

Installment #7

The Third Heaven

By the late 6th century AD, a brief list of the so-called seven deadly sins was firmly in place in the church. Pride was listed first, although some placed it last, and was followed by envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth. Do you see any of these looking back at you in the mirror?

But what is pride? To make it in the “top seven list,” it has to be *a too-excessive view of oneself, with the result that such self-glory interferes with one’s relationship with God*. This might very well mean that pride is the chief sin or, as medieval theologians suggested, the sin which is at the root of every other sin, against God and against others. Somewhere or other, someone has said that there is a special punishment for a sin of such magnitude, that is, the being stretched for eternity on a wheel in hell.¹ But if you wish to do better than pride, try this advice from Abba Tithoes², a desert father of the Orthodox Church: “The way of humility is this: self-control, prayer, and thinking yourself inferior to all creatures.”

Paul the Apostle was bedeviled by what he called “super-apostles,” or false apostles who followed him around from place to place, telling the people that Paul was a fake apostle. The text below comes from a segment of 2 Corinthians where Paul is trying to defend his ministry against these bogus charges.³

¹I have to brag. There is nothing to be gained by it, but I must brag about the visions and other things that the Lord has shown me. ²I know about one of Christ's followers who was taken up into the third heaven fourteen years ago. I don't know if the man was still in his body when it happened, but God certainly knows. ³As I said, only God really knows if this man was in his body at the time. ⁴But he was taken up into paradise, where he heard things that are too wonderful to tell. ⁵I will brag about that man, but not about myself, except to say how weak I am. ⁶Yet even if I did brag, I would not be foolish. I would simply be speaking the truth. But I will try not to say too much. That way, none of you will think more highly of me than you should because of what you have

¹ The punishment for sinful pride seems mild when compared with punishments for other types of sin. We need not go into this here except to say that punishments were not always equal to the evil done.

² Check the internet for Balamand Monastery, sayings of the desert fathers.

³ The date of this letter is somewhere between 55-58 AD, written from Macedonia.

*seen me do and say.*⁴

The portion of Paul's writings above is fascinating for one studying Jesus and Paul. It seems to me rather universally accepted that the "one of Christ's followers" of which Paul speaks is none other than the apostle Paul himself. By attempting to remain anonymous, Paul removes any attempt on his part to brag about his spiritual experiences, which are unusually described as "the third heaven." I have underlined those words which to me are of significance to our study, hoping I haven't missed anything important.

The Third Heaven

In the ancient world, the heavens were layered, so that in Jewish thought as many as seven layers of heaven were thought to exist. When Paul writes of the third heaven, he means (1) the immediate heavens (from earth to the moon or near stars), (2) the deep heavens (the distant stars, as far as one can see), and (3) the domain of God (that which we cannot see). So when the apostle speaks of being taken to the "third heaven" he means that he visited the place where God lives. We mustn't fault the apostle for his acceptance of the cosmology of his day. Today, with Hubble and other space probes, we are overwhelmed with the depth of the "star world," the hidden (to our eyes) milky ways, and the great void behind them.

It is important to note that the notion of God living in a space beyond the stars in no way diminishes the truth of God's interaction with our world. God is nearer than your next breath, fully capable of dealing with the tiniest problem of all who exist—and at the same time! God fills space as we know it, and fills it fully. There is no "place" where God is not, and in this we take great comfort. If the depth of space blows our mind, think of the depth, width, breadth, and height of God. It is beyond me! God is everywhere—all of the time—with all of his knowledge, love, power and majesty. It is this God whom Paul calls Dad in Romans 8: "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." Paul uses an Aramaic word for Father: "Abba." The word has an intimate sense to it, as though we were speaking with our earthly father. We can run fast to God with our problems, assured that He knows all about them before we utter our first word.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 12:1-6, [Contemporary English Version](#).

When I first read that “this man” was taken to the third heaven, I thought it must have mystic connections. I thought our verse in 2 Corinthians was an attempt by Paul to explain a little about what happened to him during the fifteen years after his conversion.

“...when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man, ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went immediately into Arabia and later returned to Damascus.

¹⁸Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter and stayed with him fifteen days.”⁵

However, it looks, upon further investigation, that this is probably not true, although one can say it does describe something of Paul’s experience and therefore does relate to Acts 9. The problem we encounter is that of time. The probable date of 2 Corinthians is late in a year from 55-58 AD. This puts the writing of 2 Corinthians later by several years than Paul’s conversion. However, Paul was given some instruction as early as his conversion, as we read in Galatians 1:11-12.⁶

¹¹ My friends, I want you to know that no one made up the message I preach. ¹² It wasn't given or taught to me by some mere human. My message came directly from Jesus Christ when he appeared to me.

It is likely that Galatians was the first book written by Paul⁷, as far as we know, and 1 Corinthians was the second. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 Paul speaks of the content of the Christian message in the form of a creed.

¹ My friends, I want you to remember the message that I preached and that you believed and trusted. ² You will be saved by this message, if you hold firmly to it. But if you don't, your faith was all for nothing. ³ I told you the most important part of the message exactly as it was told to me. That part is: Christ died for our sins, as the Scriptures say. ⁴ He

⁵ Galatians 1:15-18.

