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A1408 – February 23, 2014 – 2 Corinthians 12:1-6
Paul's Trip To The Third Heaven

If you'd open your Bible to 2 Corinthians 11:16ff we'll review Paul's defense of his apostleship against the false apostles who had won over the hearts of some of the Corinthians. Paul's method is to apply the wisdom principle of Prov 26:5, "Answer a fool according to his folly; lest he be wise in his own eyes." In other words, stand on the ground of your opponent and defend yourself from their standpoint of foolishness in order to reveal their folly. In reality, as verse 19 indicates, the Corinthians thought they were wise, but in truth they were foolish because they tolerated the foolish gladly. The evidence that they tolerated foolishness was verse 20 - they put up with five abuses, any one of which would have been sufficient to discount the validity of their ministry. First, they tolerated the false apostles enslaving them, meaning they allowed them to enslave them to the Law of Moses, putting them in bondage. Second, they put up with their devouring their bank accounts, meaning the false apostles required high wages to minister. Third, they allowed them to take advantage of them for their own purposes, meaning they allowed the false apostles to manipulate them into carrying out their agenda. Fourth, they tolerated their arrogant self-exaltation, meaning they put up with the false apostles putting themselves above them. And fifth, they even allowed them to hit them in the face, meaning they literally put up with physical abuse. In those respects Paul says in verse 21 he was weak by comparison because he never used such abusive and controlling methods. Such abuses are shameful. Paul could not even compare himself at all with the false apostles on those points. Instead he ministered in the startlingly contrastive manner of humble servant hood.

But in other respects Paul could compare himself with his opponents. In verse 22 he argues that in the area of family heritage he was equal to his opponents. Are they Hebrews? So was he. Are they Israelites? So was he. Are

they descendants of Abraham? So was he. So they had no advantage over Paul when it came to family heritage. In verses 23-27 Paul argues that in terms of physical sufferings in the ministry he had to endure far more than his opponents and so he was a superior servant of Christ. “in far more labors...far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times beaten with rods, once stoned, three times shipwrecked, a night and a day spent in the deep. On frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren, labor and hardship, sleepless nights, hungry and thirsty, without food, in cold and exposure.” Much of this is news to us since we never find it recorded in the Book of Acts. The reason is because Paul wasn’t accustomed to boasting about all the physical sufferings he had to endure in the ministry. Instead he just kept it to himself, handled it by the grace of God and kept on ministering. In verses 28-29 Paul argues that in terms of spiritual sufferings in the ministry he had to endure far more than his opponents and this too evidenced his superiority over the false apostles. These are the internal pressures you face when you really care about fellow believers. And I take it that these pressures are far greater than the external pressures because they never let up, they are the hurts and pains of the flock you are shepherding. He says, “There is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.” Those are the churches Paul planted and he kept in close contact with those churches. He had concern for them because of the attacks from within and the attacks from without. Also he says, “Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?” Paul cared about his converts and when they fell into sin he identified with them and this comes with a lot of spiritual pressure. And any true pastor knows these pressures. They don’t just brush it off or write people off, they have intense concern for them. Verse 30, and here is the theme of these boastings; if Paul had to boast he would boast about his weaknesses, not his strengths. His opponents we can imagine boasted in a long list of successes all typed out on their resume. Paul said I don’t boast in my victories, if I am pressed to boast I’ll boast of what pertains to my weaknesses. Why? Because ultimately when we boast in our weaknesses what is highlighted is the grace of God that enabled us to endure the weaknesses. It is the grace of God that Paul is illuminating. In verses 32-33 Paul returns to his weaknesses and argues that there was a pattern of suffering in his ministry from the very

beginning because part of his commission to be an apostle was that he would face many sufferings. Jesus said to him, “I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.” And suffer Paul did. From the very beginning when he was in Damascus he was blacklisted by the local king Aretas who ordered Paul’s arrest and in the manhunt his only way of escape was through a window in a basket. The point is that Paul was a marked man and this was a mark of his apostleship. His opponents could not and did not boast in such weaknesses. Therefore Paul is the true apostle and they are the false!

