

2 Cor 12:1-10 Exaltation and Infirmary, part 1

In our text today, Paul mentions two experiences that he's had. He's continuing his "foolish" boasting about himself in order to convince the church to remain loyal to him and not follow the false teachers. He doesn't enjoy talking about himself, but he feels that he has to distinguish himself from the false teachers, who are boasting about their visions and dreams.

In this passage, Paul mentions two particular experiences: the first one, heavenly, the second one, satanic. The first experience was Paradise. The second experience was almost hellish. In the first, he approaches the throne of God. In the second, he's brought down to earth by pain, suffering, and loss. The first experience was unique to Paul; very few people have an encounter like that. The second experience is rather common; many people have a "thorn in the flesh" of one kind or another.

Our experiences are not quite like Paul's, yet we too may have spiritual highs and lows. Whatever our experience might be, we can respond like Paul did in vs. 9-10. We can see our weaknesses as an opportunity to experience more of God's grace and strength. That's the kind of experience we should be seeking—more grace and more power to serve and honor God, more dependence on God and less on ourselves.

Paul tells us about his experiences and his responses to them. Like Paul, we usually cannot control the experiences, but we can control our response to them.

12:1 Note that the author begins this section by repeating the fact that his boasting is "not profitable." He knows that this boasting about his experiences and comparing himself to others is foolish and not Christ-like. He didn't want to talk about his personal supernatural experiences. But he's doing it in the hopes that his readers will listen to him instead of the false teachers—they were boasting about their supernatural experiences, and so Paul here describes one of his transcendent experiences.

.12b "I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord" – that's his next topic; now he's going to talk about a remarkable experience that happened to him.

Let's consider Paul's exaltation and infirmity.

I. .1-5 Exaltation: Paul's "visions and revelations"

As I mentioned, this experience was unique to Paul. Nowhere does the Bible say that every Christian should expect such dramatic experiences. Paul was a unique character; he was a uniquely chosen apostle, and as such, he sometimes had remarkable spiritual experiences, many of which are recorded in the book of Acts (Acts 9:12; 16:9, 10; 18:9, 10; 22:17–21; 23:11; 27:23, 24).

Some Christian groups put a lot of emphasis on supernatural experiences, i.e., visions, dreams, trances, revelations, ecstasies, and the like. They see these experiences as normal, part of the Christian life; they often expect such experiences during a worship service.

We typically call such people “Charismatics” or “Pentecostals.” They believe that God gives people experiences like this regularly.

Does God communicate to us today in visions, dreams, and transcendent experiences? No, the normal way God speaks to us today is through the Bible—the written word of God. The Bible is the only authoritative, God-breathed communication to us from God today.

In fact, the Word of God is “more sure” than personal experiences—2 Peter 2:19ff.

We must evaluate all spiritual experiences—our own or someone else’s—by the Word of God. If mystical experiences do not line up with biblical patterns and clear teaching, then we have no reason to believe the one claiming to have such experiences. I am frankly very doubtful of claims regarding supernatural experiences of this dramatic style.

We occasionally hear about “near death” experiences. A best-selling book tells the story of a little boy who supposedly died, had remarkable experiences in heaven, and then returned to tell everybody what happened. Years later, the author revealed that it was all a big lie; he dreamed up the whole thing. But book stores still sell that book. So I think we can be skeptical about claims like this unless the claim comes from an apostle. If it’s inspired—as the Bible is—we can believe it. If it’s not inspired, there is no compelling reason to believe it.

Paul is very reluctant to talk about his supernatural experiences, which shows us that such experiences are *not* normal, and even if they happen, we should be reluctant to talk about them. Paul went years without saying anything about this experience, so we should not expect such things to happen normally.

A. The experience—

1. .1b He had visions and revelations.

a) “visions” (ὄπτασία) – lit., an appearing; a sight that appears to the mind. Generally, a vision is supernatural, not physical. It pertains to something seen in one’s mind; it’s not a physical experience.

- b) “revelations” (ἀποκάλυψις) – the word means “something uncovered, revealed, made known.” Revelations would be anything that God revealed or exposed that would not otherwise be known. A revelation could be something seen or something revealed another way.

In verse 7, he refers to “the abundance (ὑπερβολή) of revelations.”

