

# PAUL'S REVELATION<sup>1</sup>

October 27, 2019  
19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Revision E

## Epistle: 2 Corinthians 11:31-12:9

Today's Epistle is used in the West either on the 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost or two Sundays before Lent. In the Orthodox lectionary, today's Epistle lesson is also used for the Feast Day of Peter and Paul on June 29.

The lesson focuses on some of the visions and revelations that the Apostle Paul experienced. These visions were great revelations, but Paul had kept silent about them for 14 years (2 Corinthians 12:2). Since 2 Corinthians was written in 55 AD, this places the time of the revelations in 41 AD, which would be about 7 years after Paul was converted on the road to Damascus. Thus, the visions occurred while Paul was in Tarsus (Acts 9:29-30) and about 4 years before Barnabas brought him to Antioch to help out with the church there (Acts 11:25-26). For more details of this and for a history of the early life of Paul, see the Epistle lesson for the 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost.

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The Apostle John experienced similar visions and revelations (Revelation 1:10-11, 17, Revelation 4:1-2), which occurred on "the Lord's Day" (Revelation 1:10) or Sunday<sup>2</sup>. John did not say whether he was bodily translated to heaven (Revelation 4:1-2). Like Paul, he may not have known.

Why did Paul keep silent about these things so long? And why did he break silence at this time? He states that it is not profitable for him to boast of such things (2 Corinthians 12:1). However, the Corinthians had been putting up with others that had boasted (foolishly) of their own visions (2 Corinthians 11:18-20). While Paul was reluctant, he could also see that some of the flock in Corinth were in danger of perishing: those that had not repented from uncleanness, fornications and lewdness (2 Corinthians 12:31). He needed to get their attention regarding the things he had been saying and show them that the heretics they had been putting up with hadn't seen what he had seen.

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<sup>1</sup> See also the Feast Day for Peter and Paul (6/29), where this Epistle lesson is also used.

<sup>2</sup> Ignatius in 107 AD wrote the Christians no longer keep the Sabbath but live in accordance with the Lord's Day: Ignatius of Antioch, Magnesians, 9:1.

John Chrysostom adds<sup>3</sup> that Paul was caught up into Paradise – before the beginning of his apostleship – so that he might not be inferior to the rest of the Apostles or seem to be. For they had accompanied Christ but Paul had not.

“Great indeed was this revelation! But this was not the only one: there were many others besides, but he mentions one out of many. For that there were many, listen to what he says: ‘Lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations’ (2 Corinthians 12:7). And yet, a man may say, if he wished to conceal them, he ought not to have given any intimation whatever or said anything of the sort; but if he wished to speak of them, to speak plainly. Why then is it that he neither spoke plainly nor kept silence? To show by this also that he resorts to the thing unwillingly. Therefore, also he has stated the time delay, ‘fourteen years’. He mentions this to show that he had refrained for so long a time and would not now have spoken out now, except the necessity for doing so had been great. But he would have still kept silence, had he not seen the brethren perishing. Now if Paul from the very beginning was such a one as to be counted worthy of such a revelation, when as yet he had not done such good works; consider what he must have grown to in fourteen years. Notice also how even in this very matter he shows modesty, by his saying some things, but confessing that of others he is ignorant. For that he was caught up indeed, he declared, but whether ‘in the body’ or ‘out of the body’ he says he does not know. Yet it would have been quite enough, if he had told of his being caught up and had been silent about the others; but as it is, in his modesty he adds this also. Was it the mind that he was caught up and the soul, while the body remained dead? Or was the body caught up also? It is impossible to tell. If Paul, who was caught up and who heard things unspeakable, so many and so great, had fallen into ignorance, much more we. That he was in Paradise he knew, and that he was in the third heaven he was not ignorant, but the manner he didn’t know clearly.”

### **The Third Heaven**

The third heaven, which Paul and John saw in their visions, is a term used by 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews to describe heavenly realms. One can think of the atmosphere of the earth as the 1<sup>st</sup> heaven where birds fly, and which holds moisture for rain (Genesis 1:8, Revelation 8:13, 19:17). The sun is described as stopping in mid-heaven, or the second heaven, for Joshua (Joshua 10:13) and the lights in the heavens are located there (Genesis 1:14). The 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven then, would be the place where God dwells.

Methodius of Olympus stated<sup>4</sup> that Paul had at least two revelations: one of the third heaven and one of Paradise. Methodius was countering heretics of his day who said that life in Paradise was incorporeal; not true, people have fleshly bodies in Paradise.

“Paul had (at least) two revelations. Paul does not suppose paradise to be in the third heaven, when he says, ‘I know such a man caught up to the third heaven; and I know such a man, whether in the body or out of the body, God knows, that

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<sup>3</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians*, XXVI, vv. 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Methodius of Olympus, *From the Discourse on the Resurrection*, III, 9.

Jerome, *Letters*, LI, 5 says that the third heaven is in one place and Paradise is in another place.

was caught up into paradise' (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). Here he signifies that Paul had seen two revelations, having been evidently taken up twice, once to the third heaven, and once into paradise. For the words, 'I know such a man caught up', make it certain that he was personally shown a revelation respecting the third heaven. And the words which follow, 'And I know such a man, whether in the body or out of the body, God knows, that he was caught up into paradise', show that another revelation was made to him respecting paradise. Now he was led to make this statement by his opponent's having laid it down from the apostle's words that paradise is a mere conception, as it is above the heaven, in order to draw the conclusion that life in paradise is incorporeal."

