

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

II 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.

NOTES

Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

Lesson Text: II Corinthians 12:1-10

Related Scriptures: I Kings 19:9-13; Romans 5:1-5;
I Corinthians 2:1-10; II Corinthians 11:16-33

TIME: probably A.D. 56

PLACE: from Macedonia

GOLDEN TEXT—"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" (II Corinthians 12:10).

Lesson Exposition

PAUL'S VISION OF HEAVEN— II Cor. 12:1-4

Vision from Christ (II Cor. 12:1). If the Corinthians wanted to boast of their accomplishments, Paul thought it better to boast in what the Lord accomplished in his weaknesses. Paul chooses throughout his letter not to dwell on his academic accomplishments, such as being the prized pupil of the renowned first-century rabbi, Gamaliel. He does not bring up the fact that he could speak multiple languages fluently. Instead, he gives a list of his many sufferings (cf. 11:23-33).

Paul acknowledges that nothing is ever to be gained by boasting in the flesh. The Corinthians were looking for someone who had impressive credentials, but Paul would not indulge them. In both of his letters to the Corinthians, he makes it evident that if he boasted, he would boast only in the Lord.

"Caught up" by Christ (II Cor. 12:2). To further drive home the point that he is not boasting in himself, he refers to himself in the third person as if it had possibly been someone else's

vision. But New Testament scholars agree from the context of the passage that Paul is most definitely referring to himself as the man that he knew. The details that he gives could only be provided by the one who actually saw the vision.

In this vision, Paul was "caught up" to the third heaven. Notice that he does not say that he went up, but that he was "caught up." No one can ascend to God on his own.

The Jews had been taught that the "third heaven" is the dwelling place of God. Paul did not know whether he was in his body or not, but he does not seem concerned with that detail.

Glory of Christ (II Cor. 12:3-4). Paul does not describe every detail of his vision, because it was not possible or permitted to repeat the things he heard. The prohibition may have come directly from God, but there is also an aspect that human language simply lacked the words to describe the sounds and speech of heaven. Therefore, Paul is not able to provide specific details about the scene.

PAUL'S THORN IN THE FLESH— II Cor. 12:5-7

Paul's boasting (II Cor. 12:5-6). The goal here was not to brag about what he had done in his own life. That would have benefited no one. His stated goal all along was to preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified (I Cor. 2:2). He was not out on a personal glory campaign for himself, nor was he trying to gain a personal following. Paul was perfectly content with exposing his weakness in order to emphasize God's power at work in him.

Paul's humility (II Cor. 12:7). The glorious vision Paul experienced did not come without a cost to him personally. It is easy for those who have intimate experiences with the Lord to become conceited and to look down on others as unspiritual, ironically letting their pride turn a precious gift into a snare and a hindrance to them.

Much debate has been aired as to what exactly the thorn was, but Paul does not tell us. Therefore, it is absolutely futile to speculate. There simply is no way to know. If we follow the intention of the text, it is much more important to understand the thorn's purpose than to determine exactly what it was.

Satan hoped the message of the thorn would bring evil to Paul, but God had a beneficial message in mind: Don't become arrogant and prideful. God had blessed Paul in a very unique way, and He had placed a unique calling on his life, which was to take the gospel to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 9:15).

PAUL'S CRY FOR RELIEF— II Cor. 12:8-10

Paul pleads for help (II Cor. 12:8). Paul knew that he could not relieve himself from this problem. He could not simply pull the thorn out of his flesh and obtain relief. When it would not go away, he pleaded with God three times to remove it from him.

God answers (II Cor. 12:9-10). But God did not remove it. He responded to Paul's request by telling him that His grace was sufficient for him. What did Paul need more than relief? Grace. Not grace to deliver him from his affliction, but grace to continue on in spite of it. God would get greater glory by using Paul in spite of the thorn than by removing it altogether.

Paul learned a great lesson in contentment from the thorn in his flesh. He learned to boast in his weaknesses instead of his strength because it was his weakness that magnified the power of God in his life.

—Robert Ferguson, Jr.

QUESTIONS

1. What did Paul focus on instead of his accomplishments?
2. What did Paul choose to boast about in his letters?
3. Why can we be confident that Paul is speaking of himself in mentioning the heavenly vision?
4. What is a possible reason why Paul did not provide a lot of detail about the vision?
5. Why was Paul content to expose his weakness to the Corinthians?
6. Why are we not told what Paul's thorn in the flesh was?
7. What message did God bring to Paul through the thorn that Satan tried to use for evil?
8. How did Paul respond to the thorn at first?
9. How did God respond to Paul's plea for help?
10. What lesson did Paul learn from his suffering?

—Robert Ferguson, Jr.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. When God leads believers to boast, it is for His glory and not their own (II Cor. 12:1)
2. God uses both the highs and lows in our lives in our ministry to others (vss. 2-4).
3. God's goodness speaks for itself without any need for us to boast (vss. 5-6).
4. Without trials, believers would forget to rely on God (vs. 7).
5. Persistent prayer demonstrates faith in the midst of trials (vs. 8).
6. God wants His people to minister in His power, not their own strength (vs. 9).
7. God's light shines brightest in a believer when his own light is most faint (vs. 10).

—Cheryl Y. Powell.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. In what other New Testament passages does God use visions and revelations to communicate with one of His people?
2. What are some of the ways in which God has revealed Himself to His people?
3. What comes to mind when you think about heaven? What Scriptures teach us about heaven?
4. How is it possible for Paul to boast in his infirmities?
5. What Scriptures could you use to encourage a friend or family member who lives with chronic pain or illness?

—Cheryl Y. Powell.

Golden Text Illuminated

“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” (II Corinthians 12:10).

Paul proclaimed that he would gladly boast about this affliction and all his other frailties.

This may seem odd to us, especially in a world that so prizes comfort and success. Why would anyone boast about their weaknesses? Not only that, but Paul writes that he takes pleasure in insults, hunger, thirst, persecutions, and other distresses, including imprisonment, shipwreck, stoning, exposure to the elements, flogging, and even his anxiety about the churches (II Cor. 11:24-28).

Paul did not believe that his problems and predicaments were intrinsically good. Rather, he was content that God was working through them to produce something of eternal value in him. Paul shows a similar attitude in Romans 5:3-5 when he writes that he will exult in his tribulations, knowing that they produce a godly chain of results: troubles lead to perseverance, which leads to strong character, which in turn produces hope, finally culminating in the love of God flowing from his heart.

Paul concluded this chapter with his characteristic mixture of humility and sternness. He reminds the Corinthians that neither he nor any of his emissaries have ever been a burden to them. Indeed, he vowed to expend everything he had for them. But he also hopes that on his next visit they would not disappoint him.

—Mark Winter.