Paul, as an apostle, and during the early years of the church, had remarkable supernatural experiences. Jesus appeared to him on multiple occasions. He had visions and dreams. He had many such experiences—an abundance of them.

- c) We don’t deny that such things happened, but we are skeptical that such things are normal for today. That apostolic age was different; it was a transition from the OT law to the NT church. We see many things happening in the book of Acts that we don’t see happening today—they were not normative—they don’t necessarily set a pattern for normal Christian life.
- d) Why would the Lord give Paul this experience? Perhaps it was because Paul was about to suffer greatly for the cause of Christ, so he needed an overwhelming supernatural experience to give him strength to endure all the pain and opposition he’d encounter. Paul faced incredible challenges, opposition, and suffering. This vision gave him confidence that it was worth it all. His first-hand knowledge about the glories of heaven gave him courage to endure here on earth.
- e) Why would he relate this experience? It could be that the false teachers were claiming authority over the church because of their mystical experiences. Perhaps they claimed to have received revelation directly from God. Perhaps they claimed to have had dreams and visions. Paul has been comparing himself to the false teachers, so maybe he felt compelled to describe one of his experiences of visions and revelations to validate himself in the eyes of the Corinthian believers.

Quotes: [By relating this experience,] the Corinthians would see that [Paul] was not outmatched by his rivals in one important area of their boasting.¹

2. .2 A man caught up to the third heaven
 - a) “I know a man in Christ” – Although it sounds like Paul is about to tell us what happened to a fellow believer—“such a man” (vs. 3), “such a one” (vs. 5)—many Bible students believe that he’s actually describing his own experience here.
 - (1) Paul is comparing himself to the false teachers in this whole section. So this is most likely a description of what happened to him, not to someone else.
 - (2) His innate humility leads him to describe it in terms of something that happened to another person. He’s rather embarrassed even to talk about this, so he puts in terms of someone else’s experience.
 - (3) But the context and details make it pretty clear that he’s talking about an experience he had himself.
 - b) .2a And this happened 14 years ago. So he’s said nothing about it for 14 years. How many of us would keep silent about such an experience for 14 years? Most of us would tell others about it immediately. Paul didn’t.
 - c) BTW, the book of Acts does not relate this vision/revelation. It would have happened around AD 43, during the years that Paul spent in Syria, before he was accepted among the apostles in Jerusalem. These are sometimes called the “silent years” of Paul’s life because we have no record of his activities from about 35-45.

¹ Murray J. Harris, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 394.

3. .2end He was “caught up” (ἀρπαγέντα) to the third heaven. It’s the same root word as “caught up in the clouds” in 1 Thes 4:17, describing the rapture. It refers to a sudden seizing. He was caught up/seized suddenly by this experience.

4. This was such an overwhelming experience that Paul is uncertain as to the kind of experience this was, whether physical or spiritual, in the body or out of it. He didn’t know if he were dreaming or awake, if this were happening in space and time or only in his mind. Paul himself didn’t understand what kind of experience this was.

Quote: Consciousness of God totally eclipsed any awareness of the physical world of space and time.²

5. .2end Paul was caught up to “the third heaven.” Using biblical language, we would say that the sky/atmosphere is the first heaven, outer space is the second heaven, and heaven itself—God’s abode—is the third heaven. He calls the same place “Paradise.”

.4 Paradise is a Persian word meaning “walled garden/park.” In the dry and barren landscape of the middle east, a lush, private garden would be a wonderful place to be. Kings and wealthy people might have walled gardens like this.

At some point, people started thinking about heaven in terms of Paradise—the most wonderful place imaginable.

6. .4 In Paradise he “heard inexpressible words.”

a) Notice that Paul gives no description of what happened in heaven. He could not repeat the words that he heard there. What he heard was both “inexpressible” (ἄρρητος) and “unlawful” (οὐκ ἔξεστιν) to speak.

Paul uses a play on words here (ἄρρητα ῥήματα), meaning something like “expressions that cannot be expressed” or “unutterable utterances.” Speech that cannot be spoken.

² Murray J. Harris, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 395.

He's referring to words that *cannot* be expressed or that *must not be* expressed.

- b) Even if Paul understood these words, they were only suitable for heaven. One cannot speak such words on earth. These things are both *beyond* human speech and *unapproved* for human speech. It's best not to speculate about what kinds of things he heard; we don't know and Paul would not and could not tell us.

