

Message #31

II Corinthians 12:1-6

One minister stepped up to his pulpit one Sunday and said “Today I am going to preach on the subject of humility. I believe that I have written one of the finest things that has ever been written on the subject and this will be the best message I will ever preach in my life.” After his message on humility was over, one of the members of the congregation went to the pastor and said “thank you Pastor for that message.” The proud minister said “Don’t thank me, thank the Lord.” The parishioner said, “Well I thought about doing that, but the message wasn’t that good.”

The greatest sin in the ministry or in any minister or in anyone’s life is the sin of pride. Someone wisely said when it comes to our Christian life it is imperative that we blow God’s trumpet not our own trumpet. Pride is a terrible sin. C.S. Lewis said it is the most evil of all sins because through that sin the Devil became the Devil. It is pride that leads to every other vice. Pride is a completely “anti-God state of mind.” God hates pride and so did Paul.

Paul did not like having to talk about himself. He loved teaching truth about the grace of God. He loved unraveling the precious grace doctrines. **When grace is accurately understood there is no room for any boasting.** The grace system is a no merit system. **Grace is that which we do not deserve and that which we cannot earn.** Our only boast is in the Lord. But the problem for Paul was that he was under attack as not being a true apostle and he was forced to defend himself and that meant he had to talk about himself and what God had actually done.

This is important to see. **Paul will present what God actually had done.** He does not make up stories that are not true. He tells the truth. He never thinks more highly of himself than he ought. He was hesitant to boast, but he needed to counter his opponents. So in this section of Scripture, Paul informs the Corinthians of this truth:

PAUL’S EXPERIENCES AS AN APOSTLE WERE LITERALLY OUT OF THIS WORLD EXPERIENCES AND NONE OF THE FALSE APOSTLES COULD COME CLOSE TO PAUL’S RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND WHAT HE HAD SEEN GOD DO.

Paul was way out of the league of false apostles. They could not hold a candle to what Paul had seen and experienced. Frankly, neither can we. Paul was reluctant to get drawn into this kind of thing. We may observe from **verse 1** that this was “necessary” for Paul but it was not “profitable.”

If you have ever listened to some people boast about their relationship with God, it is obnoxious. Some would have you think they have done more, seen more, experienced more than any other believer on earth. They want you to think they are big spiritual stuff. Well for Paul it was true. He had done more, seen more and experienced more than any other believer on earth. But he did not like having to talk about that. He was the most spiritual man on earth, but he also was a very humble man.

Men and women who for no reason just start boasting about their incredible experiences are really not following the mindset of Paul.

Now because he was under attack, there are four Pauline truths that he sets forth:

PAULINE TRUTH #1 – Paul received visions and revelations from the Lord. **12:1**

Now the Corinthians were very impressed with signs and wonders and spectacular revelatory gifts. The false teachers were claiming they got special revelatory messages from God and the Corinthians believed them. The reason they believed them is because they were ignorant of the Word of God. We know from I Corinthians 3:2, they could not even receive solid food and they were gullible. When you do not have a solid, deep grasp of God's Word, you are susceptible to religious frauds who do not present the truth. They were putting Paul down by claiming they had received far more revelatory data than he had.

Paul had to defend himself. He says, “Look, I have received many visions and revelations that have come from the Lord.”

Now the word “visions” (οπτασια) is the Greek word from which we get our English word optics. The word means to actually view something. Something comes into your view and you really see it (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 321). The word “revelations” (αποκαλυψις) refers to a disclosure of truth that is uncovered and revealed (*Ibid.*, p. 50). Now the prepositional phrase “of the Lord” means that God is the true source of these things.

So what Paul is saying is God has actually revealed to me and let me actually see His truth and all kinds of things. God has literally singled Paul out to reveal things to him that he actually saw and Paul will go on and talk about those things.

We know in Acts 9 that Paul was actually stopped by Jesus Christ himself. Paul said in Galatians 1:12 that the grace Gospel that he proclaimed and taught was a revelation given to him by Jesus Christ Himself. He said in his first letter to the Corinthians that the Communion service for the church was give to him directly from the Lord (I Cor. 11:23).

