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2 Corinthians

...but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands. 2 Corinthians 11:33

Here Paul details how he made his escape from Damascus. His words here explain "the things which concern my infirmity." There are other examples of people escaping in such a manner in the Bible. One is found in Joshua 2 -

"Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house *was* on the city wall; she dwelt on the wall." Joshua 2:15

Another similar account, with less detail, is found in 1 Samuel 9 -

"So Michal let David down through a window. And he went and fled and escaped." 1 Samuel 19:12

What is explicit in the Joshua account, and which might be inferred from the story of David, is that these men let themselves down by a rope which was thrown over the side for them. However, in Paul's case, he had to be let down by a "basket." It shows that he was too infirm on his own to climb down a rope. Thus he seems to be hinting at the shame he felt for having to rely on others to deliver him in this way.

It was in a basket, through a small opening in the wall called a *thuris* that he was let down. The *thuris* is only mentioned twice in the Bible, once here and once in

Acts 20:9 where Eutychus fell out of the window he was sitting in. Such little windows or doors were placed into the walls of a city for those who dwelt in houses along the wall. Paul was able to get free from his foes in this manner.

Of interest is that the word "basket" here is not the same as that used in Acts 9:5. There it was called a *spuris*, which is a tightly wound plaited basket of reeds. Here, Paul calls it a *sargané*. This is a plaited rope basket. This is the only use of this word in the Bible. This probably comes from the Hebrew word *sarag*, which means to be intertwined. Thus, the same idea is conveyed for both words. If this comes from *sarag*, which is likely, Paul is subtly continuing with his comparison of himself to the false apostles by using a word of Hebrew rather than Greek origin.

Life application: God uses those who are dependent on Him and often that dependence on Him is realized in the assistance of others. Paul was placed in a situation where he needed the help of others in order to find his relief. There is nothing wrong with showing such dependence on those around us, particularly when we realize that God placed them in our lives for that very reason.

It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: 2 Corinthians 12:1

Paul's first words can be taken in a couple ways. One is that they might be an ironic statement to the Corinthians. When he says, "It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast" he might be saying, "As you can see, I have done nothing worthy of boasting. I have not suffered at all as my previous words testify quite clearly." This is the highest of irony because everything he has said from verse 11:22-33 shows that he had, in fact suffered greatly for Christ. Further, he had gone to extreme lengths to preach the gospel.

The second way his words might be taken would be as an admission that it was unbecoming of him to continue to boast in the manner which he had through the previous verses. He felt that it was improper, but that he was urged on by the fact that the Corinthians were looking for just this type of thing to boast in.

Whichever way his words are to be taken, from this "boasting," which was "doubtless not profitable," He turns to a new line of thought with the words, "I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord." Paul's visions and revelations are noted throughout Acts. The word "visions" is described well by Albert Barnes -

It "...is used in the Scriptures often to denote the mode in which divine communications were usually made to people. This was done by causing some scene to appear to pass before the mind as in a landscape, so that the individual seemed to see a representation of what was to occur in some future period. It was usually applied to prophecy, and is often used in the Old Testament."

"Revelations" would be the truths which were learned as a result of the visions. At least six times in the book of Acts he had specific visions that are recorded. Also in Galatians 2:2, we read this -

"And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain."

Life application: Paul claimed to have had visions because he was an apostle of the Lord. His visions led to his revelations and they have become a part of the Holy Bible. However, the apostolic period is over. It is best to not accept any supposed vision from the Lord at this time. There is a constant stream of such claims and the vast majority of them in no way match the Bible in content or intent. False visions have led to entire cults of people being led astray, such as those of Ellen G. White of the Seventh Day Adventists. It is far better to stick to the Bible than worry about whether someone's supposed "vision" is true. Even if it is, which is unlikely, it is unnecessary for proper faith and practice.

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. 2 Corinthians 12:2

Verse 1 said, "It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast." This verse now moves into the third person to avoid any such hint of boasting. He says, "I know a man in Christ." This is referring to himself. There are a couple of ways of knowing this is so.

First, anyone else's visions wouldn't have had any bearing on his comments here. They would be superfluous to the intent of his letter. Secondly, in verse 7 he moves to the first person, still talking about the same thing. Paul is accomplishing his feat of not boasting while still conveying a thought which the Corinthians could boast in concerning his status as an apostle.

This man, meaning himself, is "in Christ." He was, at the time of the occurrence, already a Christian. This is something he speaks of concerning the redeemed several times. One example is -

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation." Galatians 6:15

The dating of this epistle can be fixed at 57/58 A.D. Next he says it was "fourteen years ago." This would make the event he is writing about around 43/44 A.D. Therefore, this is after his conversion, but it is something not specifically mentioned in Acts. Speculation as to when and where the vision occurred is just that, only speculation.