Quote: The things Paul watched in heaven are too sacred for our human minds to comprehend and assimilate.³

App: Often, when people claim to have gone to heaven, they also claim to have heard all sorts of things. They have many stories about what they saw and heard. Paul says that his experience was unutterable, not repeatable, private, not intended for public exposure.

E.g., The Charismatic preacher Jesse Duplantis infamously claims that he went to heaven and had a whole set of experiences there. I am not inclined to believe Mr. Duplantis. When Paul says that this happened to him, I believe him—he's an inspired apostle. When others make such claims, I am not at all inclined to believe them.

If Paul could not utter such things, if they are not lawful for him, then why is it OK for others to utter such things? Why is it lawful for them? Doesn't make much sense.

B. The response:

- 1. .5 I will boast about "such a one"
 - a) Remember that Paul is engaging in a little foolish boasting here to try to convince the people at Corinth to listen to him, not to the false teachers.

³ Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 19, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 410.

b) If the false teachers have stories of supernatural experiences, so does Paul. He doesn't really want to brag about this experience, but he mentions it in the hopes that it will convince the people that they should listen to him. If they are impressed/convinced by stories like this, then they should listen to him.

2. .5b I will boast in my infirmities (ἀσθενεία)—he does not want to brag about his supernatural experiences. He'd rather talk about his weaknesses—his afflictions. Cf. 11:24ff.

The true mark of a genuine servant of God is what he's suffered for the name of Christ. Claims of supernatural experiences are not the basis of evaluating someone's ministry. Rather, we should consider what they have done in serving Christ and how they've suffered for the name of Christ.

3. .6 I will refrain.

This verse is a rather cryptic; the language is a bit obscure. He seems to be saying a couple of things here.

a) First, this visionary experience was fact. His description of his experience was true; he's speaking the truth about it. He could talk about it because it really happened. He would not be a fool to describe this experience because he'd be speaking the truth.

This is a fairly strong hint that Paul is speaking about himself, not someone else.

b) .6b Second, he does not want anyone to think unrealistically about him in light of this experience. He is not trying to impress anyone by describing this visionary experience. He does not want to elevate himself or glory in this experiences. He wants to glorify Christ, not himself. That's why he was reluctant to say anything. He brings it up only because the false teachers were talking about it.

App: This attitude of avoiding personal glory is just about the opposite of those who tell everyone about their supernatural experiences. They tell about their experiences in order to exalt themselves. That's the opposite of what Paul intended.

- c) By describing this experience as if it happened to someone else, he can mention it without taking credit for it or exalting in it. He's avoiding glory for himself.

That is a truly humble attitude that was lacking in the false teachers and is often lacking in people who claim such experiences today.

Several things we can consider as we finish up this part of the text:

1. Don't expect to have this kind of supernatural experience. Paul's spiritual experiences were unique to himself, as are our own spiritual experiences. This account is not given to us for us to duplicate; we most likely will not have this kind of experience. We should not seek this kind of experience.
2. We can be assured that heaven exists and that it is far beyond our imaginations and expectations.
1Co 2:9 But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.
3. If we have transcendent spiritual experiences, we should keep quiet about them and not seek to exalt ourselves or impress others through them. No matter what our experiences may be, we must remain humble and deflect the glory to God, not boast about them.
4. One part of this that we can follow is in vs. 6—"I will speak the truth." We should avoid foolishness, and we should speak the truth. Our spiritual experiences are not authoritative; truth is. We should be far more concerned with Scriptural truth than we are about spiritual experiences. Cf. 2 Pet 2.19—"a more sure word of prophecy"
5. Today, we see heaven by faith, through the testimony of Jesus, Paul and others. But that promise of eternal life in heaven strengthens and fortifies us for the challenges and trials of life here on earth. We can endure because of the glory that awaits us. One day we'll hear and understand those "inexpressible words." Paul's experience will be ours, and that experience will be eternal.
6. Our saved loved ones are now hearing those inexpressible words. They are with Jesus in Paradise, no doubt enjoying the dwelling places that Jesus prepared for them. They are having these kind of transcendent experiences every day, all the time.

In vss. 7-10, Paul will describe another kind of experience, an irritating physical affliction that brought him back down to earth and kept him humbly relying on God's grace and strength. We'll talk about that next time, DV.