

How the work of God gets done (2 Corinthians 12:1-10).

A. Lifted up (1-6):

In v.1 of chapter 12, Paul wrote, *“I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord”*. His rivals had claimed that he was not worthy of the name “apostle” and they had almost succeeded in winning over the Church in Corinth to their opinion. The fact that Paul wrote as he did suggests that they had made this an issue. A pointed comparison was being made: “the Lord speaks through us, but you never hear much from Paul about visions. He can’t have them very often, or he would talk about them.” Their logic went like this. If God approves of a man he will grant him special communications direct from heaven but the man who does not receive such blessings is second rate. Why pay any attention to him? This problem has not gone away. It is not unusual for one Christian to approach another and say, “The Lord told me yesterday...” This person has, it seems, received a special message straight from the throne of the universe, perhaps through a picture, an audible voice, a strong conviction laid upon his heart, a prophecy or a message in tongues. Some of us are immune to this sort of thing. Our temperaments are not very suggestible. I once preached at an event where a middle-age couple performed duets accompanied by an accordion. They introduced each item by saying, “the Lord gave me this song...” I wasn’t convinced. It did not seem fair to blame the Almighty for such dreadful songs. Nevertheless, in some circles, if a person claims direct communications from God, his reputation will soar. Some of the people who make such claims are clearly sincere, but others, sadly, have sensed an opportunity to manipulate people. If you want to control other people, and some Christian leaders do, nothing brings them into line quite as effectively as the hint that failing to respond to their guidance amounts to disobeying God. It is also a convenient way of placing yourself beyond the reach of criticism. All debate and disagreement is silenced at a stroke once you make it clear that people who disagree with you are thereby questioning the Almighty. Another common ploy, which also leaves people baffled and cowed, is to infer that since the Holy Spirit speaks through you, even the most tentative question would amount to quenching the Spirit.

It was this situation which prompted Paul, from v.2 onwards, to talk about a vision he himself had experienced *“fourteen years”* before (2). Several visions are attributed to Paul in the NT, but this experience was uniquely intense. Although the account is given in the third person (*“I know such a man”* [3]), the apostle was relating his own experience. In v.7 he explained that the unpleasant *“thorn in the flesh”* was given partly to prevent his getting above himself because of the *“abundance of the revelations”*. Even so, the fact that he wrote in the third person suggests that Paul found it distasteful to speak of himself. Note also that he did not receive the vision because of his elevated status as an apostle but simply as *“a man in Christ”* (2). It was clearly an overwhelming experience. The statement in v.3, *“whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows”* tells us that Paul had been so overcome that he had no clear recollection of his state of consciousness. Had his soul left his body for a time as he was bathed in the glory of the heavenly realms? Or had he been taken up into glory, both body and soul like those believers who will be alive at the last day? Paul could not recall. He had been so swamped by beauty and joy, love and acceptance that such things no longer mattered.

Where did he go? Two expressions are used. Firstly, in v.3, he wrote of being “*caught up to the third heaven*”. Bible-believing scholars will probably debate the exact meaning of this phrase until the Second Coming. (Jewish and early Christian scholars believed that there were different degrees of glory in heaven but did not agree about the number.) My own view is that Paul was trying to convey the ultimate in blessedness. He could get no higher. He was at the pinnacle, the summit of love and delight. Even to think about it fills the heart with longing. Secondly, the apostle also called his destination “*paradise*” (4). This word stems from a Persian word, which means a king’s pleasure garden, a place of calm, tranquillity, refreshment and peace of mind. Can you imagine the palace gardens of the King of the Universe? They were once located on this earth, in a place called Eden. They shall be again.

Do you envy Paul? Suppose he had said all this, not in a letter but on his next visit to Corinth. Picture the circle of eager listeners. They had heard many stories about visions in the recent past, but here was a vision of visions! It is not difficult to imagine someone calling out, “Tell us what it was like Paul!” Was there a sigh of disappointment when he replied, “I can’t”? To begin with, nothing more could be said because he was lost for words. That phrase “*inexpressible words*” in v.4 means that Paul heard something so exalted and lovely that words failed him. This is quite remarkable. Paul of all people did not usually struggle to express himself, but this occasion defeated even his powers of language. Glory caressed him, bathed him and left his mind so swamped by sheer splendour that one of the greatest intellects of the first century was dazzled to the point of incoherence. Who spoke? What was said? We must leave such questions alone. We cannot even come close to it. In Revelation 1:12-16, we have the apostle John’s description of the vision that he received of the risen Christ on the island of Patmos,

“Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.”

