

## Caught Up to the Third Heaven

2 Corinthians 12

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The following is an excerpt from  
*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary on 2 Corinthians 12* .

**I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. (2 Corinthians 12:2–4)**

Paul had received many visions in his life, six of which are recorded in Acts (9:3–12; 16:9–10; 18:9–10; 22:17–21; 23:11; 27:23–24). He had also received the gospel he preached by revelation (Gal. 1:11–12). But the vision he was about to describe was the most amazing and remarkable of them all. With characteristic humility, he related it in the third person, writing, **I know a man in Christ**. Obviously, Paul was that man, as verse 7 indicates.

The vision took place **fourteen years** before the writing of 2 Corinthians, which was in late a.d. 55 or early a.d. 56, putting it sometime between Paul's return to Tarsus from Jerusalem (Acts 9:30) and his commissioning by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1–3). Little is known about that period of Paul's life except that during it he ministered in Syria and Cilicia (Gal. 1:21). God may have granted him this personal experience to steel him against the suffering he would experience on his missionary journeys. Having been given a glimpse of the heaven that awaited him, he could face the most relentless and severe suffering that dogged every day of his life. Now, after fourteen years of silence, Paul was apparently relating the vision for the first time.

Exactly what was the reality of the experience was unclear even to Paul, as the twice-repeated phrase **whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know** emphasizes. He did not know **whether** his body and soul were **caught up to the third heaven** or whether his soul temporarily went **out of his body**. **Caught up** translates *harpazo*, the same verb used of the Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Paul was suddenly snatched up into the **third heaven** which, transcending the first (earth's atmosphere; Deut. 11:11; 1 Kings 8:35; Isa. 55:10) and second (interplanetary and interstellar space; Gen. 15:5; Ps. 8:3; Isa. 13:10) heavens, is the abode of God (1 Kings 8:30; Ps. 33:13–14; Matt. 6:9). The parallelism of the two phrases demands that **Paradise** be equated with **heaven** (see Luke 23:43; cf. Rev. 2:7, which says the Tree of Life is in Paradise with Rev. 22:2, 14, 19, which place it in heaven). The Persian word from which the Greek word translated **Paradise** derives means "walled garden." The greatest honor a Persian king could bestow on one of his subjects was to grant him the right to walk with the king in the royal garden in intimate companionship.

Unlike modern charlatans, who claim trips to heaven and visions of God, Paul gave no sensational, detailed description of what he saw or experienced in heaven but mentioned only what he heard. And even that consisted of **inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak**. What he heard was in a language unlike anything on earth. Though the apostle understood what was said, there were no words in human language to convey what he heard, nor would he have been **permitted to speak** about it even if that were possible. The veil between earth and heaven remains in place. What God wants known about heaven is revealed in the Bible; as for the rest, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God” (Deut. 29:29).

The true measure of a man of God does not lie in his claims of visions and experiences with God, or the force of his personality, the size of his ministry, his educational degrees, or any other human criteria. A true man of God is marked by how much he has suffered in the war against the kingdom of darkness, how concerned he is for people, how humble he is, and how accurately he handles the supernatural revelation found in God’s Word (2 Tim. 2:15). Like Paul, such men patiently endure the suffering and humiliation of this life, knowing that such “momentary, light affliction is producing ... an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17).

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