

CHAPTER TWELVE

What the Unenlightened Cannot See

BACKGROUND: Paul has shared many insights into the power and glory of God. Now he expounds upon the mysteries of that which surrounds the Creator—His Kingdom.

12:1. It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: Paul is about to relate a supernatural experience that he would normally not share with anyone because of the dangers of falling to the sin of pride. He does so now only to a limited degree, to establish, without a doubt, his authority as an Apostle.

12:2-3. 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 know...He begins as though speaking about someone else. But he would not worry about seeming to boast unless referring to himself.

Around 41 AD, after his escape from Damascus but before he began his missionary journeys, Paul was transported to the “third Heaven,” a Jewish expression for the immediate presence of God. During this experience God revealed great mysteries to him, but even he did not know whether he was in his body or out of it at the time.

Such a person does not see by sense perception, but his vision is as clear as or clearer than that by which sight perceives sensibilia. He sees by going out of himself, for through the mysterious sweetness of his vision he is ravished beyond all objects and all objective thought, and even beyond himself.

GREGORY PALAMAS¹

God gave Paul this experience because he was chosen for his ministry after Christ had ascended, so had not been taught by Him in person.

... that he might not seem to be inferior to the rest of the Apostles. For since they had accompanied with Christ, but Paul had not: He therefore caught him up unto glory also.

CHRYSOSTOM²

12:4. how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Paul speaks of having heard that which he could not reveal, as John was not allowed to write what the seven thunders had uttered (Rev 10:4). As Jesus told Nicodemus (Jn 3:12), God does not reveal His mysteries to the worldly man because they are beyond his comprehension.

These mysteries cannot be fully known (or, rather, experienced) except by the saints—by those who live in perfect union with God, transformed by grace and belonging rather to the future life than to our earthly life.³

12:5-6. 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 forbear, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me. Because he had this experience by “going out of himself,” by being taken “beyond himself,” Paul could refer to it as

having happened to someone else. He resists the temptation to embellish facts to bring glory to himself, relating only that which is necessary to establish his right to try to guide the Corinthian Christians. He wants to lead them to worship God, not him.

12:7. 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. The visions and revelations Paul experienced gave him spiritual wisdom and power. But the difficulties that God allowed Satan to bring to his life would remind him and all who would learn of his life and work that he was a human being, as dependent upon God as everyone else.

Affliction rends pride away and prunes out all listlessness and exercises unto patience: it reveals the meanness of human things and leads unto much philosophy. For all the passions give way before it: anger, envy, emulation, lust, rule, desires of riches, of beauty, boastfulness, pride, anger and the whole remaining swarm of these distempers.

...For thus has God led all the saints through affliction and distress, at once doing them service and assuring that mankind will not entertain a higher opinion of them than they deserve. For thus it was that idolatries gained ground at first; men being held in admiration beyond what they deserve.

CHRYSOSTOM⁴

As we learn in the Old Testament Book of Job, the Devil cannot touch God's people without permission from Him. God will not let us be tempted beyond what we are able to endure (I Cor 10:13).

It is noteworthy that Satan does not claim for himself the power to strike, he who never fails to proclaim his presumption against the Author of all things. The Devil knows that by himself he is able to do nothing, for he does not even exist by himself as a spirit. It must be known that the will of Satan is always evil, but his power is never unrighteous: for his will comes from himself, but his power from God. That which he wills to do in his malice, God in His righteousness allows him to accomplish. We must not fear him who can do nothing without permission. That Power alone is to be feared Who, by allowing the Enemy to be unleashed, makes his unrighteous will serve for the execution of righteous judgments.

GREGORY THE GREAT⁵

Modern theologians contend that Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was a physical malady, perhaps an affliction of the eyes that caused unsightly scaling and made looking at him unpleasant. This could account for his large handwriting (Gal 6:11) and shed light on his comment that his followers were willing to pluck out their own eyes if they could give them to him (Gal 4:13-15). An ancient theory is that Paul's problem was debilitating headaches, perhaps brought on by some type of chronic fever that attacked him repeatedly. Chrysostom, however, and most of the Greek Fathers, as well as some eminent scholars of later ages, asserts that this thorn was his vulnerability to his enemies: those who tried to thwart his work and had him beaten, imprisoned and living under the constant threat of death.

12:8-9. 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. When it is evident that a person has been able to do much in terms of God's work in spite of personal difficulties and shortcomings, it is clear that divine power was involved.

