# 2 Corinthians 12:1

*Visions and Revelations — Caught Up to the Third Heaven*

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## Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:1–21

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*“It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory; I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, whether in the body I cannot tell, or whether out of the body I cannot tell, God knoweth, such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, whether in the body or out of the body I cannot tell, God knoweth, how that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such an one I will glory, yet of myself I will not glory, but in my infirmities. For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool, for I will speak the truth. But now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me.*

*And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then am I strong.*

*I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended of you; for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. For*

*what is it wherein ye were inferior to the other churches, except it be that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong.*

*Behold, the third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be burdensome to you; for I seek not yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. And I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved. But be it so, I did not burden you; nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you with guile. Did I make gain of you by any of them whom I sent unto you? I desired Titus, and with him I sent a brother. Did Titus make gain of you? Walked we not in the same spirit? Walked we not in the same steps?*

*Again, think ye that we excuse ourselves unto you? We speak before God in Christ; but we do all things, dearly beloved, for your edifying. For I fear, lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not; lest there be debates, envying, wraths, strifes, backbiting, whisperings, swellings, tumults. And lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and that I shall bewail many which have sinned already, and have not repented of the uncleanness, and fornication, and lasciviousness which they have committed."*

## It Is Not of Profit to Boast

The eleventh chapter shows us that the Corinthians were occupied with appearances. They were carnal, as we learn in 1 Corinthians, and chapter by chapter Paul had dealt with some particular aspect of the flesh as it came out. So when he comes at the end of chapter 11 to speak of being let down through a window in a basket to escape — making himself little, glorying in infirmities, so that what is of God might come out — it was quite commensurate with how bad the situation was. Boasting and folly quite possibly always go together.

Darby's rendering of verse 1 is: "It is not of profit to me to boast." After all he has just put before them, that is the right note. Boasting is a little cheap profit. Someone boasts, talking about themselves, not accomplishing anything, hoping to influence or manipulate — it is not of profit to boast. But then immediately he says: "I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord." Someone might think that is boasting. No: that is what grace wrought in him. When the Corinthians are told in 1 Corinthians 1 that they came behind in no gift, that was not a compliment to them — it was pointing to what the grace of God had conferred upon them. Nothing in their behavior. Similarly here, coming to visions and revelations of the Lord is speaking of what grace had wrought, not boasting of what Paul had attained.

## I Knew a Man in Christ — Conscious Knowledge

In verse 2, the word for "knew" is the word for having conscious knowledge in oneself. And he uses the same word in verse 3: "I know such a man." This is very good reason for believing the man he speaks of is the apostle Paul himself. He has conscious knowledge of such a man because it is himself. And the important point is that he is not speaking of himself as an apostle here. He is speaking of himself as a Christian. "I knew a man in Christ" — every brother and sister falls under the category of a man in Christ. It is not a matter of sex; it is a matter of character: those who are in Christ. And he is speaking as one such.

Now, the same word is used about whether he was in the body or out of the body: "I cannot tell — God knoweth." He did not have conscious knowledge of that fact. Some scholars look in the book of Acts for an occasion when Paul was beaten unconscious and suggest that may be when this occurred. That is possible, but it is not determinative of anything, and it is not what the apostle intends by saying this. He was not conscious of any bodily impediment whatsoever. There was no sense in him of any physical limitation upon his enjoyment of that scene of glory. For those who live with some permanent bodily injury, or with

advancing years and the accumulation of their effects, there is something comforting in that: caught up, a man in Christ has no subjective consciousness of the body as any impediment to his enjoyment of that scene.

## A Man in Christ — The New Creation

2 Corinthians 5:17 says: “If any man be in Christ, there is new creation.” This passage in chapter 12 sets forth the subject of new creation. What does it mean that there is a new creation? This man, a man in Christ, was caught up to the third heaven. He was not like a fish out of water there. He was like someone who belonged there. That is the man of whom it is written, if any man be in Christ, there is new creation — he belongs up there. In this world, we are the fish out of water; up there is the place where we belong.

The truth of being a man in Christ means being before God in all the power and virtue of Christ and his work. As Ephesians says, he is taken into favour in the Beloved, before God as having Christ’s place. And every man in Christ is going to be caught up. The Lord Jesus was caught up — the male child born of the sun-clad woman in Revelation 12 was caught up. Here the model Christian man is caught up. And in 1 Thessalonians 4, we are told that we are going to be caught up — the dead in Christ shall rise first, and then we who are alive, together with them, shall be caught up and meet the Lord. The Lord was caught up first, the model Christian was caught up, and every Christian will have this experience.

