

Paul's Vision

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

INTRODUCTION

- A. On September 21, 1823, Joseph Smith claimed that he received a vision from God.
1. Here is what he wrote about that vision: "A personage appeared at my bedside, standing in the air, for his feet did not touch the floor Not only was his robe exceedingly white, but his whole person was glorified beyond description [He] said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me, and that his name was Moroni; that God had a work for me to do."
 2. Obviously, you & I cannot believe Smith's claims. Such revelations have ended & the message God supposedly revealed to Smith contradicts what God revealed through the apostles of Jesus.
- B. But, in the days of Paul, many did, in fact, receive visions from God.
1. It certainly seems that in the first century many well-intentioned Christians had problems separating true visions from claims like those of Joseph Smith.
 2. Specifically, in Corinth, some who claimed to be apostles were unsettling the Corinthians' faith: "If someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough" (2 Cor 11:4).
 3. These false apostles were apparently attempting to discredit Paul.
 - a. In the final four chapters of 2 Corinthians (chapters 10-13), Paul defends his apostleship in light of the attacks of these men called "super-apostles."
 - b. Paul finally declares, "I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. The signs of a true apostles were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works" (2 Cor 12:11-12).
- C. All of that is important as we approach tonight's text:
1. READ TEXT.
 2. These false apostles were boasting about receiving so-called "revelations" from God.
 3. Paul says, in essence, "They claim to receive revelations from God, but let me tell you about the true revelation I had."
 4. Paul writes here in the third, rather than the first, person: "I know a man in Christ"
 - a. This was a common method about the rabbis to avoid pride.
 - b. The context makes clear that Paul speaks of himself. Why else would God send "a messenger of Satan to harass" him because of these great revelations unless Paul experienced them?
- D. This passage, although written nearly two millennia ago concerning the truth of Paul's apostleship, tells us much in the modern world. Paul speaks of GOD'S MIND, GOD'S MEEKNESS, & GOD'S MIGHT.

GOD'S MIND, vv 2-4

- A. "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."
- B. Both of Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians are so laden with sarcasm & irony that it's sometimes quite difficult to keep a straight face as you read through them.
1. As Paul defends his apostleship, it's quite clear that the "super-apostles" are boasting of their position.
 - a. At 10:17, Paul says, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."
 - b. At 11:21, Paul writes, "Whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that."

2. Paul writes about how others are boasting and then he writes tongue-in-cheek at 12:1: “I must go on boasting.”
 - a. Paul then, in his “boasting,” describes the vision he had.
 - b. But, as Paul “boasts,” he isn’t even know if his vision occurred “in the body or out of the body” & he can’t even repeat much of what he learned there.
- C. Paul’s point in his mock boasting is to say, “There’s no point in boasting about what one can do or what one has seen, for it’s God who determines those things.”
 1. Paul had no idea whether he experienced “the third heaven” “in the body or out of the body.” If Paul had no idea, how could we have any idea whether Paul’s experience was “in the body or out of the body”?
 2. What things did Paul hear in “the third heaven”?
 - a. The text says that “he heard things that cannot be told.”
 - 1) The KJV says that Paul “heard unspeakable words.”
 - 2) This does not mean that Paul could not hear these words or that the heavenly beings who uttered them could not say them.
 - a) But, this means that Paul could not reveal what he had heard.
 - b) That meaning becomes clear, for Paul adds, “which man may not utter.”
 - b. God knows what Paul heard in “the third heaven,” but we do not. Paul knew what he heard in “the third heaven,” but the Corinthians did not.
- D. The whole point is that God knows much that we shall never know.
 1. “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut 29:29).
 2. “The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:25).
 - a. As we have said before, the Corinthians really thought they were wise, that they understood the mysteries of all things.
 - b. Paul says, “Wait just a minute! God’s foolishness is much wiser than you could ever be.”
 - c. Does that not really put us in our place?
 - 1) Why do bad things happen to the righteous?
 - 2) How many secrets of the human body have not been uncovered by science? How many secrets of the universe have been unlocked by space exploration?
 - d. But, so many attempt to put themselves in the place of God.
 - 1) How much money has been wasted by NASA trying to find out how the universe began?
 - 2) How many have said, “Homosexuals need to be allowed to marry, because they love each other, and who can say that’s wrong?”
 3. God is the One who knows all. It’s God and only God, therefore, who has a right to speak where he has spoken.

DIVINE MEEKNESS, v 7

- A. “To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.”
- B. It’s interesting to notice, from this verse, the control that God has over Satan.
 1. It was God who sent the “messenger of Satan to harass” Paul.
 - a. I understand that the text doesn’t say that God sent the “messenger of Satan” to Paul.
 - b. However, the purpose of this “messenger” was to keep Paul from becoming conceited.
 - 1) Satan would have loved that, wouldn’t he?
 - 2) Imagine the benefit to Satan’s kingdom had this stalwart apostle had turned from the faith due to conceit. Satan had much to gain by not sending one of his angels, the Greek term, to Paul.
 - c. The purpose for which Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was given makes it quite obvious the Lord himself sent the thorn.
 2. God’s control of the universe, then, even extends to Satan.

