

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

“What’s Your Pleasure?”

“What’s your pleasure?” Generally a question that in reality means, “What’s your poison?” W/reference to some drink, or some drug, or some other thing that you may like to do though in reality it’s unhealthy for you, oh perhaps in certain settings it may mean something not so harmful but it’s rare to never that it’s a reference to that which is *helpful*. Because it’s generally a concept that revolves around the flesh in some way, shape or form. However if you were to ask the apostle Paul, “What’s your pleasure?” You might be astonished/astounded at his response, because what gave him pleasure, what brought delight to his soul, what it was that he preferred was to see God glorified, and the person of Christ magnified through his life.

He wasn’t worried about somehow stroking, or feeding his flesh (and I’m not even in reference to some sinful way but simply seeking out the comforts that this life may have to offer) he was “all out” full tilt about bringing glory to God. and Whatever that may mean to him personally he would accept it willingly. Remember he said, “...*according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.*” Phil 1:20 **What brought Paul pleasure? Whatever means by which Christ would be magnified in his body. Think about that...how, or in what way do you perceive your body? What’s its purpose? Do you see it as a means to simply serve your own agenda; a tool by which you’re able to perhaps seduce someone of the opposite gender?** Or is it an instrument set apart to the glory of God by the grace of God, you’re no longer your own having been bought at a price and therefore your chief aim is to glorify God both in your spirit and in your body which are His? Paul wasn’t worried about his wants, his desires, his agenda, he was worried about what God wanted, what was God’s desire for him, how could he serve the Lord’s agenda, how could he get out of the way that God might have His way in his life?

You see when it comes to the things of the flesh the bible makes it real clear that you can’t have it both ways. Because the flesh wars against the spirit and the spirit wars against the flesh; the bible says, “...*those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.*” Rom 8:5-8 So the question is, do we want to please man, do we want to please ourselves, or do we want to please God? Well as believers the answer is obvious, we want to please God. Then here’s the deal, we can’t live according to the flesh. The bible says, “...*those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.*” Gal 5:24-26 **What’s your pleasure; the things of the flesh or the things of the Spirit? If it’s the things of the flesh it’ll be so at a tremendous cost to your walk in the Spirit because we can’t have it both ways, you can’t prioritize the flesh and then reap the benefits of the Spirit. If your pleasure is the things of the Spirit, it’ll be so at a tremendous cost to the things of the flesh. Because as believers the bible calls for total annihilation, we’re to crucify the flesh along with its passions and desires.**

Again that's not always a reference to the sinful side of things. Our flesh cries out for comfort, it's not a sin to want to be comfortable. It's not a sin to want to be healthy, or free from physical affliction. **But the question is what if God has a different plan or purpose for your/my life that doesn't always involve personal comfort, or causing me to be the poster child of picture perfect health? Am I ok with that if it's God's plan to glorify Himself in my body that way? Paul wasn't only "ok" with it, he embraced it, took *pleasure in it*.**

Vs1-6

Paul has been speaking of the vanity of boasting in those areas would "wow" his audience so as to make him a spiritual superstar in their eyes. There are those in Corinth who've been about just that, "upstaging" Paul, putting him down so as to lift themselves up. **So much so that there are those in the Corinthian church (which Paul planted) who are questioning the legitimacy of his call, his credentials as an apostle. and No doubt some of the "super spiritual" would be apostles there were speaking of visions and revelations that they'd had.**

Now in our previous study Paul said, "You want to know how I received my apostolic accreditation? Through abundant labor, in stripes above measure, in prisons frequently, in deaths often, my life has been riddled with problems and persecutions, I'm beside myself with worry because of my compassion and concern regarding the well being of all the churches. There's been a common thread of humility woven throughout the tapestry of my life, from one belittling experience to another." **But here he turns the page for just a moment to seemingly sorta acquiesce to what they consider to be the marks of the real man of God, visions, revelations, the esoteric, super spiritual sort of experiences. However I'd have you know in advance that even in this, the vision he brings up isn't the end, it's merely the means by which he wants to take them to the end. He's got a reason for bringing this up and it's not to point to, or bring glory to himself.** This is kind of a "passing tone" if you will, in music there are notes known as "passing tones." and They're notes that really only "connect the dots" between 2 chords, they're not the focus, they only bridge the gap between 2 points. and That's really what Paul is doing here with this mention of this vision, this revelation of heaven, he's using it as a means to bridge the gap between what he's been speaking of, and the resolve that he's yet to make (which we'll see in a little while). **So don't think that he's spent all this time speaking of the vanity of boasting about his accomplishments, only to now boast in some super spiritual experience in his life. We'll note that he's incredibly brief and incredibly vague with regard to his experience, but he elaborates on the point in bringing it up, because that has to do with Christ, and Jesus being magnified through him. So this is simply a "passing tone."**

