

“A VISION AND A VISIT”

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago--whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows--such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

(2 Corinthians 12:2-4 NKJV)

Last week I quoted from Rabbi Kushner's book *WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE*. I confused some people because I did not make it clear why I was quoting from it. Rabbi Kushner said that God is limited in what He can do by the laws of nature and by human moral freedom. (In other words nature or humans can do as they please and God can't stop it.) He believes God is not responsible (it is not His will) for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters. He believes God hates suffering but cannot eliminate it.

I agree with him that the painful things that happen to us are not God's punishments. God is reserving punishment for the Day of Judgment. Jesus died on the Cross to take the punishment that all who believe in Him deserve and should receive. Everyone else, who do not believe in Him, will be judged by their works. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. The wages of sin is death and everlasting punishment in Hell.

God is not limited in any way, neither by the forces of nature or the schemes of wicked men. There is nothing that happens that God has not willed to happen, even the unjust crucifixion of His own Son. To say that God hates suffering and cannot eliminate it, takes away the reasons to pray. As Job said, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." The Lord sends some accidents, illnesses, and natural disasters as warnings or chastisements.

1.) It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago--whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows--such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me. (2 Corinthians 12:1-6 NKJV)

Paul is boasting and at the same time he is embarrassed by his boasting. Apparently, his boasting has been caused by the members at Corinth bragging on the boasted accomplishments of the false apostles. Last week we saw that most of Paul's boasts were of the sufferings, trials, and privations Paul had endured in order to preach the Gospel in parts of the Roman Empire where it had never been. He reminded them that they had come to faith in Christ through him.

Paul climaxes his boasting with an account of a vision he had been given fourteen years prior. Evidently, he had never told anyone about this vision. He was taken into the third heaven. The first heaven is the atmosphere around us, the abode of birds and clouds. The second heaven is the space of planets and stars. The third heaven is the dwelling place of God, His angels, and the saints in glory.

Paul tries to disguise he was the man in the vision, but reveals it was him when he tells about the thorn in the flesh. He was not permitted to tell what he heard or what he saw. This is different from most other people who have visions. You have heard television evangelists tell about a vision when they are trying to raise money. When the Presbyterian Church, U.S. was going through the turmoil which eventually caused a number of churches to break away into two other denominations, a "Vision At Montreat" was widely circulated.

2.) And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong. I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong! Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek 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 your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved. (2 Corinthians 12:7-15 NKJV)

Scholars do not agree on the nature of Paul's "thorn in the flesh" which he says was "a messenger of Satan to buffet me." The suggestions fall into three main categories psychological, physical, or spiritual. Those psychological suggestions see the vision as the beginning of some psychological disorder such as schizophrenia or epilepsy. The chief physical suggestion is a common eye disease caused by desert sand blowing in the eyes. Whatever it was, it was disabling to him at times. The spiritual suggestions are that just as God permitted Satan to test Job, He permitted Satan to send a demon who tormented Paul so that Paul had to call upon God for help.

Paul again expresses his embarrassment for boasting. He wonders why the Corinthian believers are not the ones boasting about him. They were eyewitnesses that he displayed all the signs of a true apostle even performing miraculous signs and mighty deeds.

The only way that Paul has slighted them is that unlike other churches he has not asked the Corinthians to support him.

3.) But be that as it may, I did not burden you. Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you by cunning! Did I take advantage of you by any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus, and sent our brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in the same spirit? Did we not walk in the same steps? Again, do you think that we excuse ourselves to you? We speak before God in Christ. But we do all things, beloved, for your edification. For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults; lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced. (2 Corinthians 12:16-21 NKJV)

Paul not only ministered in Corinth at no expense to the Corinthians, but when he sent Titus and another brother to Corinth on Paul's behalf they also did not ask the Corinthians for any support, not money for travel, nor lodging, nor food. Still there were those who thought that Paul was cunning and had deceived them. In exasperation Paul says he is not trying to convince them. He is just speaking these things for God to hear and judge him.

Have you ever had the experience of not wanting to visit some person or family? That is how Paul felt about this impending third visit to Corinth. He loves them as his children in Christ but he fears that what he will find himself in the middle of contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults. Every one of us can remember times and churches where all of these things occurred. In my experience, funerals, wedding rehearsals, Session and congregational meetings all had the potential of being explosive. The reason for Paul's dread is that he believes there are those who have not yet repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they practice. These are the ones who oppose Paul and support the false apostles.