This passage is dominated by the word “*like*”. John, like Paul, could not give an exact description of what he had seen because the reality was great beyond the powers of human language to describe it. The majesty that surrounds the Godhead is so wonderful that all the words in all the languages of earth could not describe it. Anyone commentating or preaching on this passage is immediately faced with a problem. How can we help our readers or listeners to see a little of what Paul saw or describe such glory in a way that you begin to long for it? The task is beyond us.

Paul was also told that it was “*not lawful*” for him to describe what he had experienced (4). He was to keep it to himself. It was to be a marvellous blessing reserved for Paul himself. That makes sense when you consider what came next. Let’s go back to that imaginary conversation. The apostle would be surrounded by excited people, “What a

blessing, Paul! You would never be the same again after something like that. What happened next, Paul? Did you rise to a new level of spiritual effectiveness, did you start to live on a higher plane? Was it victory all the way from then on?” Paul’s reply is outlined in verses 7-10. It can be summed up like this, “There has been pain and suffering every single day for fourteen years. It will be with me till the day that I die.” The apostle needed that experience of glory to prepare him for the difficult years ahead. There was no gloating, no tendency to parade this wonderful vision and live off the reputation he would get by reliving it. Paul had kept the whole thing to himself for a decade and a half because if he was going to boast on his own account at all, it would only be with reference to his “*infirmities*” (5). There would be no self-promotion. The final part of v.6 is very telling. Paul had the right to “*speak the truth*”, but chose to “*refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me*”. Most of us become angry if we think that we have not received our due, but far from being worried that people might not think sufficiently highly of him, Paul was concerned about the opposite. If people made too much of him, Jesus would be deprived of the respect and appreciation that is his by right.

B. Cast down (7-10):

We move now from the height of mystical exaltation to the depth of human weakness. In v.7 Paul mentioned that he was troubled by a “*thorn in the flesh*”. We cannot be certain what this was though many suggestions have been put forward by godly commentators. They break down into two main groups. On the one hand, some say that the “*thorn in the flesh*” was picture language and that Paul had other people in mind, whether persecutors in general or specific individuals who had given him much grief and concern or even his rivals in Corinth. On the other hand, most commentators favour the view that Paul’s “*thorn*” was some sort of physical ailment. The two most convincing possibilities are some sort of eye problem and recurring bouts of malaria. What we do know is that it was serious enough to provoke a profound crisis in Paul’s ministry. It is probably just as well that we don’t know the exact nature of the complaint. Suppose that it was epilepsy. In that case, people with other health problems would not find it easy to identify with Paul and gain help from this passage. The phrase “*thorn in the flesh*” is general enough to fit just about everybody at some stage in life. That word “*thorn*” is itself very graphic. The Greek word behind it is often used to describe small, sharp objects like pins and fish-hooks. It can also be used to describe a rather larger, but still pointed object such as a stake. If that is what Paul had in mind, it is as though this complaint was so severe that he was like a man impaled, pinned to the ground, wriggling helplessly and stuck fast. Perhaps you know how he felt.

Paul went on to say something truly astonishing. This illness, whatever it was, was at one and the same time “*a messenger of Satan*” (7) and something that was “*given*” to him. (In other words, it was God who gave it.) This touches upon one of the great mysteries of Biblical religion, the absolute sovereignty of God. It is not simply the case that God overrules the actions of evil men or the Devil himself, he foreordains and works through them without at any time being the author of sin. Several parallel cases are mentioned in the Bible. When Joseph spoke to his brothers and reassured them that he would not take vengeance on them for selling him into slavery, he said, “*you meant evil*

against me; but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20). The most striking example is the crucifixion of Jesus. Preaching on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter phrased it like this, *“Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified and put to death.”* (Acts 2:23) It was one and the same event. Evil men performed the most ghastly deed in history, yet God intended that it should happen from the outset. To come back to Paul’s illness, this perspective means that the Devil was using it to try to bring him down, to undermine his effectiveness. God was using the self-same complaint to make Paul special.

