



July 4, 2021
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2 Corinthians 12:2-10
"Beyond Paradise"



I know a person 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 such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

In many places, the Bible includes events we can easily believe happened. Parents arguing with children. Hungry people fleeing oppression. Religious institutions caught up in bureaucracy. But this summer's lectionary texts have taken us down less plausible paths which strain our credulity, like Job, and Genesis, and this one that asks us to suspend our belief in a rational world where we have talking snakes, deals between God and Satan and now Paul's visions of third heavens and Paradise.

What sounds like an LSD trip is part of the canon of faith, filled with moments not to be spoken of or repeated. And we are forced to wonder if continuing to trust in the Bible is superstitious anti-intellectualism, or is there truly another plane of existence we cannot see or know and places and experiences only a few ever have?

And yet, philosophy is filled with indictments that assert much of our regular lives are in fact the illusion failing to discover and know our true humanity. From Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, which believed we only know the shadows of truth, to Guy Debord's *La Société Du Spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle)* (1967), which asserts the modern world has a dangerous obsession with image that has replaced reality, that life has become reduced down to commodifiable exchanges while encouraging us to focus on presentation and pretense rather than genuineness – which has degraded our lives and robbed us of an authentic existence.

That life is the false reality, even though we see it on television daily, and read about it on the internet incessantly. It is typified by manufacturing moments that are meant to contain the veneer of authenticity. Not to be a spoilsport, but I saw this in spades on the steps of the

Metropolitan Museum of Art last week. A group of tourists were taking selfies, which is not at all unusual. But in this case one young lady was choreographing one of her friends, *pretending* to take a picture. It took about ten minutes of repositioning her friend higher or lower on steps, laying down, standing up, or kneeling, to capture what I presumed finally produced a picture that made it *appear* her friend was earnestly and artistically engaged in creating photographic art with style.

As one commentator observed, gradually we begin to conflate visibility with value. If something is being talked about and seen, we assume that it must be important in some way, which oddly enough was Paul's problem in Corinth! Paul finds himself in a very real worldly battle of credibility based on shallow values: appearance and presentation.

There are so-called "super-apostles" who are keen orators and present an attractive front, much like a slick televangelist. But Paul, who lacks vocal panache and (most likely) looks worse for wear from the endless beatings and shipwrecks he has endured, has lost a measure of his following in Corinth. So he shares this dramatic out-of-body experience. Normally he would not have shared this moment, but for the sake of regaining his credibility, he must.

The world of Paul's visions, as surreal and bizarre as they are, reveal the true world we are meant to live in – paradise and heaven. There is scholarly debate on

whether or not they are two ways of saying the same thing, heaven and paradise, but today I will take the approach that they are two different concepts leading to the same place.

In the ancient Greek world, paradise was a garden or grove, typified by the mythic Elysian Fields – the place heroes given immortality went to. It is a place on earth of perfect happiness. In the *Odyssey*, Homer wrote:

...to the Elysian plain...where life is easiest... No snow is there, nor heavy storm, nor ever rain, but ever does Ocean send up blasts of the shrill-blowing West Wind that they may give cooling...

These fields embodied a life of living in a manner that we were ultimately meant for. And it was in a pastoral setting for that was the place away from battle, in a place where people truly felt at home in their innermost being. In this fashion, it is similar to the paradise of the biblical Eden, in which all that is needed grows on trees and there is perfect harmony with creation.

Paradise is a place in which we feel centered, and properly alive like a radio tuned precisely into the right frequency. If paradise is an earthly moment in which the world feels right and brings resonant joy, then I encountered it over Zoom a few months ago, when my children, Wendy, my brothers and I were joined by my mom in Princeton, and my Dad in Atlanta. Suddenly they were speaking Portuguese like when we were children. It sounded like home.

Despite not understanding the words, there is something in the rhythms and intonations of that language that speaks to the center of my being – a moment of paradise, when everything felt right. Paradise can press into our lives even during times of great hardship.

In Albert Camus' *The Plague*, the moment of reprieve comes at an unexpected moment. This work from seventy years ago eerily reflects our current COVID world. Set in Algerian, France, it tells the fictional story of the bubonic plague devastating the town of Oran.

Filled with denial as to the severity, desperate people seeking to survive, courageous people trying to tell the truth, hospitals and morgue overflowing while caregivers collapse, in a moment of deepest hardship there is...an evening swim! It is a transcendent perfect moment between friends in perfectly calm waters with the beauty of a moonlight night – a moment of paradise, of deep pleasure, a gift of delight and reprieve.

That's Paradise. Perfect moments in life. We can all think of times and moments of paradise, so in mentioning it, Paul's audience can relate to this vision. It would lead them to consider their own greatest hopes and dreams in this life, but then moment is something even more.

Paul tells them it was an experience beyond paradise, all the way to the third heaven. In the biblical world, the first heaven was the sky, where the birds fly and the clouds roam. The second heaven was

the realm of the stars and planets. All the way to the third heaven is the home of God.

If paradise was a place that people could relate to as the notion of the ideal life, the third heaven is a place beyond our imagination. Scripture warns such raw encounters of God could bring death. Moses can only see God's backside and after spending time with God his face shines like the sun. Paul tells us such a moment cannot be spoken of because it overwhelms the senses and peels back the curtain of reality. Monks and Nuns pray *Lectio Divina* for decades seeking to reach the fourth stage known as *contemplatio*, the moment of ecstatic union with God.

Paul has seen the truth of things. Far from the illusion of this life, the life we believe is real. He knows.

Paul has exposed the illusory world of these "super-apostles" out of his love for God and the Corinthians. For the illusory world has degraded their lives.

On this Fourth of July, we remember the price people have paid to gain freedom for our country and the price we continue to pay for not ensuring that freedom is equally enjoyed by all. Paul's fervent desire is to set the Corinthians free from these "super-apostles". As he writes:

...you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face.

The "super-apostle's" lure is panache and appearance. Paul is at a disadvantage. He

does not sound the part. He does not look the part. Paul killed Christians. Paul betrayed his own people. How could anyone listen to him, much less trust him?!

Paul has two aces up his sleeve. First, this incredible vision. Second, and more importantly, he actually cares about them.

Paul, far from taking advantage of them, explains everything he has endured for their sake. Listen to this excerpt from chapter eleven:

Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.

They can trust, because rather than the monetary gain the “super-apostles” enjoy, he is suffering physical and emotional toil. But there is yet another reason we can listen to him. For rather than being filled with cynicism, anger, hatred or indifference he is filled with joy.

Because he gets up for God, rather than despair he finds joy. “I am overjoyed in all our affliction,” he writes to them. Paul knows he has work to do, but because of his

belief in God, he knows someday the work will be complete. In living for Christ, even hardship brings meaning, purpose, and hope.

The lure of the “super-apostle” life is considerable. The path of appearance and panache may gain us temporary freedom from despair but the path of lasting truth and hope is found in the path of Paul – deep love for others which can gain us moments of paradise here on earth, and eternal joy in the next. Amen.