Jerome stated<sup>5</sup> that Paul really did not know whether he was in the body or not when he was carried away to the third heaven.

Cyril of Jerusalem stated<sup>6</sup> that Elijah only went to the first heaven<sup>7</sup>, but Paul went to the third heaven and Paradise. Peter received the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Paul came back that he might also receive the crown of martyrdom.

"Note that a servant of Christ was caught up to the third heaven. For if Elijah attained as far as the first heaven, but Paul as far as the third; Paul, therefore, has obtained a more honorable dignity. Be not ashamed of your Apostles; they are not inferior to Moses, nor second to the Prophets; but they are noble among the noble. For Elijah truly was taken up into heaven; but Peter has the keys of the kingdom of heaven, having received the words, 'Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven' (Matthew 16:19). Elijah was taken up only to heaven; but Paul both into heaven, and into paradise, for the disciples of Jesus received more manifold grace. Paul heard 'inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter' (2 Corinthians 12:4); but Paul came down again from above. Not because he was unworthy to stay in the third heaven, but in order that after having enjoyed things above man's reach, having descended in honor, having preached Christ, and having died for His sake, he might also receive the crown of martyrdom."

### **Inexpressible Words, Not Lawful to Utter**

Paul said, "I know such a man how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter" (2 Corinthians 12:3-4). What is Paul referring to?

Clement of Alexandria stated<sup>8</sup> that Paul is intimating the impossibility of expressing God and indicating that what is divine is unutterable by human power.

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<sup>5</sup> Jerome, Preface to Daniel.

<sup>6</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, XIV, 26.

<sup>7</sup> If the first heaven is the sky where birds fly, then the Scripture only speaks of Elijah going up into the sky. He may well have attained the third heaven by the time of the Transfiguration.

<sup>8</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, V, 12.

Hippolytus of Rome stated<sup>9</sup> that what Paul saw and heard in the third heaven and in Paradise are the mysteries that Christians alone are acquainted with.

“Paul knew of the gate of heaven, partially opening it in a mystery, and stating ‘that he was caught up by an angel and ascended as far as the second and third heaven into paradise itself; and that he beheld sights and heard unspeakable words which it would not be possible for man to declare’ (2 Corinthians 12:4). These are what are by all called the secret mysteries. ‘These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him’ (1 Corinthians 2:13-14). These are ineffable mysteries of the Spirit, which (Christians) alone are acquainted with.”

Gregory the Theologian stated<sup>10</sup> that Paul may have learned something more about God's nature than has been revealed to us. Since Paul couldn't talk about it, we know only in part and see only as through a mirror dimly.

“If it had been permitted to Paul to utter what the Third Heaven contained, and his own advance, or ascension, or assumption there, perhaps we should know something more about God's Nature, if this was the mystery of the rapture. But since it was ineffable, we too will honor it by silence. This much we will hear Paul say about it, that we know in part and we prophesy in part (1 Corinthians 13:9). This and the like to this are the confessions of one who is untrained in speech (2 Corinthians 11:6), who gives proof of Christ speaking in him, the great doctor and champion of the truth. Therefore, Paul estimates all knowledge on earth only as through a mirror dimly (1 Corinthians 13:12), as taking its stand upon little images of the truth.”

### **Paul's Thorn in the Flesh**

In order that Paul might not get too conceited concerning his visions, the Lord also gave him a “thorn in the flesh”, “a messenger of Satan” to beat him up. (Greek: *kolaphizo* = to strike with the fist). Much speculation has been made concerning whether this was some physical problem or whether it refers to some people that Paul fought against. Some have implied a physical weakness; however, John Chrysostom shows that this refers to people who harassed Paul.

John Chrysostom stated<sup>11</sup> that Paul's “thorn in the flesh” referred to people who vigorously opposed him, like Alexander the coppersmith and others with him. Since the word “satan” means an adversary in Hebrew, the term “messenger of satan” refers to the continuous persecution from Paul's enemies. The “thorn in the flesh” could not be a physical ailment from the devil since the devil submitted to all of Paul's bidding.

“There are some who have said that Paul's “thorn in the flesh” was a kind of pain in the head which was inflicted by the devil; but God forbid! For the body

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<sup>9</sup> Hippolytus of Rome, Refutation of All Heresies, V, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Gregory the Theologian, Second Theological Oration, XXVIII, 20.

<sup>11</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, XXVI, v. 7.

John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Timothy, V, v. 20.

of Paul never could have been given over to the hands of the devil, seeing that the devil himself submitted to the same Paul at his mere bidding. Paul set laws and bounds for Satan, when he delivered over the fornicator for the destruction of the flesh (1 Corinthians 5:1-5), and Satan dared not transgress them. What then is the meaning of what is said? An adversary is called, in Hebrew, satan; and the Scripture has so termed such as were adversaries. Speaking of Solomon, it says, 'In his days there was no satan,' that is, no adversary, enemy, or opponent (1 Kings 5:4). What he says then is this: God would sometimes not permit the Preaching to progress, in order to check our high thoughts; but permitted the adversaries to set upon us. This indeed was enough to pluck down his high thoughts; not because of pains in the head. By the 'messenger of Satan', Paul means Alexander the coppersmith, the party of Hymenaeus and Philetus, all the adversaries of the word; those who contended with and fought against him, those that cast him into a prison, those that beat him, that led him away to death. For they did Satan's business. As then Paul calls those Jews children of the devil (Acts 19:14-17), who were imitating his deeds, so also, he calls a 'messenger of Satan' everyone that opposes. He says therefore, 'There was given to me a thorn to punch me; not as if God puts arms into such men's hands, God forbid! Not that He chastises or punishes, but for the time allows and permits them.'"