Today in chapter 12 we come to a most interesting passage, Paul is going to speak about someone who was caught up to the third heaven and how this person heard inexpressible words and so forth. It’s a rather cryptic passage and people have long asked, “Who is Paul talking about?” And for a number of rather definitive reasons they have concluded that Paul is talking about himself. So let’s diverge for a moment to see the arguments that prove that Paul is relating a personal experience. First, Paul would hardly be embarrassed about relating someone else’s experience as indicated by verse 1 and 5. Second, he reveals the exact time the revelation took place as fourteen years ago in verse 2. Third, he knew what was revealed and also that it was not permitted to be told to others in verse 4. Fourth, it would hardly strengthen his argument for his apostleship if he were relating some other Christian’s experience. Fifth, the mention of confusion on whether he was in the body or out of the body points to someone relating their personal experience. So for these five reasons I take it that the experience related here of being caught up to the third heaven is a personal experience of Paul.

But if Paul is talking about himself why does he speak in the 3rd person? Why doesn’t he just say, “I was caught up to the third heaven” rather than “I know a man who was caught up to the third heaven?” Of course, you already know the answer if you’ve been keeping up with Paul’s approach. He’s boasting, but in such a way that he is not really the center of the picture. It’s amazing to watch how carefully Paul boasts when he is pressed to boast. Earlier he boasted in weaknesses so as to put the grace of God front and center in the picture. Here he boasts in the 3rd person so as to move himself out of the center so that you’re kept wondering if this is really Paul or not, even though we can see that it is Paul.

So let's take a look at it. In verse 1 Paul says, **Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable.** The Greek uses the particle *dei* of necessity. The point is Paul had no other recourse than to boast. Why? Because boasting was the only way he could win over some of the Corinthian converts who had been drawn after false apostles. But notice that Paul quickly qualifies the necessity of his boasting by saying **though it is not profitable.** By the word **profitable** Paul means "nothing can be gained by it." Paul knew that there was nothing to be gained by boasting before the Lord. Now perhaps their being convinced of Paul's apostleship could be gained by it, or perhaps the revealing that such boastings were not valuable could be gained by it, but before the Lord nothing could be gained by it. Before the Lord there is only one boast that can gain anything and that is boasting in Christ and Him crucified, the Lord of glory!

But nonetheless, Paul says in the middle of verse 1, **I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord.** In other words, I will boast. And the topic of my boasting **will be visions and revelations from the Lord.** Paul had multiple visions and revelations. Several are recorded in the Book of Acts though the one he will recount here is not recorded in the Book of Acts. The difference between a vision and a revelation is that a **vision** involves an audio and visual phenomenon. It can involve transportation or teleportation. A **revelation** is a disclosure of truth by some other means such as verbal speech. So all visions are revelations but all revelations are not visions. Because one preposition is controlling the two nouns separated by *kai* Paul is probably referring to revelations by way of visions. Verse 7 seems to confirm by referring only to "revelations." So the kind of revelation Paul will recount here was a disclosure of truth that came by way of a vision that involved teleportation. The source of these visions should be obvious but is stated at the end of verse 1 to be **of the Lord** or more accurately, **from the Lord.**

Verse 2, **I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven.** As you've guessed this verse gives a lot of information but it's somewhat cryptic. First, Paul says **I know a man.** This is the chief argument that the man is not Paul. However, that Paul knows the man does not exclude Paul from being the man since he also knows himself to be a man. And indeed what Paul is doing here is referring to himself in the 3rd person so that he is not focusing

the attention on himself in the boasting, which is his very purpose. Second, the man he is referring to, which is himself, is **in Christ**. This is a technical term for one who is a member of the body of Christ, which is the Church. Membership in the body of Christ is based on the baptism ministry of the Spirit. This ministry began on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 and not before. The reason it could not begin before is because Christ had not ascended and the Spirit had not been given. So on the day of Pentecost those who believed were baptized by the Spirit and placed in Christ. This is not a wet baptism but a dry baptism that occurs when an individual believes. The man here who is **in Christ** is Paul. Third, the timing of the event is **fourteen years ago**. Since this letter was written in AD56 then the event was in AD42 or 43 depending on the exact time of year. Putting together Paul's chronology from Galatians and the Book of Acts we learn that Paul was placed in Christ in AD33 on the Damascus Road. He then spent three years in Damascus followed by 10 years in Syria and Cilicia. If the event described here occurred in AD42 or 43 then Paul was either in Syria or Cilicia. In the sequence of the Book of Acts this occurred in Acts 9:30. This was the period when Paul was in training for his missionary journeys which began in AD46.

