**Vision into heaven and thorn in the flesh** 24/4/22 dkm

Read: Job 2:1-10, 2Corinthians 12

Text: 2Corinthians 12:1-10

Psalms: 121old, 127, 119:65-72, 117

The apostle John was on the island of Patmos when, on the Lord’s Day, he was ‘in the Spirit’, hearing and seeing wondrous things. He saw into heaven where a throne was set, ‘and One sat on the throne’ (Rev 1:9, 10, 4:2). The book called Revelation is John’s record of that vision. The apostle Peter had a vision of a sheet descending from heaven (Acts 10:10). The apostle Paul also had visions and revelations in which the Lord spoke to him and he saw wondrous things. His conversion was the result of a blinding vision, and the piercing voice of the risen Jesus. Paul had other visions in which the Lord spoke personal words of guidance and reassurance to him (Acts 16:9, 18:9). Paul must have told Luke, who records these visions, but Paul did not base his preaching of the gospel on visions, apart from his actual conversion (Gal 1:12). He did no go around telling people about some new revelation from the Lord. He preached Christ crucified ‘according to the Scriptures’ (1Cor 15:3, 4).

Here in the penultimate chapter of the apostle’s second letter to the Corinthians, Paul continues his boasting to the brethren in Corinth. They had been listening to boasting from false teachers who had infiltrated their church, so let them listen to their true apostle for a moment. The boasting of these intruders was aimed at discrediting the apostle Paul and establishing their own power base within this church. They boasted of their Jewish heritage, but Paul countered such boasting ‘in the flesh’. They boasted in their rhetorical skills, deriding Paul as a poor speaker who refused to charge a preaching fee. Paul had a boast which they could not match, namely the extent of his suffering for the sake of the gospel. He boasted in his weakness (11:30).

It seems that the intruders also boasted of ecstatic experiences through which they received divine revelation. Paul did not dismiss such experiences but questions the way these men boasted of such experiences. He writes, ‘I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord’ (12:1), even though boasting of such experiences is pointless. Paul tells of a thorn in the flesh that kept him humble (12:7), and concludes with the Lord answering his prayer with the words, ‘My strength is made perfect in weakness’ (12:9).

**1. Visions and revelations**

Paul was reluctant to boast from the beginning, but having been compelled to do so (12:11), he questions the credentials, the commitment, and the experiences of the men who came to Corinth with a different gospel. Their letters of commendation were really self-commendation. Sure, they were clever speakers, but what was their message? Besides, they were enslaving and exploiting ordinary church members (11:20). Paul’s reference to visions and revelations points to these men boasting in such experiences. As we said, Paul does not dismiss such experiences, but having accused these men of being agents of Satan (11:14), we can only conclude that their visions and revelations were from Satan.

In his ministry at Corinth, Paul displayed ‘the signs of an apostle’, namely ‘signs and wonders and mighty deeds’ (12:12). Visions and revelations were different, and were matters that Paul did not even speak about, let alone boast about in his ministry. Visions were given by the Lord for personal guidance and strengthening, as we said when we listed a few visions recorded by Luke. But Paul goes on to speak about ‘a man in Christ’ who was ‘caught up to the third heaven’- some call this a rapture (12:2).

The apostle suddenly starts speaking in the third person- ‘I know a man in Christ’. Speaking in this way has the effect of distancing oneself from the person spoken about, but there is no mistaking that Paul is speaking about himself. Carson points out that there was no point in Paul boasting about some else’s revelation in his own defence against his opponents. I recall a student going on about a young man wanting to study medicine but now studying dairy science. I thought it was his brother, but he finally said he was talking about himself. We often speak like this, but not with a whole story like this student.

Apart from Carson’s comment, Paul is careful to say, ‘A man in Christ’, meaning a believer like himself. He also refers to the time, namely fourteen years previously, another give-away. If Paul was writing in AD56 he was referring to AD42, a time when he was in the region of Tarsus, prior to a call from Barnabas (Gal 1:21, Acts 11:25). There is no other record of this experience of the apostle Paul, and what he records here is lacking in detail- he explains why.

Paul writes of being ‘caught up to the third heaven’ (12:2). He does not know if he was caught up in the body or out of the body, but assures us that God knows. Why does Paul repeat this aspect of his experience? Repetition has the effect of making sure the words are heard. This experience was very real to Paul, even if he had trouble explaining it. He knew that God knew, and may have been looking forward to when he could ask God about it. We are reminded of Phillip being caught away by the Spirit of the Lord, and the three disciples being on the mountain with Jesus when Moses and Elijah appeared.

Paul was ‘caught up to the third heaven’ or, ‘caught up into Paradise’ (12:2, 4). The atmosphere where birds fly was regarded as the first heaven, the place of the sun and the stars the second heaven, and beyond this was the abode of God or the third heaven. Paradise is a Persian word for a walled garden; the Garden of Eden is called the paradise of God, as in heaven (Rev 2:7). Paradise is a place of bliss in the presence of the Lord (Luke 23:43, Heb 4:14).