John Chrysostom continued to say<sup>12</sup> that Paul eventually recognized that God's grace was sufficient for him to raise the dead, heal the blind, cleanse lepers, etc. Paul didn't need the luxury of preaching without annoyances. At first Paul and the Lord had a different viewpoint; Paul thought that his thorn was to keep him from being exalted; God said that He permitted this to show His power. This also makes it plain that Paul is not referring to pains in the head.

"When the Lord spoke to the Apostle Paul, 'My grace is sufficient for you', He was saying, 'It is sufficient for you that you raise the dead, that you cure the blind, that you cleanse lepers, that you work those other miracles. Don't seek also exemption from danger and fear and the luxury to preach without annoyances. Are you dejected that it should seem to be that your God is weak, that there are many who plot against you, beat you, harass and scourge you? This very thing shows My power. 'For My power', He said, 'is made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:9). When being persecuted you overcome your persecutors; when being harassed you get the better of them that harass you; when being put in bonds you convert those that put you in bonds. Don't seek then more than is needed! Notice how Paul assigns one reason, and God another? Paul says, 'Lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me' (2 Corinthians 12:7); but Paul says that God said He permitted it in order to show His power. 'You seek a thing which is not only not needed, but which also obscures the glory of My power'. By the words, 'is sufficient for you', God signifies that nothing else need be added, but the whole was complete. From this also it is plain that Paul is not referring to pains in the head. The Apostles did not preach when they were sick, for they could not preach when ill; but even though they were harassed and persecuted, they overcame all. After having heard this then,

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<sup>12</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, XXVI, v. 9.

Paul says, ‘Most gladly therefore will I boast in my weaknesses’ (2 Corinthians 12:9). That Paul and his fellow Apostles may not sink down, when those false Apostles are boasting over their contrary lot and these are suffering persecution, Paul shows that he shines all the brighter for this. Thus, the power of God shines forth the brighter, and what happens is just matter for glorying. Therefore, he says, ‘Most gladly therefore will I boast’. Paul also hints at another thing also, namely, that in proportion as the trials grew in intensity, in the same proportion the grace was increased and continued.”

“Notice how Paul has now revealed it in the clearest manner? In mentioning the type of weakness, he spoke not of fevers, nor anything of that sort, nor any other bodily ailment, but of ‘injuries, persecutions, distresses’. Notice a single-minded soul? He longs to be delivered from those dangers; but when he heard God’s answer that this was not fitting, he was not only not sorry that he was disappointed by his prayer but was even glad. Therefore, he said, ‘I take pleasure’, I rejoice, I long to be injured, persecuted, distressed for Christ’s sake. And he said these things both to check those enemies, and to raise the spirits of these friends that they might not be ashamed at Paul’s sufferings. For what he said was enough to make them shine brighter than all men.”

Alexander the coppersmith was most likely the son of Simon of Cyrene, who had been pressed into service to carry Jesus’ cross at the crucifixion (Mark 15:21). Simon and his sons, Alexander and Rufus, were probably among those men from Cyprus and Cyrene (Acts 11:20) who had started the Church in Antioch.

Rufus was in Antioch when Paul and Barnabas were sent off on their First Missionary Journey and when Paul and Silas were sent off on the Second Missionary Journey. After the Second Missionary Journey, Rufus was sent to Rome by Peter and Paul and was there when Paul wrote Romans (Romans 16:13). Later Rufus was ordained Bishop of Thebes in Egypt; he was eventually martyred in 107 AD along with Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch.

Alexander chose a different path for himself, however. He was associated with the craftsmen such as Demetrius the silversmith in Ephesus (Acts 19:24) who built small idols; he opposed Paul in about 54 AD (Acts 19:33). Later Paul referred to Alexander as a coppersmith (2 Timothy 4:14). Yet he rejected the faith. Along with Hymenaeus, Paul felt it necessary to deliver them to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme (1 Timothy 1:19-20). They were part of a heresy that claimed that the resurrection was already past (2 Timothy 2:16-18); this overthrew the faith of some people. Finally, it was Alexander that was primarily responsible for Paul’s martyrdom in about 67 AD. Paul said, “Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works. You also must beware of him, for he has greatly resisted our words” (2 Timothy 4:14-15). The implication is that Alexander went out of his way to have Paul hunted down, arrested and accused before the Roman authorities. Since Alexander had inside knowledge of the beginnings of Christianity, this represented a serious betrayal. Alexander also had an ax to grind at Paul for Paul’s delivering him over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh.

John Chrysostom pointed out<sup>13</sup> that Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was not given to him to keep him humble; and Paul was not just being humble in mentioning it. The reason for the "thorn" was "That the excellence of the power may be of God, and not of us".