Paul pleaded for God to deliver him from his torment but was told that his “thorn” would remain with him, so it would be clear that his accomplishments could have been achieved only with divine assistance.

When Paul was in prison, he converted his captors (Acts 16:23-33). Time and again he overcame his persecutors (2 Cor 1:9-10, 11:23-33). He repeatedly found himself in precarious situations over which, through the grace of God, he prevailed. Although his personal suffering was intense, he knew it was a small price to pay for the power of God that was working through him.

Knowing then these things, let us not fear to suffer evil but to do evil.

CHRYSOSTOM⁶

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a). In what way are these verses important to all Christians?

12:10. *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.* He takes pleasure in his awareness of those areas in which he is vulnerable because he has learned that when he has done all he can do in any situation, God steps in.

And so it was too in the Old Testament; by their trials the righteous flourished. So it was with the three children, with Daniel, with Moses, and with Joseph; they all shone and were counted worthy of great crowns. For when the soul is afflicted for God’s sake, it also is purified. It receives greater assistance from God because it needs more help and is worthy of more grace. Becoming philosophic, it reaps a rich harvest of good things even before the reward which is promised to it by God.

CHRYSOSTOM⁷

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). Since righteous suffering can bring purification, strength, wisdom and other blessings to Christians, should we intentionally seek to suffer?

12:11-13. *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!* Paul regrets that he has been forced to defend himself and his authority. The Corinthians had witnessed many miracles that God had performed among them through him, and they were well aware of the fact that he asked for nothing for himself but their love and trust. They had benefited from his ministry and should be quick to praise him.

12:14. *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.* He is planning to return to them soon. As in the past, he will expect nothing from them for himself. As their spiritual father, he seeks only their souls for God’s Kingdom. This should be the primary goal of every parent and godparent for their charges.

12:15. *And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.* He will gladly give not only what he has but also of his very being

out of love for them, but the more he extends himself for them, the more they seem to take him for granted. They do not reciprocate his love by defending him to his enemies.

The lack of love among Christians that this type of behavior demonstrates is very detrimental in the Church. Chrysostom wrote that under such conditions:

I behold the mass of the Church prostrate, as though it were a corpse. And as in a body newly dead, one may see eyes and hands and feet and neck and head and yet no one limb performing its proper function; so, truly, here also, all who are here are of the faithful, but their faith is not active; for we have quenched its warmth and made the body of Christ a corpse. Now if this sounds awful when said, it is much more awful when it appears in actions. For we have indeed the name of brothers but do the deeds of foes; and while all are called members, we are divided against each other like wild beasts. I have said this not from a desire to parade our condition but to shame you and make you desist. Such and such a man goes into a house; honor is paid to him; you ought to give God thanks because your member is honored and God is glorified; but you do the contrary: you speak evil of him to the man that honored him, so that you trip up the heels of both and besides, disgrace yourself. And why, wretched and miserable one? Have you heard your brother praised, either among men or women? Add to his praises, for so you shall praise yourself also. But if you overthrow the praise, first you have spoken evil of yourself, having so acquired an ill character, and you have raised him the higher. When you hear one praised, become a partner in what is said; if not in your life and virtue, yet still in rejoicing over his excellencies. Do you see what disgrace we are the causes of to ourselves? How we destroy and rend the flock? Let us at length be members (of one another), let us become one body.

CHRYSOSTOM⁸

12:16-19. But be that as it may, I did not burden you. Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you with guile! 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. Paul received no earthly benefit for himself for his work with the Corinthians. Neither did he arrange to be compensated through those he sent to continue the work. Their purpose was to bring the light of the Gospel to the Corinthians—nothing else. The money they have collected is for the church in Jerusalem, not for him.

12:20-21. 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; and 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 licentiousness which they have practiced. Paul's fear is that his desire to present the church in Corinth to Christ unblemished will not be realized—that he will find it defiled by sin.

It is not enough to read and to study the sacred Scriptures, we must fulfill them also. To me it seems that if anyone is involved in contentions and in quarrels, his prayers are not acceptable, his supplications are not answered, his gift rises not upwards from the earth; and neither does the giving of alms avail him for the forgiveness of his sins. And wheresoever there is no peace and tranquility, the door is left open to the Evil One.

APHRAATES⁹

Paul's hope is that he will find that the Corinthian Christians have repented, so he can guide them to the glories of continued spiritual growth.

