

In chapters 11 and 12 Paul compares himself to others who were trying to take over the church at Corinth. Whereas they were “taking advantage” of the people, and “lording it over” them, Paul wrote about his sufferings for the sake of the gospel. Paul vindicates his ministry not by his personality, but by his service to Jesus Christ.

Our passage today has two of the most famous phrases, or images, in all the New Testament: Paul being “caught up to the third heaven,” and his “thorn in the flesh.” One of them makes us wonder what in the world is going on, and the other, what out of the world is going on? One of them is mysterious, because Paul doesn’t give us any information at all what is his problem, and we are curious. And the other is mysterious and strange, so holy or other-worldly that Paul is forbidden to speak of it, as verse 4 tells us. The purpose of today’s sermon is to tell you everything about these two events or circumstances in Paul’s life. Well, I’ll tell you at least everything I know.

Maybe there are a couple of questions to ask ourselves- just kind of keep them in your mind as we go along. Is it possible that at some point in your life you have had a great vision? Maybe not a transportation to another world, it could

have been one of those half-sleeping, half-awake dreams that leave you mystified or put you on edge, that you think about for hours or days afterwards; maybe you felt a sense of peace or experienced the presence of God with you. It could have been even a defining moment of your life- as was this vision of Paul- or maybe you had the vision and didn't even realize it was a vision until much later. And the second question is this, what is it that you think you can't live through, or live without? What kind of suffering do you think you could not withstand, what might be taken from you that would leave you defenseless against "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"? I believe Paul's thorn in the flesh is that kind of all-consuming pain.

These two things then, one sacred and inspiring, and the other, humiliating and evil- Paul calls it a messenger from Satan. But somehow they are tied together. What we must recognize that they are not the same thing, as martyrs and religious hermits might want them to be, those who find ecstasy in their suffering. For Paul, they are separate things, though related: a lifting us, and a bringing low. One of the meanings within this passage is that we should not go about trying to live exclusively in either one of these states, neither the exalted and spiritual, nor

the debased and ascetic. But simply to live by God's grace and power in suffering and in joy.

This third heaven where Paul journeyed isn't a place that we can see from the observatories or through the Hubble Telescope. Astronauts have never beheld it. Scientists tell us- if I understand any of what they say- that the universe is infinite but yet it has an edge or an end, where light and heat are not; that the universe is infinite, yet still expanding. This third heaven is beyond the heaven of atmosphere- the sky above us, so it is not in the clouds, or on a mountaintop; it is beyond the heaven of stars and constellations, so it is not on some planet in a far off galaxy; it is the "heaven of heavens," as the ancients may have called it. It is the place where God dwells. And rather than think of it as a place that must be billions of light years away, beyond the edge of the universe, perhaps we should think of it as another dimension, an alternate universe, or even an alternative state of awareness. How else can God be on his throne in heaven and yet among us? It is curious that Paul doesn't know if his body took the trip or not. For that reason, we cannot call the third heaven a purely spiritual realm. And so, we should not consider Paul's journey to be only a dream, or as some cynics may think, merely wish fulfillment: that he wants heaven to be so wonderful he envisions it in such a

manner. We should think of this as a real event for Paul, it seemed to be a powerful moment in his life, and a very personal one, so that he is reluctant to share it. If it were only something in his mind, it makes sense he would give details that would prove his authority as an apostle, and silence at last those who would denounce or demean him.

But it is important to understand the journey to third heaven and the things Paul saw there, not as something he was himself able to do. Paul was taken to the third heaven. It was a gift to him. By God's grace he beheld the Glorious Realm and heard the unutterable heavenly language. But that is only half the story, that is just the first blessing.

Many people have written and discussed Paul's thorn in the flesh, wondering if it could have been blindness caused by the bright light shining from heaven that day of his conversion on the road to Damascus; some have said it could have been migraines or epilepsy or malaria; some have thought he fought against sexual temptations- Paul being a bachelor and on the road a lot. Some have thought leprosy or a deformity. Whatever it was, it was something he continued to struggle with, and was a thing just as debilitating and painful as the vision of third heaven was exalted: it was the exact opposite. And it took away any reason he may have

had to be proud of himself. Twice he wrote in verse 7, “to keep me from being too exalted.” And even though he calls it a messenger of Satan, he also knew it also was a gift, the grace of God that reached him in his personal suffering and weakness. It was important that his feet remain planted on the earth even though he knew the beauty of paradise.

I’m sure we have all watched a beautiful sunrise and said, “what a glorious morning,” or looked out at snow covered peaks and thought, “what a glorious sight”; when we have let the immensity of something- the ocean or a mountain range or a great forest- and the beauty of it inspire feelings of joy or awe, or even faith and thankfulness. There is nothing wrong with that. But it is only half the story. Do these feelings lead us then to loving the earth, caring for it and protecting it, so that we are even willing to make sacrifices for it? Have the feelings of happiness, even the ecstasy, of love and the joy of sharing and being understood by another person, of love being returned; have you ever felt the euphoria of love so that you wanted to sing, “Heaven, I’m in heaven,” like Fred Astaire as he danced with the beautiful Ginger Rogers in the movie “Top Hat”? Have these feelings become the deeper feelings of giving and helping and trusting and forgiving, and even sacrifice for the sake of the beloved? And have there

been times in worship when you were so emotionally and spiritually exalted, by the singing of a favorite hymn, or in prayer, when God's Spirit moved in you? But did it move you then to service to others, to sometimes difficult and self-less acts? That is the second half of the story. In these grand emotions we may feel mighty enough to do anything- like King David who said, "By you, O Lord, I can defeat a troop; by my God I can leap over a wall." And yet, we all know that passion cools. That is when we must find somewhere the power to continue. That power is the grace of God; it is the second blessing. And our passage says it this way, in verse 9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Could Paul have borne the sufferings he listed in chapter 11, and which we noted last week, on the strength of that moment, that memory, in third heaven? His life was a long journey, and required the abiding grace of God to build him up when he was beaten and weary. Did Jesus go to the cross in his own power, or did the grace of God take him up to that hard place he knew he had to go? God's grace is not just in the amazing and moving and enjoyable things of our lives. His grace is all the parts of our lives, all the comings and goings that make us more completely his, that cause us to depend more and more upon him, that cause us to want to serve and share him, and that cause us to come to know what we are.

And we believe that God's grace in us calls us together to encourage one another, and to worship with open hearts the Lord who abides with us. Thanks be to God.

I wonder if Paul's opponents in Corinth, those "false apostles" ever experienced the second blessing. Haven't you met people who are so impressed with themselves, whose understanding of God is limited to their own vision of him?

But sometimes God is a question to us. There are hurts we must deal with, thorns in the flesh which God could remove if he would, healing he could bring if he would, but he does not. What is our response to these?

For Paul, he said that he would boast only of these weaknesses, for when he is weak, then he is strong- because that strength is the might of the Lord within him; it is in his weakness that the power of Christ may rest upon him. That phrase, "rest upon me" in verse 9 is an unfortunate translation; better would be, "dwell upon me." The power of the Lord lives within us because of our weakness. *There is room for only one ego in our hearts.* Will I try to live by my own self-sufficiency, by my own power, or by the strength of Jesus Christ? Jesus can show us the true glories of heaven, and his kindness and strength are with us in all the struggles and sickness and loneliness of life.

We need both blessings: the hope and the grand vision, and the comfort and abiding presence of the Lord; together, his tender mercies that never desert us all the days of our lives.