- Things revealed belong to those to whom they have been revealed – that is, they are intended to be understood. “*The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law*” (Deut 29:29).
- One of the primary revelations is that of the Lord Himself. “*And the LORD appeared again in Shiloh: for the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the word of the LORD*” (1 Sam 3:21).
- Revelation is associated with believing, or being persuaded of

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communication in which something is seen in the mind that is not seen with the eye. It is apparently in animated form, as compared to hearing a voice.

Some of Paul’s Recorded Visions

A few of the visions given to Paul are recorded for our learning.

- When Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, He gave him extensive instruction. Paul referred to this in his defense before Agrippa, referring to it as “*the heavenly vision*” (Acts 26:14-19).
- After being struck down on the road to Damascus, and while he waited for a word from the Lord, Paul had a “**vision**” of Ananias coming in to him, putting his hand upon him, and the receiving of his sight (Acts 9:12).
- Early in his ministry, when the Spirit had stopped Paul and company from entering into Bythinia and Asia, Paul had a **vision** “*in the night*,” in which he saw a man from Macedonia standing and saying, “*Come over into Macedonia and help us*” (Acts 16:9-10).
- Once, when it appeared Paul had

an exhaustive account of the “visions” of Paul. We assume that they were frequent and extensive, for Paul did not confer “*with flesh and blood*” to obtain an understanding of the New Covenant, God’s “*eternal purpose*,” and the extensive effects of Christ’s death and resurrection (Gal 1:16).

In this text, however, Paul will refer to a “*vision*” that is not made known in any other text of Scripture. As we proceed through this section, it will become clear why he chose this event as an example of the superior experiences he had.

REVELATIONS

“*. . . and revelations of the Lord.*”

Other versions read, “*and revelations from the Lord*,” NIV “*revelations I received from the Lord*,” NLT “*revelations granted me by the Lord*,” WEYMOUTH “*revelations which the Lord has given me*,” WILLIAMS PHILLIPS

A “*revelation*” involves **the opening up of a mystery**, or something that could not be understood or comprehended by human wisdom alone. It comes from a word meaning, “*an uncovering . . . a laying bare, making naked*,” THAYER “*disclosing, revealing*,” FRIBERG and “*to take out of*

There are certain disadvantages to the flesh when a person is given much insight from the Lord— by Given O. Blakely

things not seen. *“Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?”* (Isa 53:1).

- ☛ God reveals *“deep and secret things”* – that is, things hidden from the understanding of men, yet which pertain to them. *“He revealeth the deep and secret things: he knoweth what is in the darkness, and the light dwelleth with him”* (Dan 2:22).
- ☛ Before God works among men, He reveals what He is going to do through His prophets. *“Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets”* (Amos 3:7).

☛ In confirmation of these things, the book of the Revelation is referred to as *“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto Him, to show unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass; and He sent and signified it by His angel unto His servant John”* (Rev 1:1).

OF THEMSELVES, MEN DO NOT EXPERIENCE OR SPEAK OF REVELATIONS

What Paul will now address has nothing whatsoever to do with the ordinary means of acquiring knowledge. In this world, men study, do research, and reason. Sometimes they acquire extraordinary knowledge by these means

– like discovering weather patterns, the nature of disease, and the various uses of natural resources. Even then, however, it seems to me that God is involved in the expansion of such knowledge, particularly when genuine temporal benefit is realized from it.

However, this is not the kind of knowledge that Paul now mentions. The *“revelations”* of which he speaks could never be found by research, human logic, or lengthy cogitation. In these matters, if God did not pull back the curtain to the realities being revealed, men would not even know they existed, much less what they mean, or what Divine purposes are being served by them.

I KNEW A MAN

“² I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.”

This passage has been the subject of much foolish speculation. Baffled by the subject and the manner in which it is approached, some have imagined that Paul is speaking of the experience of some other personality. Recently I spoke with a young man who was told that Paul was here referring to John. This was a remarkable display of Biblical and spiritual ignorance. As I will show, Paul is speaking of himself.

I KNEW A MAN IN CHRIST

“I knew a man in Christ . . .”

Other versions read, *“I know a man in Christ,”* NKJV /NASB/NIV/NRSV *“I have knowledge of a man in Christ,”* BBE *“I have known a man in Christ,”* YLT and *“I know a man in union with Christ.”* WILLIAMS

First, this entire context is about Paul himself. He is the one who is so glorying (12:1,5,6). He categorically states that he received a thorn in the flesh for the revelations given to him (12:7). It would be completely unreasonable for Paul to introduce the experience of someone else in this

context. It would neutralize what he has already said, causing it to become virtually meaningless. He also could not move easily to further comments concerning his own experience in Christ Jesus.

Here, Paul speaks in the third person – referring to himself as though he was someone else. This is not an uncommon practice, and is seen several places in Scripture.

- ☛ JESUS. *“And Jesus saith unto him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head”* (Matt 8:20). *“And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven”* (John 3:13). *“If the Son therefore*

shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (John 8:36).

- ☛ JOHN. *“Now there was leaning on Jesus’ bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved”* (John 13:23). *“When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son!”* (John 19:26). *“Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee?”* (John 21:20).

By saying he *“knew a man in Christ,”* Paul means this was an experience he had after he was delivered from the power of darkness and translated into Christ’s kingdom.

This is Paul’s only Scriptural reference to this event, and then he mentions it over fourteen years after it occurred. The way in which he speaks of it indicates that he no doubt had thought of the occasion many times – yet he had made no mention of it in his writings.

ABOVE FOURTEEN YEARS AGO

“. . . above fourteen years ago. . .”

Other versions read, “who fourteen years ago.”^{NKJV}

This is Paul’s only Scriptural reference to this event, and then he mentions it over fourteen years after it occurred. The way in which he speaks of it indicates that he no doubt had thought of the occasion many times – yet he had made no mention of it in his writings.

We do not have the faintest notion precisely when this event took place. If,

stoned.

I CANNOT TELL

“(whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth) . . .” Other versions read, “whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know,”^{NKJV} “if he was in the body, or out of the body, I am not able to say,”^{BBE} “still in the body? I do not know; or out of the body? I do not know,”^{NJB} “Don’t ask me whether my body was there or just my spirit, for I don’t know,”^{LIVING} “I don’t know whether he was in his physical

experience in which he was bodily lifted up between heaven and earth: “And he put forth the form of an hand, and **took me by a lock of mine head; and the spirit lifted me up between the earth and the heaven**, and brought me in the visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the inner gate that looketh toward the north; where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provoketh to jealousy” (Ezek 8:3). Again Ezekiel testified, “Moreover **the spirit lifted me up, and brought me unto the east gate of the LORD’S house**, which looketh eastward: and behold at the door of the gate five and twenty men; among whom I saw Jaazaniah the son of Azur, and Pelatiah the son of Benaiah, princes of the people” (Ezek 11:1). Again, Ezekiel spoke of being lifted up in a vision: “Afterwards **the spirit took me up, and brought me in a vision by the Spirit of God into Chaldea**, to them of the captivity. So the vision that I had seen went up from me” (Ezek 11:24). Once again Ezekiel wrote of a lofty experience. “In the five and twentieth year of our captivity, in the beginning of the year, in the tenth day of the month, in the fourteenth year after that the city was smitten, in the selfsame day **the hand of the LORD was upon me, and brought me thither. In the visions of God brought he me into the land of Israel**, and set me upon a very high mountain, by which was as the frame of a city on the south” (Ezek 40:1-2).

Suffice it to say, history has found some saints experiencing most unusual things. All of this confirms that His “judgments” are “unsearchable,” and His “ways past finding out” (Rom 11:33). Those who desire a God whose ways are always clear and lucid, and who never conducts Himself transcendent to nature will not be pleased with the true God.

as is commonly believed, this letter was written around 58 A.D., the experience would have taken place somewhere around 44 A.D. This would have been several years after his conversion, which took place around 37 A.D. It is doubtful that this refers to the time Paul was stoned in Lystra, which is thought to have occurred around 46 A.D. All of this, of course, is nothing more than conjecture. **However, it does confirm that we remain in the dark concerning this event.** Luke does not record it in Acts, and Paul makes no other reference to it. It could not refer to what was revealed to Him when he was converted, for that was repeated several times by Paul (Acts 22:6-10; 26:12-18; 1 Cor 15:8). Also, it could not be the revelation given to Paul while he was in a trace in the Temple, for the words spoken to Paul at that time were recorded (Acts 22:17-21).

We will, therefore, have to leave the timing of the matter precisely as Paul describes it – around fourteen years before he wrote this letter. It was after he was converted, and a while before he was

body or not,”^{IE} “whether in his body or outside of his body, I do not know,”^{ISV} and “I don’t know of it was an actual physical experience.”^{PHILLIPS}

Here again, Paul confirms he is speaking about himself: “whether in the body **I cannot tell; or whether out of the body I cannot tell.**” He does not speak as a spectator, but as the participant.

John the Apostle

When John received the Revelation, there were at least two times when he was “**carried away in the Spirit**” (Rev 17:3; 21:10). This all occurred after John was already “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day” (Rev 1:10). It was also after he had been raised to an even higher level “in the Spirit” (Rev 4:2).

Ezekiel the Prophet

Ezekiel experienced a similar thing: “So **the Spirit lifted me up, and took me away, and I went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit; but the hand of the LORD was strong upon me**” (Ezek 3:14). Again, Ezekiel spoke of an

Philip the Evangelist
After preaching to the Ethiopian eunuch, and baptizing him into Christ, Philip experienced a supernatural transport. “And when they were come up out of the water, **the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip**, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:39). This clearly took place “in the body.”

Suffice it to say, history has found some saints experiencing most unusual things. All of this confirms that His “judgements” are “unsearchable,” and His “ways past finding out” (Rom 11:33). Those who desire a God whose ways are always clear and lucid, and who never conducts Himself transcendent to nature will not be pleased with the true God.

The Soul Sleeping Heresy
Commensurate with the absence

of “*sound doctrine*” (1 Tim 1:10; 4:3; Tit 2:1), and the delivering of “*all the counsel of God*” (Acts 20:27), all manner of false teaching begins to surface. Among such doctrines is found the soul sleeping heresy, now gaining much prominence among supposedly conservative people. This teaching declares that the soul is not conscious apart from the body, and that it remains “*asleep*” just as the body, until the morning of the resurrection. The advocates of this teaching declare that upon death the individual enters into an unconscious and inactive state that will not be interrupted until the dead are raised.

While it is not my purpose to here deal extensively with this bit of theological nonsense, our text strikes this doctrine down to the ground. **Paul speaks of a very real experience in which he was taken to another very realm, and heard very real words.** However, he states that he does not know whether he was in the body or out of the body. Among other things, this does mean that there can be experiences OUT of the body, where the soul, independent of the body, can be subjected to another environment, and be privy to a communication of words. The soul and the body, therefore, are not inextricably united together. The unseen part of man can have experiences independent of the body, else these words would make no sense at all.