"Listen to Paul, saying, 'Lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me' (2 Corinthians 12:7). This was not an expression of humility. Far from it! The thorn was not sent him that he might be humble, nor does he say this only out of humility. There are other causes besides to be assigned for it. Observe how God, accounting for it, says, 'My grace is sufficient for you'; not 'that you may not be exalted above measure'. 'For my strength is made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:9). Two ends therefore were answered at once; what was going on was made clear, and the whole was ascribed to God. For this cause, Paul has said elsewhere, 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels'; that is, in bodies weak and liable to suffering. Why? 'That the excellence of the power may be of God, and not of us' (2 Corinthians 4:7). If our bodies were not subject to infirmity, everything would be ascribed to our bodies. Elsewhere we see Paul grieving at the infirmity of Epaphroditus, concerning whom he writes, 'He was sick almost to death, but God had mercy on him' (Philippians 2:27). And many other instances there are of his ignorance of events, which was profitable both for him and his disciples."

Paul asked the Lord three times to remove this "thorn" (2 Corinthians 12:8). But each time, the Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in (your) weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Paul's example is a good lesson for us today. Whether we have had visions of the Lord in glory or not, the Lord will put limits on us so that we don't get too exalted above measure (2 Corinthians 12:7). That way the Lord gets the glory for the achievements and His strength is made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). From Paul's point of view, he took pleasure in infirmities, reproaches, needs, persecutions and distresses for Christ's sake (2 Corinthians 12:10). For being weak, then he was strong.

### **Messengers of Satan**

The term "messenger of Satan" (or angel of Satan) needs further clarification. We note that Paul's "weakness", whether physical or personal was "a messenger from Satan" (2 Corinthians 12:7). The life of Job also contains illustrations of both physical and personal messengers from Satan. Job was a descendant of Esau who lived during the years that Israel was in Egypt. His ordeals began with the Lord pointing out to Satan that Job was unique on the earth "a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil" (Job 1:8). Job even offered prayers and offerings for his ten children consecrating them just in case they had sinned in their heart (Job 1:6). Satan doesn't believe anything God says and felt that if Job were poor and destitute, Job would curse God to His face (Job 1:11). So the Lord allowed Satan to send several "messengers" his way.

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<sup>13</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Timothy, X, v. 20.

First the Sabeans attacked and took all Job's oxen and donkeys, killing Job's herdsmen in the process (Job 1:14-15). Second, "the fire of God" fell from heaven and burned up all the sheep, killing the shepherds with the sheep (Job 1:16). Third, the Chaldean raiders came and took all Job's camels, killing the keepers who were defending. Lastly, while Job's children were having a feast at the house of the oldest son "on his day" (probably his birthday, Job 1:4) a tornado came from across the wilderness, collapsing the house on top of them and killing them all (Job 1:18-19). Thus, these messengers were two personal ones (the Sabeans and the Chaldeans) and two miraculous ones (the fire of God and the tornado). Today's insurance industry would refer to these last two as "acts of God" even though their source is an act of Satan.

Job's response to all this was to prepare himself to worship the Lord saying, "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). Meanwhile, the Lord pointed out to Satan that Job held fast to his integrity "even though you incited Me against him to ruin him without cause" (Job 2:3). Satan still didn't believe anything that God said, and replied that if Job were plagued with diseases on his bone and his flesh, he would curse God to His face (Job 2:5). So, the Lord allowed Satan to send more "messengers" to Job.

The next "messenger from Satan" was a physical one: "severe boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7). Now destitute and unable to afford any medical attention, Job's only medical alternative was scrapping the pus off his skin with a piece of broken pottery. Completely disfigured by these diseases, Job's wife advised him: "How long will you hold out, expecting the hope of your deliverance? Just say some word against the Lord and die!" (Job 2:9 LXX). When three of his friends came to see him after hearing of his adversity, they didn't even recognize him at first because of his disfigurement. When they did, they openly wept (Job 2:11-12). Following this, they sat down with him for seven days without saying a word, for they saw that his pain was very great (Job 2:13). For Job, it was so bad he wished he had never been born (Job 3:1).

Following this came the last messenger: the inquisition. Job's three friends thought that Job had some secret sin that brought all this evil down on his own head. Eliphaz the Temanite suggested that those who plow iniquity and sow trouble harvest it. The innocent and upright don't perish for no reason (Job 4:7-8). Bilhad the Shuhite suggested that perhaps Job's sons had sinned and had gotten their just reward. If Job, himself were without guilt, surely God would have, by now, restored his righteous estate. After all, God will not reject a man of integrity nor will He support evil doers (Job 8:4, 6, 20). Job claimed he was innocent. Zephan the Naamathite suggested that the Lord knows false men without investigating their circumstances. "If you would direct your heart right and spread out your hand to Him (that is, in prayer); if iniquity is in your hand, put it far away and do not let wickedness dwell in your tents (Job 11:4, 11-14). The effect of all this on Job was that "the tents of the destroyers prosper while the just and blameless man is a joke (Job 12:4, 6).

This last messenger from Satan was perhaps the cruelest and the most difficult to deal with. After all, there was ample evidence all around Job that it was true! Chrysostom commented<sup>14</sup> that "the reproaches of Job's friends appeared more grievous than the worms and the sores. For there

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<sup>14</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, XII, 3.

is nothing more intolerable to those in affliction than a word capable of stinging the soul”. This is exactly what the “messengers of Satan” seek to convince us of also: that God is not faithful, that He doesn’t care about us and that we should only trust in what we can see.

