

“Discipleship, Transformation, Transcendence”  
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II Corinthians 12:2-10

Our story today begins with the Apostle Paul being “caught up in the third heaven.” We don’t know exactly what that means, but we can safely assume that Paul had an ecstatic mystical experience, perhaps one similar to that enjoyed by the author of Revelation. Unlike St. John the Divine, however, Paul was evidently forbidden to reveal what he learned on this extraordinary journey.

The secret of this miraculous blessing was so great that Paul was initially reluctant to admit that he went, coyly referring to this fortunate soul in the third person, as if he were relating the experience of someone else: this from a man who usually had no trouble talking about himself. But by the seventh verse of chapter twelve, the pretense is dropped, as Paul confesses, “to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to torment me.”

Nobody knows exactly what this means either. Paul refers to this thorn nowhere else. Many have assumed that he struggled with some sort of illness or debilitating injury. Others speculate that Paul was referring to an especially challenging opponent. No evidence has ever been found to substantiate any interpretation. What we do know is that the thorn was sufficiently bothersome for Paul to appeal three times to God to remove it.

God’s response, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness,” led Paul to “boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” Paul’s ready acceptance of this paradoxical utterance from God shows Paul’s strong faith, and that’s the original purpose of this entire passage.

In fact, this nine-verse sequence is part of a larger four-chapter section of II Corinthians, in which Paul tries to prove his authority to a Corinthian community suspicious of his credentials. Paul shared his journey to the third heaven as a way of demonstrating

God's favor towards him. For those who believed Paul inadequate, he countered with God's message that "power is made perfect in weakness." But what does this nine-verse chunk of II Corinthians mean to us?

After all, few of us would challenge Paul's authority. He wrote a large portion of the New Testament. So if Paul's original message – to justify his legitimacy – is the sole content of the passage, then these verses merely confirm what we already hold to be true, and therefore, their revelatory capacity has been exhausted, emptied. We've taken all the meaning they have to give.

But might there be another possibility? Could subsequent generations like us, under the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, glean an even greater wisdom from this passage, beyond the original intent of the author? Often people say or write more than they realize. So if we believe that a single passage can have multiple meanings, then what we have is a living text, a fully interactive creature of God.

I prefer the second option, the living Word, and so did the early Church Fathers of the first four centuries. They identified four primary ways of reading scripture: literal; allegorical; moral; and mystical. The living Word allows for multiple interpretations, beyond the author's original intent and context. The living Word opposes the dead letter literalism practiced by some. The notion that a verse means one thing and one thing only for all time, far from strengthening scripture, actually sells it short. Because if God is alive, which I fervently believe, then any text that reveals God's Word must also be alive. Anything else proves inadequate to the task. And the one thing we know with certainty about living things is that they are dynamic, not static. In other words, living things don't always stay the same, despite appearances to the contrary.

Rocks, for example, exhibit no signs of life. They just sit there, pushed about by forces beyond their control. You can try having a conversation with a rock, and if you've

been dropping acid, you might be successful. But living things, like human beings, are different.

Consider your child, your spouse, your parent, your friend. Those people move. They breathe. Living things change and respond. They are unpredictable at times, able to surprise and delight and occasionally disappoint and frighten us. Even if we're stuck in the middle of Timbuktu, and don't know the local language, we can converse with people through simple hand signals and the like. And that is how scripture is. It's alive, and we can converse with it.

So what does this living Word from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians have to say to us today? Well, it's tricky. The whole passage is cloaked in mystery: the fantastic journey to a realm beyond; the provocatively unidentified thorn; the paradoxical response of God that "power is made perfect in weakness." But at the heart of this passage lies at least one central message: God has the power to transform us and make us transcendent, and God will use this power.

Without doubt, Paul's ascent to the third heaven was a transforming moment in his life, so powerful that he dare not share the details of his experience. Perhaps there was no way to put it adequately into words. This secrecy never surrounded his mystical experience with Jesus on the road to Damascus, so we might suppose that Paul's trip to the third heaven goes beyond even that seminal, defining moment.

This part of Paul's story tends to escape us, because we have so little information, but also because this extraordinary experience of transcendence seems inaccessible to us. The road to Damascus makes sense. Many of us have gone through conversion experiences like the one Paul received on the road to Damascus. But ascending to a dimension beyond the human plane; well, that's much more rarified.