God Knoweth

While Paul does not know whether he was in or out of the body, he realizes that God **does** know – and that is sufficient. It was apparently not important for Paul to know whether he left his body at this time or not. Paul conducted his life with this dependency upon the Lord, frequently saying “*God knoweth*” (2 Cor 11:11; 12:2,3) and “*the Lord knoweth*” (1 Cor 3:20; 2 Tim 2:19). Paul will make this statement again in the next verse. I will deal with it more extensively at that time.

THE THIRD HEAVEN

“... *such an one caught up to the third heaven.*” Other versions read, “*such a one caught up even to the third heaven,*” ^{ASV} “*who was taken up to the third heaven,*” ^{BBE} “*taken up into the third heaven,*” ^{GENEVA} “*was caught up right into the third heaven,*” ^{NJB} “*I was*

taken up to heaven for a visit,” ^{LIVING} and “*caught up . . . even to the highest heaven.*” ^{WEYMOUTH}

This is the only such reference in all of the Bible, and it is a most fascinating one. In fact, one must carefully guard not to venture into the realm of speculation or vain curiosity on

the cloudy heavens, or the area immediately above the earth, and which is immediately related with the earth. In the account of creation the area separating the waters above from the waters beneath was called “*heaven.*” “*And God made the firmament, and divided the waters*

THE THIRD HEAVEN 3rd
GOD IS IN HEAVEN (Ecc 5:2)
GOD IS IN THE HEAVENS (Psa 115:3; Matt 6:9)
HEAVEN OF HEAVENS (Deut 10:14; 1 Kgs 8:27; Neh 9:6)
THE SUN STOOD STILL IN THE MIDST OF HEAVEN (Josh 10:13)
... THE STARS OF THE HEAVEN (Gen 22:17)
LIGHTS IN THE FIRMAMENT OF THE HEAVEN (Gen 1:14-15)
... THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN (Matt 26:64)
... THE FOWL OF THE HEAVEN (Gen 1:8)
FOWL... IN THE OPEN FIRMAMENT OF HEAVEN (Gen 1:20)

this matter.

When Ezekiel was transported away, it was to the river Chebar, between heaven and earth, Chaldea, and the land of Israel (Ezek 3:14; 8:3; 11:1,24; 40:1). But this was not the kind of experience Paul here describes. He was carried up into “*the third heaven.*” This is the only place this term is used. In order to understand it, we must have some working knowledge of how the Scriptures use the word “*heaven.*” It is used in three different ways.

• First, “*heaven*” is used to describe

which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day” (Gen 1:7-8). This is also the area in which the fowls of the air fly: “*And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven*” (Gen 1:20). It is also the area in which the clouds reside: “*Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man*

sitting on the right hand of power, and coming **in the clouds of heaven**" (Mat 26:64).

- Second, the, the upper part of the "firmament," or visible arch of the sky, is called "heaven," and is the place where the sun, moon, and stars

This is "the third heaven" into which Paul was caught up. The residence of God, Christ, and the holy angels, and the seat of Divine government where Divine purposes originate and from whence they are carried out! Fourteen years after this experience, it remained firmly embedded in Paul's memory. Only eternity will open up its depths.

reside – "celestial bodies" (1 Cor 15:40). "And God said, Let there be lights in the **firmament of the heaven** to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years" (Gen 1:14). "That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as **the stars of the heaven**, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies" (Gen 22:17). "And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. Is not this written in the book of Jasher? So **the sun stood still in the midst of heaven**, and hasted not to go down about a whole day" (Josh 10:13).

- Third, the place where God resides is

referred to as "heaven." "Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for **God is in heaven**, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few" (Eccl 5:2). "But our **God is in the heavens**: he hath done whatsoever He hath pleased" (Psa

115:3). "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our **Father which art in heaven**, Hallowed be Thy name" (Matt 6:9).

This is also referred to as "the heaven of heavens." "Behold, the heaven and **the heaven of heavens** is the LORD'S thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is" (Deut 10:14). "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, **the heaven and heaven of heavens** cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?" (1 Kgs 8:27). "Thou, even Thou, art LORD alone; **Thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens**, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and Thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven

worshippeth thee" (Neh 9:6).

"The third heaven" is the place where God resides, and where holy angels are located (Matt 18:10; 22:30; 24:36; Mk 12:25). There have been some few godly souls who were given visions of this realm. Ezekiel "saw visions of God" (Ezek 1:1; 8:3; 40:2). Zechariah was given to see heavenly activity (Zech 3:1-7). Isaiah saw the Lord "high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple," heard a heavenly conversation, and even participated in it (Isa 6:1-13). Micaiah the prophet saw into heaven, and a dialog that took place concerning wicked Ahab (1 Kgs 22:15-15). In all of these cases, however, what was seen and heard was, to some degree, understood and communicated to men.

This "third heaven" is the one from which Jesus came. As He Himself said, "And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but He that **came down from heaven**, even the Son of man which **is in heaven**" (John 3:13). And again, "For the bread of God is **He which cometh down from heaven**, and giveth life unto the world" (John 6:33). And yet again, "For **I came down from heaven**, not to do Mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me" (John 6:38). When Jesus returns "the second time," He will come "from heaven" (1 Thess 4:16; 2 Thess 1:7). The Holy Spirit, now residing within the saints, and empowering the Gospel, is said to have been "sent down from heaven" (1 Pet 1:12).

This is "the third heaven" into which Paul was caught up. The residence of God, Christ, and the holy angels, and the seat of Divine government where Divine purposes originate and from whence they are carried out! Fourteen years after this experience, it remained firmly embedded in Paul's memory. Only eternity will open up its depths.

GOD KNOWETH

"³And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth:)"

What Paul is going to relate is

intensely personal. It is not possible that he would be privy to such information if what follows had not happened to him. It is ever true that "no man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man

which is in him" (1 Cor 2:11). Paul continues, therefore, to speak about something **he personally experienced**, relating the information in the third person.

There are certain disadvantages to the flesh when a person is given much insight from the Lord— by Given O. Blakely

GOD KNOWS, I KNEW THIS MAN

“And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth).” Other versions read, *“And I know such a man . . . God knows,”* ^{NKJV} *“and I know how such a man . . . God knows,”* ^{NASB} *“And I know that this man . . . but God knows,”* ^{NIV} *“and I know that such a person . . . God knows,”* ^{NRSV} *“and I have knowledge of such a man . . . I am not able to say, but God only,”* ^{BBE} and *“I know the same man . . . God knoweth.”* ^{TNT}

This is not something Paul heard about, but something that happened to him. Here he is not expressing a deep seated desire, but relating a profound experience. **This was something of which he was aware – not something that took place in a subconscious and identifiable state.** Paul is not describing a subliminal experience that took place outside the area of conscious awareness. Neither, indeed is it a euphoric experience that was disproportionate to its cause, or inappropriate to life’s situation – something like a drug-induced state.

- ☛ Paul knew the time when it occurred – *“fourteen years ago.”*
- ☛ It was a personal experience not a period of being made aware of someone else’s experience.

Paul again affirms that while the experience to which he alludes was very real, he was not sure whether he was in the body or out of it. This could refer to being dead or alive. There may very well

the faculties of hearing and seeing operational.

- ☛ There is a higher realm in which the human mind and conscience are

Paul again affirms that while the experience to which he alludes was very real, he was not sure whether he was in the body or out of it. This could refer to being dead or alive. There may very well be other profound spiritual experiences in which the body cannot participate.

be other profound spiritual experiences in which the body cannot participate. As this is a most mysterious subject, and precious little has been revealed about it, it is not wise to linger long upon it, for it will awaken carnal curiosity which has a distracting nature about it.

Whatever we may think about this text, it substantiates several things worthy of note.

- ☛ There is such a thing as being *“out of the body,”* yet fully conscious, with

subjected to more noble and exhilarating experiences.

- ☛ Every human experience is not understandable – that is, everything about it may not be known.

Before he continues, Paul concedes that **God knows** he is speaking the truth. He makes this appeal because of the extraordinary nature of the event he is about to relate. It is as though he vividly recalls the coming day of judgment when all will be fully known.

CAUGHT UP INTO PARADISE

“⁴ How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”

CAUGHT UP INTO PARADISE

“How that he was caught up into paradise . . .” All versions read the same – *“paradise.”*

The word *“paradise”* is mentioned three times in Scripture.

- ☛ A place Jesus went following His death. *“And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in **paradise**”* (Luke 23:43).

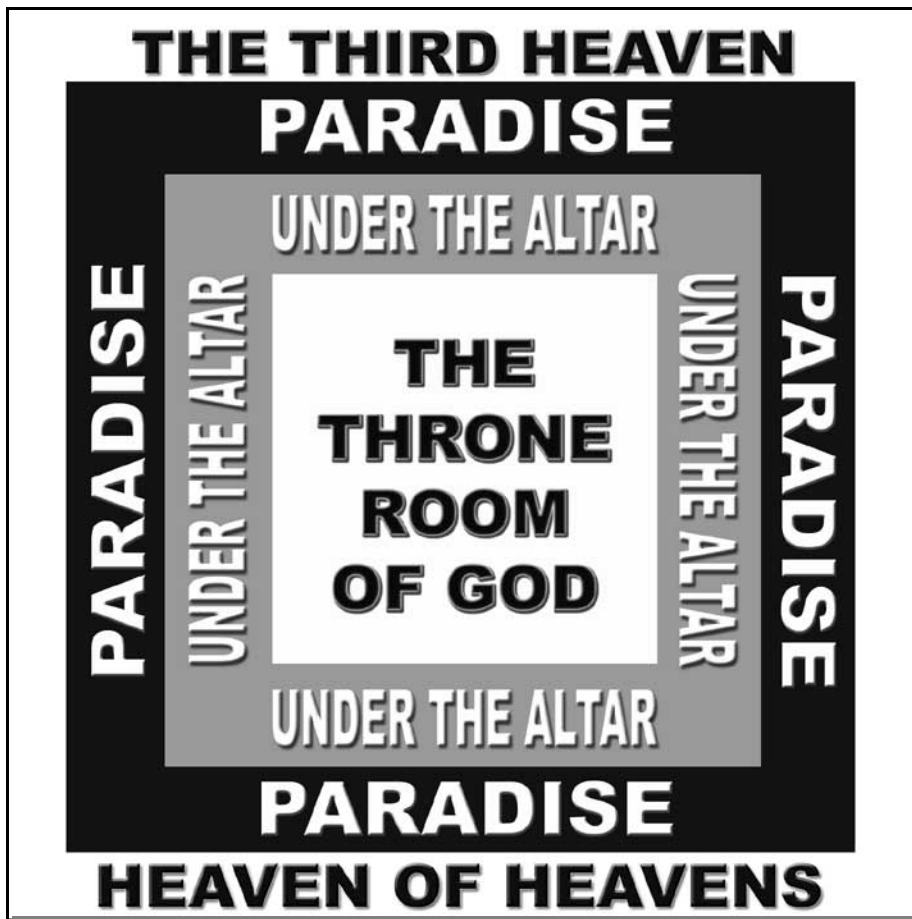
- ☛ When Paul was caught up into the third heaven. *“How that he was caught up into **paradise**, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter”* (2 Cor 12:4).

- ☛ Where overcomers will be found following their tenure in this world. *“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the **paradise** of God”* (Rev 2:7).

