

Sam Storms
Enjoying God Ministries
Romans #32
September 5, 2021

The Great Disproportion

Romans 8:16-18; 2 Corinthians 12:1-6

In reading your Bible, have you ever felt as if a verse of Scripture suddenly seemed to leap off the page and smack you upside the head with a thud. And it hurts! When I say, it hurts, I mean that it is a sudden jolt to the system. It's a bit scary. It's unnerving. It may be downright painful to your soul. You read it and say to yourself, "I wish I hadn't read that. My life and emotional stability in general would have been much better off had I never seen this statement."

Romans 8:17 is just such a verse of Scripture. Everything seemed to be moving along quite well in Romans 8. Hearing that there is "no condemnation" for those who by faith are in Christ was wonderful. Such reassuring and heartwarming statements like this are so uplifting. Then all of this talk of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives is equally encouraging. And to hear that we are the adopted children of God and co-heirs with Christ is almost too glorious even to believe.

But then it happens. We are "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ," says Paul, in v. 17, "***provided we suffer with him*** in order that we may also be glorified with him." Ouch! Yes, I want to be a fellow heir with Christ. The promise that I will inherit God himself is almost more than I can take in. The prospect of being "glorified" with Christ is beyond beautiful. What a day that will be! So why did Paul have to throw in this statement about suffering and ruin it all? You may be saying:

"I don't like suffering! I'm not an especially brave person. I don't have a high level of pain tolerance. I get a bit queasy when I think of what so many in the history of the church have suffered and endured and I just don't think I'm up to it. I fear I'll chicken out at the first challenge I face. I'm afraid I'll deny my faith and turn away from Jesus under the threat of persecution. Why did Paul have to conclude such a wonderful paragraph in Romans by saying that in order to be a fellow heir with Christ and be glorified with him I have to be willing to suffer for Christ?"

My guess is that Paul was completely aware of that sort of reaction. He probably had numerous people who asked him about his perspective on the necessity of suffering and why he chose to speak on it so often. I'm sure many also asked him for help as they encountered painful challenges to their faith. They undoubtedly asked him how he did it himself. What was the key to his courage? How did he endure? What kept his heart committed to Christ when his enemies raged against him?

There are many places in Paul's letters where he answers those kinds of questions (2 Cor. 4:16-18; 6:4-10; 11:22-29). Peter also responds to those who fear what may be coming their way. He instructed his readers in 1 Peter 4:12-13 to "not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you, to test you, as though

something strange were happening” to you. In fact, he said, “rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Peter 4:13-14).

So, what does Paul say about this in Romans 8? Well, for one thing, he concludes the chapter with the reassurance that no kind or degree of suffering will ever be able to separate us from the love that God has for us in Christ. He mentions tribulation and distress and persecution and famine and nakedness and danger and even death by a sword (Rom. 8:35). None of these things can do anything to cut you off from the love of God. Praise God!

But we don’t have to wait until the end of Romans 8 to hear what Paul has to say about this. Knowing full well that his comment in Romans 8:17 will undoubtedly have evoked anxiety and fear in the hearts of many, he immediately follows up on that statement with Romans 8:18. There he says, “Don’t be fearful or cowardly or overly concerned that you won’t be able to bear up under whatever sort of suffering may come your way. ***For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.***”

Let me say one more thing by way of introduction. There was a time in the history of our country when the prospect of suffering for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ was quite remote and unlikely. Our government took steps to protect religious freedom and to guard Christians from persecution. But no more. As you know all too well, the defense of religious freedom is eroding and the commitment of our national leaders to make America a safe place for Christianity and the Church to thrive is quickly fading from view.

If not within my lifetime, then surely in the lifetime of my children, it will become a life-threatening danger to be a Christian in the United States. That is already the case in numerous countries around the world: Iran, India, China, North Korea, Nigeria, and others too many to count. Listen to me. It’s coming our way. It isn’t that far off. And the church of Jesus Christ, I fear, is ill-equipped to face it. That is why Romans 8:18 is so important and so essential for us to devote considerable time to thinking about it.