⁶ Contemporary English Version.

⁷ Many scholars believe that 1 & 2 Thessalonians were the first of the Pauline books.

*was buried, and three days later he was raised to life, as the Scriptures say.*⁸

School of the Desert

Paul tells us that after his initial encounter with the living Christ, he went to Arabia, which at the time was owned by North Africa. There, in the desert sand Paul lived and prayed. There was much to do if he was to fulfill the intention of the Lord for his life. Was he living alone or with a family or friends? We do not know. What we do know is that he needed to know what the Christian message was about and what he should say now that he was a friend of those whom he once hated. A new convert in those days was not given a place of prominence in the church. There was much to learn. Today we make the mistake of thinking zeal is enough to be a Christian leader. But zeal can be dangerous if it is not controlled by discipline and Scripture.

By the 4th century AD, many leaders of states considered themselves Christian and had their people baptized. One result of this wholesale Christianizing process was that being a Christian was little more than being a pagan. So some Christians, in an attempt to live a Christian life, fled to the desert and lived there, in caves or in small communities. These people became known as desert fathers and, in some instances, were famous for their teachings. Some of their practices were strange but their intentions were to be true followers of Christ. They regarded their desert habitat as a test from God or, in some instances, as a test from the devil and his demons.

The two greatest tests for the people of God are found in both testaments: the crossing of the Reed Sea in the OT⁹ and the temptations of Jesus in the NT.¹⁰ The trek through the desert for forty years from Egypt to the land of promise (Canaan) was at times a struggle between good and evil. With our Lord, His temptation is definitely the telling of Jesus' triumph over the devil in the desert, with the angels coming afterward to minister to Him. In both testaments, good clearly triumphs over evil, but only after intense struggles. In the retelling of these stories new generations of Christians have learned about themselves, their tendency toward evil, the redemptive love of God, and

⁸ Contemporary English Version.

⁹ Exodus 13:17ff.

¹⁰ Matthew 4:1-11.

their personal triumph over the devil on their way to the kingdom of God. Our deserts may not be as sandy as theirs, but they are just as real.

Have you been to school in the desert? I'll bet you have at one time or another. I have taken my seat and answered yes to the roll call many times. We must remember that the third heaven is where God lives. I know that God lives everywhere with all of His power and majesty all of the time, that He is not restricted to one place more than any other. I have enjoyed over the years telling my ministry students that God is in His fullness in that class as much as in any grand church, that they are as close to God as they will ever be while sitting at their desks. I suspect they thought they were as close to the devil as they will ever be. Even so, that God is everywhere all of the time is certainly true and that He can be said to be at one place is also true. This is one of the paradoxes of Christian thought. In other words, we will never figure that one out. It just is!

Seeking God

The goal of the spiritual life is to go where God lives, which the Gospel of Matthew calls the kingdom of God. Whatever you call it though, we still want to go there, to be with God in all of His glory, to see true light, to feel true love, to know true joy. But until that day comes, there are many things for us to work on. One of corrections we need to make is seen in these words of encouragement by a French spiritual director, Jean-Pierre de Caussade.

1 You seek for God, beloved soul,
2 and he is everywhere,
3 everything speaks of Him,
4 everything offers him to you,
5 He walks beside you and
6 is within you.
7 He lives with you and yet you
8 try to find Him.
9 You seek your own idea of God,
10 although you have Him in
11 His reality.
12 You seek perfection and you
13 meet it in all that happens to you.¹¹

Put your name where “beloved soul” is and see if these instructions do not sound a little more personal. Every line is important; every line carries its own message. But I

¹¹ Jean-Pierre de Caussade, Abandonment to Divine Providence.

want you to focus on lines 9-11. Note that God is with us in our seeking Him, even if our view of God is not what He is like. In fact, it is almost a sure thing that our view of God is not like He is at all. The third heaven was an experience—a prolonged experience—where Paul learned about God and God’s call upon his life. This does not happen in a moment, but in a lifetime. It is a commitment to Him, a determination to follow Him and learn what He is like. It is a joyous, demanding, following.

Reflections

Do you know anyone who has been to “the third heaven”? Think carefully.

Preparing for Our Next Installment

Our next lesson (#8) is **Darkness and Light**:

1. Read Colossians 3:1-17 carefully.
2. Read the following quote from the introduction to Walter Brueggemann’s book, Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation, p. 1.

The preacher in the U.S. culture deals with a claim that is commonly accepted as the truth by the listeners. That is, we preach mostly to believers. There is a casual, indifferent readiness, even in our increasingly secularized society, to grant the main claims of the gospel—not to grant them importance, but to accept them as premises of religious life. In fact it is precisely the problem for the proclamation of the gospel that the great claims of the gospel do not seem to be problematic or in question.

The gospel is too readily heard and taken for granted, as though it contained no unsettling news and no unwelcome threat.

1. Reread carefully; underline the importance words.
2. What do Brueggemann’s words mean for [your church]?
3. What would the Apostle Paul have to say about B.’s statement?
4. Does B. reflect your criticism of today’s church? Why do you answer as you do?

--Jerry L. Mercer
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