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"The Hope of Heaven"

2 Corinthians 12

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In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul described an extraordinary revelation of heaven which he spoke about in the third person, so as not to appear boastful. While Paul chose not to share details, there are more than 575 other passages in the Bible that describe heaven. In this study, we will see what the Bible has to say about how to accept Christ as Savior and have the hope of heaven. Are you certain that you will go to heaven when you die?

1. **2 Corinthians 12:1-6** – *"It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me."*
2. Context
 - a. Chapter breaks
 - i. Chapter and verse breaks were later added to our Bibles to make passages easier to find. Do not let these breaks stop you from seeing the thematic continuity.
 - b. Apostolic authority
 - i. Some at the church of Corinth, which Paul established, were questioning Paul's apostolic authority.
 1. The Corinthians were comparing Paul to others who seemed more apostolic.
 2. Others were simply trying to question Paul's apostolic authority to prop up their own credentials.
 - c. Paul's trials
 - i. **2 Corinthians 11:22-33** – *"Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes [whippings] above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been*

in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.”

1. Paul compared himself to these “super apostles” that the Corinthian church was comparing him to.
2. Paul spoke of what he had endured for the sake of the Gospel as evidence of his apostolic credentials.
3. Jews would whip people 39 times instead of 40, to avoid erring by miscounting.
4. Paul was tired, but he persevered for the sake of the Gospel.
5. **DISCUSS:** Do you persevere when you are weary? What motivates you to keep going?

ii. **2 Corinthians 11:32** was about Paul’s sufferings in Damascus.

1. Paul had encountered Christ on his way to Damascus, Syria.
 - a. There was an enclave of Christians in Damascus, and Paul was on his way to persecute the church.
 - b. Paul thought Christianity was a heretical Jewish sect and that he was doing God a favor by persecuting the church.
 - c. Jesus met Paul on the road to Damascus, revealing Himself as the true Messiah, and Paul believed in Him.
2. The Jews saw Paul as a traitor, and he went from persecutor to persecuted.
3. The Believers in Damascus put Paul in a basket and lowered him down to safety.

3. Visions and revelations

- a. Apostolic authority
 - i. In chapter 12, Paul shifted to speaking of his visions and revelations as another proof of his apostolic authority.
- b. Paul’s humility

- i. In verse 2, we see that Paul did not talk about his vision of heaven for 14 years.
- ii. Paul wrote of his heavenly vision in the third person.
 - 1. Paul said “*I know a man*” to avoid appearing to be bragging.
 - 2. We know that the man Paul knew was himself because he switched to first-person pronouns in verse 7 while describing a “*thorn in the flesh*” that God gave him to prevent him from becoming proud.
 - a. **2 Corinthians 12:7–9** – “*And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*”
 - b. **DISCUSS:** How has God used even your “thorns” to help you stay close to Him? How have you learned that God’s strength is made perfect in weakness?
- iii. Paul preferred to boast in his infirmities.
 - 1. How closely we cling to Christ amid difficulties reveals our hearts toward God.
 - 2. **DISCUSS:** How has God used trials to reveal to you your heart?
- c. A visit or a vision
 - i. Paul did not know whether his revelation of heaven was a visit to or a vision of heaven.
 - ii. Paul’s confusion gives credence to the belief held by most scholars that this visit or vision of heaven occurred during Paul’s death or near-death experience at Lystra.
 - 1. Paul and Barnabas went to preach at Lystra.
 - 2. God used Paul to heal a lame man.
 - 3. When the people saw the miracle, they thought Paul and Barnabas were the gods Hermes and Zeus come down to them.
 - 4. When Paul and Barnabas saw the people trying to sacrifice to them, they ripped their clothes and told the people that they were just men trying to point them to the one true God.
 - 5. The Jews came and persuaded the people of Lystra to turn against Paul and Barnabas, and so the people of Lystra went from deifying these missionaries to seeking to kill Paul.

6. **Acts 14:19–20** – *“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. However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city. And the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.”*
 - a. The people stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking him dead.
 - b. The disciples prayed for Paul till he got up—either healed or resurrected by God—and returned to Lystra.

