

Who Was Caught Up Into Heaven in II Corinthians 12?

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In II Corinthians 10 and 11, St. Paul has felt constrained to give the Corinthian Church a thorough rundown on his background, his experiences in the field, and the intervention of God on his behalf to preserve the ministry that Christ holds second to none in the Mission of the Church. But he is very uncomfortable in doing this, repeatedly interrupting himself to remind people that this would ordinarily be a very foolish thing for a man to do and that he was only doing it to counteract the criticisms that has apparently negatively impacted his leadership in that church. Now he reaches a point where he is unwilling to go any further with this and so he changes to a dialogue about others that he has known in the field and their experiences;

II Cor 12:1 It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.

This particular thing has to do with the visions and revelations from God. These are not revelations and visions that have resulted from a study of the Scriptures and are contained within the framework of the extant cannon. These visions and revelations are outside the existing Scriptures of the time and are designed to help complete the unique revelation of the Holy Scriptures. This instance has no equal in terms of importance in the experiences of the apostles.

You may ask exactly how the relating of the experiences of someone else contributes to what he set out to do here, which was to impress the church with his own experiences and qualifications. It is a fair question and we will attempt an answer. The high and unique nature of what the Apostle is going to tell us about in the life of this other man indicates his importance as a church leader. It shows the Will of Christ, the Head of the Church, to have St. Paul know all there is to know about the whys and wherefores of the situation.

II Cor 12:2 I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.

St. Paul talks about this man and says that he saw him last 14 years ago. He is unable to assure the Corinthians that the man is still alive. He simply does not know where he is or what has happened to him in the intervening years. He then goes on to say that this man was caught up into the third heaven. We will not get off on to a discussion of the first, second, third, or seventh Heaven at this point. We will simply tell you that the third heaven is a term that indicates the highest Heaven where God dwells. Unlike some revelations of the Scripture, this man was not caught up to a high mountain or taken up into the atmosphere somewhere; he was in fact caught up to Paradise, the very throne of God.

II Cor 12:3 And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;)

II Cor 12:4 How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

The Apostle tells us that this man may or may not have been in his body when taken up into the third heaven. It is evident from this revelation that the man in question did not know whether or not he was in his body, and after

talking to him, St. Paul could not definitively answer that question either. The Lord knows what the man's physical and spiritual condition was when he was caught up into Heaven to receive this vision and revelation. This means, of course, that there may not have been a single legitimate out-of-body experience in the entire Bible.

He goes on to say that the man heard words which are not lawful for men to utter, at least in this dispensation of time.

II Cor 12:5 Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

St. Paul will glory in this man and his experiences instead of glorying in himself and his own experiences any further.

Who Was This Man?

There has been a lot of speculation in the history of the Church as to who St. Paul is talking about. The general opinion of most expositors, as totally incredible and unbelievable as this may seem, is that St. Paul was talking about himself. Huh? Excuse me my brethren, but that is not a possible or sensible explanation. Let us consider for a moment what St. Paul has said about this man:

1. It was 14 years ago when St. Paul last saw him and he does not know if he is still alive or if he has since died.
2. The man heard words that were not lawful for him to repeat.
3. Neither that man nor St. Paul knows whether he was in his body or out of his body and entirely in the spirit when he was caught up into paradise.
4. St. Paul will boast about that man and his experiences instead of himself.

We face a very simple proposition when it comes to whether or not this was St. Paul. How could the Apostle possibly say that he did not know whether he himself had been alive or dead for the last 14 years? And how could the Apostle, if he was talking about himself, say that he would glory in this other man instead of glorying in himself? Either St. Paul is talking about someone else OR he is resorting to wanton dishonesty and deliberately misrepresenting the whole situation in order to put people off his track. In the past two chapters, he has openly talked about himself and his own experiences. Why would he resort to subterfuge now if he wanted to continue to talk about his own experiences? The position often taken that St. Paul was talking about himself is simply absurd and ridiculous. One of the reasons why Bible expositors take this position is that it is a difficult passage and they do not wish to risk ridicule by offering personal beliefs. And so, they flee to the tree of tradition and hide in its branches so that they will not be exposed. This is a sad commentary on the character and courage of Bible commentators. Let me be clear on the matter: St. Paul **was not talking about himself** he was talking about **another man**.

Is There a Shoe That Fits?

If that is the case, who was this other man and why would St. Paul not identify him? Those are two very different questions. Are there any plausible answers? There are and I will give them to you now.

