

Do you want to go to heaven? Well, all of us breathe in the first heaven. It is the atmosphere, where birds and planes fly. A few humans (astronauts) have visited the second heaven as well. That is what we call outer space. But most of us are “astro-nots,” although we will pass through both heavens with the Lord when He returns for us. We read of two heavens being created in the beginning (Genesis 1:1). That there are **two** and not **three or more** is not obvious in our translations. English has two tenses (singular and plural) but Hebrew has a dual tense as well. The word “heavens” in Genesis 1:1 is dual. God created two heavens. What is this third heaven Paul went to? This is the eternal heaven where God is. Everyone seems to want to go there. Do you know anyone who has gone there and returned? What have they told of it? Are there people up there sitting on clouds playing harps, as depicted in cartoons? Do they know what is going on down here? Can they communicate with people down here? Can we with them? Do they have white gowns and halos? Are they happy? Much of what fuels men’s imaginations is based upon careless and obviously ignorant reading by ungodly men of descriptions of heavenly scenes in scripture. Since many, if not most, of these are more symbolic than literal, misleading images of heaven are fed to the populace. Are experiences and sensations reported by those having “near death experiences” accurate descriptions of heaven? Many, many questions and so few answers!

Scripture does give us some information about heaven, and chapter 12 is one place it does. But it does little to satisfy our curiosity. Perhaps it raises more questions than it answers. We do not know and are not told as much about heaven as we are about the One who inhabits it. And isn’t that the key to satisfying our curiosity? While it is referred to as Paradise three times in the New Testament, twice by the Lord Himself, heaven isn’t just a happy vacation/retirement resort where we might enjoy sensual pleasures for evermore. It is the place, if that is what we can really call it, our Creator and Redeemer inhabit. The “who” is what makes a honeymoon wonderful, not the “where.” So it is being in the presence of the Father and the Son, that is Paradise.

Paul, in his Spirit-moved defense of his apostolic ministry and authority, makes a startling revelation of an experience he had fourteen years previous. He describes it in the third person for he even now does not want to in any way magnify himself to them.

5 Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

Those among them opposing him were providing enough self glorification to go around. He also does not fully comprehend what really happened and cannot describe it to us because it was incomprehensible and indescribable

to a mere human in the un-resurrected/unchanged body. While there he heard wonderful things spoken in a wonderful manner but he cannot express them in writing for our direct edification.

The Lord Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, is the only person who has come down from heaven. He came to reveal the Father. We have seen the Father because we have seen Jesus, John 14:6-11. After seeing the Lord in glory Saul/Paul received many things, many truths directly from the Lord, which he passes on to us in his epistles. We know the glorified Lord by faith through Paul’s eyes and ears. So it really doesn’t matter that we aren’t given the sayings Paul heard in the third heaven. And we don’t need to yearn for similar experiences. By faith we have it all, as given and preserved in the inspired (God breathed) Scriptures. Paul didn’t go about telling every one “I went to heaven and this is what I heard.” But what he heard affected his whole life and I believe is embodied in the teaching, exhortation and encouragement in his epistles. What he heard also affected his attitude so much that he was truly selflessly all for Jesus and for those He loves. That accounts for his zeal and his endurance through hardship and suffering for Christ and for them..

Why does Paul reveal this experience now? Why hadn’t he trumpeted it every where he went as many others would do? What excitement that would generate. What crowds would come to listen to him who had heard directly from heaven. Ta Daaaaah! Wouldn’t the publicists have a field day. But no, those methods of attracting sinners are unbecoming to the Lord. He didn’t tout His glory while here. Far be it from us to glorify ourselves or other men while seeking to draw men to Christ. Football heros? Testimonials of famous men? Great preachers? No, it is the Spirit through the word of the gospel that draws and saves. That is what 1Corinthians 9 is about. Likewise, methods that glorify men to inspire (and entertain) the saints do not fit with the Lord’s example, or that of the apostles and other believers presented in the New Testament. That is what 1Corinthians 14 is about. No, it is the meek, weak, broken down, ailing, plainspoken, apostle that greets us. Just as the Lord had

“no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him”

Isaiah 52:2,

there was none in Paul. Busy exalting themselves they looked down on him for this lack. He now in grace explains his physical condition which they disdained. It was due to a thorn in the flesh Exactly what it was is not stated and really doesn’t matter. Impediment, impairment, affliction, infirmity, disability, bad eyes, speech difficulties, arthritis, whatever it was these are ailments we are all familiar with, either firsthand or in

friends and loved ones. They are common to man due to sin in the world since Adam. Yet Paul characterizes his thorn as from Satan, given by God that he might not glory over his experience. Again a stark contrast to those in Corinth who were glorying in their superior knowledge, eloquence and gifts. We sometimes hear believers say of some ailment or difficult person in their lives as their cross to bear. Not so. A “cross” is suffering at the hands of men, persecution, for our faith in Christ. A “thorn” is something also undeserved, but chastening given by the Father for our spiritual well-being. Satan delights to administer thorns. God, in His infinite love and wisdom, chooses to use that perverse creature to accomplish His purposes, by permitting him to cause suffering to God’s own people. Job is an example of this.

Paul doesn’t like this thorn. A thorn under the skin is a continually, frustrating, nagging sharp pain. Paul understandably and properly prays for its removal. He prays three times, as did the Lord in the garden of Gethsemane. Paul received the answer. **“My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”** He accepts the answer, not reluctantly but readily. For he has a new way to glorify His Lord. He can rest in and enjoy the power of Christ daily in his life of service for Him. “Infirmities” now join the list of other hardships he has already been experiencing for Christ’s sake. He can truthfully say he takes pleasure in them for Christ’s sake **“for when I am weak, then am I strong.”** The Lord uses our weak vessels to accomplish His purposes. He has already pointed this out in chapter four.

4:7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

Should we continue praying for something after we

have received a negative answer? Apparently not more than two more times if we go by the Lord’s example which Paul followed. Persistence in prayer while awaiting an answer is urged and commended by the Lord and the apostles. But persistence after a clear answer is not. The Lord may indeed give us the desire of our heart and suffer with us the consequences of our insistence upon our own will. Paul did not insist on healing and chose rather to endure his affliction and depend upon God.

This scripture, among others, clearly shows that healing is not always God’s mind. Furthermore, indiscriminate public displays of so-called faith healing is not God’s plan for today, if it ever was. Publicly calling down miraculous healing as signs to unbelievers ignores the sadly divided testimony among believers today. The world is to know we are Christians by our love, not by our miracles. The use of Isaiah 53:5 to claim that illness is never God’s will is bogus. Philippians 3:25-28, and 2Timothy 4:20 give two more instances where healing was not exercised for believers. On the contrary, 1Timothy 5:23 encourages use of medicine. And Colossians 4:14 refers to Luke the beloved physician accompanying Paul, indicating using medical assistance is also scriptural. Yet, the prayer of faith heals, James 5:13-16. We have seen that more than once among us at Trott Brook.

May God give us needed mercies and grace to carry on in His service even when weak and uncomfortable, without murmuring but gladly relying upon the Lord and His strength.

By Ron Canner, September 8, 2004