4. A vision of heaven

- a. The third heaven
 - i. Paul was not speaking of layers of heaven; he was using the common language of that day.
 1. The sky was considered the first heaven.
 2. Outer space was considered the second heaven.
 3. God’s dwelling was considered the third heaven.
- b. Unspeakable things
 - i. Paul said there were things he saw and heard in heaven that he could not repeat (verse 4).
- c. An open invitation
 - i. The Bible tells us both heaven and hell are real.
 - ii. All who believe in Jesus are welcomed into heaven.
 1. For Believers, this life is as bad as it gets; for non-believers, this life is as good as it gets.
 2. **DISCUSS:** How does remembering the brevity of this life and the eternity of the life awaiting us shape your choices?

5. The hope of heaven

- a. Describing heaven
 - i. There are over 575 passages about heaven.
 1. Heaven is mentioned over 275 times in the New Testament.
 2. Heaven is mentioned over 300 times in the Old Testament.
 3. **Isaiah 6:1–3** – *“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said:*

'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!'"

4. John saw a similar vision of heaven in **Revelation 4**.
5. **DISCUSS**: How do these glimpses of the King of heaven sitting in His glory affect your understanding of God?
- ii. Heaven is the habitation of God and the eternal home for those who trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (**Psalm 103:19; Isaiah 66:1; 2 Corinthians 5:6–8; Revelation 21:27**).
 1. **Psalm 103:19** – *"The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all."*
 2. **Isaiah 66:1a** – *"Thus says the LORD: 'Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool.'"*
 3. **2 Corinthians 5:6–8** – *"So we are always confident, knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord."*
- iii. Heaven is located somewhere above the earth, beyond outer space (**Isaiah 55:9; Psalm 103:11; 2 Corinthians 12:1–2**).
 1. **Isaiah 55:9** – *"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."*
 2. **Psalm 103:11** – *"For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him."*
- iv. Heaven has streets of gold, gates of pearl, walls of jasper, foundations of precious stones, and a crystal-clear river (**Revelation 21:18–21; 22:1**).
 1. **Revelation 21–22** describe a future heaven and earth, but they still give us a picture of the place where Believers will spend eternity.
 2. **Revelation 21:18–21** – *"The construction of its wall was of jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones: the first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass."*
- v. Heaven is illuminated by the presence of God and His glory (**Revelation 21:23**).

1. **Revelation 21:23** – *“The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light.”*
2. Our Lord illuminates heaven!
3. **DISCUSS**: One day, God’s light will govern the world; in the meantime, how do you walk in the light of God’s Word?
- vi. Heaven is a place of “no mores”—no more death, mourning, crying, pain, sorrow, sin, or sickness (**Revelation 21:4**).
 1. **Revelation 21:4** – *“And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”*
 2. Because there is no more sorrow in heaven, God may wipe away the memory of those who are not in heaven with us.
 3. **DISCUSS**: Knowing we will one day live in a place with no more sin, how do you live in expectation of that great day?
- vii. Heaven is a place of reunions with loved ones and friends who knew Christ as Savior (**Matthew 17:3–4; John 21:1–7**).
 1. We will recognize who people are, even if we never saw them in the flesh.
 - a. When Jesus took Peter, James, and John up to the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared and the apostles recognized them.
 2. We will retain a similar likeness when we gain glorified bodies.
 - a. When Jesus rose from the dead, He was recognizable to the apostles (**John 21**).
 3. **DISCUSS**: How has God comforted you in the face of death?
- b. Be prepared
 - i. We need to know where we will go after we die.
 1. **Hebrews 9:27** – *“It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.”* (KJV)
 2. **DISCUSS**: How has belief in Christ removed your fear of death?
- c. The Way
 - i. Once you trust Christ, you pass “from death into life” (**John 5:24**).
 1. **Romans 8:1** – *“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.”* (KJV)
 - ii. Jesus is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (**2 Peter 3:9**), but we must choose Him.
 1. “Repent” comes from the Greek **metanoia**, meaning “to change your mind.”
 2. We must decide to turn away from the way we have been living, surrender to Jesus, and accept God’s free gift of salvation.

3. The punishment intended for us was placed on Jesus, *“and by His stripes we are healed”* (**Isaiah 53:5**).
- iii. Jesus is the only way to be saved and enter heaven.
 1. **John 14:6** – *“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.’”*
- iv. Jesus will one day judge the world based on who is and is not written in the Lamb’s book of life.
 1. **Revelation 21:27** – *“But there shall by no means enter it [heaven] anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.”*
 2. All who trust in Christ as their Lord and Savior have their name written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.
 3. **DISCUSS:** Is your name written in the Lamb’s Book of Life? How do you know?

* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New King James (NKJV)