



**Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10**

Scripture scholars almost universally agree that the man who was “caught up” into the heavenly vision which Paul describes, is, despite his own assertion, Paul.<sup>1</sup> The apostle’s denial of it being himself may stem from rhetorical conventions of the time, or because Paul has just finished emphasizing that the only real thing to boast of is weakness (11:30).

Paul’s detailing of being caught up into the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven still serves the purpose of legitimizing his authority as an apostle of Christ. If the “superlative apostles” who have undermined Paul’s claims can boast of things they should not, so can Paul, although the point will come back to the Christ-like sufferings Paul endures, which are the seal of his apostleship.

## *The 3<sup>rd</sup> Heaven*

Paul mentions “the third heaven” in this passage, which in a Jewish cosmology, is simply the place where God dwells. It may be helpful to note that heaven (Greek *ouranos*) is the word we would use as “sky”. From this perspective, the “first heaven” is the locus of birds and clouds etc., the “second heaven” is the abode of the sun and moon and stars, and the third is the dwelling of God.

## *A Thorn in the Flesh...*

Paul’s mystical revelations were so great, (though most of us don’t often think of Paul as someone who had visions or mystical experiences) that God had to give him a “thorn in the flesh” to keep him humble.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Gorman *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, Eerdmans. Grand Rapids, MI 2004 pg. 327

Much ink has been spilled speculating about the identity of this “thorn” – was it an illness? An opponent or even demon? Was it a moral weakness in Paul? Perhaps it is simply the trials and tribulations that Paul has outlined throughout 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians (esp. ch. 11).

Paul doesn’t think it is important to tell us what the thorn is, rather his driving point is that God’s “power is made perfect in weakness”. This is an important sort of conclusion moment for the letter, and so we need to pause and discuss.

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*Why would God allow Paul’s thorn to continue? Why is this important for Paul, and what does it mean for us? Do you have examples from your life?*

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Christians do not think the way the world thinks, and they do not fight the way the world fights. In his letters, Paul constantly admonishes and reminds Christians that they think and see the world the way Christ does (c.f. 1 Cor 2:16, Romans 12:1-2, Phil. 2:2-5 etc.). With striking force, Paul drives that point home here in speaking of God’s work within him. Paul’s relating of God’s message “my grace is *sufficient* for you” hearkens back to 2 Cor. 3:5-6, where Paul says: “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God, who has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant...”

The message of the cross is not simply a sermon or a letter for Paul – God has made Paul an *alter Christus* – another Christ. As Paul embraces his sufferings with love for others, the message of the cross is paraded in front of the Corinthians as the true Gospel of God.

## *Positive and Permissive*

It might seem as though God is the author of Paul’s sufferings, and consequently that God desires us to suffer – here we need to make an important distinction.

The bible is emphatic that God is not the author of evil, suffering or death. The problems and sufferings we encounter are not invented by God, rather they are a general consequence of the fall, and of human sin on a meta-level. The Church makes a distinction in God’s will:

- God’s *Positive* Will: This is what God directly desires – things like the law, the salvation of the world, the blessing of all creation
- God’s *Permissive* Will: These are things that God *allows* to happen as a consequence of human freedom, or for the sake of a greater good.

A good example of this is the crucifixion of Jesus. In one sense, the Father’s will (as Jesus submits to in the Garden of Gethsemane) was for Jesus to die on the cross. However, God’s will from the beginning was never death, but life – and so God’s positive will was for His Son to redeem all of us, and given the fall of mankind, God allowed the sufferings of Christ (without causing them) because through Jesus’ loving obedience unto death, the world would be redeemed and renewed.

## *Back to Paul (and us)*

Through Paul, the love and life of Jesus are lived out anew in the world – as should be the case for every baptized Christian. God’s answer to evil in the world is not better politics or education or civil liberties (as good as all of them can be), God’s answer to evil is the death of His Son, and its recapitulation in every Christian. Christians are not victorious through power plays, financial leverage, or other worldly boasts; Christians make their boast in the cross. Paul’s language here echoes a similar passage from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians:

I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong. ~2 Cor. 12:9-10~

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ~1 Cor. 1:22-24~

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*Where in your life can you share the mind of Christ in regard to suffering? Is there a situation where you can choose to conquer through weakness?*

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### **Read 2 Cor 13:1-14**

Paul has now walked the tension of asserting his legitimate authority given to him by Christ, while driving home the heart of the Gospel message of suffering love.

Paul notes that his authority is for “building up” and not for tearing down – an assertion he has voiced earlier in 10:8.

Paul finishes his letter with the Trinitarian blessing which the Church has adopted at the beginning of Mass (with a slight alteration).

