

## 2 Corinthians 12:1-6 – “Knocking on Heaven’s Door”

Paul continues in this theme of boasting, but more so it’s glorying. At the end of chapter 11 Paul laid out the many things he’s had to endure in his life, the many tribulations he’s had to go through. We read in **Romans 5:1–5**, *“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> and perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup> Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”*

We like to glory or boast in the hope of the glory of God, but glory in tribulations? Boast in tribulations? Wait a second!

But notice, it doesn’t say rejoice (or glory) **for** the tribulation, but rather glory **in** tribulation. How? Because God is doing a work in it and through it for our good and for His glory!

Chapter 11 ended with Paul being let down in a basket. He went through one of his more humiliating ministry moments to now share one of his more exciting ministry moments. In chapter 12 we’re being lifted up to the heavenlies. Paul isn’t boasting in tribulations, he’s now boasting in revelations! Our tribulations aren’t meant to put us down, they’re meant to lift us up to a greater more godly perspective of what we’re facing and going through. They’re meant to remind us we’re in a broken world and we long for eternity. Paul is going to share this perspective with us as we get into chapter 12.

### 1. Rapture Ready – 12:1-2

**12:1-2 - *It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: <sup>2</sup> 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.***

Paul is still struggling with having to speak this way. He knows this is not a profitable course of action to take. But he also sees that it is necessary.

The ESV translates this verse: *“I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it...”*

But again, Paul's purpose is to defend the gospel he's preached and to open the eyes of the Corinthian Christians being pulled into the deception of these false apostles.

It's quite probable that these false apostles were passing on various visions they said they had received from the Lord. One way to make yourself sound very spiritual is to tell people you have a word from the Lord for them.

This is what some do today, they put themselves in a puffed up position through sounding spiritual and many fall for it. Everything needs to be tested. We have to be careful that we hear what God is telling us personally, not just what someone else says God is speaking to them.

Now interestingly in vs. 2+3 Paul is going to refer to a man that's had a pretty amazing experience. That man is Paul as we'll find out in vs. 7. So why does he refer to himself in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person?

I believe it's because Paul was so uncomfortable talking about himself. He did not like the idea of having to boast in some of his experiences. How about you? Can you relate to Paul in this?

- Some people love to talk about themselves to the point where you can just sit there and have a 30-minute conversation with them, and you've said nothing!
- I encourage you to be engaged in others. Don't be the majority focal point of your conversation. More importantly keep the dialogue centered on Jesus!

As Paul begins to recount this story, he's a little unsure of some of the details. We know it happened 14 years ago, and perhaps it's been 14 years since he's ever even talked about it. He's not sure if this is something that happened in the body or out of the body. He's not sure if he was dead or alive when this happened. But he knows he was **caught up to the third heaven...**

I like this word caught up... It's the same word used in **1 Thessalonians 4:17**, *"Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord."* What's that speaking of? The rapture!! Now I know people have different views on the rapture – when it happens, if it happens at all. I'm not going to get majorly into it today, but I will get minorly into it. And regardless of what you believe, the bottom line is, are you in Jesus!? Is He your blessed hope?

Now one reason people like to say there's no rapture is because the word is not in the Bible. But neither is the Trinity. The word Bible is not in the Bible, but these are all very real and understood things.

But here in 2 Corinthians 12:2, like in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, the word caught up is translated from the Greek word *harpazo*. The Latin Vulgate (Latin Bible) translated this as *raptus*, where we get our English word rapture.

Paul experienced here a premature rapture.

Like I said there's been some debate over the years as to when this is going to happen. Does it come before the tribulation, or part way through the tribulation, or after the tribulation? Or is it even an actual event?

- First of all we need to realize that the tribulation is a time where God judges a Christ rejecting world. It's the last week (or 7 years) of Daniels 70 week prophecy (Daniel 9) where God begins to directly intervene in the affairs of man (particularly with His people Israel).
- So it's a time of God's wrath upon the earth. **Revelation 6:16-17** says, *"[They] said to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!'<sup>17</sup> For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"*
- The Bible tells us that God will not judge the righteous with the wicked (Genesis 18). **1 Thessalonians 5:9** tells us that *"God did not appoint us unto wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Now back in Revelation, we see before the wrath of God comes, something important happens. John is called to 'come up here' (**Revelation 4:1**). It's a picture of the rapture. John is in the heavenly habitat as he witnesses God's judgment unleashed.