The word *“paradise”* is a

transliteration (letter by letter) of the Greek word *παράδεισον* (para-deis-on). Lexically it means, “a garden, pleasure-ground, grove, park . . . that part of Hades which was thought by the later Jews to be the abode of souls of the pious until the resurrection of the dead . . . an upper region in the heavens,” ^{THAYER} “a place of blessedness for the souls of the righteous dead, the heavenly place where God dwells,” ^{FRIBERG} and “a dwelling place of the righteous dead in a state of blessedness (usually equated with heaven.” ^{LOUW-NIDA}

This word, in any of its varied forms, is found only in the above texts of Scripture. Even though men have written volumes concerning the meaning of this word (McClintok and Strong’s Cyclopeda contains 20 pages under the heading



“paradise”), these texts are the sum of what is said of it in Scripture.

From what IS said of this word, we may conclude at least the following.

- ☛ It is not a place occupied by men in the flesh.
- ☛ It is a place of comfort and bliss where Jesus went following His death, and before His resurrection.
- ☛ It is a high and lofty place, related to “the third heaven.”
- ☛ It is the future abode of those who, by their faith, overcome this present evil world.

A Possibility

Without lingering long on this subject, I present here a possibility of what is intended by the use of the terms “third heaven” and “paradise.” The first expression could be a more general one, referring to the area above the creation

itself, and where the Living God and His throne are located. That domain, however, may not be likened to one grand opened area. Whatever was intended by Jesus’ remark to the thief concerning being with Him “in paradise,” it could not have referred to the place of His ultimate exaltation that followed His ascension back to heaven. It is expressly stated that God “highly exalted” Christ, declaring Him to be the “Son of God with power BY the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 2:9; Rom 1:4). Second, we are provided a glimpse into the heavenly realms in which the “souls” of martyrs are beheld. They are depicted as being “under the altar” (Rev 6:9). There is also a reference to Lazarus who, upon his death, was “carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom” (Lk 16:22). In both of these latter cases, those who had departed from their bodies and residence in this world were conscious, and in communication with other personalities. There was a sense in which they were in “heaven,” yet they were not in the heart of it, where the very throne room of God exists.

Because this is an area of speculation, I will say no more on the matter, lest I cause it to be more cloudy than it already is. I only mean to establish that there is no reason for adopting confusing views about this text that conflict with other passages of Scripture.

Paul remembers, and does so with great lucidity, an experience that he had in which he was not sure whether he was in or out of the body. He says he was caught upon into “the third heaven” and “paradise,” which I assume refer to the same occasion, and not two separate ones. The entirety of the language here speaks of a single experience.

UNSPEAKABLE WORDS

“ . . . and heard unspeakable words . . . ” Other versions read, “*inexpressible words*,”^{NKJV} “*inexpressible things*,”^{NIV} “*things that are not to be told*,”^{NRSV} “*things that cannot be told*,”^{RSV} “*words came to his ears which may not be said*,”^{BBE} “*secret words*,”^{DOUAY} “*cannot be spoken*,”^{GENEVA} “*things so astounding*,”^{NLT} “*unutterable sayings*,”^{YLT} “*things which cannot be re-told*,”^{IE} “*things that cannot be expressed in words*,”^{ISV} “*that must not be told*,”^{WILLIAMS} and “*utterances beyond the power of man to put into words*.”^{AMPLIFIED}

Paul does not say he heard words he did not understand, but words that he could not express, re-tell, or put into human speech. These were not words like the glorified Christ used when He spoke “in the Hebrew tongue” to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus (Acts 26:14). Paul related those words (Acts 26:15-18).

These were words Paul could hear and understand, yet which he could not repeat in human language. They were not mere sounds, but were “words.” They were not “inexpressible” for the one speaking them in “paradise, but were to Paul, who was the one hearing them.

The idea here is that whatever was communicated to Paul was intended ONLY for him. It was not meant to be repeated to other souls. Here was a heavenly comfort for a choice messenger who would be required to pass through very remarkable and extensive difficulties. No ordinary comfort would do for a man of this caliber. Thus Paul hears

There are certain disadvantages to the flesh when a person is given much insight from the Lord— by Given O. Blakely

words addressed to his understanding, but which he could **not** bring to the understanding of others.

NOT LAWFUL FOR A MAN TO UTTER

“. . . which it is not lawful for a man to utter.” Other versions read, “man is not permitted to speak,”^{NASB} “things man is not permitted to tell,”^{NIV} “no mortal is permitted to repeat,”^{NRSV} “man may not utter,”^{RSV} “man is not able to say,”^{BBE} “which it is not allowed to utter,”^{DARBY} “which it is not granted man to utter,”^{DOUAY} “which are not possible for man to utter,”^{GENEVA} “may not be spoken by any human being,”^{NJB} “they cannot be told,”^{NLT} “I am not allowed to tell them to others,”^{LIVING} “a man is not allowed to tell such things to other men,”^{IE} “things which no human being is permitted to repeat,”^{WEYMOUTH} “things which no human being has a right even to mention,”^{ISV} and “must not be translated into human speech.”^{PHILLIPS}

There is a language for the heart and mind that cannot be spoken in words

– such as the look Jesus gave Peter after he had denied Him (Luke 22:61-62). Did not that “look” speak to Peter? And yet who would take it upon themselves to put it into words? It was something intended for Peter alone.

The expression “not lawful” does not mean “thou shalt not say them.” It rather means that **there is no provision to say them**. The words Paul heard were transcendent to human speech. They were not designed to be retold like the Gospel. Even if Paul wanted to tell them, he was not able to do so.

The Complexity of Man

Man is an extraordinary creation, made “in the likeness of God” (Gen 5:1). There is more to him than his body and its five senses. He is capable of receiving communications that defy articulation. What child of God has not had those times when a joy and confidence were experienced that could not be adequately communicated to others? **There is a communication of the Lord with man that is far above that of man with man!**

Jesus is presently speaking from heaven (Heb 12:25). Those who live by faith are being “taught” by Him, and are “learning” Him (Eph 4:20-21). I do not mean to equate these occasions with the lofty experience of Paul, when he was “caught up into paradise.” **I rather intend to show that there is a level of communication between the Lord and the redeemed that often exceeds the capabilities of human language.**

For example, when Jesus referred to His sheep hearing His voice (John 10:27), that is not to be equated with hearing a humanly intelligent string of words. When the Spirit “leads” us in the mortification of the “deeds of the body” (Rom 8:13-14), it is not always with words that can be repeated. When He bears witness with our spirit, that we are “the children of God” (Rom 8:16), we may not be able to precisely relate that witness in human speech. **Therefore, it should not surprise us that Paul heard words that could not be uttered by him.** That is an experience that many believers have had to a lesser degree.

I WILL GLORY IN THAT MAN

⁵ Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

Since the Corinthians had become accustomed to teachers who talked about themselves – commending themselves, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves (2 Cor 10:12) – Paul will now speak about himself. But his speaking will be of another order. **He will not glory in his achievements, but in his infirmities.** Even when he focuses upon one of his singular experiences, it will be one that he cannot explain to the satisfaction of the flesh.

I WILL GLORY IN SUCH AN ONE

“Of such an one will I glory . . .” Other versions read, “I will boast,”^{NKJV} “On account of such a one I will have glory,”^{BBE} “Of such a man will I rejoice,”^{GENEVA} “On behalf of someone like that I am willing to boast,”^{NJB} “That experience

is something worth boasting about,”^{NLT} and “I am honestly proud of an experience like that.”^{PHILLIPS}

Some of the translations are overly simplistic in their representation of this verse. Again, speaking of himself

is willing to glory in such a person – i.e. of such an experience. Here is an experience that cannot be outlined, diagnosed, confirmed, or expounded. Paul heard words he cannot repeat – it simply is not possible. **That is the kind of thing men do not put on a resumé.**

Here is an experience that cannot be outlined, diagnosed, confirmed, or expounded. Paul heard words he cannot repeat – it simply is not possible. That is the kind of thing men do not put on a resumé.

in third person, as though he was standing outside of the experience itself and peering into it, Paul affirms that he

YET NOT MYSELF

“. . . yet of myself I will not glory . . .” Other versions read, “yet of myself I

To hear words in the heavenly realm and not be able to repeat them is a cardinal demonstration of human weakness. To be comforted by the Lord and not be able to relate how it was done, putting it into words, is not something in which flesh can glory. But Paul is not in the flesh. He is in the Spirit.

will not boast," NKJV "but on my own behalf I will not boast," NASB "I will not boast about myself," NIV "for myself I will take no glory," BBE "but of myself I will not rejoice," GENEVA "but I am not going to do it," NLT "but of myself (personally) I will not boast," AMPLIFIED and, "but I have made up my mind not to boast of anything personal." PHILLIPS

The words "of myself" means things he can explain about himself – as men of the world do. He will not glory in the revelations given to him to be communicated to other men (Eph 3:9). Those were not an achievement, but a gift from God., He will not glory in his prodigious labors, for it was the grace of

God in him that did the work (1 Cor 15:10). He will not provide a tally of souls that he has won, or churches that he has established, or studies that he has compiled. He knew that all such things were actually God working in him "both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phil 2:13).

If you were to remove all such boasting from the "Christian" world, a sudden vacuum would occur. Few religious leaders would have anything else to say. Paul is not in that category.

BUT IN MINE INFIRMITIES

" . . . but in mine infirmities." Other versions read, "except in my

infirmities," NKJV "except in regard to my weaknesses," NASB "but only in my feeble body," BBE "I am going to boast only about how weak I am and how great God is to use such weakness for His glory," LIVING and "except as regards my infirmities (my weaknesses)." AMPLIFIED

Here is one of his weaknesses: he was not able to repeat what he had heard when he was caught up into paradise! To hear words in the heavenly realm and not be able to repeat them is a cardinal demonstration of human weakness. To be comforted by the Lord and not be able to relate how it was done, putting it into words, is not something in which flesh can glory. But Paul is not in the flesh. He is in the Spirit. He can glory, or boast, in such an experience. He knows that only God can receive glory for such a thing, and he is quite willing for that to happen. In fact, in his view (which is the only proper view), this is the only kind of boasting that God will permit – and even this is to be done in sparse measures. When it comes to glorying, salvation has been so designed as to allow its recipients to glory only in the Lord. Thus it is written, "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:31). This is rule that is constantly violated in Christendom.

SO YOU WILL NOT THINK TOO HIGHLY OF ME

" 6 For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me."

THOUGH I WOULD DESIRE TO GLORY

"For though I would desire to glory . . ." Other versions read, "For though I might desire to boast," NKJV "For if I do wish to boast," NASB "Even if I should choose to boast," NIV "For if I had a desire to take credit to myself," BBE "For though I should have a mind to glory," DOUAY "For though I would rejoice," GENEVA "I have plenty to boast about," NLT "Even if I wanted to brag," IE "If however I should choose to boast," WEYMOUTH and "If I should choose to continue boasting."

