

THE ECSTASY AND THE AGONY

by Ray C. Stedman

As I come to these studies in Second Corinthians, I am impressed anew that our times are getting more and more "Corinthian"; we are approaching the very level of life that the Apostle Paul found in that city. These letters therefore speak very eloquently of our times.

In these closing chapters Paul is caught up in a game of one-upmanship. He does not want to be there, but that is where he is. I have now been at three pastors conferences on two different continents in the last few weeks, and I have noticed that, no matter where in the world you are, if you gather a group of pastors together they always start playing one-upmanship. One pastor will say to another, "How are things going with your church this year?" The other will say, "Well, we've had a pretty good year." (You can see that they are feeling each other out to see how far they can go.) One of them will say, "How many converts did you have?" (If they are Baptists they will say, "How many baptisms did you have?") The other will say, "Well, we've had two or three a month." The first man then changes the subject because that is more than he had. He will say, "Our choir did very well this year." The other one will say "Our missionary budget is better than ever before." You can sense how they are playing "Who can top this" games.

Now, this is what was happening here in Corinth. There were some false apostles who had come in who were boasting about their exploits, how faithful and how tremendously dedicated they were. They were hypnotizing these Corinthians into believing that they were true apostles of Christ, teaching them false things, etc. In order to get back the attention of the Corinthians, Paul has to compare notes with them, in a sense, and boast of his exploits, which he has been doing in these chapters.

But what remarkable boasts he makes, with not a word of what we might expect, not a word of what many preachers boast about today. He does not display an impressive list of scholastic degrees. He does not mention any of the famous converts he has worked with. He does not make any claims about the great crowds he has preached to or the remarkable miracles that accompanied his ministry. He does not say anything about being an internationally known apostle. All of these things were true, but Paul did not say one word about them, in sharp contrast with many who are preaching today. Rather, he begins to boast about an incredible list of hardships -- beatings, fastings, imprisonments, stoning, shipwrecks, dangers from every side. Then he includes the almost embarrassing story about the night he has to be let down over a wall in a basket in order to escape a plot to take his life. That does not sound like much to boast about because it represented a collapse of all his dreams and plans.

But when we come to Chapter 12, Paul describes an experience that finally sounds like something well worth boasting about. In this chapter we have his story of his being caught up into Paradise, and an accompanying story about a thorn in the flesh that was given to him.

He introduces this with a suggestion that this vision of Paradise is only one of many he had. Verse 1, Chapter 12,

I must boast; there is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. {2 Cor 12:1 RSV}

This, by the way, was the basis of his claim to be an apostle. Luke tells us that apostles were those who had seen the risen Lord after his resurrection. Paul, of course, was not one of the original twelve, but he had seen Christ on the Damascus road. Now he tells us here that there were many occasions when he had visions of the Lord. That does not mean a fantasy or something he saw in his mind. He actually saw the Lord; the Lord appeared to him and taught him. This is the basis of his claim to be an apostle. Paul said that Jesus himself had

taught him what he had learned, the truths of the gospel that he preached. That, incidentally, is an important fact to bear in mind when people are challenging the apostle's authority in these days. We must remember that he himself said that it was the Lord who taught him these things. After many years of ministering around the world, Paul had a chance one day to compare notes with the original apostles, Peter, James, John and others, and he tells us in Galatians that they could add nothing to what he had learned from the Lord himself. So here is the basis of this great apostle's teaching: It came directly from the Lord in personal appearances.

Now, in Verse 2 and following, Paul goes on to give us one of the most dramatic of these occasions:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven -- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise -- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows -- and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.
{2 Cor 12:2-4 RSV}

Perhaps the strangest thing about that account is that Paul puts it in the third person, as though it happened to someone else. I am not sure why that is, but later, in Verse 7, he makes very clear that it was to him this happened. Here, however, he sounds as though it were to somebody he had once known. He does not tell us very much; notice that there is not much detail about life beyond. (I have always wished I could interview him about this.)

