

Visions And Revelations

“I must needs glory, though it is not expedient, but I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ, fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I know not, or whether out of the body, I know not, God knoweth), such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man (whether in the body or apart from the body, I know not; God knoweth), how that he was caught up into Paradise, I heard unspeakable things, which is not lawful for a man to utter. On behalf of such a one will I glory; but on mine own behalf I will not glory, save in my weaknesses. For if I should desire to glory, I shall not be foolish, for I speak the truth: but I forbear, lest any man should account of me above that which he seeth me to be, or heareth from me” (2 Cor. 12:1-6).

Contrary to his wishes and feelings, the apostle has been forced to “glory” (boast) that he might meet his enemies on common ground. There is a slight twist in his boasting, however. While they likely boasted of their status among the Jews and of “great things” they had done, Paul declines to meet them on such terms, boasting of their accomplishments, rather he will boast in his infirmities and sufferings he experienced in Christ.

In this present section the apostle speaks of things that might appeal to one’s vanity and pride — visions and revelations from God. Yet, of the grand event he records he does not claim that he, himself experienced it: “I know a man ... on behalf of such a one will I glory, but on my own account I will not glory, save in my weakness” (2 Cor. 12:8). That this “one” of whom he speaks actually is himself there is no doubt for he immediately writes, “... and by reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelation, that I should not be exalted overmuch, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7).

As to the occasion of this vision there is no way to know. Fourteen years earlier would have placed the apostle approximately on his first journey with Barnabas (Acts 13-14). But we really do not know. What we do know is that Paul often had visions and revelations from the Lord, the first coming when Christ confronted him on the Damascan road (Acts 9:4-6). Then came his vision when he had gone to Jerusalem after his conversion, and enemies threatened him and the Lord told him he must leave the city (Acts 23:17-18). There was the vision at Troas when they received the Macedonian call (Acts 16:7-9), and the vision in Corinth to strengthen and urge him on to greater efforts (Acts 18:9-10). Then there was the vision in Jerusalem when he had been beaten and almost lost his life (Acts 23:11), and the vision at sea when his vessel was in danger of sinking (Acts 27:23-24).

Besides these visions, other revelations came to him, whether visions or otherwise. He went up to Jerusalem “by revelation” for the critical decision on the status of the Gentiles (Gal. 2:2). But whether this revelation came in the form of a vision we do not know. But of all the visions stated, there was a reason why it was given. In this vision he recorded in 2 Corinthians 12, it simply tells us he was caught up into Paradise (third heaven) and heard unlawful things for a man to utter — he gives no hint as to when or why the vision came.

Because of the exceeding greatness of the vision, there was given him a “thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, that I should not be exalted overmuch” (2 Cor. 12:7). Pages upon pages have been written speculating as to what this “thorn in the flesh” was, and still we are as much in darkness as to what it was as ever. We know why it came: it was a “messenger of Satan” that he should not be exalted overmuch. But did Satan give it? Did the Lord allow Satan to test Paul just as God had allowed Satan to test Job millenniums before?

Whatever the thorn was, we know it was a trying matter for Paul. Three times he prayed God to remove it, but God’s answer was, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). So Paul submitted and bore the pain the thorn brought him with grace and dignity. He said, “For when I am weak, then am I strong” (2 Cor. 12:1). So we, when we realize our weaknesses, look to God for support when those weaknesses test us and we become strong as we trust in God to carry us through the trials we face.

And so he comes to the end of his “boasting.” He says, “I am become foolish: ye compelled me; for I ought to have been commended of you; for in nothing was I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I am nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, by signs and wonders and mighty works. For what is there wherein ye were made inferior to the rest of the churches except it be that I myself was not a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong” (2 Cor. 12:11-13).

Having been forced to boast of himself, even though it were his weaknesses, was a distasteful item with Paul. Yet he had. He reminded them they should have commended him for they knew the evidences he supplied in their midst of his apostleship: signs — wonders — mighty works. That they should have honored Paul for his apostleship and the blessing he brought to them through his sacrifice and cost to himself should be a “no-brainer.” He cannot resist one final jab of irony. Having asked how he had made Corinth inferior to other churches, except possible that he was a physical burden to them, he writes sarcastically, “Forgive me this wrong.”

The apostle is done now with his effort to sway the tottering element among brethren back to their sensibility. The remainder of the book is at hand. Paul will close and send it as a messenger that comes before his certain visit to them. Hopefully it will bring about repentance among those who are still enamored by the schemes of the false apostles.

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