- a. Satan must obey the Lord.
 - b. Satan cannot tempt us beyond what we can handle (1 Cor 10:13).
- C. The Greek term translated “thorn” in our English translations can mean either “thorn” or “stake.”
1. The term was actually used of stakes that were used for torture; it’s not clear whether “thorn” or “stake” is intended, but it doesn’t really matter.
 2. Scholars through the years have attempted to pinpoint precisely what this “thorn” was.
 - a. The only hint we have from the text is it was “in the flesh.” That likely rules out mental anguish or temptation.
 - b. Some have said that this refers to Paul’s bad eyesight.
 - 1) It is quite obvious from his Epistles that Paul had poor eyesight.
 - a) In Rom 16:21 we learn that Tertius wrote that Epistle; honestly, it’s highly likely that most, if not all, Paul’s letters were actually dictated to someone who put them on paper.
 - b) Paul says to the Galatians: “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand” (Gal 6:11).
 - c) Some have even suggested that one reason Paul took companions with him on missionary journeys was so that they could help him get around.
 - 2) Paul obviously had an ophthalmological problem of some sort, but it’s quite conceivable that his problem could have easily been corrected with modern glasses.
 - 3) If, as many believe, Paul’s vision problems resulted from the light on the Road to Damascus, this could not have been the thorn in the flesh, for the thorn in the flesh was given because of Paul’s vision at least six years after his conversion.
 - c. There are also clues that Paul had some sort of obvious physical deformity.
 - 1) “You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus” (Gal 4:13-14).
 - a) Paul does say in the next verse that the Galatians would have plucked out their eyes for him.
 - b) However, a simple vision problem would likely not have been “a trial to” the Galatians.
 - 2) The Corinthians said of Paul, “His letters are eighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account” (1 Cor 10:10).
 - a) That leads me to think that Paul’s physical ailment was more involved than simply the eyes.
 - b) His ailment could have easily been some neurological condition or even some injury that affected both the way Paul saw & the way others saw him.
 - 3) Early church tradition describes Paul’s physical appearance in less than aesthetic ways.
 - a) A document from the late second century says that Paul was “a man little of stature, thin haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, [and] a nose somewhat hooked.”
 - b) While it’s far from certain, it’s possible that tradition contains a kernel of truth in its physical description of Paul.
- D. Obviously, it doesn’t matter at all what Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” may or may not have been. The important thing is that God sent one of Satan’s angels to torment Paul in order to keep Paul from becoming too conceited.
1. Suffering can have quite positive effects.
 - a. “We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead” (2 Cor 1:8-9).
 - b. “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (Js 1:2-4).
 2. When we face suffering, we dare not forget that suffering can have quite positive effects on our lives.

DIVINE MIGHT, vv 8-10

- A. “Three times I pleaded with 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.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so 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.”
- B. Paul pleaded with the Lord three times that the messenger of Satan would leave him.
1. However, the Lord refused to send Satan’s messenger away from Paul.
 2. We dare not forget that the Lord’s refusal to answer a prayer the way we wish does ***not*** mean that he does not hear or that he does not care.
 - a. In fact, Jesus prayed three times in the Garden for his Father to remove the cross from him, yet God refused to do so.
 - b. If the Father refused to his Son’s prayer positively, who are we to believe that God should always act precisely as we pray???
- C. God did not refuse to answer Paul’s prayer, but the Lord says to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”
1. God’s grace—i.e., his mercy, compassion, & willingness to help—are sufficient regardless of what trial we face.
 - a. Therefore, we can put our confidence in God regardless of what transpires in this life.
 - b. I especially like the way the prophet Habakkuk frames this issue: “Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places” (Hab 3:17-20).
 - 1) The Book of Habakkuk is a series of dialogues between the prophet & God.
 - a) Habakkuk cannot understand how God can be just, for wickedness is all around him.
 - b) God responds that he is sovereign & acts according to his time, not Habakkuk’s.
 - 2) By the end of the Book, the prophet fully trusts in the Lord & he expresses that trusts by saying that regardless of what transpires, his trust is firmly rooted in God.
 2. The Lord also says that his power is made perfect in weakness.
 - a. If, as I have suggested, Paul had some sort of physical deformity that was obvious to others, think about the ironic power God was able to display through him.
 - 1) Here is a man who cannot heal himself, but is able to heal others.
 - a) At Lystra Paul healed a man who had been lame since birth (Acts 14:8-10).
 - b) In Philippi, Paul cast a demon out of a girl (Acts 16:16-18).
 - c) While Paul was at Ephesus, “God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them” (Acts 19:11-12).
 - 2) Think about the power that God was able to display through Paul!
 - a) It had to be quite obvious that Paul wasn’t healing these individuals through his own power—he isn’t even able to heal himself.
 - b) The power Paul used to heal had to be the power of God. No other explanation would make any sense at all.
 - b. Is it impossible that through the weaknesses we endure, God can display great power to others?
 - 1) A Christian lay in the hospital with a quite poor prognosis from his physician.
 - a) The days ahead for him were hidden in a cloud, but he was already finding glory in that cloud.
 - b) One morning he awoke to find a note from the night nurse pinned to his pillow: “I did not want to wake you,” she had written, “but I want to thank you for our talk last night. It meant more to me than I can tell you.”
 - i. That talk about been about the nurse’s life, her sorrows & some of the tragedies that had befallen her and of her many, many years away from God.

- ii. But, that night in the hospital, because of this Christian's illness, she was able to find hope, mercy, & compassion.
- 2) How much good can be accomplished for the cause of Christ through our own suffering, if we will allow it?
 - a) Who might be encouraged to face his own struggles?
 - b) Who might see the grace of God in the way we respond to our suffering?
 - c) Who might come to Christ through the way that we live?
- c. Are you ready to display the power of Christ in your life through your sufferings?