So three things Paul did know; first, the man, which is himself, second, that he was in Christ when it happened and third that the year it occurred was AD42 when he was either in Syria or Cilicia; then we have the parenthetical, probably set off by dashes or parentheses in your Bible, which explain what Paul did not know. But let's skip over that for now and finish the end of what he did know. Fourth, that **Such a man** he says **was caught up to the third heaven**. The verb **caught up** is *harpazo* and is the word from which is derived the Latin word "rapture." Paul is saying that he experienced a rapture. It means "to be caught up." It could be by transportation which is the movement of something from one point to another point through physical space or it could be teleportation which is the movement of something from one point to another point without traversing the physical space. Some have supposed that a rapture is a violent snatching up but that is incorrect, it is rather being taken up without having control over the situation.

Several people have experienced raptures in history. Ezekiel says that he was caught up between earth and heaven (Ezek 8:3). Christ is said to have been caught up to God at His ascension (Rev 12:5). Philip was caught up at the Shephelah of Israel and set down in Azotus (Acts 8:39). The Church is

destined to be caught up at the pre-trib Rapture (1 Thess 4:17). So raptures have occurred before in history. Paul is saying here he was raptured.

Fifth, the location of the rapture is known to be **the third heaven**. There are three heavens; the third heaven, also known as paradise, the second heaven referring to the starry heavens and the first heaven referring to the atmospheric heavens up against the face of the earth. In Genesis 1 these three heavens are created in reverse order. First, the third heaven, also known as Paradise according to verse 4, was created in Genesis 1:1. When it says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" the only heaven being referred to is the third heaven. While the English reader of the Bible may be misled by the plural word "heavens" the Hebrew has no singular for heaven and so it is an interpretive decision. Seeing that the starry and atmospheric heavens were created on day 2 leads to the conclusion that the third heaven was created on day 1. The picture we get in Genesis is that the third heaven was created outside of and against the edge of the earth which was a ball of water that was uninhabited and uninhabitable. On day two God separated off a portion of the ball of water and placed a space in between the waters above and the waters below. The space in between He called "heaven." What is not clear at this point in the creation narrative becomes clear on days 4 and 5. On day four the stars are placed in the second heaven and thus known as the heavens and on day 5 the birds are created to fly on the face of heaven which is the atmosphere around the earth. So if one looks at the details of the creation narrative he will see that it explains the creation of all three heavens and that since day one the third heaven has always been beyond and against the edge of the universe. Physicist's model of popular Big Bang Cosmology posits that there is no edge of the universe because of the true observation of equal star density in every direction from earth. They therefore posit that this can only be true if the universe is infinite. They fail to consider the possibility that the earth is at or very near the center of the universe which would account for the observation of equal star density in every direction just as well. In any case, there is an edge of the universe because the only thing that is infinite is God. To claim that the universe is infinite is to claim that the universe is god. This is idolatry. So **the third heaven** is beyond the edge of the present universe and this is where Paul was raptured to for a temporary period of time.

Now come back to the parenthetical remark in verse 2 which is repeated in verse 3. Paul knew a lot about this experience but he did not know what he says here. **Whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows.** Of course **God knows. God knows** everything. He knew perfectly well the state Paul was in during this ride to the third heaven beyond the edge of the universe. But Paul did not know. He was obviously conscious but as far as whether he was **in the body...or out of the body** he could not distinguish.

Now to be **in the body** would mean that in body and spirit, that is, that his whole person was caught up to the third heaven such that he was no longer present on earth at the time. To be **out of the body** would be in spirit only; that is, his spirit was caught up to the **third heaven** while his body remained present on earth for the time. Paul didn't know which state he was in and we don't know which either, it's pure speculation. But what is not speculation is very interesting; by admitting that he could have been in the body Paul shows he is open to the possibility that a mortal body of a believer could go to the third heaven. The testimony of Enoch who lived before the Flood and died not for he was taken confirms that a mortal body of a believer can go to the third heaven in the presence of God. Whether this body has a sin nature or not is a question but what is not a question is the fact that when we commit personal sin and we confess we are actually defiling the true heavenly temple and there has to be a fresh application of the cleansing blood of Christ because of our defiling presence in that sense. So I don't have problems with Enoch or Paul going to the third heaven in their mortal body and it does not appear to be a problem in Paul's mind either. He definitely held that it was possible that he went to the third heaven in his mortal **body**.