After this, he says, "...whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows." The vision was so real to him that he felt as if he was in a body, but yet, he could not prove that he actually was. This resembles visions of the OT, such as in Ezekiel -

"And it came to pass in the sixth year, in the sixth *month*, on the fifth *day* of the month, as I sat in my house with the elders of Judah sitting before me, that the hand of the Lord GOD fell upon me there. ² Then I looked, and there was a likeness,

like the appearance of fire—from the appearance of His waist and downward, fire; and from His waist and upward, like the appearance of brightness, like the color of amber. ³ He stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my hair; and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the north gate of the inner *court*, where the seat of the image of jealousy *was*, which provokes to jealousy. ⁴ And behold, the glory of the God of Israel *was* there, like the vision that I saw in the plain."

Ezekiel said he had a vision while he "sat in my house with the elders of Judah," wherein he was transported to Jerusalem, having been taken "by a lock of my hair." There he saw and heard and experienced, and yet his body surely remained in his house. This may be something akin to what Paul experienced. The vision was so real that he simply couldn't tell the state of his earthly body at the time.

Still referring to himself, he next says, "...such a one was caught up to the third heaven." Nonsensical debates are made as to what Paul is referring to when he says "the third heaven." What we can deduce is that it is a real place, and that it is "other" than where we are. People write lengthy commentaries on celestial gradations of what one "heaven" or another "heaven" is like, but it is all wasted ink. What we have from Paul is all that we need to understand the rest of the vision's details.

As a point of interest though, he uses the term *harpazo* which is translated as "caught up." This is the same term he uses for what believers will experience at their own rapture which is noted in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Thus, there is no reason to not believe in a literal rapture where our bodies will be changed and we will be transported to be with the Lord. Those who deny this must then deny Paul's vision in these verses. With God, all such things are possible.

Life application: The Bible gives us enough information to understand what happened in certain circumstances in only a limited way. The admonition to not go beyond what is written is good at such times. We should be careful to not make up things, stating them as fact, concerning things of which we cannot be sure. In other words, when someone analyzes a passage such as that of Paul's vision,

make sure that it is in line with his words, but that it does not unnecessarily go beyond them.

And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 2 Corinthians 12:3

Paul now seems to repeat himself for the purpose of emphasis, and many scholars generally take it that way. So far the words of verses 2 and 3 can be compared by noting them side by side -

*I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven.

*And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—

In verse 3, he has added in the word *kai*, or "and." This then seems to indicate not emphasis of the same thought, but the introduction of a new thought. Verse 4 will bring that revelation to light, but regardless of what verse 4 says, Paul continues on with the same line of reasoning which is found in verse 2. He is referring to himself in the third person, and he is completely unaware of whether what he will describe actually occurred in the body or out of the body. To him, it remained an enduring mystery which only God knows.

The word "whether" is used in both verses. If there is a distinction being made between the two events, then he was unsure of his state in both circumstances as they occurred.

Life application: Paul, as an apostle of Christ, has the right to make the claim that he is making concerning his visions. His words are a part of the biblical record and

God used Paul for that very purpose. He will note that the things he saw and heard while in this state were "unlawful for a man to utter." It would logically follow then that what he saw was not to be described by him (which he refrains from doing) and therefore the same would apply to anyone else who claims to have made such a heavenly visitation. It is better to not trust the visions of others than it is to find out that their words were not true. In the end, we have the Bible and so any such extra revelations, even if true, would not add to what we need for our faith and practice. So why buy the book?

...how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. 2 Corinthians 12:4

Once again, with the two thoughts finished, placing them side by side gives a better perspective of Paul's statements -

*I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven.

*And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

As can be seen, it is probable, but not entirely certain, that the terms "the third heaven" and "Paradise" are not the same thing. He is likely saying that he was been caught up to the third heaven as well as having been caught up into Paradise. The word for "Paradise" here is the same word as that used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament when referring to the Garden of Eden, or the "Paradise of Eden." This word is found only three times in the New Testament; in Luke 23:43, 2 Corinthians 12:4, and in Revelation 2:7. It is the reward which faithful believers will receive because of the finished work of Christ.

Paul says that while there he "heard inexpressible words." In this, there is either:

- 1) A paradox - he heard speaking which may not be spoken because it is impossible for us to express the same words. In attempting to do so, he would do injustice to what he had heard. Or,
- 2) They are words which are not to be uttered by man at this present time. He was allowed to hear them, but forbidden from re-stating them.