PAULINE TRUTH #2 – Paul was literally transported by God to His heaven . **12:2-4**

Paul says okay, you want to talk about things of God, I will tell you something that I have not told anyone. Contrary to the allegations of the false teachers, Paul says I will tell you an experience that none of the false teachers have ever received or will ever receive. False teachers are never going to see heaven because he has already said their destiny is hell (II Cor. 11:15). Paul says not only do I teach about heaven, I have been there and seen it.

Now we may observe from **verse 2** that Paul begins by saying “I know a man.” He talks in the third person, not the first person in telling this story. He does this out of humility. He is downplaying himself because he is not telling them this story so they would elevate him.

Now the specific event Paul is going to describe is an event that occurred 14 years prior to this moment (**verse 2**). This means a couple of things:

First, this means Paul had told no one for 14 years. An experience like this would probably be something most people would have immediately told everyone who would listen. Most people could not help but boast about this, but not Paul. He considered this to be a very personal, private moment and he didn't even like to tell others about it. Paul was more interested in teaching people God's Word, not sharing personal experiences.

Second, this puts Paul back in time before his first missionary journey. **Fourteen years takes us back to around A.D. 42, which places this sometime after his conversion on the road to Damascus, but before his first missionary journey.** This occurred during his silent years of preparation.

Paul was saved somewhere around the year A.D. 35 and then he disappears for several years. Barnabas goes and finds Paul in Tarsus and brings him back to Antioch somewhere around A.D. 43-44 (Acts 11:25-26). Then Paul began his first missionary journey somewhere around A.D. 48-49 (Acts 13-14). **Sometime before Barnabas found Paul, probably while in Tarsus, he was caught up to the third heaven.**

So for all of these years Paul has not said one word about this, until this moment. Now there are three key facts to observe here about the experience:

Fact #1 - Paul was "in Christ." **12:2a**

This is a key and critical Pauline prepositional phrase. Being "in Christ" is the prerequisite for being able to go to heaven. This classification of being "in Christ" is a reference to the moment the Holy Spirit baptizes one into Christ the moment one believes. This status is critical to eschatology for one in Christ is guaranteed heaven either via death or Rapture.

Now Paul is going to present a Rapture-type of event, so he is clear to point out that one must be "in Christ."

Fact #2 - Paul left his body. **12:2b-3**

This physical body cannot go to heaven. Paul actually taught these Corinthians that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:50). In order to go to heaven, the immaterial part of a person must leave the material part of a person. Sinful flesh and blood cannot ever inherit the Kingdom of God.

So to get to heaven, we have to say goodbye to this sinful flesh body and it is clear from Paul's language here that this is exactly what happened. Now carefully observe Paul says whether in the body or not "I do not know." This is significant because this teaches us that when we leave our bodies to go to heaven, we don't notice a major difference individually.

In other words you are still you and you are thinking as you when you leave your body. You just change locations, and are very much aware of who you are.

By the way, this shoots down those people who claim they left their body and knew it and floated above it and looked down around like some floating spirit-being. When a person actually leaves the body, they don't know it; God knows it.

Fact #3 - Paul was taken to God's third heaven. **12:4**

The Bible presents three different heavens: 1) Our atmosphere; 2) Stellar Heaven; 3) God's Throne heaven. Paul was literally transported up "way beyond the blue." He was transported into God's heaven, which is the third heaven.

The Apostle Paul had literally been raptured. He had literally left his body and was caught up into heaven, the third heaven, which is the Paradise of God. So there are only three heavens, not seven or ten like some religious people would have you to believe. When you get to heaven three you are at the highest level because you are with God.

Now there are some key observations we want to make about this incredible Pauline experience. Remember he actually saw this and experienced this, so we are getting an eye witness account:

(Observation #1) - To get to this heaven one must be "caught up." **12:4a**

This point right here means you cannot possibly get to heaven on your own. Someone has to take you there. Someone has to authorize you to go up to heaven. God is the One who authorizes one to go up to heaven and only those "in Christ" get to go up.

(Observation #2) - When one gets to this heaven it is "Paradise." **12:4b**

Notice Paul calls heaven "paradise" (παράδεισος) which is a Greek word that refers to a beautiful, pleasurable garden type of park (*Ibid.*, p. 339). Heaven is a beautiful place; a serene place and it is a park type place.