MONTGOMERY

In this expression, Paul is saying that if he desired to continue glorying in the things given to him, he still has plenty he could write about. He has not run out of extraordinary things to say – things that were not at all common among men. The only reason for boasting, of course, is because it is some way in which a person excels his peers. Even the world recognizes this principle. And, who is the person that does not see how Paul had, in fact, excelled among men – even among godly men.

I SHALL NOT BE A FOOL

" . . . I shall not be a fool . . ." Other versions read, "I will not be a fool," NKJV "I shall not be foolish," NASB "I would not be a fool," NIV "it would not be foolish,"

BBE "I shall not be talking like a fool," NJB "and would be no fool in doing it," NLT "I will not play the fool," WILLIAMS "I shall not be a witless braggart," AMPLIFIED and "I should certainly be no fool to be proud of my experiences." PHILLIPS

Paul will therefore stop his glorying, for it brings no honor to God or advantage to men to go on speaking endlessly about oneself – even in the matter of relating very real things that have been experienced in the service of the King.

Paul refuses to blend in with the worldly crowd, or join the ranks of the religious boasters. Although, speaking as a man, he has plenty of reason for legitimate boasting, he will refrain from doing so, for it would be foolish to

There are certain disadvantages to the flesh when a person is given much insight from the Lord– by Given O. Blakely

continue speaking in this manner.

I WILL SAY THE TRUTH

“ . . . for I will say the truth . . . ”

Other versions read, “for I will speak the truth,”^{NKJV} “for I shall be speaking the truth,”^{NASB} “because I would be speaking the truth,”^{NIV} “for I would be saying what is true,”^{BBE} “for I would be telling the truth,”^{NAB} “for it will be nothing but the truth that I will tell,”^{WILLIAMS} and “I should be speaking nothing but the sober truth.”^{PHILLIPS}

What Paul is saying is this: “If I did continue speaking about myself, I would confine myself to saying only the truth, just as I have done up to this point.” He is not engaging in a promotion of himself. His soul interest is to establish that what has been said about him is untrue. **He is a really an apostle, and he has a real message from God.** The fact that he has endured all of the adverse circumstances he encountered while in the process of doing the will of God confirms this to be true.

Why was it necessary for Paul to write in this way? It was because there is a propensity in the flesh to exaggerate, and even to lie, when one insists upon glorying in personal experience or exploits. Not only did Paul refrain from speaking in this way because he knew it was not right or in keeping with the nature of kingdom labors, this would also serve to further distinguish from the “false apostles” who were leading the Corinthians astray. It appears to me that he knew the **manner** of those who labor in the flesh, as well as the nature of the walk of faith. He therefore refrains from doing what his critics do without a single twinge of their conscience.

NOW I WILL FORBEAR

“ . . . but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me.” Other versions read, “But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me,”^{NKJV} “but I refrain from this, so that no one may credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me,”^{NASB} “But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me,”^{NRSV} “but I will not, for fear that I might seem to any man more

than he sees me to be, or has word from me that I am,”^{BBE} “But I refrain, so noone will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say,”^{NIB} “But I will not go on in case anybody should rate me higher than he sees and hears me to be, because of the exceptional greatness of the revelations,”^{NJB} “But I won't do it. I don't want anyone to think more highly of me than what they can actually see in my life and my message,”^{NLT} “But I forbear, lest anyone should be led to estimate me more highly than what his own eyes attest, or more highly than what he hears from my lips,”^{WEYMOUTH} and “But I refrain from doing this, to keep anybody, on account of the superiority of the revelations, from giving me a higher rating than my actions and teachings

have experienced hearing some famous Christian leader, only to realize that what he had to say did not measure up to his reputation. Here is how Paul is indicating that a man of God is to be measured – **by how he appears, and what he says. That is, by his manners and his message. How does he conduct himself, and precisely what does he say, teach, and preach?** If a person's life does not adorn the doctrine (Tit 2:10), or if his life is not in harmony with the nature and objective of salvation, that cannot be offset by the boasting of the individual. Also, when the words that are spoken by an individual are not characterized by kingdom uniqueness and spiritual power, that person cannot possibly say anything about himself that will make him greater

Here is a marvelous revelation of one of the aspects of real spiritual life. Paul extends himself to avoid leading people to be unduly impressed because of what he says about himself and his experiences with the Lord.

deserve,”^{WILLIAMS}

Here is a marvelous revelation of one of the aspects of real spiritual life. Paul extends himself to avoid leading people to be unduly impressed because of what he says about himself and his experiences with the Lord.

The measure of true kingdom greatness is not the testimony of the individual about himself. If what a person says about himself exceeds what he appears to be before observant people, or what he preaches and teaches, then we ought not pay any heed to it.

Notice why Paul refrains from any **extended** boasting: “But I abstain [from it] **so that no one may form a higher estimate of me than [is justified by] what he sees in me or hears from me**.”^{AMPLIFIED} If this rule were honored by every professing servant of God, it would drastically change the landscape of contemporary Christianity. Perhaps you

than his words.

Paul knows this Kingdom principle: no man is “*to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith*” (Rom 12:3). **In Christ Jesus, a person's value is determined by what they have received from God.** Whatever he has received, is intended to profit the body of Christ. Not only, therefore, will Paul refuse to view himself as being greater than God has made him through His faith, he will not speak in such a manner as to provoke others to think of him beyond his God-appointed capacity in the body of Christ.

Paul does not desire the people to think of him more highly than what they actually see him to be. This particularly related to what he declared and taught, which constituted the vast majority of what men knew of him. Remove those, and we are left with very little.

Were we to evaluate contemporary mega-church leaders by this criterion, many men who are

presently considered great, would actually be seen as very small, with little understanding of the things of God, and

a very limited acquaintance with the living God Himself. They do not rank high in heaven either.

TO AVOID UNDUE EXALTATION

“⁷ And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.”

Now Paul will confirm that

the Lord and His purpose with what Paul was given to see? Is it not written of the prophets who with the eagle eye of faith foresaw and prophesied of the Savior, *“Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what, or what*

made by the King they served (Dan 3:18). Daniel had to choose to obey God or the honor of edict of a heathen king under whom he served (Dan 6:10). **In each of these cases, worldly prominence brought with itself certain liabilities,**

Involvements in this world, even legitimate ones, exercise influences over the souls of men that must be overcome. Blessed is the person who perceives this, and puts on *“the whole armor of God,”* that he may be able to *“stand against the wiles of the devil”* (Eph 6:11).

LEST I BE EXALTED ABOVE MEASURE

“And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations . . .” Other versions read, *“And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations,”* ^{NASB} *“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations,”* ^{NIV} *“even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated,”* ^{NRSV} *“And by reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations, that I should not be exalted overmuch,”* ^{ASV} *“And because the revelations were so very great, in order that I might not be overmuch lifted up,”* ^{BBE} *“And lest the greatness of the revelations should exalt me,”* ^{DOUAY} *“And to keep me from being puffed up and too much elated by the exceeding greatness (preeminence) of these revelations,”* ^{AMPLIFIED} and *“So tremendous, however, were the revelations that God gave me that, in order to prevent my becoming absurdly conceited.”* ^{PHILLIPS}

This is an extremely sensitive point. **When God causes His servants to be humbled, or moves them to experience some neutralizing influence in their lives, it is not normally owing to worldly prominence.** For example, a person may be an outstanding scientist, mathematician, musician, athlete, or the

When it comes to obtaining an extensive understanding of the things of God (which things are intended to be declared), there comes a time when men must choose between worldly prominence and spiritual excellence. It appears to me that this is the lot of most, if not all, men of God.

extraordinary revelations are offset, so to speak, by certain fleshly limitations. Very few souls have enjoyed extraordinary worldly advantages and unusual spiritual insight at the same time. I understand that contradicts some current “Christian” teaching. Nevertheless, it is true.

Some of those who attained to remarkable riches include Abraham (Gen 13:2; 24:35), Solomon (1 Kgs 10:23), Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:13), Job (Job 1:3), Joseph of Arimathaea (Matt 27:57), and Zacchaeus (Lk 19:2). Those who were raised to lofty places of worldly prominence include Joseph (Gen 41:43), Moses (Acts 7:22; Heb 11:26), Solomon (1 Kgs 10:23-24), Daniel (Dan 2:48; Dan 5:29), and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan 3:30).

No one of sound mind considers these to be the standard status of the people of God. However, even taking these few exceptions to be the rule, how would you compare what they knew of

manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into” (1 Pet 1:10-12).

When it comes to obtaining an extensive understanding of the things of God (which things are intended to be declared), **there comes a time when men must choose between worldly prominence and spiritual excellence.** It appears to me that this is the lot of most, if not all, men of God. There came a time when Moses had to choose between *“affliction with the people of God”* and Egyptian prominence, which was nothing less than *“the pleasures of sin”* (Heb 11:25). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had to choose to either bow before God or before an image

There are certain disadvantages to the flesh when a person is given much insight from the Lord— by Given O. Blakely

likes. These are **not** the kind of gifts for which “*thorns*” are dispensed.

Paul is very precise. **What he will now declare is directly traceable to the quantity and nature of the revelations that had been vouchsafed to him.** It was **not** because of his success in starting churches. It was **not** because of the remarkable number of souls that he had won. It was **not** owing to his administrative skills, or even his steadfast perseverance in his trek to glory. It was **not** because God wanted him to be the very best worker that was possible. **It was because of what he had been given to see!**

The revelations given to him were not ordinary, and thus the rest of his life would not be ordinary either. Being “*exalted above due measure*” does not mean that Paul had a natural tendency to think more highly of himself than he ought to think. Paul testified in truth, “*I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He **considered me faithful, putting me into service***” (1 Tim 1:12).^{NASB} Therefore, the propensity to think of himself as some great person was not the issue with which Paul will now deal. **Rather, it was the greatness of the revelations that had been given to him.** Fleshly distinctions were not the point, but spiritual ones. The Lord had made Himself known to Paul in ways most rare, and that was the condition that could lead to “*being too elated.*”

In a very small comparison, this is boasting like that of the seventy whom Jesus sent out to preach the Gospel and invade Satan’s empire. When they returned they said, “*Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name*” (Luke 10:17). He responded, “*rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven*” (Luke 10:20).

Now, Paul will testify how the Lord kept him from inordinately rejoicing in what God Himself had given to him.

THERE WAS GIVEN TO ME A THORN IN THE FLESH

“ . . . there was given to me a thorn in the flesh . . . ” Other versions read, “*a thorn in the flesh was given to me.*”^{NKJV} “*there was given me a sting of*

my flesh.”^{DOUAY} “*so I was given a physical condition which has been a thorn in my flesh.*”^{LIVING} “*like the agony of impalement.*”^{WEYMOUTH} “*a thorn was given to me, and placed in my body.*”^{ISV} “*there was sent upon me a physical disease, sharp as a piercing stake.*”^{WILLIAMS} “*there was given me a thorn (a splinter) in the flesh.*”^{AMPLIFIED} and “*I was given a physical handicap.*”^{PHILLIPS}

This was a gift from God – “*there was given to me.*” It was a special gift, intended to keep Paul from being “*exalted above measure,*” or rejoicing too much in the greatness of the revelations given to him. **The Lord does not intend that we should rejoice more in what He gives us than in Himself.** What is received from the Lord is not an end of itself, and is therefore not to capture our attention. It is the Lord Himself that is the object of our major quest (Phil 3:10).