Paul reminds us that the usefulness of our “thorns in the flesh” or “messengers of Satan” are that we don’t get exalted above measure (2 Corinthians 12:7). After all, we are to bear our crosses as our Lord bore His (Mark 8:34-37), and as He humbled Himself to death on the Cross, so should we. The Lord told Paul, and He tells us, “My grace is sufficient for you for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Going through all he went through, it’s hard to imagine the Lord’s grace being sufficient for Job; but it was. Paul also said, “God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

John Chrysostom pointed out<sup>15</sup> how tribulation is profitable for the saints. David and Paul express the same gratitude for God doing this to them. Both were afflicted by men acting as “messengers of Satan”.

“Tribulation is profitable to the saints, that they may exercise moderation and lowliness, and that they may not be puffed up by their miracles and good works, God permits it for this end. We hear David the prophet, and Paul saying the same thing. David says, *‘It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes’* (Psalm 119:71). Paul said, ‘I was caught up to the third heaven’ and transported to Paradise; he goes on to say, ‘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 punch me’ (2 Corinthians 12:7). What can be clearer than this? ‘That I might not be exalted above measure’, for this reason, he said, God permitted ‘the messengers of Satan to punch me’. By messengers of Satan, he means not particular demons, but men ministering for the devil, the unbelievers, the tyrants, the heathens, who perseveringly molested, and unceasingly worried him.”

Tertullian noted<sup>16</sup> that King Saul was given an evil spirit from the Lord to terrify him and humble him. Paul was given a messenger of Satan to punch him, but perfect him in weakness. Paul turned around and delivered men over to Satan to chasten them for blasphemy.

“‘The Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord terrified him’ (1 Samuel 16:14). The design of the Lord was to humble Saul. As Paul tells us, there was given him a messenger of Satan, to punch him (2 Corinthians 12:7). Even this sort of thing is not permitted in the case of holy men, unless at the same time strength of endurance may be perfected in weakness. For Paul likewise delivered Hymenaeus and Alexander over to Satan that by chastening they might learn not to blaspheme (1 Timothy 1:20). You see, then, that the devil receives more suitably power even from the servants of God; so far is he from having it by any right of his own.”

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<sup>15</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Statues, I, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Tertullian, De Fuga in Persecutione, IV, 2.

The Lord saw His Cross (which itself was a messenger of Satan) as His Glory (John 12:23). Job wasn't aware of what was going on in heaven between the Lord and Satan, but eventually He realized that his ordeal was for his glory also. And as a result, Job was rewarded both in this life and in the age to come (Job 42:10-17, James 5:11).

### **Strength Made Perfect in Weakness**

Paul said, "The Lord 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" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Paul also said, "For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching *were* not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:2-5).

Paul also said, "We rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only *that*, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 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" (Romans 5:2-5).

John said, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Matthew said, "Wide *is* the gate and broad *is* the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow *is* the gate and difficult *is* the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

Paul said, "You seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. Though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you" (2 Corinthians 13:3-4). John Chrysostom pointed out<sup>17</sup> that there are three meanings of the word weakness (or sickness): bodily sickness, weakness in the Faith, and susceptibility to persecution. It is this third definition of weakness that Paul refers to a lot.

"These words have much obscurity and give disturbance to the weaker sort. Therefore, it is necessary to unfold them more clearly, and to explain the significance of the expression where the obscurity exists, that no one may be offended. What then is that which is said here; what does the term "weakness" designate; and in what significance is it used? The term has many meanings. Bodily sickness<sup>18</sup> is called 'weakness'. It is even said in the Gospel, 'Behold, he whom You love is weak' (John 11:3-4) concerning Lazarus, being sick near death;

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<sup>17</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on 2 Corinthians, XXIX, vv. 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> The Greek word *sthenoo* means to strengthen, and the Greek word *astheneo* means to be weak. *Astheneo* is used many times in the New Testament to refer to both bodily sickness and weaknesses. All the words in this quote translated "sickness" and "weakness" are forms of the same Greek word.

and He Himself said of Lazarus, ‘This weakness is not unto death’. Paul, speaking of Epaphroditus said, ‘For indeed he was weak almost unto death, but God had mercy on him;’ (Philippians 2:27) and of Timothy, ‘No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent weaknesses’ (1 Timothy 5:23). For all these foregoing examples denote bodily sickness. The not being established firmly in the faith is also called ‘weakness;’ the not being perfect and complete. And denoting this Paul said, ‘Receive one who is weak in the faith, *but* not to disputes over doubtful things’. And again, ‘One believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats *only* vegetables’ (Romans 14:1-2), denoting him who is weak in the faith. In the foregoing then are two uses of the term ‘weakness;’ there is yet a third thing which is called ‘weakness’. What then is this? Persecutions, plotting, insults, trials, assaults. Denoting this Paul said, ‘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”’ (2 Corinthians 12:8, 9). What does ‘in weakness’ mean? In persecutions, in dangers, in trials, in plotting, in deaths. Denoting this Paul said, ‘Therefore I take pleasure in weakness’ (2 Corinthians 12:10). Then showing what kind of weakness he means, he spoke not of fever, nor of doubt about the faith; but what? ‘in weaknesses, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong’ (2 Corinthians 12:10). That is to say ‘when I am persecuted, when I am driven up and down, when I am plotted against, then am I strong, then rather I prevail over, and get the better of them that plot against me. Because that grace rests upon me. It is then in this third sense that Paul uses ‘weakness’; and this is what he means by it; he seems to them to be humble and contemptible. He had no desire to boast, nor to seem to be what he really was, nor to display the power which he possessed of punishing and revenging.”