To repent means both to lament the sins we have committed and to refrain from the sins we lament. For the one who grieves over some sins yet continues to commit others either does not know how to repent or but pretends to repent.

GREGORY THE GREAT¹⁰

FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

(a). What does 2 Cor 12:8-9 say to all Christians? There has never been, nor will there ever be, a person who has not had some difficulty to deal with in life. Thus the fact that the exact nature of Paul's affliction is a matter of conjecture is an advantage. Shrouded in mystery, it stands as a source of strength for everyone, for no one can say that it was less difficult than what s/he has had to endure. When, in spite of physical infirmities or difficult situations in our lives, we *press toward the goal* of trying to become Christ-like (Phil 3:14), we demonstrate the power and glory of God and His divine plan. It is easy to say we love God when all is well in our lives and in the lives of those we love. Adversities test our faith. Satan refused to believe Job's faith in God was real while he had family, friends, wealth, and health (Job 1:7-12 & 2:1-6). When God allowed Satan to take everything from Job, finally including his health, to test his faith and love and still he remained steadfast, everything was restored to him twice-over (Job 42:1-10).

If then you are a disciple, travel the straight and narrow way, and be neither disgusted nor discouraged. For even if you are not afflicted in one way, you must inevitably be afflicted in another. For the envious man, the lover of money, he that burns for a harlot, the vainglorious and everyone who follows what is evil endures many disheartenings and afflictions and is not less afflicted than the true Christian...Since then whether we follow this way of life or that, we will be afflicted: why not choose the way which along with affliction brings crowns innumerable?
CHRYSOSTOM¹¹

(b). Since righteous suffering can bring purification, strength, wisdom and other blessings to Christians, should we intentionally seek to suffer? When the early Christians began to realize that there were blessings inherent in righteous suffering, some began to go out of their way to put themselves in situations which would bring pain. But contrived or self-inflicted agony is useless. We do not have the right to inflict suffering upon ourselves or others, nor should we seek it as an end unto itself—it will find us soon enough. Paul's example tells us to do all we can, short of denying Christ or compromising our faith, to avoid such situations and to keep ourselves strong for the work the Lord has for us to do. However, if suffering plants itself firmly in our lives, we should pray for God's help and while keeping our eyes on Him, do what we can to help ourselves. If we hang on and carry on, He will do the rest—He will see us through. When addressing the possibility of facing persecution, Scripture is clearly against self-surrender:

You will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. But when they persecute you in this city, flee to another (Mt 10:22-23).

Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna for much of the first half of the second century. When he was about eighty-six years of age, he was urged to pay homage to Caesar and recognize him as

“Lord.” To a Christian, this was to deny Christ. Polycarp refused, so was tied to a pyre and set aflame. Marcion was an eye witness to the martyrdom of this saintly man. He wrote in glowing terms about the courage and joy with which Polycarp faced death at the hands of his persecutors.

Marcion also wrote, however, about another incident which occurred when courage failed a Christian who deliberately put himself in harm’s way.

There was one man...Quintus by name, a Phrygian recently arrived from Phrygia, whose courage failed him at the sight of the beasts. It was he who had compelled himself and some others to surrender themselves voluntarily; and after much persuasion he was induced to take the oath and offer incense.¹² (And that is the reason, brothers, why we do not approve of men offering themselves spontaneously. We are not taught anything of that kind in the Gospel.)

MARCION¹³

¹ Meyendorff, *Triads*, p.38.

² Schaff, “Homily XXVI,” Vol. XII, p.399.

³ Lossky, *Image*, p.50.

⁴ Schaff, “Homily XXVI,” p.401-02.

⁵ Lossky, *Image*, p.217.

⁶ Schaff, “Homily XXVIII,” p.411.

⁷ *ibid*, “Homily XXVI,” p.401.

⁸ *ibid*, “Homily XXVII,” p.406.

⁹ Toal, “Against Discord and Anger,” Vol. One, p.346.

¹⁰ *ibid*, “The Angelic Choirs,” Vol. Three, p.210.

¹¹ Schaff, “Homily XXVI,” p.402.

¹² Just as the righteous of old were urged to worship pagan gods (Dan 3:15), early Christians were often given the choice of paying homage to the reigning emperor and burning incense in his honor or losing their lives through a torturous death like being fed to wild beasts.

¹³ Staniforth, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp,” (4), p.156.