The “Thorn”

There has been some speculation about the nature of this “*thorn.*” Some have suggested that it was a propensity to sin – like “*Iust.*” This is a very foolish suggestion, and betrays a total lack of familiarity with the Lord Himself. Such an action would have the Lord giving Paul an extra inclination that is condemned and is to be mortified (Rom 8:13; Col 3:5). **What kind of reasoning would lead one to believe that God would exclude people from the Kingdom for immorality** (1 Cor 6:9; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5), **then give a propensity to such things?** Such miserable thinking borders on blasphemy.

The expression “*in the flesh*” means in the body, not in the fleshly, or carnal nature. Circumcision, for example, is said to be “*in the flesh*” (Rom 2:28). Those who marry under adverse circumstances are warned that they will have “*trouble in the flesh*” (1 Cor 7:28). Those who draw undue attention to themselves are said to make “*a fair show in the flesh*” (Gal 6:12). Paul described continuing to live in this world as “*if I live in the flesh*” (Phil 1:22), and abiding “*in the flesh*” (Phil 1:24). Those who had not seen Paul are described as not having seen his “*face in the flesh*” (Col 2:1). When Paul was bodily absent from people, he said he was “*absent in the flesh*” (Col 2:5).

Being “*in the flesh*” is not confined to being in the body, **but this is its meaning in this text,** as well as those I have just cited.

AN EXAMPLE OF THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS

“Even Baxter, who was subject himself to some such disorder, supposes that it might be the stone or gravel (kidney stone); and the usually very judicious Doddridge supposes that the view which he had of the glories of heavenly objects so affected his nerves as to produce a paralytic disorder, and particularly a stammering in his speech, and perhaps also a ridiculous distortion of the countenance. This opinion was suggested by Whitby, and has been adopted also by Benson, Macknight, Slade, and Bloomfield. But though sustained by most respectable names, it would be easy to show that it is mere conjecture, and perhaps quite as improbable as any of the numerous opinions which have been maintained on the subject. If Paul’s speech had been affected, and his face distorted, and his nerves shattered by such a sight, how could he doubt whether he was in the body or out of it when this occurred? Many of the Latin fathers supposed that some unruhly and ungovernable lust was intended. Chrysostom and Jeromesuppose that he meant the headache; Tertullian an ear-ache; and Rosenmuller supposes that it was the gout in the head, and that it was a periodical disorder such as affected him when he was with the Galatians; Galatians 4:13.”^{ALBERT BARNES}

The idea is that extraordinary spiritual benefits were coupled with an extraordinary physical handicap. It is called a “*thorn*” because of the pain it inflicted. It was placed in “*the flesh*” – his body – and not in his spirit or soul. We know this is the case, because Satan delivered it, and he “*cannot touch*” what is born of God (1 John 5:18).

We cannot know with absolute certainty the precise nature of this “*thorn.*” Nor, indeed, is it imperative that we do so. The presence of this “*infirmity*” may be what occasioned Paul initially preaching to the Galatians. Of that occasion he wrote, “*but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time*” (Gal 4:13).^{NASB} It is also in his writings to the Galatians that Paul suggested this “*thorn*” had something to do with his vision: “*I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me,*” or “*you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me,*”^{NIV} or “*I bear you witness that you would have torn out your own eyes and have given them to me*

[to replace mine], if that were possible”
AMPLIFIED (Gal 4:15). And again he wrote, “Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand,” or “See with what **large letters** I have written to you with my own hand,”^{NKJV} or “see **how large I have to make the letters**”^{LIVING} (Gal 6:11).

There is no question about the meaning of these texts, but whether it refers to “the thorn” or not, we cannot be sure. This could also have simply been one of the “infirmities” in which he gloried, and not a particularly isolated one. I do have an inclination toward the view of it being the “thorn,” but cannot substantiate it to my own thorough satisfaction, much less yours.

A Conclusion

If this was a bodily infirmity, as is

sent from Satan to give me pain,”^{BBE} “an angel of Satan, to buffet me,”^{DOUAY} “a messenger from Satan to batter me and prevent me from getting above myself,”^{NJB} “a messenger of the Adversary, that he might buffet me, that I might not be exalted overmuch,”^{YLT} a messenger from Satan to hurt and bother me, and prick my pride,”^{LIVING} “a messenger from Satan. It always tortures me, stopping me from becoming too proud,”^{IE} “Satan’s angel, dealing blow after blow, lest I should be over-elated,”^{WEYMOUTH} “It was Satan’s messenger to keep on tormenting me so that I would not become conceited,”^{ISV} “a messenger of Satan, to continue afflicting me, and so to keep me, I repeat, from being overelated,”^{WILLIAMS} “a messenger of Satan, to rack and buffet and harass me, to keep me from being excessively exalted,”^{AMPLIFIED} and “one of Satan’s angels - to harass me and

something impersonal, such as a disease or handicap.

Peter refers to evil angels – “angels that sinned” (2 Pet 2:4). Jude refers to them as “the angels which kept not their first estate” (Jude 1:6). Paul referred to the possibility of an “angel” from heaven, or representing himself as being from heaven, preaching a variant Gospel (Gal 1:8). Satan is said to transform himself into an “angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14). Jesus referred to “the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41), and John did as well (Rev 12:7,9).

Satan’s angels are wicked spirits that carry out his will. They are personalities that can think, plot, and strategize. Just as surely as Satan caused boils to rise up on Job, from the sole of his feet to the crown of his head (Job 2:78), so this messenger from Satan caused a grievous “thorn” to be experienced by Paul. It was as though this “messenger,” or angel from Satan had the power to push the thorn more deeply, twisting it about, and inflicting more and more suffering. This wicked spirit was given leave by the Lord to do this, just a Satan was given leave to afflict Job.

Now, for some, this introduces a most difficult consideration. Is it not written, “We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not” (1 John 5:18). Beyond all question, this is the truth! But this “messenger from Satan” did not afflict what was “born of God,” but what was called “the image of the earthy” – the bodily part of Paul, which was traced back to Adam (1 Cor 15:49).

To Buffet Me

This “messenger from Satan,” delivered a “thorn” that was “given” to Paul by God, to keep him from inordinate glorying because of the remarkable revelations given to him. **This was not the intention of Satan’s messenger, but of the God who controlled him!** The wicked “messenger” fully intended to cause Paul to deny like Peter, betray like Judas, or despise the birthright like Esau. He intended to induce murmuring, blasphemy, doubt, fear, and bitterness.

This “messenger from Satan,” delivered a “thorn” that was “given” to Paul by God, to keep him from inordinate glorying because of the remarkable revelations given to him. This was not the intention of Satan’s messenger, but of the God who controlled him!

doubtless the case, then such infirmities cannot be considered to always be a curse – such as in the case of Gehazi (2 Kgs 5:27) and Uzziah (2 Chron 26:19). There are conditions in which they bring advantage – as in Paul’s case. This also indicates that perfect health is not a Divine objective, else God would have contradicted such an objective in the case of Paul, who was a choice servant.

THE MESSENGER OF SATAN

“... the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.” Other versions read, “a messenger of Satan to buffet me – to keep me from exalting myself!”^{NASB} “a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated,”^{NRSV} “a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated,”^{RSV} “one

effectually stop any conceit.”^{PHILLIPS}

Now, the emphasis shifts from the “thorn” itself to the personality who delivered and maintained it: “the messenger of Satan.” The word “messenger” is translated from the Greek word ἄγγελος (an-gel-los), from which we obtain the word “angel.” This Greek word is used in used thirty-three times in the Epistles (Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 4:9; 6:3; 11:10; 13:1; 2 Cor 11:14; 12:7; Gal 1:8; 3:19; 4:14; Col 2:18; 2 Thess 1:7; 1 Tim 3:16; 5:21; Heb 1:4,5,6,7,13; 2:2,5,7,9,16; 12:22; 13:2; James 2:26; 1 Pet 1:12; 3:22; 2 Pet 2:4,11; Jude 1:6). It is translated “messenger” or “messengers” in this text, and James 2:25 (where it refers to the two spies hidden by Rahab). All of the other times it is translated “angel” or “angel.” **But it is never used as**

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He had no mind to make Paul better, but to make him worse. **However, the whole experience was being managed by God, and was designed to make Paul a more proficient minister of the Gospel.**

The word “*buffet*” means torment, harass, give pain, hurt, bother, torture, afflict, and rack with pain. The meaning of the original Greek word is to “strike with the fist, and “treat with violence continually.” ^{THAYER} “beating or striking with the fist, box on the ear, cuff . . . treat roughly, ill treatment,” ^{FRIEBERG} and “beat,

strike, harass, trouble.” ^{UBS}

Paul is not describing a casual experience. **An angel of Satan was given the authority from God to harass Paul, pummel him in his body, strike him repeatedly, and cause great discomfort to him.** If you cannot conceive of God doing such a thing, then go and learn what this text means! While you stand in carnal wonder at how much Paul was given to see, also behold the price his flesh paid for that experience. **Precious few men**

would consider such insights worth that price, but Paul did. He could reason from the thorn to the revelations, so that it became a constant evidence of the magnitude that he had received.

So, you want great insight, do you? You say you desire to comprehend the “*deep things of God*,” know Christ more profoundly, and perceive more of the depths of God’s “*eternal purpose*.” All of this is certainly for you, but it will not be accompanied by worldly comforts.

I SOUGHT FOR DELIVERANCE

“⁸ For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.”

Paul did not know about the “be-happy-all-the-time” philosophy that is recommended by the sophists of the day. I am not sure how he would have received the admonition, “Put a smile on your face, and let the world know you are happy.” It is not that I am suggesting Paul looked miserable all of the time. **Rather, it is just that outward happiness is not the aim of spiritual life, nor is it set forth as a noble objective.** We do, indeed, thank God for the times when our rejoicing bubbles up through our bodies, and our faces shine with joy. But we are not naive about such matters. There are times when we in our measure ask the Lord to relieve us of painful experiences. Paul will now tell us of what he went through in this regard.

FOR THIS THING

“*For this thing I . . .*” Other versions read, “*Concerning this thing*,” ^{NKJV} and “*about this thing*.” ^{BBE}

“*This thing*” was certainly not something incidental, casual, or easily endured, even though the language may seem to suggest this is the case. We are talking about a messenger from Satan, given leave to pummel and strike at Paul, inflicting painful and debilitating experiences in the flesh. **Generally**, this refers to the “*messenger*” from Satan. **Specifically**, it refers to the “*thorn*” that the “*messenger*” was using to torment

the Apostle.

I SOUGHT THE LORD THRICE

“*. . . besought the Lord thrice . . .*”

Other versions read, “*I pleaded with the Lord three times*,” ^{NKJV} “*I entreated the Lord three times*,” ^{NASB} “*three times I appealed to the Lord*,” ^{NRSV} “*three times I besought the Lord*,” ^{RSV} “*I made request to the Lord three times*,” ^{BBE} “*three times I begged the Lord*,” ^{NAB} “*I implored the Lord three times*,” ^{NAU} “*thrice the Lord I did*

circumstances, then surely this prayer will be answered.