But back in Vs 1 he speaks of visions, and revelations of the Lord. If you begin to look at various visions/revelations of the Lord in the NT you'll probably be surprised to find that they're more common than what you might think. Time forbids us but suffice it to say Paul had several of them, not only seeing the Lord on the way to Damascus, the Lord ministered to him by vision in Corinth (so he stayed there for a year and a half). **He saw a vision of a man beckoning him to come to Macedonia; he had a vision of an angel telling him that they would all survive a shipwreck that was coming. It simply didn't seem uncommon for the Lord to minister to him this way. Peter had a # of visions, Cornelius had a vision, the women who came to the tomb of Jesus had a vision of angels, Stephen had a vision of Jesus as he was being martyred, of course John had several visions from which we get the book of revelation.**

So we shouldn't be overly shocked should the Lord want to minister to us via a vision of some sort. I'm not saying that we should look for them, or seek after them, but it's certainly not beyond the scope of something God might do. However you'll also note that the vast majority of the time a personal vision was pretty much limited to just that, a *personal* vision. **It was something that God was ministering to the person individually and it didn't go beyond them personally. So if someone reports a vision that God gave them that had to do with you I'd be very skeptical, and very cautious. If God wants to speak to you He's well able.**

Now in Vs 2 Paul begins to speak of one such vision/revelation, and though he speaks in the 3rd person it's almost universally accepted that he's speaking about himself. and From what I read it wasn't uncommon in that day for a Rabbi to relate an experience in the 3rd person anyway but on top of that Paul was walking with extreme caution in regards to this because it was a radical experience and he wanted to be careful not to draw attention to himself. **He's bringing it up because he has a point to make but he only brings it up to the point that the principle can be established and he doesn't press it any farther. Because as he says in Vs 6 he *doesn't* want anyone to look at him or consider him as anything more than who he is.** He's not looking for the limelight, or the "Wow Paul, you're really great, you must walk close to Jesus, my maybe if I touch you your spirituality will rub off on me!" He's saying, "Look I'm flesh and blood just like any other man." Plus since he makes the transition into the 1st person in Vs 7 it becomes obvious he's referencing himself here. But he says in Vs 2 (read).

Ok, there are a few things that we want to see here. #1 I think it's important to see what it was that qualified him to be "caught up" to the 3rd heaven. Did you see it there? It wasn't because of any merit of his own, because he was "Paul the apostle" or anything of the sort. It was because he was "in Christ." "I know a man *in Christ* who was caught up to the 3rd heaven." Now what is the 3rd heaven, well it's not saying that there are various levels of heaven as the Mormon doctrine would allege, a place for the good, the better, and the best or any nonsense like that. This is simply a way of expressing the place where God dwells, heaven in the sense that we think of today. **Because today we don't speak of the 1st, or the 2nd or the 3rd heaven, we speak of the atmosphere in which we live, (the sky above us, the 1st heaven), the 2nd heaven would be what we'd call outer space, or the planetary heavens, and then the 3rd heaven is where God dwells. Paul is saying that he was caught up into the presence of God.** But we need to realize that though man can travel through the 1st and 2nd heaven on his own to a degree, there is no way for him to reach the 3rd heaven apart from Divine intervention. and That intervention takes place "in Christ." Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*" John 14:6 and So don't miss that, if you're not *in Christ*, if you've not given your heart to Christ, you're not abiding in Him, and His word isn't abiding in you, you have no hope of ever being caught up or taken into God's dwelling place, the 3rd heaven. **Because there's no other name under heaven, given among men by which we must be saved. So 1st and foremost make your calling and election sure, give your heart to Christ, because that's the only thing that allowed him, that qualified him to be brought into the presence of God, he was "in Christ."**