The second option seems more likely because of his final words, "...which it is not lawful for a man to utter." The Bible scholar Bengel explains the verse in this manner -

"Others, who did not hear them, cannot; Paul, who did hear them, is not sufficiently able; and though he were able, yet it would not be lawful, it would not be proper in the state of mortality; because the inhabitants of the earth would not understand them."

Life application: Verses 2-4 of this chapter show us that those who claim to have had visions of heaven, and who then repeat them, are most probably making them up. Why would God have Paul state the things he did here and then change His way of dealing with someone later? The answer is that He wouldn't. We have just what we need in the pages of the Bible to satisfy our current walk with the Lord. Further, He has given us enough information about what is coming to let us know that wonderful things lie ahead.

Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities.
2 Corinthians 12:5

It is obvious on the surface that Paul has been speaking of himself concerning the visions of the third heaven and of Paradise. Therefore, the words of this verse are the epitome of irony. Still referring to those events as if they were someone else, he says, "Of such a one I will boast." The reason for this is because they are

divinely given honors, worthy of boasting to those who need direction in matters of a divine nature.

However, he continues with the words, "yet of myself I will not boast." This is referring to all of the sufferings and trials he endured which are noted in the previous chapter. Those are the things which the Corinthians thought were to be boasted in, as is evidenced by their boasting in those types of things in the false apostles.

However, Paul has shown them that they are merely earthly and of no true spiritual value. Because of this, he has put the thought of boasting in those things away. They no longer have the importance to him that they once did, and such things should not be a source of boasting by others as well.

But Paul finishes by noting that there is one type of earthly trial that is worthy of boasting in. Of all of the fleshly things he could have boasted in, he only does so in his "infirmities." Through verse 10, he will explain exactly why this is so.

Life application: Many of us have done things which the world would think of as great. Maybe we retired with a high rank from the military. Perhaps we were the CEO of a big company. Some of us may have been exceptional at some type of sport. Maybe we were on a TV show with a special talent. Oooh! Ah! But what value has any of this from a heavenly perspective? Zilch. Let us not boast in the things that have no heavenly value. Instead, let's try learning our Bible, telling others about Christ, and helping out in the church we attend. And when we do these things through infirmity, then we have something we can truly boast in.

For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me *to be* or hears from me. 2 Corinthians 12:6

Paul is being precise in his selected wording. He just said that "of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities." Now, to show that he could, and may even desire to, boast in something more than his infirmities, he says, "I will not be a fool." If he were to boast in his achievements, it would be the truth and it wouldn't be the mere ravings of a mad man. The things he would claim would seem preposterous to his hearers and yet it would be the truth. As he says, "...for I will speak the truth."

However, he withheld such boasting with the reason being, "lest anyone should think of me above what he see me *to be* or hears from me." In other words, "What marvelous things Paul boasts of! Could they be true about him? He is weak, infirm, and his speech is contemptible. The man is a living paradox!"

The things which he knew, had done, and had experienced were the things which people would naturally boast in. They would elevate him to an exalted position. But these were not the things which he wanted others to notice, and so he refrained from stating them. Instead, he will focus on something of which no one would normally boast. In this, he followed the pattern of Christ who had "no form or comeliness." In Him there was "no beauty that we should desire Him." He was humble and lowly and washed the feet of His disciples.

Paul, now following that same example, will give illustrations of the things he felt it was acceptable to boast in. What the world looks for as great and worthy of note is the opposite of what the Christian should be focusing on.

Life application: Doing lowly, menial tasks is not a sign of weakness, especially if you don't have to do them. Assuming such jobs is simply a sign that you are willing to ensure that which needs to be done gets done. Never be afraid to get your hands dirty, either literally or spiritually, as needs arise.

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 2 Corinthians 12:7

In the Bible, there are certain verses which come with incredibly long and detailed commentaries by scholars. This is one of them. The words of Paul here have meaning and they convey his thoughts as he attempts to explain his infirmities; the very things in which he feels boasting is acceptable. Because of this, scholars really want to know what he is talking about.

He begins with, "And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations." These are the things he spoke of in verses 1-4. These revelations were the kinds of things that could then make him to appear to be "the man in God's favor."

It cannot be denied that anyone who claims to have had heavenly visions is normally either elevated to an unhealthy level, or is disregarded as insane. If the visions are believed, it means that those who believe the person are willing to accept that they have participated in something divine. If this is so, then they are marked as special and worthy of listening to. It is, unfortunately, this type of thing that has led to the formation of many cults throughout the church-age.