Verse 3, **And I know how such a man** the rest is parenthetical so skip for the time being and continue in verse 4, **how such a man...was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.** There's a correction here. The original Greek of verse 3 does not say **And I know how**, it just simply says, **And I know such a man**, there is no how. The whole point is Paul did not know how he was caught up, so mark out **how**. Paul simply says, **And I know such a man...was caught up into Paradise.** Now **Paradise** is the Greek word from which we get "paradise. It is parallel to **the third heaven** in verse 2 so that we know that **Paradise** and **the third heaven** are the same place and

not a different place. Another description of the same place in Luke 16 is Abraham's bosom. The reason it is called Abraham's bosom is because it is entered by all who have a faith like Abraham. The reason it is called the third heaven is so that we realize it is beyond and against the edge of this universe and the reason it is called Paradise is because of its beauty and wonder. You might recall that when Jesus was on the cross there were two criminals beside him also on crosses. They were suffering justly for what they had done. One of them was jeering at Jesus saying that if He was the Savior let Him save Himself. The other defended Jesus recognizing that Jesus was the Savior and what He was doing was saving others. When the man said to Jesus, "Remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" Jesus recognized that he had believed and gave him more than he hoped for. He would not have to wait until the kingdom to be with Jesus, for truly, Jesus said, "today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Seeing that Jesus breathed his last about 3pm and the day ended at 6pm this man also died before 6pm and was with Jesus on that day in Paradise, more than 20 billion light years from earth. .

Now that is a very great distance to be transported, if indeed they were transported. Light travels at a speed of 186,000mps or 700,000,000mph and three hours would not get you very far. But with the claim that the speed of light is constant you have problems even in Big Bang Cosmology. At this constant speed, light from every galaxy has not had enough time to reach every other galaxy. The reason this is a problem is because the Big Bang Cosmology predicts uniformity of temperature throughout the universe. Yet for uniformity of temperature light from every galaxy has to have reached every other galaxy but the galaxies are too far away from one another for this phenomenon to have occurred. So either the speed of light has changed over time (a blasphemy to science) or Big Bang cosmology is wrong or both. However, if when a believer dies he is transported through the actual physical space then he travels much faster than the speed of light. If not, then some form of teleportation can be envisioned where the spirit of the believer is instantly transferred from earth to Paradise without having to pass through the space-time continuum. Jesus and the man on the cross certainly either went in spirit far faster than the speed of light through the space-time continuum or they were teleported there instantly. Paul, again, we don't know if he was transported or teleported. He didn't know either; he didn't even know whether he was there in spirit or in the body. But I would

hypothesize that there are things that move faster than the speed of light such as angels and there are things that are teleported. But the more important point is that God is not limited by the conceptions of modern physicists and their conceptions of the universe are not accurate descriptions of all that goes on in the universe.

So Paul, whether transported or teleported, arrived in Paradise virtually instantaneously. In verse 3 he repeats that he did not know **whether** he was **in the body or apart from the body**. But what he did know was verse 4, that he **was caught up into Paradise and** when he was there he **heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak**. Now the Greek **inexpressible words** is *arretos* and refers to words not to be shared since they are holy, that is, he heard things he was not supposed to tell others. It does not mean that Paul heard things that were unable to be expressed in human language. What Paul heard was human language so far as we can tell, and he understood what was said, but what he heard was too sacred to tell. At the end of the verse he says it this way; he heard words **which a man is not permitted to speak**. The Greek word for **not permitted** does not mean “impossible” to say but “unauthorized” to say. Paul was not allowed to repeat what he had heard. He clearly heard it and understood it but he was not to repeat it, it was too sacred to tell.

Now there are two other occasions when a biblical writer was permitted to see or hear something but not permitted to speak them to others. First, in Daniel 12 Daniel received certain information that is recorded in Daniel 10 and 11 but it was so far beyond his time that its meaning was not accessible to himself or others at the time. Daniel simply did not understand all that was revealed to him. Those who live through the things revealed will be the ones who actually understand them. But as for Daniel, the Lord says, “conceal these words and seal up the book until the end of time” (cf Dan 12:4). The meaning is that the things will not be understood until they come to pass. This is why Dr Walvoord used to say that we know more about Daniel than Daniel. Certain things revealed to Daniel have now come to pass and so we know what they meant whereas Daniel did not. Second, in Revelation 10 John received information regarding the judgment of the seven thunders. When they uttered their judgments John heard them and understood them but when he was about to write them down a voice told him to seal up the things which the seven thunders had spoken and do not write them. So there

