

AF A9 BIBLE STUDY: 2 Corinthians 12

Scripture of Lesson: 2 Corinthians 12: 1-21

In this chapter Apostle Paul writes about his experience of being in the third heaven, a thorn in his flesh and his love toward the church.

1. Vision of the Third Heaven

In verses 1 to 6 Paul writes about his own experience of being taken up to the third heaven but does not write about what he saw there. The 'third' heaven refers to the realm where God dwells, whereas the first heaven is the atmospheric layer around the earth, and the second the space outside of the earth. The experience of being taken up to heaven is sometimes referred as 'rapture.' Bible speaks of several people who were raptured: Enoch [Gen. 5:24], Elijah [2 Kings 2:11], and Jesus Christ [Luke 24:51, Acts 1:9]. The two witnesses of God who would witness in Jerusalem during the period of tribulation, as revealed to Apostle John in Rev. 11, will be raptured to Heaven [Rev. 11:12]. And there are multiple prophecies about the rapture of the church when the Lord returns to gather His harvest [Matt. 24: 37-42, Luke 17:34-36, 1 Corinth 15:51-52, 1 Thess. 4:15-17].

On the other hand, there were those who were taken up to Heaven and came back to earthly life. Apostle John, during his experience of revelation, was taken up to Heaven, even to the presence of God's throne [Rev. 4:1]. And here in this chapter Paul writes about a similar experience. Yet it was not Paul's place to reveal what he saw in heaven [v. 12:4] but apostle John's, who wrote extensively of what were revealed to him by God for the benefit of those who believe, both in the first century and thereafter.

When God gives visions or revelations to people, He does so for two reasons: First, God shows visions to the faithful who are weary of doing His will. Secondly, God shows visions of heaven and things to come to instruct servants of God to have a clear vision about the future plan that God has in entrusting His work to such servants. When Elijah was weary of his lone ministry for God and was facing a death threat from the evil queen, Jezebel, God sent an angel who fed him with heavenly food and drink for two days. Then, God told him that He had reserved 7,000 true Israelites who had not bowed before Baal but were loyal to God of their fathers. God gave him a vision, which made it worthwhile for him to continue God's work [1 Kings 19:1-18].

God gave Abraham the vision of *"a city not built with human hands but whose builder and maker is God* [Heb. 11:10]." God gave visions about the future, both near and far even to the end of the world, to Daniel so as to encourage the people of Israel about their release from the 70 year captivity in Babylon, about the coming of the Lord and the eternal kingdom of God, which would be ruled by Messiah the King. In each era of human history God chose a few faithful servants to whom He revealed visions and revelations to equip them so that they could lead the people of God in the right path of God. When the right time came, some 2,000 years ago, God sent His Son to this world as the incarnate manifestation of His truth, will and plan. Let us be glad and thankful for the clear life and message that our Lord gave to the perishing and starving world.

Paul's experience of going up to Paradise must have been greatly encouraging to him. This experience he never forgot and he wanted to tell the Christians about it. However, he was not permitted to do so. Yet, it kept him dedicated to the work for Christ in spite of adversities. It kept the fire of love burning within his heart that made him face any difficulties with the singleness of desire to tell the gospel story to the Gentile world. Do we have such a vision of having met God and Jesus Christ in our personal experiences? Is there such a burning fire in our hearts that keeps us being dedicated to Christ no matter what difficulties might come before us?

2. A Thorn in Paul's Flesh

Sometimes we wish a certain weakness in our body or life be removed from us. We all want our bodies to be perfect and our life to lack nothing-- enough wealth to enjoy life's good things, excellent wellness to avoid expensive healthcare costs and enjoy a long life, well-behaving and smart children who make us proud, and success in our career to brag about to our acquaintances. But Paul had a certain defect in his body, of which nature is not clear, that he prayed to God to have it removed from him. Yet, God's reply to this request was, "*My grace is sufficient for thee; for My strength is made perfect in weakness* [v. 12:9]." Note Paul's remarkable attitude. Instead of complaining about God's unwillingness to remove it, he is now thankful that his life with weaknesses can be used for manifesting God's power! And he declares;

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 [v. 12:10].

What kind of attitude do we have about our shortcomings and needs? Satan coaxed Jesus to turn a stone into bread to fill his hunger. Certainly it is and was within the Lord's power to do so. But He chose not to follow Satan's advice because He wanted to demonstrate that "*Man shall not live by bread alone but by every Word that comes from the mouth of God* [Matt. 4:4]." What are our choices when we recognize a lack and seek the means of meeting the lack? Do we consider which way shows forth the power and glory of God the most? Or is it the most expedient way that maximizes the return?

3. Paul's Love for the Church

God has confessed His love to His people numerous times while He demanded His people to love Him:

Since you were precious in My sight, You have been honored, and I have loved you; therefore I will give men for you, and people for your life. [Isiah 43:4]

In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them; In His love and in His pity He redeemed them; And He bore them and carried them all the days of old. [Isiah 63:9]

Our Lord Jesus loved His disciples as observed by apostle John:

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. [John 13:1]

And God "*so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life* [John 3:16]." Before His ascension to Heaven, our Lord commanded His disciples to feed His sheep with the same love they had toward Him. Love of God's flock is an essential character as a servant of God. Thus, it is no wonder that apostle Paul openly confesses his love of the Corinthian church in verses 15 and 19, just as you as parents plainly tell your children that you love them.

God has been telling this perishing world that He loves them. He has been sending the message of love in diverse ways. Every sunrise, every spring after winter, every bird singing its melodies, every flower that shows its beauty, and every baby born into life -- these all bear God's message of love for the humanity. Let us respond to this amazing love of God in a true and genuine way by showing love in kind -- praising and glorifying Him through Christ our Lord, worshipping Him as our Creator and Lord, and showing the same love to our neighbors.

Discussion topics:

1. *Have you had a personal encounter with Jesus Christ who showed His divinity to you? Share the experience with others.*
2. *What are your weaknesses/ needs? How did such weaknesses affect your attitude to God?*