The word “*thrice*” means “three times,” or three separate occasions. The use of the term here means that Paul sought the Lord in three differing and apparently extended periods. His petitions parallel the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane, when he prayed three times that, if it was possible, God would remove from Him the bitter cup of iniquity and

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call upon,” ^{YLT} “*Three different times I begged God*,” ^{LIVING} “*three times over I supplicated the Lord*,” ^{MONTGOMERY} and “*Three times I called upon the Lord and besought [Him] about this*.” ^{AMPLIFIED}

The word “*besought*” is an unusually strong one indicating calling, begging, beseeching, supplicating, and entreating. It is calling upon the Lord for help, relief, and alleviation of a most grievous condition. Now, if it is true that God wants us all to have an outwardly happy life and the very best of all

cursing that He was required to drink. “*And He went a little farther, and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me: nevertheless not as I will, but as Thou wilt . . . He went away again **the second time**, and prayed, saying, O My Father, if this cup may not pass away from Me, except I drink it, thy will be done . . . And He left them, and went away again, and prayed **the third time**, saying the same words*” (Mat 26:41-44).

The fact that Paul sought for the

removal of this affliction indicates its severity. He had passed through beatings, shipwrecks, and many and divers perils. He was not squeamish about the circumstances through which his ministry carried him. Nor, indeed, was he accustomed to ministering in great comfort. He obviously considered this “*thorn*” an obstacle to his ministry, as well as something that was painful, and perhaps even debilitating. Therefore, on three occasions he earnestly besought the Lord concerning this condition.

Some have taught men that it is wrong to make repeated requests to the Lord, stating that this is an indication of unbelief. I hardly see how it is appropriate to in any way insinuate that Paul was weak in faith, or in any way

inferior in his prayers. Those who suggest such a thing have only sided with Paul’s critics in Corinth. They had no basis for their charges, and neither do those who would affirm Paul’s repeated petition was one that lacked faith.

THAT IT MIGHT DEPART FROM ME

“ . . . *that it might depart from me.*” Other versions read, “*to take it away from me,*”^{NIV} “*that it would leave,*”^{NRSV} “*that it might be taken away from me,*”^{BBE} “*to make me well again,*”^{LIVING} “*I wanted it to go away from me,*” “*to rid me of him,*”^{WEYMOUTH} and “*to make it go away and leave me.*”^{WILLIAMS}

The objective of Paul’s repeated petition is clearly stated: that the “*thorn,*” as well as the “*messenger*” who

ministered it, would “*depart*” from him. He could not make it go away himself, and thus He asked the Lord to do this. There was no physician that could help him in this matter. He did not ask the churches to join him in this supplication. He was close to the Lord, and no one could have better presented the case than himself. After all, the Lord had given to him unparalleled visions and revelations, sharing things that had been kept secret from the foundation of the world. Who would imagine that Jesus would divulge such marvelous things to a man whose faith waffled back and forth? The very notion is too foolish to pursue any further. It reveals an abysmal ignorance of the very nature of the Lord’s dealings with His servants. God does not vouchsafe heavenly secrets to the carnal.

MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT

“^{9a} *And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness.*”

It has become fashionable to

about the “simple Gospel,” and the uncomplicated nature of salvation.

HE SAID UNTO ME

“*And He said unto me . . .*” Other

The most prodigious thinkers in all of the world have been challenged by Scripture. Many of them have even stood dismayed before the Word of God, unable to make any satisfactory sense out of it with mere natural resources.

speak of the simplicity of salvation, and the commonness of Scripture – even though there has never been a student of Scripture in the history of the world who classified it as “children’s reading.” The most prodigious thinkers in all of the world have been challenged by Scripture. Many of them have even stood dismayed before the Word of God, unable to make any satisfactory sense out of it with mere natural resources. We have a cause before us that will challenge the simplistic thinker who loves to boast

versions read, “*he hath said unto me,*”^{ASV} “*but he has answered me,*”^{NJB} “*Each time He said,*”^{NLT} “*He said this to me,*”^{IE} and “*but His reply has been.*”^{WEYMOUTH}

After Paul had besought the Lord “*three times,*” that the “*thorn*” and its “*messenger*” would be removed, he finally received an answer: “*He said unto me.*” Surely his petition will be answered, and the thorn will be removed. After all, there are promises given concerning prayer in general, as well as prayer for the sick.

- ☛ “*For every one that asketh receiveth: and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened*” (Mat 7:8).
- ☛ “*And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive*” (Mat 21:22).
- ☛ “*And whatsoever ye shall ask in My name, **that will I do,** that the Father may be glorified in the Son*” (John 14:13).
- ☛ “*If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and **it shall be done unto you***” (John 15:7).
- ☛ “*And in that day ye shall ask Me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My name, **He will give it you***” (John 16:23).
- ☛ “*Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. **The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much***” (James 5:16).
- ☛ “*And whatsoever we ask, **we receive of Him,** because we keep His*

There are certain disadvantages to the flesh when a person is given much insight from the Lord– by Given O. Blakely

commandments, and **do those things that are pleasing in His sight**" (1 John 3:22).

- ☛ "And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask any thing according to His will, He heareth us: and if we know that He hear us, **whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him**" (1 John 5:15).

Should we not expect, therefore, that the Lord will remove Paul's "thorn," and call back the "messenger" that was authorized to "buffet" him? Do you suppose that it is possible Paul failed to meet the criteria that had been spelled out? (1) Believing. (2) Asking in Christ's name. (3) Abiding in Christ, and His words abiding in him. (4) Asking the Father in Jesus' name. (5) A fervent prayer offered by a righteous man. (6) Keeping His commandments and doing what is pleasing in His sight. (7) Asking according to the will of the Lord.

Here we will find that there is a higher law than the temporary welfare of the saints of God. I am not sure that the above texts are intended to cover, for example, things **unrelated** to the kingdom of God and His revealed purpose. This does not mean that such requests are ignored. We are speaking here of **guaranteed** answers if the individual meets the stipulations.

Let us behold how the Lord answered Paul. There is much to be learned here that will deliver is from overly simplistic views of the Kingdom, and the tendency to exalt our perceived needs above His revealed objectives. Admittedly, we are on very sensitive ground. Therefore, I will keep myself to the text itself, lest I inadvertently cause some to despair of having their prayers answered.

The answer to Paul's request did not come by much study and research, and neither will yours. We are not traversing in the field of academics here, but of the nature and purposes of the Father as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR THEE

... My grace is sufficient for thee... Other versions read, "My grace is enough for you,"^{BBE} "My grace suffices thee,"^{DARBY} "My gracious favor is all you need,"^{NLT} "No. But I am with you; that is all you need,"^{LIVING} "My gracious love is enough for you,"^{IE} "My grace is all you need,"^{ISV} "My spiritual strength is sufficient,"^{WILLIAMS} and "My grace (My favor and loving-kindness and mercy) is enough for you [sufficient against any danger and enables you to bear the trouble manfully]."^{AMPLIFIED}

While this answer is personal, it is not confined to Paul. Who would dare to affirm that grace was not sufficient for them as well as for Paul? **What person is there who would boldly declare that more is needed than the grace of God?** Is there

While this answer is personal, it is not confined to Paul. Who would dare to affirm that grace was not sufficient for them as well as for Paul? What person is there who would boldly declare that more is needed than the grace of God? Is there really such a thing as a trouble or circumstance that is too much for grace?

really such a thing as a trouble or circumstance that is too much for grace?

What did the Lord mean by this answer? For one thing, Paul's thrice-uttered petition was denied. The Lord refused to remove the thorn or call back the messenger of Satan. For another thing, the Lord reveals a secret here that was little known previously, and still remains hidden from the multitudes. **His grace "is sufficient."** That is, there is no insufficiency or inadequacy in it. It brings more to the individual than a "thorn" and the "messenger of Satan" who brings it, can remove from that person. If Grace "abounded" **"MUCH MORE"** than the "offence" which plunged the human race into hopelessness (Rom 5:15), you may be sure it will have no difficulty outweighing a thorn!

"Grace" is a big word. It speaks of the love, mercy, and goodness of God.

There is strength in it, as well as peace, joy, and unparalleled satisfaction. There is Divine desires and favor as well.

- ☛ Grace enabled us to believe (Acts 18:27).
- ☛ Grace teaches us to reject ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to "live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world" (Tit 2:11-12).
- ☛ Grace can enable a servant of God to "labor more abundantly than they all" (1 Cor 15:10).
- ☛ Grace comes with abundant supplies of "love" and "faith" (1 Tim 1:14).
- ☛ It is "through the grace of God" that

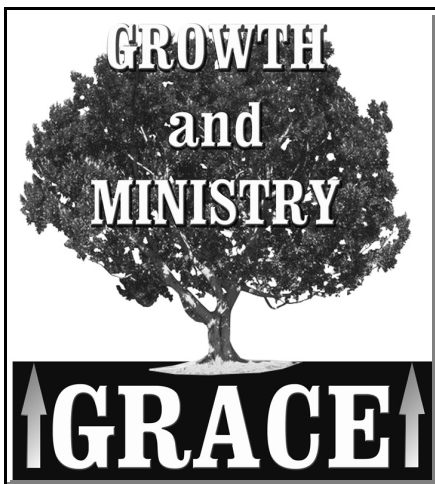
we "shall be saved" (Acts 15:11).

- ☛ The "word of His grace" is able to "build you up, and give you an inheritance among all them that are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).
- ☛ Grace is what has "justified" us (Rom 3:24).
- ☛ Being "under grace" frees us from being "under law" (Rom 6:14-15).
- ☛ The differing nature of spiritual gifts is owing to "grace" (Rom 12:6).
- ☛ Grace enabled Paul to be a "wise masterbuilder" (1 Cor 3:10).
- ☛ Redemption and remission are owing to "His grace" (Eph 1:7).
- ☛ We are given "everlasting consolation and good hope through grace" 2

Thess 2:16).

- We were “saved” and “called” in strict accord with God’s grace (2 Tim 1:9).
- Grace can make a person “strong” in the Lord (2 Tim 2:1). By the grace of God, Jesus “tasted death for every man” (Heb 2:9).
- The throne upon which Jesus is presently seated is a “throne of grace” – a throne where sustaining and empowering grace is dispensed (Heb 4:16).
- Grace establishes “the heart” (Heb 13:9).
- We “stand” in the grace of God (1 Pet 5:12).

What possible inadequacy can exist where the grace of God abounds? What circumstance is capable of neutralizing grace when the individual has a strong faith? Is there any circumstance capable of separating us from the love of God – and love is the principle ingredient in grace? Is it not written, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:35,39).



Grace is sufficient, and let no one deny it! **There is no such thing as a**

circumstance in which grace cannot sustain, enable growth, and cause an abounding ministry. It is no wonder that the Lord said, “My grace is sufficient.”

But that is not all He said to Paul. He said, “My grace is sufficient FOR THEE!” The grievous “thorn” for which Paul sought deliverance had not diminished the strength or effectiveness of the grace of God! There was no need to remove it, for it was really taking nothing of value from him. Yet, there is more to the matter than that!