Now when did this happen? Well he says that it was 14 yrs prior to his writing this, and those who date such things will tell us that when you crunch those #'s you'll find that the timeline places him with in the spectrum of time that you find him ministering there in Lystra. You say, "Big deal, what happened in Lystra?" Well there they were Paul and Barnabas, ministering, sharing the gospel when Paul looked out into the crowd and there was a man who'd never walked from his mother's womb. and Paul was observing him intently and when he discerned that he had the faith to be healed he told him to stand up straight on his feet and the guy was miraculously healed. The people freaked out, thought the gods came down to visit them, were trying to sacrifice to them. Paul was like, "Hey we're human just like you!" and He tried to turn their attention back to God who created all things and commands all men everywhere to repent. Then some Jews from Antioch entered the equation, stirred up the crowd against them and so they stoned Paul, dragged him outside the city and left him for dead.

It says that they stoned Paul, and dragged him outside the city supposing him to be dead. Now believe me when I say that they knew dead when they saw it, I'm of the persuasion that the reason it says that they "supposed" it was because he stood back up and went into the city. So in their minds they "thought" he was dead; it seems to me that God raised him up. But my point in that is that though I can't prove it, it would seem that this experience of being caught up to the 3rd heaven happened at that time when Paul was stoned and left for dead outside the city of Lystra.

Furthermore what amazes me is that he kept silent about this experience for 14 yrs and when he feels backed in a corner to bring it up he only does so in the most vague of verbiage and with but shadows of descriptions.

1st of all he says that he doesn't even know if he was in or out of the body, so it's pointless for us to speculate though we do, but he himself doesn't know so how can we know for sure? He says, "Man only God knows." But by that comment (little sub point here) we can again affirm a conscious awareness that's not limited to the body. Because he's saying that he knew full well what was going on, but he's not sure if he was in or out of his body which means that one is just as aware of is circumstances out of the body as he is in the body. My point in saying that is that he didn't slip into a state of unconsciousness, or soul sleep. He was immediately in the presence of God and was totally aware of his surroundings. Some teach that when you die you're soul sleeps until the resurrection. The bible says, "*We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.*" 2 Cor 5:8 So as a believer the moment you're absent from this body, you will be present with the Lord, fully aware of your surroundings. If you're not a believer you'll be separated from the Lord, fully aware of your surroundings (Luke 16:19-31). But he says that he was, "Caught up" it's the Greek word "harpazo" which means to be "snatched up violently, or suddenly, instantaneously" it's the same word that's used with reference to the rapture of the church in 1st Thess 4:17. He was instantaneously in the presence of God.

But check it out he didn't even mention the experience for 14 yrs and when he did he only did so reluctantly with vague and ambiguous verbiage at best. In Vs 4 he says that he was caught up into Paradise, he doesn't mention a thing he saw, and as far as what he heard he only tells us that that it was so amazing that it's in expressible in human terms and it would be a sin for him to even try and relate it to us.

There's that much of a gap between what he saw with heard Vs the words at the disposal of the human vocabulary to try and articulate it, it's an impossibility.

Now, when he speaks of Paradise understand that it's just another reference to heaven. Paradise simply speaks of the place of the righteous who've died in faith either looking *forward* to the Saviors work on the pre-side of the cross, or in faith resting in the Saviors *finished* work on the post-side of the cross. **Before Christ that place was what the NT refers to as Abraham's Bosom in Luke 16, a separate compartment in Hades where the righteous went having died as opposed to the area of the unrighteous who'd died where they're tormented in flames. Because no one could precede Jesus to heaven, apart from the righteousness of Christ no one makes it to heaven.** So they were there in waiting, after the work of the cross the bible tells us that Jesus led those held there captive and ascended on high. So now the moment one dies in Christ he/she goes immediately into the presence of God, Paradise.

Now I've tried to get to this a few times already but 14yrs later Paul finally shares vaguely about this experience. Today when some has what they call an "NDE" or a "near death experience" man they write books, go on nationwide conference tours, describe breath taking images.