- I say that to say, we as Christians have a great hope today! We don't have to be walking in fear or worry of what's going to come. We look in expectation of Who is going to come! I'm not saying we will be exempt from difficulty or trial (Paul makes that pretty clear for us). We can expect to face some real hardships ahead for being believers in this God forsaking world. But in all these things we keep our eyes on Jesus who is more than faithful to carry us through.
- **Titus 2:11–13**, *"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men,<sup>12</sup> teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age,<sup>13</sup> looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,"*

Paul says he was caught up to the **third heaven**... This is not to say there are levels of heaven. Some earlier Jewish Rabbis believed this way. Paul is simply speaking in a way that people in this day understood their surroundings and creation. They spoke of the first heavens as being the sky above us; the atmosphere where the clouds lay. The second heaven spoke of the celestial sky; where the stars were hung and the planets fly. The third heaven spoke of the dwelling place of God.

He will later define this place as **Paradise** (vs. 4).

## 2. Sweet Sounds – 12:3-4

**12:3-4 - *And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—<sup>4</sup> how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.***

Paul repeats here that whether it was in the body or out of the body, he does not know. Many have tried to speculate what actually happened to Paul. Some might say he was carried up to the heavens with body in tow. Others may say his spirit left his body and he saw all that heaven offered.

Not even Paul was sure what really happened. It's hard for us to know exactly how or when this happened, but one possible connection could be to when he was ministering in Lystra (**Acts 14:19**, *"Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead."*).

- It could be that Paul actually died for a time and was taken up to heaven. We of course can't say that with certainty, not even Paul knows what really happened.

Though Paul may not be too sure how this all happened, this he does know, he was **caught up into Paradise**... What is this Paradise? It's the place that Jesus said the man on the cross would enter into that day.

- **Luke 23:43**, *"And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.'"*
- **Revelation 2:7**, *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."*

William Barclay wrote this about Paradise: “The word *Paradise* comes from a Persian word which means *a walled garden*. When a Persian king wished to confer a very special honour on someone specially dear to him, he made him *a companion of the garden* and gave him the right to walk in the royal gardens with him in close companionship. In this experience, as never before and never again, Paul had been the companion of God.”<sup>1</sup>

There’s been many interpretations and views as to this Paradise. Some have said it’s an intermediary place between here and heaven. That some people go there as an initial check in place and eventually are brought into heaven at the resurrection. But understand, this was no intermediary place for Paul. He was speaking of heaven itself. Remember Jesus said to the man on the cross, ‘**Today** you will be with **Me** in Paradise.’

It's going to be a glorious place! Heaven is going to be far more amazing and exciting than you can every imagine! It’s going to be like walking through a lush garden – a new and better Garden of Eden! There’s going to be delicious fruit, beautiful colors, smells like you’ve never experienced (and an absence of smells that you would like to forget). Heaven is not some boring drab place. It’s going to far exceed anything we can ever comprehend, because it’s a place that the Lord is preparing for us and is preparing for our new resurrected bodies that will no longer have limitations.

This 85-year-old couple, having been married almost 60 years, had died in a car crash. They had been in good health the last ten years mainly due to the wife's interest in health food and exercise.

When they reached the pearly gates, Peter took them to their mansion, which was decked out with a beautiful kitchen and master bath suite and Jacuzzi. As they "oohed" and "aahed," the old man asked Peter how much all this was going to cost.

"It's free," Peter replied, "This is Heaven."

Next they went out back to survey the championship golf course that the home backed up to. They would have golfing privileges every day; and each week the course changed to a new one representing the great golf courses on earth.

The old man asked, "What are the green fees?"

Peter's reply, "This is Heaven! You play for free."

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, W. (2002). *The Letters to the Corinthians* (3rd ed., p. 304). Westminster John Knox Press.



Next they went to the clubhouse and saw the lavish buffet lunch with the cuisines of the world laid out.

"How much to eat?" asked the old man.

"Don't you understand yet? This is Heaven, it's free!" Peter replied with some exasperation.

"Well, where are the low fat and low cholesterol tables?" the old man asked timidly.

Peter explained, "That's the best part--you can eat as much as you like of whatever you like and you never get fat and you never get sick. This is Heaven!"

With that the old man went into a fit of anger, throwing down his hat and stomping on it, and shrieking wildly.

Peter and his wife both tried to calm him down, asking him what was wrong.

The old man looked at his wife and said, "This is all your fault! If it weren't for your blasted quinoa salads and bran muffins, I could have been here ten years ago!"

We should be longing for heaven! It's not just for the great things we're going to see and experience, but more so it's because we're going to be with Jesus!

This should be our primary focus and reason for desiring heaven.

Now what's really remarkable is as amazing and glorious as heaven is going to be, Paul doesn't share these physical aspects with us, rather he highlights the things he heard! I'm sure Paul couldn't even entertain trying to describe the things he saw in heaven (that would be like trying to describe this creation to a person that was born blind).

- This causes me to be a little leery of those who claim to have been taken up to heaven. Some false teachers will claim to have regular visits to heaven and discussions with Jesus. Some people write books and embark on speaking tours just to tell their story.
- Yet it took Paul 14 years to even bring up what happened. And when he does bring it up, all you get is: *'I couldn't even attempt to tell you about it!'*
- It's exciting to think about what Heaven is going to look like, but imagine what we will be hearing when we're there!?