There is an unwritten rule in Historic Orthodox Bible exposition. If there is if an experience such as this one, and there is only one person in the Bible who fits that experience, it is likely and acceptable that he is the person in question. In this case there is only one person in the Bible that this vision and revelation fits, and it fits him with great exactness. That man is St. John. He is the one who was caught up in the spirit into Paradise. He is the one who heard the voice of the seven thunders and was told not to write what they said because it was not lawful to repeat what the seven thunders revealed. In our discourse on the Book of Revelation we have examined the matter of the voice of the seven thunders as far as it can be examined in our view and we will not

go into that now. Whatever the seven thunders said and however they said it, St. John heard something that made sense to him and he was about to write it down when he was told that it was illegal to do so. The conclusion that we draw is that St. Paul is talking about St. John.

But is this possible? Was Revelation not the last written book of the New Testament? No one can say that with impunity. No one knows what book of the New Testament was written last. And even if it was the last book written, there is no certainty that it was written at the time when the vision and revelation was given. It may have been written years later.

But was St. John in the Gentile regions contemporary with St. Paul? We know that St. John was in Asia Minor and in the islands of the Mediterranean. A church was established in Crete which St. Paul acknowledges to have been the work of St. John initially. Jesus told His disciples that after the Holy Spirit was given, they would be His witnesses, starting with Jerusalem and Judea, then moving out into Samaria and Galilee, and finally to the uttermost part of the earth. It was more than four years after Pentecost when St. Paul first went to preach to the Gentiles. Both St. Peter and St. John had gone into Gentile regions and ministered to the Gentiles prior to that. The fact that St. Paul was ascribed the title of Apostle to the Gentiles does not mean that he was the first one to have ever preached the Gospel to them. In fact we know, from the Acts of the Apostles, that St. Peter was the first to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Lastly, there is the question as to why St. Paul did not simply identify this man as St. John, if that is in fact who he was. Is there a meaningful answer for that which comes from the Scriptures without having to twist them to make them fit this scenario? There is indeed. The answer is that St. John, in his Gospel and in his letters, never identified himself by name. He always referred to himself as "that other apostle whom Jesus loved," or some other such vague reference. It does not require imagination to understand that when St. John passed along this information to St. Paul, he asked that the Apostle, if he repeated what St. John had said, not use his name.

I remind you again, for the purpose of context and proper exegesis, that the fact that St. John went to St. Paul and shared this experience with him is a great recommendation of St. Paul's importance in the Gentile world and God's desire to have the Apostle fully informed about such matters as these. This is certainly a verification of St. Paul's authority and power.

The Reason For This Short Bio

The Apostle reminds the Corinthians again that if he wished to go on glorying in himself and his own experiences he would not be a fool because of the motivation and the crucial issues at stake. But he will not do any more of that because there is another side of this matter that he does not wish to promote. He does not want anyone in the Corinthian Church to look down on him in comparison to the false prophets who are undermining his ministry, but neither does he want them to exalt him above that which a servant of God should be exalted. There is a danger of people glorying in St. Paul and not in Christ, and the Apostle will not be a part of that. He has done enough glorying in his experiences, his qualifications, and his direct lines of communication with and protection from God.

II Cor 12:6 For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me.

In the interest of keeping men from glorying in him above measure, St. Paul tells them some of the things that God has done to keep the matter in perspective when it comes to Christ, the Head of the Church, on the one side, and any apostle, no matter how gifted and blessed, on the other:

II Cor 12:7 And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

Though there was a problem in Corinth with people respecting him because of the organized and cleverly prosecuted effort to defame him by the intellectuals and philosophers, St. Paul was nevertheless given enormous power, honor, privilege and support by God. The kinds of things that he experienced could well have caused the Corinthians to glory in this man. There were the many revelations from God that found their way into the Scriptures. The most important was that which took place during the three years in Arabia where he got the matter of the decline of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament and the establishment of Christ and the Church (which was before there was ever a Jew or an Old Testament) straightened out. There was the power of the Holy Ghost in his preaching. In addition to that, we have had some insight now into the fact that St. Paul felt somewhat misused because he was not given more credit for his gifts and experiences and God, who knows each person's frame, and took note of that. In order to prevent a personality cult from developing, and St. Paul, who was most vital to the finishing of the Scriptures and the establishment of the Gospel in Gentile regions, from being sidetracked by vain glory, God gave him a thorn in the flesh.

But that will be another subject for another time. For now I believe that this has been a sufficient explanation to understand the textual flow of these scriptures, and that with certainty one can say that St. Paul **was not** speaking of himself here.