## This Is Not a Boast

When someone wants to boast about something, the idea is to boast about something for which there are corroborating witnesses. If you boast about something no one saw, no one heard, and it was only you — someone will simply say it never happened, and the boast has no weight. For a boast to carry weight, there needs to be a crowd that was there, that can confirm it. What we have here

by its very substance is not a boast that carries any weight of that kind. I was caught up to the third heaven — an infidel will say you were not. What does one say? Well, I was not boasting. A statement of fact is not a boast. And these are the kinds of things about which Christians ought to glorify — what grace has done and bestowed. They do not make trophies to display. Paul never came back from the third heaven with a medal on his chest. If there were an implied "I must be somebody special because the Lord did this for me," that would be boasting — but that is simply not here.

## The Third Heaven and Paradise

He was caught up to the third heaven, and then he says, caught up into paradise. So we know where paradise is located. There are those who have thought it was not always located in the same place — that it was at one time down in the earth somewhere — but that is doubtful. Paradise was where it was. When the Lord said to the dying thief, "To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise," he was speaking of this. But that going in the disembodied state is not looked at in Scripture as the Lord's entry there as man. His entry there as man — into the presence of the Father in bodily resurrection — was when he was taken up and a cloud received him out of their sight, as described in Acts 1. As he says at the end of John 16: he came out from God and goes to God. The book of Hebrews speaks of only one entry there in virtue of his blood, and not of his going there in the disembodied state. But from this passage we know where paradise is.

Revelation 2:7 adds: "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." Human and Islamic ideas of paradise involve lengthy catalogues of the satisfying of every lust. But from Scripture we know really only two things: the Lord Jesus is there, and the tree of life is there. The tree of life is very likely symbolic of Christ as the sustainer of life forever — nowhere in Scripture is our life looked at as standing in any independence of Christ. Christ in us; he that hath the Son hath life; Christ is our life. This will not

change in glory: he will be the sustainer of that life eternally. What makes heaven heaven is the presence of the Lord Jesus. If he is not there, it is not heaven. If he is there — that is everything.

## Above All Heavens — The Glories of Christ

The word “caught up” in verse 2 means as far as — caught up as far as the third heaven. This suggests to the mind that there may be something higher yet than the third heaven, something above it. In Ephesians 4:9–10, speaking of Christ’s ascension, it says: “He that descended is the same that also ascended up above all heavens.” That looks to be saying something reaches above the third heaven. If there is a third heaven — the atmospheric heaven, the starry heavens, and then the third heaven where God dwells — there appears to be something as to his ascension that was above all heavens.

John 17:5 is illuminating here: “And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self, with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.” As man, he enters that glory which he had with the Father before the world was. This is Godhead glory. He can’t be asking this in the sense of a divine person who had left it — in John 1 he speaks of himself as the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, and he always is and always will be in the bosom of the Father in respect of the relationship and unity of the divine persons. But this: where he is here in manhood and has done the work of glorifying the Father, he prays that he might take manhood into that glory he had with the Father before the world. That is certainly above all heavens. A man in Christ does not enter into what is above the third heaven — that belongs to Christ alone.

In John 17 he prays that his own might be with him to behold the glories conferred upon him by the Father. There are glories that we share, and glories that we behold in him. The ones we behold are not communicable; the others we enter into. It has been attributed to H.E. Hayhoe: every Christian blessing is a

mountain peak beyond which God could not go. There is nothing withheld from us that God could have given us. Whatever we do not have is not possible for God to give us, because it belongs to the divine persons exclusively and man cannot enter into it and share that.

## “God Knoweth” — A Comforting Word

Twice in our passage — once in verse 2 and once in verse 3 — there is a most comforting little expression: “God knoweth.” There is a great deal that God knows. One thing that comes near the top of the list is that God knows he loves me. Even such a thing as whether the apostle was in the body or out of it — God knew. There is a certain submission of spirit which is content to let God know some things and not require to know them oneself. It is the honor of kings to search out a matter, says Proverbs. But it is a Christian grace sometimes to say, God knows, and just let it be. God is able also to act based on what he knows, and part of the pathway of Christian wisdom is to allow God to act. J.N. Darby, in his later years, would say over and over again: I don’t meddle in those things. He was content to leave things in God’s hands, waiting for God to act. The hand of God is so much better than the hand of man. It is a hard lesson to learn, but it is a blessed and a happy one.

*My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.*