MY STRENGTH IS MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS

“. . . for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Other versions read, “for power is perfected in weakness,”^{NASB} “for My power is made perfect in weakness,”^{NIV} “for my power is made complete in what is feeble,”^{BBE} “for power is made perfect in infirmity,”^{DOUAY} “for my power is made perfect through weakness,”^{GENEVA} “for power is at full stretch in weakness,”^{NJB} “My power works best in your weakness,”^{NLT} “for My power in infirmity is perfected,”^{YLT} “My power shows up best in weak people,”^{LIVING} “power matures in weakness,”^{WEYMOUTH} “it is only by means of conscious weakness that perfect power is developed,”^{WILLIAMS} “for My strength and power are made perfect (fulfilled and completed) and show themselves most effective in [your] weakness,”^{AMPLIFIED} and “for where there is weakness, my power is shown the more completely.”^{PHILLIPS}

Notice that what was called “grace” is here referred to as “strength,” or “power.” Here is the underling reason for the Lord’s rejection of Paul’s petition: **If He removed the thorn, there would also have been a corresponding reduction in the amount of Divine strength He gave to him.**

Divine strength and human strength do not mix – in fact, they are an admixture. Grace is not given to make “the natural man” better, or to increase fleshly aptitude. Human “weakness” is what causes Divine strength to mature. This was depicted in Israel.

- In their deliverance from Egypt when they were helpless and oppressed.

- In crossing the Red Sea safely, and seeing their enemies drowned in the very waters through which they passed on dry ground.
- In receiving manna every day, when there were no other resources.
- In receiving water from a rock – and a rock of flint at that!

When was it that Moses was given seventy competent men to assist him in judging the people? It was when he cried out. “And Moses said unto the LORD, Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? and wherefore have I not found favor in thy sight, that thou layest the burden of all this people upon me?” (Num 11:11,25). **God’s strength is perfected in human weakness.**

When did a holy angel come to encourage Elijah, even preparing a meal that strengthened him for forty days? It was when Elijah’s strength ran out and he said, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers” (1 Kgs 19:4). **Where there is weakness, God’s power is shown more completely.**

This is the manner of the kingdom, so that **when a person focuses upon human strength, there is a certain forfeiture of Divine strength.** Should a person choose to rely upon natural resources, the Lord has a way of depleting them even though all manner of energy is expended to keep and refine them. He can send Jonah to the bottom of the sea in the belly of a great fish, where human wisdom evaporates. Then Jonah will willingly and eagerly cry out, “Salvation is of the Lord” (Jonah 2:9).

Many a poor soul has failed to see the truth that Paul grasped after only three petitions. Thus they have stumbled through life, unable to serve the Lord acceptably, or with any level of satisfaction. Nor, indeed, have they experience the grace of God to any measurable degree. There was simply too much of themselves in everything they did. Their world was too small. But it was not so with Paul. He was “given” a thorn, so that he would the better qualify for the grace of God.

There are certain disadvantages to the flesh when a person is given much insight from the Lord– by Given O. Blakely

MOST GLADLY I WILL GLORY

“^{9b} Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

How does a servant of God who has been mercilessly buffeted by a “messenger of Satan” react to a rejection of his petition go be relieved of his grievous “thorn in the flesh?” Is faith capable of handling such a situation? Will the man of God despair like Esau, weeping bitterly and pursuing his request even after it has been denied (Heb 12:17)? Will he cry out like Cain that his lot was “greater than I can bear” (Gen 4:13)? Will he cry out like the patriarch Job, who was not told what was happening to him, “Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived” (Job 3:3)?

Now, let us behold how a man of God who has been granted a large measure of faith will react. Let us look carefully at the response of a man who has perceived more of God’s purpose than the ordinary believer.

MOST GLADLY THEREFORE

“Most gladly therefore . . .” Other versions read, “Therefore most gladly,” NKJV “all the more gladly,” NIV “very gladly,” GENEVA “I am happiest of all,” NJB “So now I am glad,” NLT “so I will be very happy,” IE “most happily,” ISV “Therefore, I will . . . gladly,” AMPLIFIED and “I have cheerfully made up my mind.” PHILLIPS

Paul is not cast down because his petition was denied. Now that he sees what the Lord is doing, he puts on the “garment of praise” (Isa 61:3). **He arrives at a happy conclusion, not a miserable concession.**

I WILL RATHER GLORY IN MY INFIRMITIES

“ . . . Will I rather glory in my infirmities . . . ” Other versions read, “rather boast in my infirmities,” NKJV “I will rather boast about my weakness,” NASB “I will boast all the more . . . about my weaknesses,” NIV “I take pride in my feeble body,” BBE “therefore will I rejoice in mine infirmities,” GENEVA “boast about how

weak I am,” LIVING “to brag about my weaknesses,” IE “I will boast of my infirmities rather than complain about them,” WEYMOUTH “Therefore, I will all the more gladly glory in my weaknesses and infirmities,” AMPLIFIED and “to be proud of my weaknesses,” PHILLIPS

This is why he has testified of his beatings, shipwrecks, stoning, and perils. It is why he has spoken of being hungry, thirsty, destitute, and apparently at the mercy of his enemies. **He now sees that it has all been in order that the Lord might give him “more grace,” and more strength.** He will not boast of what he has done, but how he has survived the assaults of the wicked one.

THAT THE POWER MAY REST UPON ME

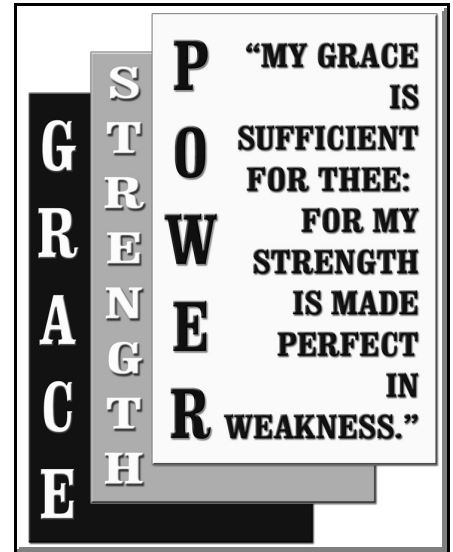
“ . . . that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” Other versions reads, “that the power of Christ may dwell in me,” NASB “So that the power of Christ may be on me,” BBE “that the power of Christ may dwell upon me,” DARBY “that the power of Christ may dwell with me,” NAB “that the power of Christ may work through me,” NLT “to be a living demonstration of Christ’s power, instead of showing off my own power and abilities,” LIVING “in order that Christ’s power might overshadow me,” WEYMOUTH “so that the strength of Christ may overshadow me,” WILLIAMS “that over me like a tent may be pitched the power of Christ,” MONTGOMERY “that the strength and power of Christ (the Messiah) may rest (yes, may pitch a tent over and dwell) upon me!” AMPLIFIED and “because they mean a deeper experience of the power of Christ.” PHILLIPS

Paul now saw his infirmities – all of them – as the appointed means through which the “power of Christ” would remain with him, enabling him to continue to “labor more abundantly than they all” (1 Cor 15:10). Notice how these three words are used interchangeably in our text: “grace,” “strength,” and “power.”

Grace emphasizes God’s love and favor. **Strength** emphasizes the ability of God to do what He pleases. **Power** emphasizes that God does, in fact,

zealously accomplish His will and purpose. In redemption, now that Jesus is enthroned at God’s right hand, He is involving the body of Christ in the fulfillment of His objectives, and doing so in an unprecedented way.

Angelic hosts have witnessed



great feats of strength among the sons of men. Samson killing a thousand men with the jawbone of an ass (Judges 15:15), carrying away the bronze gates of a city (Judges 16:3), and pulling down the temple of Dagon with his bare hands (Judges 16:29-30). They have seen Shamgar the Judge kill 600 Philistines with an “ox goad” (Judges 3:31), and Adino the Ezrite kill 800 men with a spear “at one time” (2 Sam 23:8). However, would any venture to say that the “power of Christ” rested, or remained upon them? Indeed not, for they fought against “flesh and blood.” None of them would have fared well against the awesome “prince of Persia,” who detained a powerful angel in battle for twenty-one days (Dan 10:13).

The “power of Christ” that rested upon Paul was of another order. Through it Paul pulled down bastions of erroneous thought, “casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor

10:4-5). He broke through the powers of darkness, turning men from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God (Acts 26:18).

And what did he have to endure

powers of darkness and constrain men to call upon the name of the Lord. The strict lifestyle of the Pharisee would not be sufficient to tap into this power! Gamaliel, with all of his Jewish expertise, could not deliver such

In order for such phenomenal things to happen, it would take more than the Rabbinical schools of the Jews. If this former persecutor of the church is going to be what He has been called to be, he must cut the chords with Adam and draw closely to the Lord Jesus Christ.

in order to do this? He had to endure beatings, stoning, shipwrecks, abandonment at sea, and enumerable perils. He was infirm in body, chained in prison, and once bitten by a deadly viper. To men he looked “weak” – that is why his critics were so bold to speak against him. They would have not done so if he appeared before them as mighty Samson, or perhaps Elijah, calling down fire from heaven. But Paul had been given too much to be classified as a mere hero among men. He will deliver an insightful message to the world that will shake the

marvelous power to Paul.

In order for such phenomenal things to happen, it would take more than the Rabbinical schools of the Jews. **If this former persecutor of the church is going to be what He has been called to be, he must cut the chords with Adam and draw closely to the Lord Jesus Christ.** And how will that happen? It will come by means of “weakness” – by being put into circumstances where nature has no resources, and self simply is not equal to the occasion.

It took the tutelage of Jesus to clear the fog of nature so Paul could see this, and once he saw it, he heartily embraced it. It took the painful gouging of an otherwise intolerable “thorn” to move Paul to make three strong supplications to the Lord for its removal. It took the pummeling of a “messenger from Satan” to confirm how weak the Adamic nature really is, and how impoverished in wisdom is the “natural man.” But Paul saw it, and when he did, he “gladly” gloried in what was otherwise too difficult to bear. With “the power of Christ” resting upon him, he became equal to the afflictions of Satan’s “messenger.”

This is too hard for the flesh to learn. It is like that song that was sung in the glory. It is said of the song, “and no man could learn that song but those . . . redeemed from the earth” (Rev 14:3). But for those who can learn this blessed truth, there are such lofty and satisfying experiences as no unformed tongue can boast. **Actually, this is most excellently adapted to our situation, for “weakness” is the epitaph over our fallen race.** If the Lord’s strength is experientially perfected in human weakness, then the possibilities are endless for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Oh, that the sons of God would take hold of the truth of this wonderful text. There is so much grace to be possessed.

WHEN I AM WEAK THEN AM I STRONG

“¹⁰ Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.”

Now Paul draws his conclusion. It is more than an academic determination, or a mere exercise in heartless human logic. This is a conclusion that impacts his spirit, making him superior to the adversity that he experiences.