are seven thunder judgments along with the seven seals, trumpets and bowls, but we do not have any idea what these seven thunder judgments are (Rev 10:4). My point is that some of the biblical authors received more revelation than either they themselves understood or that they were permitted to write down. This must have served some purpose for the biblical author, though that purpose is somewhat ominous. What purpose is served by telling Paul things that are too sacred to tell us? I don't know. But certainly hearing these things motivated Paul to fulfill his ministry. Paul, more than any other Christian, was used to found and build Christ's church. He travelled on four missionary journeys and established and built up churches on all of them. He wrote the bulk of the NT epistles that the church still benefits from. He suffered greatly for the ministry. Any one of his difficulties might have caused us to throw in the towel but Paul endured them all. So perhaps the purpose of telling these things to Paul was related to his unique role in founding and building up the church. To see and hear such amazing things would certainly stick with him and continue to motivate him to press forward and endure all sufferings since he clearly saw that there was nothing else worth living and dying for.


Verse 5, **On behalf of such a man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses.** Again some argue that this verse shows that Paul was not the one who went to the third heaven. However, this manner of speaking is consistent with Paul's boasting in such a way that he is removed from being front and center. And further, how would boasting on behalf of another man improve Paul's argument that he was the true apostle and his opponents the false? It would make no sense. So the way he does it this time is he substitutes the third person (**such a man**) for the first person (himself) such that he boasts in the third person concerning the first person. But if Paul were to only speak in the first person he would not boast in anything except those things regarding his **weaknesses**, which is what he did in 11:22-29 and 32-33.

Verse 6, **For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.** Now the **if** at the beginning of verse 6 is a third class condition. Maybe Paul wished to boast, maybe he didn't, but **if** he did he would **not be foolish** because he would not go beyond **the truth**. A fool over boasts, he stretches the truth. Paul would

not stretch the truth. But, he says, **I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.** In other words, I will not boast in the 1st person, not at least with respect to any of his strengths, victories or successes. Paul ultimately was humble and his humility comes out in the fact that he kept this experience to himself for 14 years. He didn't have this great experience and then run off and tell other believers, which is what most Christians do. They have a supposed experience of going to heaven or seeing an angel and the next thing you know they write a book and sell a million copies, they boast about it. That has no place. So regardless of whether the experience is even valid there is no place for telling others about it. It should be kept secret. Paul kept his secret for 14 years and the only reason he finally told them was because in verse 1 he was forced to boast in order to win the Corinthians over to his apostolic authority. But even then the way that he did it removed himself from being front and center.

So a very interesting passage. In summary, in 12:1 Paul says his boasting is absolutely required in this instance, though he recognized it was not profitable before the Lord. But nevertheless he would go on and explain a revelation that came by way of a vision wherein he was transported or teleported. He explains in 12:2 in the 3rd person in order to remove attention from himself. He knew a man, it was himself, who was in Christ, baptized into the body of Christ, who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven which is beyond the edge of the universe. He did not know whether he was in the body or in spirit only, but what he did know in 12:4 is that he was caught up into Paradise and heard sacred words not authorized to tell others. These words surely kept Paul motivated in the ministry but in 12:5 he says, he will boast on behalf of this man in this manner but as far as boasting in himself he would not boast, except as he had already done in chapter 11, with regard to his weaknesses. In 12:6 if Paul decided to boast he would not go beyond the truth. But he refrained from boasting in the truth about himself so that no one would build up an image of Paul beyond reality.

In conclusion, what can we learn? First, we can learn that there may be a situation where we have to boast because the people we're trying to convince so admire certain ridiculous qualities. I would doubt this is a common situation but nonetheless, if it does come up there is license to do this given by 2 Cor 12. Second, if we do have to boast we can remove ourselves from



being front and center. There are ways of relating experiences that come out in a boastful manner and ways that they come out in a humble manner. The same experience can be related boastfully or humbly. We should learn how to converse in a humble way so as not to put ourselves in the spotlight. Here's a masterful example by Paul who kept this experience hidden for 14 years and probably would have kept it hidden his whole life were it not for his opponents claims of visions and revelations that so impressed the Corinthians and won them over.

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