But several things are clear from what he says:

One is that it was obviously an experience where he went beyond this present life; he entered, he says, "the third heaven." (He also calls it "Paradise.") Now the "third heaven" was a reference to the Jewish belief about the structure of the universe. There were three heavens, they believed. The first was the atmosphere around the earth, the clouds, etc. Then beyond that they could see a second heaven where the stars, the sun and moon were. The third heaven was the invisible realm where God's throne was, therefore, it was called Paradise. It was the invisible dimension of life. All through the Scriptures, in the incidents where someone appeared out of heaven or went into heaven, they are referring to stepping into this invisible dimension of reality. It does not mean it is way out in space somewhere; it means that it is not visible to our present senses. It constitutes a kind of fourth dimension of life. It is there, into that realm, that the apostle was taken. If you trace back the dates, it was somewhere around the time when he came out to Tarsus, back to Antioch (some ten years after his conversion). A revival broke out in Antioch, and Barnabas had gone and brought Paul back to help him in this time.

A second thing the apostle tells us is that the body was rather unimportant in this event he is describing. If he was in the body he was not aware of it; and if he was out of the body, he did not miss it. This has always suggested to me that going to be with the Lord will not be as unique or as different an experience as we might think. Remember that, in Chapter 5, Paul calls it, "being at home with the Lord" {2 Cor 5:8 RSV}. I have just returned from being in Poland, and it was such a great feeling to get home because home is the place where you relax, you feel at ease, you are not under strain or pressure, you can kick off your shoes, stretch out and feel comfortable. That is what being with the Lord was like, Paul says. It was like being home. He was not sure from his feelings just how the body fit in, but it is clear that it was a great experience of relaxed enjoyment for him. This is perhaps one reason why he gives this account in the third person, because it was almost like it happened to someone else. He was not aware of whether his body was involved or not.

The third thing Paul tells us is that what he heard he could not tell us about. Now he must have heard some marvelous things, things which contributed greatly to his understanding of life and reality. These must have helped him in his fantastic grasp of what exists, and what God is doing. But he could not describe these things in earthly words. You notice that when you read the Old Testament prophets, and some of the New Testament prophets, that those who had visions of the Lord, visions of heaven, were never able to quite accurately describe what they saw. They had to put it in symbols -- Ezekiel's wheels within wheels and strange animals with four faces. Daniel's descriptions are somewhat similar; so are John's in Revelation. Not one could describe exactly what he saw because it is so far beyond what we presently know. This surely indicates that when we are with the Lord our knowledge will be vastly increased. We will know secrets we never dreamed

existed, secrets that are so beyond us now they cannot be put into language. That is what Paul is saying here.

Well, you might expect that this, at least, is an experience he can boast about. You might expect him now to put down these false apostles and challenge them to come up with something greater than this. But remarkably, he does not do that. In fact, he goes on to say in Verse 5,

On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. Though if I wish to boast, I shall not be a fool, for I shall be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. {2 Cor 12:5-6 RSV}

In those words, Paul is admitting that this was a very unusual experience; and, if he did boast about it, he would at least be telling the truth. This actually happened to me, he says. But he does not boast because he does not want people to look at him in any way that is not based upon what they could see for themselves. In other words, he does not desire status beyond that which is visible to people who are in touch with him personally. "What you see is what you get," is the apostle's motto. He is not making any claims about anything unusual in his ministry.

That is very remarkable, especially in these days when we have a rash of books appearing, all of which attempt to tell us of something unusual, fantastic experiences of people who supposedly died, went to heaven, and came back into the body. If you look at these books, they are all very descriptive of what the writers saw. (I know one thing about them -- not one of them would have waited 14 years before rushing into print.) They describe their experiences very specifically -- people approaching them wearing shining garments, beautiful landscapes, quiet countrysides, etc. These people immediately arrange lecture tours, television interviews, and welcome a celebrity status. You do not see anything like this with the Apostle Paul. In fact, he says, "I haven't spoken of this for 14 years, and I do so reluctantly now. I don't want to boast about it. In fact, what I want to boast about I haven't even got to yet. This vision of Paradise is the introduction to what I have to say. But this is what I boast about" -- and he goes on in Verse 7,

And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. {2 Cor 12:7 RSV}

"That," Paul says, "is my point of boasting -- boasting about my weaknesses. And out of that experience of tremendous revelation and glory which I had came the most annoying, irritating agony of my life" -- what he calls, "a thorn in the flesh." Everyone wants to know immediately what that was.