THEREFORE

“Therefore . . .” Other versions read, “That is why,” NIV “then,” RSV “Wherefore,” ASV “So,” BBE “For which

cause,” DOUAY “and that is why,” NJB “Since I know,” NLT and “In fact.” WEYMOUTH

This is a conclusion based on two great pillars.

- First, the statement of the Savior. “And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9a).
- Second, the insightful determination that Paul’s faith produced. “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (2 Cor

12:9b).

I TAKE PLEASURE IN . . .

“ . . . I take pleasure in . . . ” Other versions read “I am well content,” NASB “I delight in,” NIV “I am content with,” NRSV “I please myself,” DOUAY “I am glad of,” NJB “have delectation in,” GENEVA “I am well pleased,” YLT “I am quite happy,” LIVING “that is why I rejoice,” MONTGOMERY “I am well pleased and take pleasure In,” AMPLIFIED and “I can even enjoy.” PHILLIPS

Taking “pleasure” is not pleasure after the order of this world – the “pleasures of sin for a season.” The phrase “take pleasure” does not mean “it

There are certain disadvantages to the flesh when a person is given much insight from the Lord— by Given O. Blakely

feels good, or I really enjoy it.” It rather means “I think it good . . . to do willingly . . . to prefer or choose . . . to be favorably inclined to,” THAYER “to consent to . . . approve of,” FRIBERG “be content,” UBS “and “to be glad to do.” LIDDELL-SCOTT

The idea is that in view of what I receive from God during these times of weakness, I gladly consent to them, perceiving them as occasions of Divine intimacy and advantage, rather than woes that work against me.

ADVERSE CIRCUMSTANCES

“ . . . infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses . . . ”

Circumstances are like a mighty torrent that drowns weak souls – those who cannot see the unacceptability of the flesh to God. Paul briefly classifies some of these harrowing experiences, which are all areas in which “the power of Christ” may be realized.

Infirmities

Other versions read, “weaknesses,” NASB “being feeble,” BBE and “the thorn,” LIVING The word “infirmities” is a general word referring to human frailty. It has particular reference to feebleness of health or sickness. Jesus is said to have healed people “of their infirmities” (Lk 5:15). He also “cured many of their infirmities” (Lk 7:21). Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus cast “seven demons” (Mk 16:9), was also “healed . . . of infirmities” (Lk 8:2). A woman who was bowed together for eighteen years was said to have “a spirit of infirmity” (Lk 13:11). A certain lame man is described as having “an infirmity thirty and eight years” (John 5:5). Paul refers to his own “infirmities” three times (2 Cor 11:30; 12:5,9). It was because of an “infirmity,” or “sickness,” NIV that Paul was delayed at Galatia and took the occasion to preach the Gospel to them (Gal 4:13). Timothy appears to have been chronically sick, as Paul instructed him on how to deal with his “often infirmities,” or “frequent illnesses” NIV (1 Tim 5:23).

Now Paul affirms that he sees good in these “infirmities,” and is content with them.

Reproaches

Other versions read, “insults,”

NASB “injuries,” ASV “unkind words,” BBE “rebukes,” PNT “damages,” YLT “ill-treatment,” MONTGOMERY and “suffering.” PHILLIPS

Here is another kind of suffering that can have more adverse effects than an illness – “reproaches.” These are expressions of insolence, impudence, haughtiness, insult, and mental injury. STRONGS They are “serious in injuries done to as person, and grievous assaults.” LIDDELL-SCOTT Paul said he suffered “reproach” because he trusted “in the living God” (1 Tim 4:10). Hebrew believers were publically exposed

The idea is that in view of what I receive from God during these times of weakness, I gladly consent to them, perceiving them as occasions of Divine intimacy and advantage, rather than woes that work against me.

to insult, or “reproaches” (Heb 10:33). Peter spoke of people being “reproached for the name of Christ” (1 Pet 4:14) – that is, reviled and vilified because of embracing Christ, testifying of Him, and living unto Him.

Now Paul says he sees certain advantages in these otherwise bitter experiences. He cannot avoid them – at least not without denying Christ. Therefore, he chooses to view them from a higher perspective.

Necessities

Other versions read, “needs,” NKJV “distresses,” NASB “hardships,” NIV “constraints,” NJB “troubles,” MONTGOMERY and “privations.” PHILLIPS Necessities speak of times when provisions needed to live are not available. Job referred to this as “my necessary good” (Job 23:12). Paul referred maintaining “good works for necessary uses,” or working in order to “provide for daily necessities” (Tit 3:14). There were times when Paul simply did not have these “necessities.” He spoke of times when he did not have food, clothing, or a place to lay his head (1 Cor 4:11; 2 Cor 11:9; Phil 4:12).

Now Paul confesses that he sees

these times with a new perspective. They are times in which he is qualified for the power of Christ to remain upon him.

Persecutions

Other translations read, “cruel attacks.” BBE “Persecutions” are the cruel advances of the enemy. They are outward oppressions that are associated with violence. Being beaten five times with forty stripes save one, three times with rods, and being stoned are in that category. This classification includes

imprisonments, being hunted like a wild animal, and being hauled before the courts of the land on trumped-up charges. Paul frequently refers to his persecutions, when the enemy appeared to be getting the best of him (1 Cor 4:12; 2 Cor 4:9; 1 Thess 2:15; 2 Tim 3:10-11).

Now Paul says that such occasions were actually an advantage to him. He saw them differently now that he has learned of how Divine strength is ministered.

Distresses

Other versions read, “difficulties,” NASB “calamities,” NRSV “troubles,” BBE “straits,” DARBY “anguish,” GENEVA “constraints,” NAB “anguishes,” PNT “disasters,” IE and “grievous difficulties.” WEYMOUTH “Distresses” are calamities, extreme affliction, and anguish. It is when life is like passing through two narrow walls that bring great inward pain. They include the idea of pressure, stress, difficulty, and trouble. It is when life becomes restrictive and extremely uncomfortable. Elsewhere Paul speaks of the realities of these “distresses” (Rom 8:35; 2 Cor 4:8; 6:4; 1 Thess 3:7).

Now Paul testifies that he gladly

consents to go through such times, when called upon to do so. He sees that they are times when Divine resources can be obtained that are not otherwise available

themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again" (2 Cor 5:15). They come when we are *"steadfast and unmoveable, always abounding in the*

appears to be a contradiction of all reason. Those who have a distorted understanding of some of the Scriptures also have to bite their tongue when they read this text. Take, for example, the promise, ***"No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness is of Me, saith the LORD"*** (Isa 54:17). If this is an unqualified promise for every believer, how, then, can we account for "persecution"? What about the beatings, arrests, imprisonments, and final death of Paul? What of the stoning of Stephen, the beheading of John the Baptist and James, and the martyrdom of Antipas? Are we to pretend that these are not in the Word of God? Has Paul abandoned all good sense in seeing good in times of weakness?

It is time for all the church to take hold of what Paul has confessed to the Corinthians. "When I am weak, I am really strong." ^{IE} That is, Divine power is dispensed when we do not have any of our own! As long as we think we are adequate in our own persons, we will be spiritually impoverished. There is no acceptable alternative to this conclusion.

to him.

For Christ's Sake

"... for Christ's sake ..." Other versions read, *"for the sake of Christ,"* ^{NRSV} *"on account of Christ,"* ^{BBE} *"for Christ,"* ^{DOUAY} and *"for Christ's good."* ^{NLT}

The hardships of life of which Paul speaks are not experienced in the normality of life – as when regions are flooded, or experience earthquakes and hurricanes. This is not speaking of famines and pestilences that descend upon certain regions of the world, creating havoc, hardship, sorrow, and even death.

These are hardships that are experienced *"for Christ's sake"* – **that is, they are the earthly repercussions of faith and diligent service.** These are encountered when men live *"not unto*

work of the Lord" (1 Cor 15:58).

WHEN I AM WEAK, THEN AM I STRONG

"... for when I am weak, then am I strong." Other versions read, *"when I am feeble, then am I strong,"* ^{BBE} *"when I am weak, then I am powerful,"* ^{DARBY} *"it is when I am weak that I am strong,"* ^{NJB} *"when I am infirm, I am powerful,"* ^{YLT} *"when I am weak, then I am strong – the less I have, the more I depend upon Him,"* ^{LIVING} *"when I am weak, that's when I am really strong,"* ^{IE} *"for it is when I am consciously weak that I am really strong,"* ^{WILLIAMS} *"for when I am weak [in human strength], then am I [truly] strong (able, powerful in Divine strength),"* ^{AMPLIFIED} and *"my very weakness makes me strong in Him."* ^{PHILLIPS}

This is a statement out of which the flesh can make no sense at all. It

Paul is speaking of a level of Divine fellowship that is scarcely known by the professing church. It is certainly true that no weapon formed against the saints of God, will **ultimately** prosper – but that is the missing perspective. But there will be times when the enemy does **appear** to be prospering – like a *"messenger from Satan"* buffeting and pummeling the Apostle Paul. **If God is going to wipe away all tears, then there will surely be some shed in this world.**

It is time for all the church to take hold of what Paul has confessed to the Corinthians. *"When I am weak, I am really strong."* ^{IE} **That is, Divine power is dispensed when we do not have any of our own!** As long as we think we are adequate in our own persons, we will be spiritually impoverished. There is no acceptable alternative to this conclusion.

CONCLUSION

It is good for us to learn from Paul to view our life with more discernment. Many of the things that cause affliction in us are actually opportunities to move closer to Christ, and have His power rest upon us. All of this presumes that we are *"workers together with God"* (1 Cor 3:9),

and seeking first His kingdom and *"His righteousness"* (Matt 6:33).

None of these things can be effectively taught in a classroom setting. The best we can do is simply relate the way things really are – that Christ's

strength is perfected, or matured through human weakness and frailty. This is not something that happens automatically, but is apprehended by faith. We become conscious of these things as we are pressing toward the mark, running the race with patience, and fighting the good

There are certain disadvantages to the flesh when a person is given much insight from the Lord– by Given O. Blakely

fight of faith. I do not know that God has anywhere promised spiritual or eternal advantages to those who are firmly ensconced in *"this present evil world."* Those who live with themselves at the

center of the circle of life, by that very posture, forfeit *"the power of Christ."* Any posture of life that accents self, forfeits the right to power. Of course, this has some rather alarming repercussions

among those who take these things seriously. However, for those who are willing to receive them, a most blessed experience awaits them – one that promotes confidence and assurance.

Our next Hungry Saints Meeting will be held on Friday, 3/17/2006. In this session, we will continue our current series of lessons on the Epistle of Second Corinthians. Our text will be verses eleven through twenty-one of chapter twelve: **"PAUL DEFENDS HIS APOSTLESHIP."** It is a sad day when the apostle who "labored more abundantly than they all" is required to stoop to defend his apostleship to a church that he founded. Notwithstanding, because of the effects of the false teachers at Corinth, it became necessary for Paul to engage in this unpleasing task. Our meeting will begin at 7:00 P.M. You are invited to bring your family and friends for fellowship around the Word of God. Refreshments are served afterward, with a time of extended fellowship for everyone.

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A place where believers can meet, fellowship, be edified, and express themselves.

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COMMENTARY on Second Corinthians: <http://wotruth.com/2Corinthians.htm>