The Key to the Endurance of Suffering in this Present Time (v. 18)

NT scholar John Murray reminds us of what he calls “***the great disproportion*** between the sufferings endured in this life and the weight of glory reserved for the children of God – the present sufferings fade into insignificance when compared with the glory to be revealed in the future” (*Romans*, 300; emphasis mine). Let’s pause and look more closely at how Paul describes this “great disproportion” in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, a passage that is almost identical in its emphasis with Romans 8:18.

“(16) So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. (17) For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, (18) as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

Try to envision in your mind a scale of balance, on one side of which are placed all the sufferings and struggles and disappointments and tragedies and pain and sacrifices of this life. On the other side is the “glory that is to be revealed to us.” Paul’s point is that there is no contest, no comparison. The weight of glory that is awaiting us in the age to come far outweighs the cumulative impact of all the hardships and heartaches of this life.

Note again the contrasts Paul outlines for us: *affliction vs. glory, light vs. weight, momentary vs. eternal*. Paul is not saying that by suffering now we merit or earn glory later. Rather, his point is one of contrast: the worse it is now the better it will be then. This is not to say that present suffering isn’t as bad as it seems. It’s bad! It’s hard! In no way does the apostle minimize or trivialize the reality of pain and deprivation in this life. He is simply directing our attention to the incomparable glory and pleasure of heaven and life in the eternal state in order to help you bear up under the griefs of this present life.

As we turn our attention back to Romans 8:18, I want to point out three more things. First, take special note of Paul’s conception of time. He contrasts “this present time” with what will be revealed to us. For the non-Christian, there is only “this present time.” This time, this life and world, are the only things to which the unbeliever can cling. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains it, “his whole outlook is circumscribed entirely by the temporal, by the present, by the seen, and by the visible” (29). The unbeliever comes into this world, this present time, lives in it, and when he dies, he leaves it, and nothing follows. Of course, he’s wrong in thinking this way. He may not believe in anything beyond this present world, but he/she will assuredly live forever beyond the grave, in hell.

Second, to say that this glory will be revealed “to us” is misleading. That, of course, is true. We will see this glory immediately and directly and without any obscurity. But we will not be mere spectators of it. We will actually participate in it. It is not something we shall only see, but something we shall personally experience. In Colossians 3:4 Paul says that “when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him *in glory*.” You and I will in some sense be enveloped in glory, surrounded and saturated with the very glory of God and the blessings of the age to come.

Third, do you know what Paul means when he speaks of “glory”? I take it to mean the comprehensive, all-satisfying splendor of all that God is in himself and for us in Christ. God hard-wired into every human soul an aesthetic dimension, which is to say, a longing for, a recognition and enjoyment of beauty. He created us to be mesmerized and fascinated and captivated by beauty. That’s why you marvel at the amber glow of a sunset and at the massive expanse of the Grand Canyon and the artistic use of color in a Monet or Renoir.

But the greatest display and experience of beauty is the glory of God, especially as revealed in Jesus. That is why Jesus prayed as he did in John 17:24 – “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” This is the glory that will be revealed to us, the glory in which we will participate and experience and enjoy forever. And the point, then, of Romans 8:18 is to encourage you and me to endure, to persevere in our current circumstances, no matter how distressing they may be, by reminding ourselves of “the great disproportion” between what we face now and what we will experience in the new heavens and new earth.

“He’s been there! He’s seen it! He’s heard it!”

“But Sam,” some of you will say, “how does Paul know this? How can he be so certain? What makes him so confident of this claim? And is it reasonable for me to take him at his word?”

That’s a perfectly legitimate question to ask. Here is why Paul is so bold to say what he does in v. 18 – ***He’s been there!*** He knows with absolute certainty that the things we suffer now are nothing in comparison with the glory of the age to come because ***he’s seen and heard*** the glory of the age to come! It would be enough for me simply to say, “It doesn’t matter whether or not Paul has actually, personally, seen with his eyes and heard with his ears the glory that is to be revealed to us. If the Holy Spirit moved on him to tell us this in v. 18, that’s enough for me.” And that would be true.

But there’s more to Paul’s confident declaration than simply the fact that by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he was told this truth. Paul himself has been into the third heaven, into Paradise itself, and has seen and heard things there that are so utterly beyond human comprehension that he can’t articulate them to others. Let’s look at how he describes this experience in 2 Corinthians 12:1-6.

“I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me” (2 Cor. 12:1-6).