There is tremendous sanity here. We are under no obligation to pretend that pain, whether the outward pain of the body or distress of soul, is anything other than horrible. The Devil sends it and it can be excruciating. Why else would Paul *“plead with the Lord three times”* (8) times that it be taken from him? These were not three trifling prayers, a sentence long in each case, but three intense periods of deliberate and sustained praying. Paul was articulating both his agony and a sense of frustration. How would it help the advance of the gospel if he was brought low? What could be achieved in the service of Christ if he was unfit to preach or to travel?

Some people approach the Word of God with their thinking already programmed in certain areas. This is particularly apparent with respect to the suffering of Christians. I recall a Pastor describing his dealings with a lady who was puzzled that her prayers for healing had not been answered. He gently asked her to read this section of Scripture and then asked her why Paul’s *“thorn”* was not removed. She answered that it must have been because he did not have enough faith. Over the years I have met this kind of thing a number of times. The results can be cruel. The victims of long-term illness are assured that if only they had enough faith, they would be cured. Yet these are often people who have born a wonderful testimony to God’s keeping power through an extended period of pain and suffering. It is hardly kind to taunt them with their own suffering by implying that it is really their own fault, as though with the right amount of faith they would be free of it. I have also been privileged to make a number of visits to the Philippines in recent years. My visits have sometimes coincided with those of high-profile American spokesmen for the “health and wealth” gospel who had no compunction at all about making extravagant promises about the money blessings that would roll in for those who could summon up the faith. There is something obscene about a man from a wealthy country parading his riches before thousands of desperately poor people and hinting that the blame for their poverty must rest with them alone for if they had his level of faith, they would be as rich as he is. It also has to be said that the obsession with this-worldly blessings such as physical well-being and material prosperity flies in the face of Biblically informed reality. Even if we were to experience a whole succession of miraculous healings in answer to prayer, we are still mortal beings in a fallen world who must die and then face the judgement of God.

In the event, Paul did get an answer. The pain, weakness and debility continued as sharp as ever, but God sent more grace. There is a sense in which v.9 is the pinnacle, the summit of the whole epistle with its calm statement of a great truth, *“my grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness”*. When God’s people are in dire extremity, when troubles crowd in on every side, they do not need miracles.

Rather, they need God to stand by them and pour out his grace and that grace is at its greatest when we come to the end of our resources. There is no need for the Christian to pretend. For Paul, the pain was real. Being more than a conqueror (Romans 8:37) is not a matter of acting a part and pretending that misery and sorrow can be brushed off like flies. Grace is not a kind of heavenly anaesthetic. Even so, it is able to overcome the worst that sin and Satan can do. In verse 10, Paul spoke of taking “*pleasure in infirmities*”. Does this make him a masochist? Not at all, it was more that he had learned from experience that God had used him most when he was at his lowest ebb.

Real Christianity has always had this kind of stamp about it. Think of Charles Spurgeon in 19th century London preaching to 6,000 every week and adding tens of thousands to the membership of his church. Does this mean that he enjoyed a long, uninterrupted golden harvest? By no means! The backdrop to his success was that he suffered agonies of gout for several months of the year and his wife, Susannah, was a house-bound invalid for most of their marriage. John Calvin preached five times a week, wrote the famous “Institutes” and a commentary on every book of the New Testament except Revelation in a house with eight children, while all the time he was plagued by attacks of pleurisy and his last years were dogged by tuberculosis. Gallstones, kidney stones, haemorrhoids and arthritis all troubled him at various times. In more recent times, we have seen Joni Eareckson-Tada, a quadriplegic since her late teens, calmly announcing that she would rather be a prisoner in a wheelchair and know Christ than be fit and well without him. To sum up thus far, Paul has effectively silenced his critics by laying down a challenge. “Are you willing to live like me? I hate pain and discomfort as much as the next man, but if going through with it can make me into the kind of man God will use, I am ready for it.” The current evangelical scene has many people like Paul’s opponents: brash, playing to the gallery, enjoying the limelight, wanting a platform to occupy and a people to dominate. But who follows Paul?