Paul cannot describe what he saw in Paradise, or reveal what he heard. He says that he ‘heard inexpressible things, things man is not permitted to tell’ (12:4 NIV). Paul heard things that were impossible for him to relate in this sphere of our existence. The purpose of this experience was to strengthen Paul for the work he was to undertake as an apostle of Christ. Paul was called to suffer for Christ’s sake (Acts 9:16). This revelation, and other visions, were for personal strengthening not for him to boast about. Knowing the reality of heaven was especially important for Paul (5:8). Heaven or paradise is an important reality for all believers, but details in the Bible are scant, and it is not for us to speculate beyond what is written.

The revelation given to Paul by the Lord did not distract him from the ministry he was called to undertake here in this world. It did not set him above other believers in any way; he wanted everyone to judge him on the basis of his words and actions, not unprovable experiences. He would not boast about revelations given to him because they were not his doing. Paul could only boast in his sufferings. He chose to serve the Lord, knowing that this would mean suffering like that described in the previous chapter. ‘In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ said Jesus (John 16:33). These words of our Lord rang very true for Paul, and I trust they ring true for you also.

**2. Thorn in the flesh**

Pauls ‘thorn in the flesh’ is a well-known aspect of his life and indeed has become proverbial; what is your ‘thorn in the flesh’? There has been a lot of speculation as to the exact nature of this ‘thorn’, but we are not told, so do not know. Some think it a reference to enemies and persecution (cf. Numb 33:55), but most think it to be something in his physical body. The word means ‘stake’ or ‘thorn’. I am sure you have had a thorn or splinter in your finger or foot at some time, and maybe for some time. I once got a splinter in my finger that made it swell. I went to the doctor and had an X-ray, which showed a tiny piece of metal in my finger. It was more an irritant than a pain so I left it, and this piece of metal eventually emerged from my finger. Paul’s thorn in the flesh did not go away. Many think, on the basis of Galatians 4:15, that it was something in Paul’s eye, but others a speech defect, on the basis of 2Corinthians 10:10 and 11:6.

One thing we do know about Paul’s thorn in the flesh is the context in which he tells us about it. He has just told us about a wonderful revelation in which he was caught up into paradise- yes, he was the man he was talking about in verse 2. This thorn in the flesh was given him by God to stop him from becoming proud or ‘exalted above measure’. It was to keep him humble and thus close to the Lord (12:7). He is not telling us out of self-pity. Paul learned a most valuable lesson from his thorn in the flesh.

Paul understood that this thorn in the flesh was given him by the sovereign Lord. The Lord allowed Satan to afflict or ‘buffet’ Paul in this way. We think of Job, a blameless and upright man of God, whom God allowed Satan to afflict with painful sores, among other disasters. Job did not understand what was happening to him, and neither did Paul at first. This thing or this thorn brought such discomfort that Paul prayed to the Lord not once, not twice, but three times, asking the Lord to remove it (12:8). Did Paul remember Jesus praying three times in Gethsemane? The Lord heard his Son’s prayer and sent an angel to strengthen him; he did not take the cup from him (Luke 22:43). The Lord heard Paul’s prayer but did not remove the thorn; he gave Paul the grace to endure this affliction.

**3. Answer from the Lord**

If I had a painful affliction, I am not sure I would stop praying for healing after just three times! What about you? Some say you must pray till you get what you want, and if you are not getting what you want you need more faith. We must have faith when we pray, but we must also accept that the Lord knows best and will give us what is best for us. For Paul, and maybe for you, the best may not be relief from pain or suffering but the grace to endure it, even if that suffering is a difficult marriage or family life.

Sometimes the Lord has to stop us from boasting, or from going after the things of this world. You may have heard someone testify of how an affliction brought them back to the Lord. We hear the Psalmist say, ‘It was good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn your statutes’ (Ps 119:71).

The apostle Paul shared the feeling of the Psalmist when he received an answer from the Lord; ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness’ (12:9). He went even further than the Psalmist in saying, ‘Most gladly I will boast in my infirmities’ (12:10). How amazing! How can anyone be glad of his or her thorn in the flesh? Paul was when, with God’s help, he understood how this thorn made him more dependent on the Lord, and more eager glorify God rather than self.

Many think that Christian maturity means being less dependent on the Lord, but the Bible teaches the opposite. Paul was certainly a mature Christian, but he learned total dependence on the Lord saying, ‘When I am weak then I am strong’ (12:10). Do you understand what Paul is saying? Do you believe what Paul is saying? You cannot understand if you do not know the grace of God, and many a Christian does not know the grace of God in salvation or in sanctification. They think they are saved by their good works, or that salvation simply means making God their friend; ‘There is nothing that God and I cannot do together’ they say. Is this what Paul is saying. Of course not. Apart from what Paul says, the cross of Christ is the supreme example of power-in-weakness.

The apostle Paul concludes his boasting by saying, ‘I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake’ (12:10). Not for his sake, or his glory, but for Christ’s sake and Christ’s glory, Paul endured the suffering that came with being a preacher of the gospel. Paul suffered both physically and mentally for the sake of Christ.

The Corinthians, especially the false teachers with their slander and worldly criticism, had caused Paul a lot of hurt and grief. They may even have targeted his thorn in the flesh. But, while defending himself against their attacks, Paul affirms that as a true servant of Christ, he trusted himself into the hands of Jesus and the grace and strength of almighty God. ‘Paul’s glory rests on the assurance that only in his low estate will he be protected by the overshadowing power of Christ’.