

A 'Man in Christ' and the Flesh. 2 Corinthians 12

by John Nelson Darby

The Christian's position in Christ is one of communion with God, but the flesh seeks to exalt itself and must be overcome through dependence on God and the power of Christ.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:2

Topics: "Communion with God", "Strength in Weakness"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the contrast between the spiritual elevation of Paul, who was caught up to the third heavens, and the struggles of the Corinthian Christians. He explains that being 'in Christ' is a shared privilege among all believers, allowing them to experience communion with God and strength in their weaknesses. Paul's glory lies not in his accomplishments but in his infirmities, which serve to highlight God's power. Darby also discusses the role of the flesh and how it can lead believers away from God, illustrating that trials and thorns in the flesh are often used by God to prevent pride and draw us closer to Him. Ultimately, God's grace is sufficient for our weaknesses, and through our struggles, we can find true strength in Him.

Transcript

There is a great contrast between the beginning and end of this chapter, between Paul caught up to the third heavens and the Christians at Corinth, between what a Christian should be and what he can be, what he can descend to. In verse 2 we have a great privilege, which it is useful to consider. Paul speaks of himself as a man in Christ, and this is what characterizes every Christian, the whole Church. It was not in his quality of apostle that Paul was caught up to the third heavens, but as a man in Christ, on a level with the rest of the Church. He that is in Christ is a new creation, and has his place in the third heavens, although every man in Christ is not caught up there like the apostle. But we are quickened together with Christ, seated together in heavenly places in Christ. There is no spot which faith cannot penetrate.

Paul did not receive a revelation in the third heavens in order to communicate it to others; on the contrary, he went there to hear mysteries which it is not lawful for a man to utter; he went there to realize the presence of God, and to draw thence his strength. When the eye of faith penetrates God's presence it finds there, together with communion, strength to walk before Him in all circumstances. Neither is it here as on the holy mountain, the sight of the future glory of Christ; it is communion with God, in which the body

cannot share, to which it even becomes insensible. The principle of this communion applies to us all; the degree is not the same as with Paul, but our great and common privilege is this: "That ye also may have fellowship with us" (the apostles); "And truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ."

Ephesians 1:15-20 and 3:14-19 contain two very different prayers. The first has in view the knowledge of the glory of Christ, and what is connected with it; the second expresses the desire that our souls should enjoy communion with God. The apostle asks that we may be strengthened by the Holy Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith, and that we may be filled with the knowledge of the love of Christ unto all the fulness of God. We cannot realize these blessings when we are seeking after things down here; for then we are grieving the Holy Spirit, and the inner man is at once weakened.

What was the apostle Paul's subject of glory? Not what he was, nor what he had done, but his infirmities. (v. 9) In communion with God he had learnt that his strength was in God. If, in the infirmity of the flesh (Gal. 4:13), he had been the means of the conversion of many, it was that the power of God was with him. So that he took pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake, in all that was not the flesh and that did not countenance it.

Directly the apostle regains consciousness of his presence in the flesh, this latter seeks to exalt itself, and God sends the thorn. The flesh seeks relief; it fears fighting and difficulties, but God will not relieve it at the expense of the soul. It is possible to pray earnestly for the healing of infirmities, or for deliverance out of painful circumstances, which God will not grant. Our dependence on God is thereby increased. We ought not only to expect infirmities, but to take pleasure in them, that the power of Christ may be manifested in us.

This thorn in the flesh given to Paul in order that he should not exalt himself was something that rendered him contemptible in his preaching. (Gal. 4:13, 14.) It was a counterpoise to the rapture with which he had been honoured. We may not necessarily have the identical thorn that Paul had; God will always send us the needed one. It is Satan that God employs against the flesh, and Satan acts on the flesh in four different ways:

1. Before conversion the flesh is under the dominion of Satan, the conscience being hardened. This was the case with Judas, who loved money and was a thief. When he had taken the sop Satan entered into him to instigate him to unbridled iniquity, and to deliver him afterwards to despair in beholding the result of his crime.
2. Before conversion the flesh is enticed to act by the seductions of Satan.
3. After conversion the flesh remains always there, and can fall under the direct action of Satan, if the Spirit, the seal of redemption, has not yet been given, or else if He has not yet accomplished the work of deliverance in us. One finds oneself then, like Peter, opposing Christ at almost every turn. Before the transfiguration, when Jesus spoke of his approaching sufferings, and Peter out of affection, but in the flesh, wished to dissuade Him, the Lord replies, "Get thee behind Me, Satan." (Matt. 16:23)
4. Satan desires to have us that he may sift us as wheat by means of the flesh. Jesus announces it to His disciples, and prays especially for Peter, in whom the flesh was strong.

Peter put himself forward on every occasion, and showed each time that the flesh is the exact opposite of Christ. Jesus said to the disciples, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation." This is not yet entering into sin. The effect of the Spirit was to incite Christ to prayer, so that when the temptation came it had no power over Him; but the three disciples, instead of watching and praying, sleep, overcome with sorrow, and when the temptation comes they are a prey to it. In the moment when all that could break the Lord's heart was combined against Him and when Judas betrayed Him by a kiss, Jesus remains calm, submits, yields Himself up, undergoes humiliation to the full, and Peter draws his sword. The flesh leads into temptation, but sustains no one in it; it leads Peter to the high priest. There Jesus bears a glorious testimony; Peter, incited by Satan, denies Him. In everything the flesh is opposed to Christ, and yet Peter truly loved the Lord. Even after having received the Holy Spirit, we find Peter still acting in the flesh. (Gal. 2:11-21)

Every time that a Christian acts according to the flesh, what there is in him of piety sanctions and authorizes in the eyes of others his evil action. When the flesh is at work in a Christian, the effects are, for this very reason, much more fatal than in an unconverted person. Peter, by his example, led all the Jews at Antioch, even the apostle Barnabas, into his dissimulation.

To have been in the third heavens even does not change the flesh in any way. It exalted itself, and could say to Paul, "No one but you has been there." It is then that the messenger of Satan has permission to buffet him, but becomes the instrument of the goodness of God for preventing Paul from exalting himself. God does not Himself do that, but Satan, who loves to hurt the children of God, is employed by Him as a means of making the flesh disagreeable to us, just where it would desire to exalt itself and be esteemed.

Circumstances painful to the flesh are the most profitable for the soul. It would be useless for a father to inflict a punishment which would not be felt as one by his child. The work and power of God in us, as well as our own weakness, are manifested in these difficulties. When something trying is before us, God's answer is: "My grace is sufficient for thee." God would have us in His presence in joy; and all which makes us suffer in the flesh is especially profitable.

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