In order that this wouldn't happen with Paul, because his visions were really true, "a thorn in the flesh" was given to him. What does this have to do with his revelations? This thorn is the very thing that will be used to show that Paul is just a man with human limitations. By having such limitations on prominent display, it would take the eyes of his audience off of the sensational elements of his life and keep them on the reality of his troubled human nature.

This "thorn" is described as "a messenger of Satan" that was used to "buffet" him. Just as Satan was allowed to afflict Job, so he is allowed to afflict any of God's people by the approval of God. However, though Satan may think that he is accomplishing evil, God will always use such trials for good. We normally see

these things from our perspective - "Ouch this hurts; it must be evil," or "What a terrible situation, my heart is broken. Why has God allowed this evil in my life?" However, if we could just step out of ourselves and see the entire picture, we would then understand the greater plan. Job's afflictions, Paul's thorn, our own trials, heartaches, and losses - all of these things - are being used to serve God's ultimately good plan for His people.

For Paul, there was a good reason for his thorn. According to him, it was "lest I be exalted above measure." He understood the exact reason for the thorn. This doesn't mean that the thorn wasn't painful, but that he could endure having it because he knew it was serving a greater purpose. As we will see in the coming verses, he truly wanted it to be taken from him, but the Lord refused his request. And He refused for a most important reason.

The question that scholars debate concerning this "thorn" is, "What is it?" A wide variety of possibilities have been submitted as to what it is. Some believe it was a moral deficiency, such as the temptation of women or the like. Others have named various physical afflictions that it could have been. Without Paul naming it, we can only speculate. However, speculation is not to be rejected outright. There are possible clues to what it could be which are found in Acts and in His epistles.

One sound speculation, although impossible to be adamant about, is that it could be failing eyesight. When writing to those in Galatia, he said to them that at one point they would have plucked out their own eyes and given them to him (4:15). In Acts, when Paul was standing in the presence of the high priest, he claims to have not known that it was him (Acts 23:5). Elsewhere in Acts, Paul's set, fixed gaze is noted. This could be because of failing eyesight (Acts 13:9). When writing to those in Galatia, he told them, "See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!" (6:11). This could be a sign of failing eyesight. He is noted to have written this way in all of his letters (2 Thessalonians 3:17). Also from Acts it can be implied in several passages that Paul was conducted by others in his journeying. Some of the accounts seem to imply that he was simply unable to conduct himself for some reason. Failing eyesight would be a good reason. Finally, according to the Pulpit Commentary, the word for "buffet" "is derived from

kolaphos, a slap on the face, and would be suitable to such a disfigurement as ophthalmia."

In the end, we can only guess at what Paul's affliction was. And this is for good reason. If his affliction was named, it could only then be applied as a life example to those who had the same condition. Truly, only they could fully empathize with Paul's ordeal. But without naming the affliction, it allows for a common empathy by all people who suffer with their own burden, whatever it may be. We can look to our infirmity and be content that God has allowed it into our life, just as he allowed some type of unknown infirmity into Paul's life too.

Life application: If you have a "thorn" in the flesh - be it moral or physical - be content that God has allowed it into your life in order to bring Him glory. In the end, He has determined that it was necessary for your life to come out exactly as He intends.

Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 2 Corinthians 12:8

Paul's thorn in the flesh was something that he was so despondent over that he petitioned the Lord three times that it might be taken away from him. Why Paul chose to continue after the first time and to cease at three times isn't stated, but it could be that he first had on his mind the parable of the persistent widow found in Luke 18:1-8. He knew that sometimes a prayer isn't answered right away, but that we are to be determined in our prayer lives.

However, after the third petition, he ceased. Maybe this was because the Lord Jesus in Matthew 26:39-46 only petitioned His Father three times in Gethsemane concerning His own coming trial. Paul may have felt that to go beyond what Christ petitioned would be inappropriate. This is all speculation, but he is clear and precise in his words. Concerning his thorn, he "pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me."

It is significant for the believer in Jesus Christ to note that Paul "pleaded with the Lord." In other words, his prayers and petitions were directed to Jesus personally. Thus, it is appropriate to pray to Him and to expect Him to be the One to respond in whatever way He chooses. In other words, it is to be inferred that Jesus Christ is fully God and that He is fully capable of handling His responsibilities within the Godhead for all of His people. Paul has set the example which we may now follow by petitioning the Lord in this manner.

Life application: This verse gives us a general guideline for a few important issues. The first is that we may petition the Lord Jesus in prayer. The second is that we should be persistent in our prayers. It's not that the Lord might not have heard us the first time, but that there are reasons He chooses to not respond immediately. A third reason is that there is a time when we should cease in our prayers. For Paul's particular case, it was three times. This is not to be considered a set amount for every occasion though.