How can we receive this special gift of transcendence? People try so many things, and usually the harder they try, the worse they do. There are books and seminars aplenty that offer the secret way to mystical ecstasy, but the bottom line is simple: transcendence happens for us solely by God's grace. Remember Paul didn't climb a ladder to heaven. God lifted him up. And that's how it will happen to us, if we are to be so blessed.

But does that mean transcendence is a wholly random, unpredictable occurrence? Not necessarily. In the passage we heard today, Paul has established a link between transcendence and transformation. The two go together, bound in a cycle where transformation may lead to transcendent experiences and transcendent experiences lead to greater transformation. Paul's journey to heaven – an experience of transcendence – transformed him, but Paul had already been transformed in many ways, and that fundamental change in Paul made him more receptive to that pinnacle transcendent experience.

But how can we be transformed, you ask? Again, we discover that the initiative lay primarily with God. Not that we are meant to behave like rocks. We cannot make our own transformation happen, but we can seek out transformation by following a tested path that time and again has led people to transformation. That path is discipleship to Jesus, and discipleship involves imitating Christ, so that what we mimic we may someday become.

If we look at the pattern of life Jesus led, we find that he did five things consistently. He worshipped. He prayed. He studied scripture. He served those in need, and he maintained connection with a community of people who sought, like him, God's desire for their lives and for their world. If we follow the path of Jesus, if we commit ourselves to discipleship, we will gradually be changed, transformed, and become more receptive for moments of transcendence. This transcendence may not be identical to what Paul or St. John the Divine or Teresa of Avila experienced, but the "closer" we get to God in those "thin" places, the more likely something extraordinary will happen.

Of course, the real key to transformation through discipleship is humility, “for power is made perfect in weakness.” That statement, “power is made perfect in weakness,” only makes sense to a humble person. And as I’ve mentioned before, humility has nothing to do with false modesty. It’s not humble to deny that you’re good at something when you are. That’s just lying, and it denigrates a precious gift God has given you. No, humility is simply admitting the truth about the relationship between God the Creator and ourselves the creatures. The better we understand that primary relationship, the more humble we are.

Humility understands that God is God, and we are not, and what may be impossible for us is not impossible for God. Humility understands that God can take weakness and transform it into unimaginable power. Humility enables us to accept the grace of forgiveness, because only the attitude of humility brings us to the point where we can admit that we need forgiveness. Humility helps keep us on the path of discipleship, because humility makes us aware. We can puff ourselves up and pretend that we are sufficient unto ourselves, but those are fragile balloons, ready to pop and send us spiraling into despair. Humility maintains our awareness that God’s grace is the only thing sufficient for us.

How do we get humble? Well, just as transcendence and transformation exist in a reinforcing cycle, so also do discipleship and humility. The more we strive to imitate Jesus, the more humble we become, and the more humble we become, the more accurately we imitate Jesus, and hence become better disciples. Having become better disciples, through humble pursuit of the disciplines of worship, prayer, study, service, and connection, we receive transformation, and that transformation blossoms into transcendence.

But why go to all this trouble? It seems rather all-consuming, not quite the hobby we often think faith is. Well, it is worth it if you’re tired of worrying about your physical safety, or your financial security, or your status. It is worth it if you’re tired of being afraid or angry or confused, or if you’re just tired of being tired. It is worth it if you want something more out

of life; if you feel this nagging void deep down inside, like a black hole that nothing will fill, no matter how hard you try. It is worth it because transcendence brings us detachment, the ability to engage without obsessing. Far from apathy, which simply disengages without a care, detachment helps us heal the wounds we suffer and abide in peace.

Through his transforming and transcending experiences, Paul came to a point of near perfect detachment. He wrote, “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

That’s a lot of red meat there: transcendence, transformation, discipleship, humility, detachment. Big words, full of meaning, and that’s why we’re here as a community of faith. That’s why we worship and pray and study and serve: to be transformed into people that resemble Christ and who eventually experience a measure of transcendence. This is much more than anyone might have expected when we first read these nine verses from Paul’s letter, where on the surface, it’s all about him proving his worth to the Corinthians. But that’s the way with scripture. Root around long enough, prayerfully enough, and amazing things will leap out and grab you. And you’ll find that you’re not reading the Bible so much as the Bible is reading you, opening your heart up like a book to receive a special blessing.

That blessing may take your weakness and turn it into a powerful strength. God’s grace may transform you or lift you up to an extraordinary moment of transcendence. None can say what may happen but God alone. In the meantime, we humbly follow. We worship. We pray. We study. We serve. We put down roots in a community of Christians, and then we wait. Hang on tightly. You just might get “caught up.” Amen.

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