Chrysostom also pointed out<sup>19</sup> what the “weaknesses” were in Paul’s life: they were the persecutions that he had to endure everywhere he went. Paul dreaded these dangers, showing that he was but human after all.

“The believers were unlearned persons; the manner of the teaching was of an unlearned cast throughout; the thing preached was of itself enough to stagger people. For the cross and death were the message brought. Together with these there were also other hindrances, the dangers, the plots, the daily fear, and being hunted down. For the word ‘weakness’, with him in many places stands for the persecutions. ‘My weakness, which was in my flesh, you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God’ (Galatians 4:14); and again, ‘If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my weakness’ (2 Corinthians 11:30). What was the weakness? ‘In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me’ (2 Corinthians 11:32). And again, ‘Therefore I take pleasure in weakness, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake’ (2 Corinthians 12:10). Having said, ‘I was in weakness’, he did not stop at this point, but explaining the word ‘weakness’ makes mention of his dangers. He adds again, ‘I

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<sup>19</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, VI, 2.

was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling' (1 Corinthians 2:3). What is Paul saying? Did Paul also fear dangers? He did fear, and he dreaded these dangers excessively; for though he was Paul, yet he was a man. But this is no charge against Paul but shows a weakness of his human nature; and it is to the praise of his fixed purpose of mind that even when he dreaded death and stripes, he did nothing wrong because of this fear."

Cyprian of Carthage stated<sup>20</sup> that Paul was not grieved by all the suffering that he endured, but he benefited from all this. His strength was made perfect in weakness. This means that adversity does not call us away from the Faith but strengthens us.

"The Apostle Paul, after shipwrecks, scourging, and many grievous tortures of the flesh and body, says that he is not grieved, but benefited by his adversity, in order that while he is sorely afflicted he might more truly be proved. 'A thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to punch me, lest I be exalted above measure. 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"' (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). When, therefore, weakness and inefficiency and any destruction seize us, then our strength is made perfect; then our faith, if when tried it shall stand fast, is crowned. As it is written, 'As a furnace tests the potter's vessels; so, the test of a man is the way he reasons' (Ecclesiasticus 27:5). This, in short, is the difference between us and others who don't know God, that in misfortune they complain and murmur. Adversity does not call us away from the truth of virtue and faith but strengthens us by its suffering."

John Chrysostom stated<sup>21</sup> that our affliction in the world is profitable to us. Job was more illustrious after than before his ordeal. Timothy had constant sickness most of his adult life. Paul never cured Timothy – even though he could have – but left him in the furnace of his sickness for his benefit. Paul himself endured a great deal of physical pain from the blows, chains and maltreatment from public executioners. But then he learned the benefit of this and rejoiced.

"Paul proved that we will not be confined to a condition of punishment, but that some profit will be derived from it, namely release from the penalties to which our sin is liable. Paul added: 'If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world' (1 Corinthians 11:31-32). Moreover, that they who have lived very righteously derive much benefit from such chastisement is plain from the case of Job, who was more illustrious after it than before. Also, from the case of Timothy, who although he was such a good man, and entrusted with such an important ministry, and made the circuit of the world with Paul passed not two or three days, nor ten or twenty, or a hundred, but many in succession in ill health, his body being very seriously enfeebled. Paul shows this where he said, 'No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities' (1 Timothy 5:23). Paul, who raised the dead, did not cure Timothy's

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<sup>20</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, Treatises, VII, 13.

<sup>21</sup> John Chrysostom, Letters to Olympias, #2, 3.

infirmity but left him in the furnace of his sickness so that he might therefrom contract a very great abundance of confidence. The lessons which Paul himself had enjoyed from his Master, and the training which he had received from Him, he imparted to his disciple. Although Paul was not subjected to bodily sickness, yet he was punched out by trials no less severe, which inflicted much physical pain. 'A thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to punch me' (2 Corinthians 12:7), meaning by this the blows, bonds, chains, imprisonments, being dragged about, and maltreated, and tortured by the scourges of public executioners. Wherefore also being unable to bear the pain occasioned to the body by these things 'Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me' (2 Corinthians 12:8). And then when he did not obtain his petition, having learned the benefit of the trial, he kept quiet, and rejoiced at the things which happened to him."

John Cassian noted<sup>22</sup> that we sometimes pray for things that are not beneficial to us. Even the Apostle Paul did that when he asked that his "thorn in the flesh" be taken away. Christ Himself in the flesh did this also when He asked that His cup pass from Him. But what Paul and Christ also did is to seek the Will of the Father in all things.