Now we have had the privilege of visiting most of the national parks in the United States. Many of us have visited Yosemite, the Grand Canyon, the Everglades and Glacier Bay in Alaska. But of all the national parks, my favorite is Yellowstone. We lived in that country for 8 years and we love it. But there is a park that is far greater than Yellowstone; it is the park that exists at God's heaven. I can't wait to see it. It must be spectacular because that is the way Paul describes it.

Now earlier in the epistle Paul identified this paradise heaven by another noun, he called it "home" (ἐνδημεω) (II Cor. 5:8-9). That particular word "home" is a very rare Greek word that refers to a place where people actually live and reside (*Ibid.*, p. 152).

So if we combine these two Pauline words, we may conclude that **the moment a believer leaves his body, he is not even aware that he has left his body, and he is instantly caught up to heaven and when he gets there he sees a beautiful, wonderful park-like garden place and he immediately understands this is home.**

Now by virtue of the fact that he visited this place, Paul had obviously seen those believers who were already home. Plus it is possible that while he was there, he may have actually got a glimpse of the “Bema Seat” (II Cor. 5:10), where believers will be judged.

(Observation #3) - When a person is caught up to heaven it is so spectacular one cannot even verbally describe it. **12:4c**

When he got to heaven, what he saw and heard were things that were “inexpressible.” That word “inexpressible” (*απατος*) actually refers to words that are unspeakable and indescribable (*Ibid.*, p. 61). Paul saw things and heard things that he could not even put into words. He had never heard nor seen anything like this. He could not even put it all into language.

(Observation #4) - When a person is caught up to heaven one is not permitted by God to describe it. **12:4d**

Now take a good look at what is said here, any person who actually goes to heaven is not permitted to be on earth and speak about it. The word “permit” (*εξου*) is one that refers to a lawful permission (*Ibid.*, p. 160). It is against the law permission of God for one who has actually gone to heaven to come back and tell stories about all that was seen. God will not permit it.

This to me solves a key point. Every now and then somebody will make the news by claiming they have gone to heaven and they have been sent back to tell the story of all they saw. I don't believe it and I don't buy it. I don't know what they think they saw, but it was not of God and it was not His heaven because God does not permit some minister or some kid to go to heaven and see it and come back and go on a speaking circuit to describe it. If Paul didn't do it, you may be certain these people aren't doing it.

The majority of things Paul actually heard and saw, he never told us. This was a very private revelation given by God to Paul and it was not given for him to pass on to the church. We may assume, in view of the terrible suffering that he endured, God permitted him to literally go to heaven and see it; but for the rest of us, we will have to wait our turn.

PAULINE TRUTH #3 – Paul did not want to boast about this experience. **12:5**

Paul says I don't like boasting about my trip to heaven, I would rather talk about my weaknesses because he realized he still had a lot of work to do in his life before he finally got to heaven. Paul says it was a tremendous honor to have the privilege of going to Paradise, but what I want to boast about is my weakness.

Paul knew there was nothing in him that merited the trip to Paradise. Paul saw himself as a weak, sinful man. When we truly begin to understand the grace of God, we will see ourselves in the same way. We won't be focused on boasting about our spirituality because we will realize how weak we truly are.

PAULINE TRUTH #4 – Paul would not be foolish if he did boast about it. **12:6**

Paul says I could boast and would not be foolish to boast about these things because they are the truth. Now look what he says; I don't want to boast because I don't want people giving me more credit than what they see and hear in me.

Paul says I don't want people looking at me like I am some super saint who deserves to go to heaven. We are fragile earthen, clay pots. That is the way Paul saw it. **Human merit is a lethal, deadly myth.**

He wanted people resting totally and completely in the grace of God.

Paul never sought visions. He never sought revelations. He never sought being caught up to heaven.

Paul was a normal, finite sinner. He said listen to me and watch my life, just judge me on that. Don't judge me by the spectacular.

Now the potential of actually going to heaven is exciting, but it is only for those "in Christ." If you want to go to heaven, you must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ because He is the only One who can take you to heaven.