- Some felt that perhaps Paul had bad eyesight, because there is a passage in the letter to the Galatians where he commends his readers because they would have torn out their very eyes and given them to him. In that letter he also says, "You see with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand," {Gal 6:11 RSV}. (When I traveled with Dr. H. A. Ironside he was suffering from cataracts, and he used to write me with large letters. I often thought of those words of Paul as I read his letters.) I personally think it may well have been some eye problem that he had that repeatedly bothered him and maybe even made him rather repulsive at times.
- Some commentators feel he may have had a speech impediment because he mentions having difficulty uttering things as he wanted to.
- Some have even suggested that he was married once and had a nagging wife. That would indeed be a thorn in the flesh! I do not think there is much evidence for that, although there is some evidence that Paul was once married.

Whatever it was, we know one thing -- it was in the flesh, i.e., it was probably something physical that was bothering him.

According to Paul's word here, both Satan and the Lord were involved in giving this to him. He calls it, "the messenger of Satan," which came to harass him, to annoy him, to irritate him, to keep constantly digging at him like a thorn embedded in the flesh that he could not get hold of to pull it out. And yet, he says, it was

given to him to humble him, to keep him from being too elated about the revelations he had.

Now notice that both the Lord and Satan are involved in this together, interestingly enough. Satan is the instrument the Lord uses. There is a similar scene at the beginning of the book of Job, when Satan has to appear before the Lord to get permission to afflict Job and to bring about the terrible session with boils which he had. Yet at the end of the book God appears alone and says to Job, basically, "I'm responsible, Job. Any questions?" So you always have this combination of these two forces. Satan's purpose was to destroy and harass Paul, to make life miserable for him, as is his purpose in the trials that we have. But God's purpose was to strengthen him, to humble him and to keep him usable in his hands. I have never seen a trial or so-called tragedy come to Christians that did not have both of these elements in it.

When we were in Poland this past week I talked with a pastor there who is going through a tremendous personal struggle. He had been involved in an incident that had resulted in very severe criticism of him (which I do not think he rightly deserved). This was tearing him apart emotionally. He could not sleep or eat; his family was upset by it; he was tormented with terrible thoughts of ugly, evil things, suicidal impulses, etc., which kept coming into his mind. He was wretched, worn out, exhausted, and physically trembling because of the pressure. It was clear that he was undergoing an attack of the devil. Satan was getting at him and tremendously assaulting him. But it was also true, as I had the privilege of pointing out to him, that God was involved too. If he would stand against the devil and resist him with the weapons of spiritual warfare, God would win a great victory by this, and he himself would emerge from it strengthened, helped and more usable in the hands of God. So this is the secret behind all our trials.

Now whatever this thorn in the flesh was, Paul did not like it. He went to the Lord about it, he tells us in Verse 8.

Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." {2 Cor 12:8-9a RSV}

Paul was a mighty man of prayer, so it was natural for him to ask time, the answer comes, and it is very clear. Whether it was in a vision or some inner conviction of his mind, I do not know, but the answer was clear: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

I want to ask you something: If that is a principle that is true of life, and God knows it to be true, that his strength is made perfect in our weakness, what do you think he is busy doing with us? Making us weak, isn't it? And what makes us feel weak? Well, it is being under attack, feeling inadequate to handle the pressures and the problems that we have. So if you feel that way it is not only the devil who makes you feel that way, it is God too. God makes us feel this to keep us from that which could render us useless in the work of spreading his Kingdom. Paul knew that the worst thing he could do was become arrogant and conceited about his revelation. It was evidently more important to God to keep him humble than it was to make him comfortable, so he allowed the thing to go on.

The most dangerous threat to any servant of Christ is spiritual pride.

I want to confess to you that that is the thing I fear most in my own ministry. So many nice things are said to me, I get so many strokes, so many boosts to my ego, that I fear lest I begin to believe that some of these compliments represent remarkable abilities that I possess. If you want to pray for me, I hope you will be praying that I will never fall heir to that.