"Paul said, 'We do not know what we should pray for as we ought' (Romans 8:26). We shall see that we sometimes ask for things opposed to our salvation and that we are most providentially refused our requests by Him who sees what is good for us with greater right and truth than we can. And it is clear that this also happened to Paul himself when he prayed that the messenger of Satan who had been for his good allowed by the Lord's will to punch him, might be removed. He said, '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"' (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). And this feeling even our Lord expressed when He prayed as a man, that He might give us a form of prayer as other things also by His example. He said, 'O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will' (Matthew 26:39). Though certainly His will was not discordant with His Father's will, 'For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost, and to give His life a ransom for many' (Matthew 18:11, 20:28). As He Himself says: 'No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again' (John 10:18). In which character there is the following sung by the blessed David, of the Unity of will which He ever maintained with the Father: 'I delight to do Your will, O my God' (Psalm 40:9). For we read of the Father: 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son' (John 3:16). We find none the less of the Son: 'Who gave Himself for our sins' (Galatians 1:4). And as it is said of the Father: 'He who did not spare His Own Son but delivered Him up for us all' (Romans 8:32). And it is shown that the will of the Father and of the Son is in all things one, so that even in the actual mystery of the Lord's resurrection we are taught that there was no discord of operation. Paul declares that the Father brought about the resurrection of His body, saying: 'And God the Father, who raised Him

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<sup>22</sup> John Cassian, 1<sup>st</sup> Conference of Abbot Isaac, I, ix, 34.

from the dead' (Galatians 1:1). So also, the Son testifies that He Himself will raise again the Temple of His body, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up' (John 2:19). We being instructed by all these examples of our Lord which have been enumerated ought to end our supplications also with the same prayer, and always to subjoin this clause to all our petitions. 'Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will'" (Matthew 26:39).

John Chrysostom said the same thing and pointed out<sup>23</sup> how the Lord Himself prayed when He was on His way to the Cross. He taught us not to plunge into dangers, since that may lead to vainglory and pride. If the danger is unavoidable, however, He taught us to acquiesce in what seems good to God. Paul also learned to do this. He first asked that temptations might be removed from him. When God said 'No!', Paul understood, and from then on, he took pleasure in weakness, thus submitting his will to the Will of God.

"Since Jesus commanded us to pray 'Do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from the evil one' (Luke 11:4), He instructs them in this very precept by putting it in practice Himself. He said, 'Father if it is possible, let this cup pass from me' (Matthew 26:39). Thus, He taught all the saints not to plunge into dangers, not to fling themselves into them. Instead He asks us to wait for their approach, and to exhibit all possible courage, only not to rush forwards themselves, or to be the first to advance against terrors. Why so? Both to teach us lowliness of mind, and also to deliver us from the charge of vainglory. On this account it is said also that when He had spoken these words, 'He went a little farther and fell on His face and prayed' (Matthew 26:39). After He had prayed He spoke thus to His disciples, 'Could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation. The spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak' (Matthew 26:40-41). Notice He not only prays but also admonishes? Now this He said by way of emptying their soul of vanity, and delivering them from pride, teaching them self-restraint, training them to practice moderation. Therefore, the prayer which He wished to teach them, He Himself also offered, speaking after the manner of men, not according to His Godhead but according to His manhood. He prayed as instructing us to pray, and even to seek deliverance from distress; but, if this is not permitted, then to acquiesce in what seems good to God. Therefore, He said, 'Nevertheless not as I will but as You will, (Matthew 26:39). Not because He had one will and the Father another; but in order that He might instruct men even if they were in distress and trembling, even if danger came upon them, and they were unwilling to be torn from this present life. He taught them to postpone their own will to the will of God; Paul did this also, when he had been instructed; he exhibited both these principles. Paul asked that temptations might be removed from him, 'Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me' (2 Corinthians 12:8). Since it did not please God to remove it, he says 'Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake' (2 Corinthians 12:10). But perhaps what I have said is not quite clear; therefore, I will make it clearer. Paul incurred many dangers and prayed that he might not be exposed to them. Then he heard Christ saying, 'My

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<sup>23</sup> John Chrysostom, Against Marcionists and Manichaeans, 4.

grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:9). As soon then as he saw what the will of God was, he in the future submitted his will to God's will. By means of this prayer then Christ taught both these truths, that we should not plunge into dangers, but rather pray that we may not fall into them. But if they come upon us we should bear them bravely and postpone our own will to the will of God. Knowing these things then let us pray that we may never enter into temptation: but if we do enter it let us beseech God to give us patience and courage. Let us honor His will in preference to every will of our own. For then we shall pass through this present life with safety and shall obtain the blessings to come."

Chrysostom also mentions<sup>24</sup> that if we don't understand what God is saying about strength being made perfect in weakness, it will affect our ability to pray effectively. Christ said, "If two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:19-20). But that doesn't apply to just any two people; this refers to the virtuous, like the Apostles.

"Notice how He puts down our enmities, and takes away our petty dissensions, and draws us one to another! He puts here the great rewards of concord, if at least they who are of one accord manage to prevail with the Father, as touching the things they ask, and have Christ in the midst of them."

"Are there indeed anywhere two of one accord? There are in many places, maybe even everywhere. How then do they not obtain all things? Because there are many causes of their failing."

(1) "Some people often ask things inexpedient. We needn't marvel at this, if this is the case with some others, since it was so even with Paul. Paul asked, but then he heard, 'My grace is sufficient for you; for my strength is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

(2) "Others are unworthy to be reckoned with the Apostles that heard these words, and don't contribute their own part. He seeks such as are like the Apostles; therefore, He refers to the virtuous, those that show forth an angelic rule of life."