It's like they have a better understanding than what the bible even mentions. Paul said, "There's no possible way to describe it in human terms" yet some people write books on it. "Lessons from the light" and they describe all kinds of non-biblical garbage that people just eat up because they're looking for some sort of hope that lies beyond the emptiness of this world all the while refusing to simply turn *to* and trust *in* Jesus Christ **If there was ever *anyone* qualified to tell us about life after this life I'd think it'd be One who'd come down from heaven, lived among us on the earth, was dead for 3 days, came back from the dead and ascended into heaven. Yet people scoff at Christ and herald "Dr Kenneth Ring" as the "dean" of near death studies and praise his book, "Lessons from the light."** Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me *shall not* walk in darkness" If you want to learn lessons from the light, come to Christ.

But Paul had this vision, he was caught up, and he saw heaven, like Isaiah (Isa 6) or John throughout the book of Revelation. and He says, "I can't even describe it and what I heard I can't repeat." You see he detracts all focus and attention from himself, now he admits that a guy like that would have something to boast on, I mean that's a pretty special happening. Only a handful of men in human history have experienced such a privilege. **But he refused to boast on it, if there was attention that was to be drawn to him it would be with regard to his weaknesses, his infirmities. and Again the "super spiritual" kind of guys there in Corinth were most likely boasting on their experiences, but Paul is showing them here that just because some people don't boast on what's happened in their lives doesn't mean God hasn't ministered to them in amazing and miraculous ways.** But Paul is communicating here that people that are truly sold out to the Lord, being used of the Lord don't sense the need to try and "sell" themselves. Paul didn't want people to accept him on the basis of the experiences he told them of, but rather because they saw a transformed life, a truthful, and powerful ministry. The proof of a powerful experience with God is found in a life lived for Jesus Christ not super spiritual stories that make me seem a little closer to God than you are.

All those stories will do is inflate my pride, and set me a little higher in your eyes, where's Jesus in that? Better to simply keep those experiences between me and Jesus and let the fruit of those times spill out in a life that's lived for Him so that people are able to see Him, and be drawn to Him through me, or through you. The focus is to be on Him, not my spiritual experiences.

Vs7

Now we talked about this last week as well, if God takes you high, you can be assured that there will be a balance brought into that which will be intended to keep you humble, He'll take you as low as He takes you high. It would be easy to see how having a 1st person view into the holy habitation of God could swell a man's pride. Paul says, "God has blessed me so abundantly with revelation, illumination, insight and understanding that He's also given me a thorn in the flesh lest I should be exalted above measure." It's like "You've seen heaven Paul, but I need you grounded on the earth."

What was this "thorn" in the flesh? We don't know, he doesn't say. Understand that the word "thorn" here isn't a reference of a little prickly irritant under the skin; the reference is to an 18" Bedouin tent spike meant to hold down tents in the desert winds. Whatever it was it was a major problem for Paul to put up with. When it speaks of being "buffeted" the idea there is that of being beaten with the fist over and over and over again relentlessly. He tells us that the problem was in the flesh so we know it was a physical infirmity of some kind. Many think perhaps it had to do with his eyes, perhaps a certain type of Malaria; he traveled with Luke a lot.

Luke being a physician (a doctor), whatever it was it was evidently painful, and reoccurring; it was a problem. But notice how he phrases that it was "given" to him, not "inflicted" upon him, it was God's gift to him. "Wait a minute; God gave him as a gift some form of infirmity?" Yeah, because God wanted to use him mightily but Paul had to remember that he was only human and that the best of men are at best men. That it's the weak things of this world that God uses so that as it is written let him who glories glory in the Lord. You see Paul's "glorious" experience brought him lower than ever, worked a deep humility in him, but it brought him to a place of incredible "use-ability" and God used him unlike any other outside of Christ in this world.

Why don't we know what his "thorn" was? I believe God left it vague purposefully so that whatever problem or affliction that may be upon us at various and sundry times we can identify with what Paul went through and find hope and encouragement through the way God used it in his life. If Paul said, "Well my eyes were oozing all the time, I had unrelenting migraines, but through that God did amazing things in my life." We'd be like, "That's great Paul but that's not what I'm going through, how can I know God will use it?" But with it being open ended like this when I'm going through it, when I'm being somehow buffeted, a trial has fixed itself upon me I can take refuge in the word of God and see how God can use it for His glory.

"Well suppose I'm in the midst of some trial, I'm afflicted day and night, have no rest from this 'prickly problem' something poking me, probing me, pressuring and pursuing me unrelentingly, what am I to do?" Hey, you pray, and you pray, and you pray, notice.