I was at a conference here in California some time ago and I was speaking with the director of the conference about another man, a brother in the Lord, whom the director thought could send one of his organization's top speakers for a series of special meetings. This man drew himself up and said, "Well, I am the top speaker of our group. I'm Number 1." It was not surprising to me, after learning that, to see this man's ministry begin to crumble and fall apart; soon he was removed from his leadership position by his own organization. I have seen a lot of people fall because they grew arrogant and boastful about what God was doing through them.

So Paul comes to this conclusion. Verses 9-10:

I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong. {2 Cor 12:9-10 RSV}

He decided upon two things as the result of this lesson.

One is that he would never permit himself to brag about what he was doing. If he found himself wanting to boast, he would find some area of weakness and boast about it. He was going to do so deliberately in order that he might not succumb to the temptation to be proud.

I want to point out something to you: He did not invite these Corinthians to try to work at keeping him humble. There are a lot of people today who feel it is their business in life to keep somebody else humble. They never encourage them or say something nice about them because they are afraid it will go to their heads. But no one is ever given that responsibility. In fact, you cannot help somebody that way; you cannot keep somebody humble by not encouraging him. It becomes the responsibility of each individual to face this problem in his own life. In other words, only he can keep himself humble. It depends on how he looks at what he does, who he sees behind it and what resources he sees involved, whether they come from God or from him. That is what will keep him humble.

Paul says, "I'm going to remind myself of who I really am and what I really can do by boasting only in my weaknesses, the times of apparent failures, the times when I don't do very well. That is what I want to boast about."

Second, whenever trouble comes, he says, "I want to be content. I don't want to gripe or complain or feel sorry for myself. I want to recognize that this is the best setting for God to work in my life. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

This underscores the spiritual battle we are involved in. When is the devil being beaten? Well, not when we feel great and confident, when it looks like wonderful things are happening, when the ministry is going well. (And I speak to all of us, because we are all in the ministry. We all have an area of responsibility given to us by God.) No. The devil is being defeated when we are feeling attacked and under the gun, when we feel weak and helpless and do not know what to do, when we are not sure how to respond, when in our perplexities and sense of weakness we come before the Lord and plead with him for strength to go on one more day, and for grace to help us stand. That is when we are winning and when the Kingdom of God is being spread more abundantly than ever before.

Some years ago I ran across a letter from a missionary out in New Guinea. He was writing home to some of his supporters, sharing with them some of the struggles he was going through. This is what he wrote.

Man, it's great to be in the thick of the fight and to draw the old devil's heaviest guns, to have him at you with depression and discouragement, slander and disease! He doesn't waste time on a lukewarm bunch; he hits good and hard when a fellow is hitting him. You can always measure the weight of your blow by the one you get back. When you're on your back with fever and at your last ounce of strength, when some of your converts backslide, when you learn that your most promising enquirers are fooling, when your mail gets held up and some don't bother to answer your letters, is that time to put on mourning? No sir, that's the time to pull out the stops and shout hallelujah! The old fellow's getting it in the neck and hitting back. Heaven is leaning over the battlements and watching. Will he stick it? And as they see Who is with us, as they see the unlimited reserves, the boundless resources, as they see the impossibility of failure, how disgusted and sad they must be when we run away. Glory to God! We're not going to run away!

That captures the spirit of what Paul is writing. "When I am weak, then I am strong." God knows that is true. That is why, when we get through one battle, there is another one waiting for us. We want to throw up our hands and say, "Lord, what are you doing to me? I thought life was a Sunday School picnic where I could drift through and have a great time eating my Wheaties and doing OK." But God puts us right under the gun.

Trouble comes, difficulties hit us, three or four at a time on occasions. But they are not times for complaining; they are opportunities to fight and to win.

Prayer

We thank you, Lord Jesus, that you understand the nature of life and the combat in which you have placed us. We pray that we might not give in when struggles come, when difficulties hit us. May we be aware that this is the time when we can lean harder and draw closer to you, to test your word and trust it, to trust your grace, and that by means of doing this the devil is being defeated and grace is being released, the Kingdom of God is growing. Surely this is what you meant when you said to us, "The kingdom of God is taken by force." We pray that we may be those kind of soldiers you can trust in the midst of battle. We ask in your name, Amen.

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