(3) "Still others pray against those that have angered them, seeking for redress and vengeance. But this kind of thing is forbidden, since He said, 'love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you'" (Matthew 5:44).

(4) "Others still have unrepentant sins; they ask mercy, which thing it is impossible to receive, not only if themselves ask it, but although others having much confidence towards God entreat for them. This is like Jeremiah praying for the Jews; he heard, 'do not pray for this people, and intercede not for them in supplication and prayer; for I will not hear in the day in which they call upon me, in the day of their affliction'" (Jeremiah 11:14 LXX).

"But if all things are there, and you ask things expedient, contribute your own part, exhibit an apostolical life, and have concord and love towards your neighbor. Then you will obtain your entreaty; for the Lord is loving towards man."

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<sup>24</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LX, 2.

Chrysostom further stated<sup>25</sup> that the Apostles considered it a greater honor to suffer for Christ's sake than to be honored by Him. The Twelve rejoiced when they were beaten by the Jewish leaders for confessing Christ. Paul introduces many of his Epistles by referring to himself as either a prisoner or a slave. Christ emptied Himself of His glory to become man. To the world, this seems foolishness; but to those who understand the love of Christ, this is of all things the most blessed.

“Listen to what Luke says, ‘They departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name’ (Acts 5:41). To all others indeed it seems to be foolishness, that to suffer dishonor is to be counted worthy, that to suffer dishonor is to rejoice. But to those that understand the love of Christ, this is esteemed of all things the most blessed. Were any to offer me my choice, the whole Heaven or Paul’s chain, that chain I would prefer. Were any to ask whether he should place me on high with the Angels, or with Paul in his bonds, the prison I would choose. Were any about to change me into one of those powers, that are in Heaven, that are around the throne, or into such a prisoner as this, such a prisoner I would choose to be. Nothing is more blessed than that chain. Would that I could be at this moment in that very spot, (for the bonds are said to be still in existence,) to behold and admire those men, for their love of Christ. Would that I could behold the chains, at which the devils fear and tremble, but which Angels reverence. Nothing is more noble than to suffer any evil for Christ’s sake. I count not Paul so happy, because he was ‘caught up into Paradise’ (2 Corinthians 12:4), as because he was cast into the dungeon. I count him not so happy, because he heard ‘unspeakable words’, as because he endured those bonds. I count him not so happy, because he was ‘caught up into the third Heaven’, (2 Corinthians 12:2) as I count him happy for those bonds’ sake. That the chains are greater than those experiences of Paradise, hear how even he himself knew this; he didn’t say, I who ‘heard unspeakable words’, beseech you: but ‘I, the prisoner in the Lord, beseech you’ (Ephesians 4:1, 2 Timothy 1:8). We don’t need to wonder, that he didn’t inscribes this in all his Epistles, for he was not always in prison, but only at certain times. I consider it more desirable to suffer evil for Christ’s sake, than to receive honor at Christ’s hands. This is transcendent honor, this is glory that surpasses all things. If Christ Himself who became a servant for my sake, and ‘emptied’ (Philippians 2:7) His glory, yet thought not Himself so truly in glory, as when He was crucified for my sake, what ought not I to endure?”

Chrysostom also noted<sup>26</sup> that some unbelievers have a total misunderstanding of God. They think that Christians go through afflictions because their God is too weak to deliver them. In fact, the opposite is the case as illustrated by Paul in Philippi. There Paul and Silas were beaten very badly, handcuffed, with their feet in the stocks in the inner prison. By their prayers, Paul and Silas caused an earthquake that broke open all the doors and broke off everyone’s chains. This was what illustrates perfecting strength in weakness.

“Some unbelievers think that God permits evil because He is some infirm being, and allows such persons to be continually afflicted, from not being able to

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<sup>25</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on Ephesians, VIII, vv. 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Statues, I, 16.

deliver His own from dangers. Observe how Paul has demonstrated by means of events, showing not only that the events were far from accusing Him of weakness, but that they proved His power more strikingly to all. Paul said, 'A thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me' (2 Corinthians 12:7), and thus listed his repeated trials. Paul added, '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"' (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). Paul means, 'God's power is seen then when we are in weakness; and yet through us, who seem to grow weak, the word preached is magnified, and is sown in all quarters'. When Paul was led to the dungeon, after having received a great number of stripes, he took prisoner the keeper of the prison (Acts 16:22-24). His feet were in the stocks, and his hands in chains; and the prison shook at midnight while they were singing hymns. Notice how His power was perfected in weakness? If Paul had been at large, and had shaken that building, the thing would not have been so wonderful. 'For this reason,' God said, 'remain bound; and the walls shall be shaken on every side, and the prisoners shall be loosed. In order that My power may appear the greater, when through you, confined and in fetters, all that are in bonds shall be loosed'. This very circumstance then it was which at the time astounded the keeper of the prison, that being so forcibly confined, he, through prayer alone, prevailed to shake the foundations, throw open the doors of the prison, and to unbind all the prisoners. Nor is this the only occasion. But with Peter too, and Paul himself, as well as the other disciples, one may see this occurring constantly. In the midst of persecution, the grace of God ever flourishing, and appearing by the side of the tribulations, and thus proclaiming His power. Wherefore Christ said, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is perfected in weakness''.