Vs8

Paul said, “Man this thing was upon me so I prayed and I pleaded, and I prayed and I pleaded, and I prayed and I pleaded; 3x asking the Lord to take it from me.” He wasn’t nor are we to be some sort of masochist; he didn’t invite, nor enjoy misery, he asked the Lord to take it from him. and Not once, or twice, but 3 times. and Don’t think that 3 is the magic # he’d have kept asking from there but on that 3rd request he heard from the Lord. You keep praying till you hear from the Lord one way or another. Some people say if you ask more than once you’re not believing God, you lack faith; that’s ridiculous and holds no scriptural weight whatsoever. Others say, “Well, Jesus prayed 3x in the garden, Paul prayed 3x here, 3 must be the limit.” Isn’t it crazy how we come up with this stuff? Jesus said, “Ask, seek, knock,” and where you read that in Matt 7 or Luke 11 understand that those words are in the “present” tense and they’re in the “imperative” mood. Now if something is “imperative” what does that mean? It means it’s urgent, it’s important and it carries with it the sense of a command, the present tense means it’s an ever present ongoing action. In other words Jesus is saying, “Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking and don’t stop,” pray with out ceasing. It doesn’t become a vain repetition until my brain is engaged but my heart no longer is, and it’s mechanical but not meaningful. If you’re being afflicted, if you’re undergoing a trial, pray, keep praying seek the Lord till He speaks to your heart regarding it. He may remove it, that’s one way that God will at times lighten our load, but there’s another way of lightening a load and that is to strengthen the shoulder bearing up under it. God may do that as well, that’s the route He chose for Paul, notice.

Vs9-10

and These are the Vs we’ll pick up on and move forward from next time, what’s your pleasure? Paul came to a point whereby he could embrace infirmities, reproaches, needs, distresses and persecutions, things that we would naturally shun and recoil from.

Why? Because he was some sort of sick and twisted man who loved the company of misery? Hardly, but because God ministered to him powerfully that the strength of Christ shines forth the most brightly against the backdrop of human frailty. It’s like the diamond against the black velvet, when you’re looking at diamonds they don’t place them on white linen, they place them on black velvet. Because against that backdrop they shine bright, they stand out in sharp contrast. It’s against the backdrop of human frailty, that the power of Christ shines forth radically.

and God spoke this to him when he was down in the dumps, oh how often God will minister to us not when we’re flying high, but when we’re in the valleys of life, those low places.

I’m not encouraging you to look *for* it, or somehow invite it, and if you’re there I’d encourage you to pray and seek deliverance *from* it. But if you’re at a low point, or somehow and in some way being afflicted, stay turned toward, and tuned in *to* the Lord. Don’t waste your suffering. He’ll minister to you in that place in ways that He could never share *with* you, or show *to* you in any other place. His grace is sufficient to strengthen you, and to sustain you, and it’s there that the power of Christ is at rest *upon* you that He might be seen *through* you by those *around* you. You wait, you watch, and you’ll see.

Prayer Points:

God I want to pray for anyone who may be undergoing a trial, or some sort of “thorn” in their flesh even now. Father we definitely don’t want to have not because we ask not. So if it’s a physical affliction we pray, we plead for a healing, that You might remove it. If it’s emotional, or spiritual affliction we pray for a fresh filling and renewing by Your Spirit, Lord whatever the struggle may be we want to look to You, and trust in You, and we pray that Your grace would abound to strengthen and sustain and that Your will would be done Your way in our lives. For those who aren’t experiencing any certain thorn right now God we give You praise for that. and Pray that they would run the race set before them unencumbered, serving You, submitted to You with all their heart. We all just want to be found *pleasing* to You, *useable* to You, that our bodies might be instruments bringing honor and glory to You.

If you’ve not given your heart to Christ, we’ve spoken a bit of hard times in the life of the believer here this morning but the believer has the grace of God to strengthen and sustain them. If you’re with out Christ, then friend you’re with out hope being with out God in the world. Jesus wants to give you His grace as well, He wants you one day to be caught up to the 3rd heaven to live with Him eternally, but it’s a gift that’s only given *in Christ*. Give your heart to Christ, be forgiven of your sin and granted everlasting life, today is the day of salvation, if you hear His voice don’t harden your heart.