

2 Corinthians 12:4

Unspeakable Words — The Thorn in the Flesh — My Grace Is Sufficient

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:4–13

“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 will I glory, yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities. For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool, for I will say the truth. But now I forbear, lest any man should think above me 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 of 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 other churches, except it be that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong.”

A Height and a Depth

In chapter 12 we get both a height and a depth. The first part of the chapter gives us the height — the third heaven. At the end of the chapter, where Paul has to speak to them concerning their fleshly condition, we get a great contrast. He brings the height before them first before making the points he wishes to make at the end.

These things happened to the apostle in connection with strengthening him for his ministry, even though he was not able to communicate the things that he heard. There is a lesson in the manner in which he speaks of this experience: he spoke of it many, many years later, only when it was needful to be brought out — and even then, he spoke of himself in the third person. There was no hint in him of the kind of boasting one sometimes meets. David similarly: when he killed the bear and the lion in the course of his responsibilities, those things only came out when it was necessary to allay the fears of King Saul. It was not something he went about telling everybody in a boastful manner. Flesh-life boasts. The apostle's manner was entirely contrary to that.

Unspeakable Words — Things Not Lawful for Man to Utter

The Corinthians, a very boastful company, had made a show even of spiritual gifts, as we see in 1 Corinthians 14. Among the particular kinds of boasting there was worldly wisdom: they thought they knew everything, and they expounded it. In order to boast about something, it has to be expressible — it has to be able to be put into words. But Paul heard unspeakable things which it is not lawful for a man to utter. That sounds a great deal like a great deal of modern thought: man either knows everything already, or nearly everything, with just a few more things yet to discover. But what we find here is that there are things beside what men know, a limitation imposed by God. That is not how modern man likes to think of things. And those who have sometimes claimed similar experiences and proceeded to describe in detail what they saw — the colour of the grass and so on

— show by that very fact that something is very wrong. The apostle Paul heard unspeakable things which it was not allowed to man to utter. There is an incapacity, in accordance with the present state of things, for man to give utterance to the character of the third heaven. And obviously it is not needful for us to know what he heard: if it were needful, it would have been revealed.

The inability is not a law external to the man — as if he could tell us but is forbidden. It is an incapacity. When we are raptured, we are going to lose the old nature. We will have a body like his own body of glory, and be in a resurrection state, so that nothing of the flesh will hinder that scene of glory. There is no flesh in the third heaven. And that is also why the man was not sensible whether he was in the body or out of it — there was no impediment, either physical or from the flesh, to be sensible of.

Of Such a One Will I Glory — But Not of Myself

Of such a one will I glory — that is, of a man in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven. Every Christian is fitted, by the blood, for that scene of glory. That is a wonderful thing to boast of — not because of anything in ourselves, but because of the work of Christ. So of a man in Christ who is caught up, one may boast. Yet of himself — of Paul as a man in himself — he will not glory, but in his infirmities and weaknesses.

Here it is worth pausing on the word infirmities. When we come to Hebrews and read that our great high priest is touched with the feelings of our infirmities, many people get taught that this refers to his sympathy with our sinful tendencies. But a high priest has no sympathy with sinful tendencies — that would be a defect in him. How could he have sympathy with sinful tendencies? The answer of those who hold this view is that they think he was peccable, that when he was tested, something within him surged toward the evil, though he overcame it. But no such surge was in him. Man reasons from himself to Christ

and makes a Christ in his own image. What infirmities means is simply weaknesses, not sinful tendencies. Did the Lord Jesus ever become exhausted? According to Mark, yes — “they took him as he was” into the boat, and he lay down and fell asleep on a pillow. He was wearied in his service to the Father. That is not sinful. He was touched with the feelings of our infirmities — our weaknesses — sin apart, not sinful tendencies.

That I Should Not Be Exalted — The Thorn in the Flesh

In verse 7, the words “above measure” appear twice in the English translation. Darby omits them, and rightly so — if they stand, one might conclude that it is all right to be exalted, just not exalted to excess. But that is not the point. There is to be no exaltation, period. The thought is: lest I should be exalted by the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh. Something of a humbling nature was given to the apostle Paul, and it is called a messenger of Satan. Satan is an instrument of God, as we see in the book of Job — indeed it was God who invited the encounter: “Hast thou considered my servant Job?” Satan was an instrument in the hands of God. Job was taught something about the flesh — and he says at the end, “Wherefore I abhor myself.” There may have been self-righteousness beforehand, and credit taken. So too with the apostle Paul: the thorn was necessary lest he should be exalted.

As to what the thorn actually was, many have thought it had to do with some eye disease. He did have others write his epistles for him at times, and in one place he says, “See with how large letters I have written to you with my own hand,” implying some difficulty in writing. There may also have been something of a disfiguring nature about it, as the Corinthians complained that his letters were weighty and powerful but his bodily presence was contemptible, and they had something to say about his speech. When carnality starts running down the servant of the Lord, there is hardly any limit to how far it will go. Where there is a good spiritual state, even things that might not be outwardly attractive in a

person do not make him bad or wrong — they are simply different. But flesh can pick at anything, as chickens will peck a defect in one of their number until they destroy it. That the Corinthians treated this man who had been the instrument of their very salvation in such a manner shows what carnality is.

My Grace Is Sufficient — My Strength Is Made Perfect in Weakness

For this thing the apostle besought the Lord three times that it might depart from him. And then he stopped praying. Those words, “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities,” are the words of the man who stopped praying. He heard the answer, and those are the words of a man who has received an answer. We read that verse and say Amen — My grace is sufficient for thee — and indeed it is a fact. But the proving of it in our own lives is another matter; it is a test of what the verse says, and Scripture is set before us for practice. The apostle, of course, did rest on this, and he is the model Christian for us.

The word strength in verse 9 is the same word as power at the end of the verse: “my power is perfected in weakness.” The point is that the power of Christ may rest — or as Darby notes, tabernacle, take up its dwelling place — upon him. Whatever there was of power in the apostle’s service, it was the power of Christ. It was not by human agency or something wonderful in the vessel itself. And so he gladly glories in his weaknesses, because that sets in relief that what was operative there was not human agency.

This perfected power in weakness is worth considering. Perfect power does not necessarily mean a great abundance of it, but precisely the right amount to meet the present need — thoroughly adjusted to what the need requires. Revelation 3:8, the letter to Philadelphia, says in Darby’s translation: “for thou hast a little power, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.” A little power — but it was enough to keep his word, enough not to deny his name, and so there

was no excuse for failure in those things. Philadelphia is not a great thing in the earth; it has nothing to boast in. It is Laodicea that has all the boast. But Philadelphia had that little power, and it was sufficient. If the apostle Paul had said, well, I have this weakness and this thorn in the flesh, so I am retiring from apostleship and will write no more epistles — that was not an option. His answer was: the grace of Christ sufficed him. The strength of the oak tree is in the earth and the air around it, and it is sufficient. My grace is sufficient. We live in a world where men's hearts never say "enough." But this is a part of that: when it comes to the thorns in the flesh and the question of strength, if there is enough, there is enough.

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