"The **words** were **inexpressible** in the sense that they were too sacred to be uttered and therefore not for publication. G. Campbell Morgan writes:

There are some who seem eager to talk of visions and revelations which they have had. The question is as to whether such eagerness is not proof that the

visions and revelations are not “of the Lord.” When they are granted (and they certainly are granted to the servants of God under certain circumstances), they produce a reverent reticence. They are too solemn, too overwhelming, to be lightly described or discussed, but the effect of them will be apparent in all life and service.” <sup>45</sup> <sup>2</sup>

**Revelation 4:8**, *"The four living creatures, each having six wings, were full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!""*

**Revelation 5:9–13**, *"And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, <sup>10</sup> And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth." <sup>11</sup> Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, <sup>12</sup> saying with a loud voice: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain To receive power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honor and glory and blessing!" <sup>13</sup> And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: "Blessing and honor and glory and power Be to Him who sits on the throne, And to the Lamb, forever and ever!""*

Paul was so amazed at what he experienced in heaven he couldn't even begin to describe it. He knew that he wouldn't do it justice.

- Have you ever tried to explain something to someone and they seem so disinterested because your explanation is so poor. And you know you can't adequately describe it to them. You're excited, but you know your description is going to pale in comparison to the real thing and your only response is: *you just need to experience it for yourself.*

This is what Paul is desiring, that these believers in Corinth would experience all that God has for them. He doesn't want them to be sidetracked by these false apostles.

Even the trials we may encounter don't need to discourage us or bring doubt into our thinking. In fact, because Paul has tasted of the future glory, he knows the temporal bitterness of this life is no reason to give up.

<sup>45</sup> Morgan, *Searchlights*, p. 346.

<sup>2</sup> MacDonald, W. (1995). *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments* (A. Farstad, Ed.; p. 1865). Thomas Nelson.

- **2 Corinthians 4:17**, *"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,"*
- **Romans 8:18**, *"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."*

For this reason **Colossians 3:2** reminds us to: *"Set your minds on things above, not on things on the earth."*

- "Our minds are so much set on Earth that we are unaccustomed to heavenly thinking. So we must work at it."

"Perhaps you're afraid of becoming 'so heavenly minded you're of no earthly good.'" Relax—you have nothing to worry about! On the contrary, many of us are so earthly minded we are of no heavenly or earthly good. C. S. Lewis observed, "If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither."

"In the truest sense, Christian pilgrims have the best of both worlds. We have joy whenever this world reminds us of the next, and we take solace whenever it does not."

— Randy Alcorn, *Heaven: A Comprehensive Guide to Everything the Bible Says About Our Eternal Home (Clear Answers to 44 Real Questions About the Afterlife, Angels, Resurrection, ... and the Kingdom of God)*

### 3. Balanced Boasting – 12:5-6

**12:5 - *Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities.***

Paul says he's happy to boast in a person that has that kind of experience. That's something to talk about! But he doesn't want to do this because he's the one that had the experience.

He's much happier talking about his weaknesses (*infirmities*) than his strengths.



How about us? Do we take the blessings of God that perhaps we've enjoyed, to talk about ourselves and communicate how awesome we are for having received them? We may come across as though we're sharing how awesome God is, but do we turn it around and boast that we must be someone special for having received it?

Paul wanted only to boast in a way where it celebrated the goodness and might of God at work in his life.

Paul never used this incredible heavenly encounter to win over an audience. He didn't brag about this privileged experience. He would rather prove through his scars rather than his stars that he was sincere in his ministry and God was the power behind this ministry.

**12:6 - *For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me.***

Paul didn't want anyone to look at him and think he was special. He was just an ordinary guy in the hands of an extraordinary God.

- That's the same blessing we all get to enjoy. We don't have to find things in ourselves or try to make something happen that we can boast in. We just need to be surrendered to the Lord and boast in Him.

What can you boast of today in the Lord?

You can boast in the fact that He saved you despite your wretchedness.

- If your response is, *'Well, I've always believed, and have really always lived a Godly life,'* then what are you boasting in? Let Jesus be the Great Rescuer of your soul.

You can boast in the fact you have a future and a hope.

- We deserved hell. I certainly don't deserve to have a hope of heaven. But Jesus in His grace has granted me the gift of eternal life and a heavenly home.

You can boast in the fact that though you blow it day after day and you fall short, God never has given up on you.

- If living this Christian life were like a job that you had to check in to and do well pleasing the boss, I would have been fired long ago! But God is patient and gracious. He won't toss me aside.

Are you boasting alone in all the great things God has done for you?

Make Him your boast today. We have much reason to.