Note well. Paul doesn’t say that “nothing is to be gained” by visions and revelations, but that there is no spiritual profit for the Corinthians if he were to *boast* in them. He was personally greatly strengthened, encouraged, and instructed by such supernatural experiences and they must have served him well in the face of hardship and the temptation to compromise. But they were of no use, says Paul, in determining the comparative value of his ministry as over against that of others. As will become evident in vv. 5-6, Paul asked that he be evaluated solely on the basis of what the Corinthians could “see” and “hear” of him.

In the final analysis, heavenly translations such as that described in 2 Corinthians 12 are unverifiable. After all, Paul could have fabricated this story just as the false apostles in Corinth no doubt fabricated accounts of their own alleged revelatory encounters with God. Needless to say, Paul knows that “God knows” what really happened (see 12:2b, 3b; 11:31). But since Paul was forbidden from saying anything about the content of what he heard and saw in Paradise, the Corinthians could only judge based on the moral integrity, spiritual devotion, and Christ-like sacrificial nature of his life and ministry among them and on their behalf.

If there is a lesson to learn from this, right at the outset, it is that supernatural visions and revelations are not to be denigrated, far less denied, but neither are they to become the basis on which we judge the legitimacy of a person’s “ministry” or “calling” or the extent of their “anointing”.

Had it not been for the insidious spiritual influence of false apostles in Corinth we probably would never have known of this remarkable experience that Paul describes in 2 Corinthians 12. Paul mentions it reluctantly, and only because his hand is forced (what does this say about those who publicly and repeatedly go into graphic detail about their alleged heavenly visitations as a way of legitimizing their “ministries” and expanding their sphere of influence?). The Corinthians were welcoming into their midst men who readily and often boasted of their spiritual credentials (2 Cor. 10:12-18) and were acknowledging the authority only of those who claimed to have experience in ecstatic encounters. Thus Paul is forced against his will to employ the same tactics as these impostors lest the Corinthians be led astray to their spiritual harm.

Let’s begin by defining Paul’s terms. Visions and revelations are related but not synonymous. The word “revelation” is the broader term, “visions” being but one of many ways that a revelation might be given to a person. A vision is always seen whereas a revelation might come in the form of an audible voice, an internal impression, an angelic encounter of some sort, a dream, a trance state, or a word or image disclosed to the mind of a believer. Thus whereas all visions are revelations, not all revelations are visions.

There is an important balance for us to maintain here. On the one hand, we should not dismiss or diminish the importance of the supernatural and revelatory encounters that God provides for certain of his saints. On the other hand, neither should we elevate them to supreme importance or treat them as if they alone, more so than character and conduct, authenticate the legitimacy of one’s calling and ministry from God.

It’s hard not to speculate what Moses really experienced as he stood in the presence of the burning bush (Ex. 3:1-6). And what was it like for Elijah when chariots and horses of fire accompanied him as he “went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11)? At least Isaiah tells us that as he saw “the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up” (Isa. 6:1) he felt spiritually and emotionally unraveled, overwhelmed by the sense of his own uncleanness (Isa. 6:5). Then, of course, there’s the apostle John who, upon seeing the majesty of the risen Christ, promptly “fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17).

In one’s current fallen state, a human being is simply incapable of maintaining control or composure when in the immediate presence of divine glory. These sorts of encounters are unavoidably disorienting and overwhelming. Little wonder, then, that when Paul for the first time attempts to describe his translation into the third heaven, into Paradise itself, he struggles for words and confesses his ignorance about the nature of what actually happened. If Paul “heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (v. 4), we likewise must proceed with reverence and caution in our effort to explain this remarkable experience.

So, what does Paul mean by saying that he knows a man who was “in Christ” (v. 2)? It’s unlikely that this phrase refers to some sort of mystical unity with the Lord or an absorption of the human into the divine. This is probably just a way of referring to a Christian, a person who is in union with Christ through faith. In other words, “a man in Christ” simply means “a Christian man.”

How do we know that this “man in Christ” is Paul and that he is describing his own experience? Some have pointed to Paul’s knowledge of precisely when this event occurred (“fourteen years ago”), as well as

his knowledge of what was “heard” in the third heaven and the uncertainty of his bodily condition. But Paul could have spoken with the “man” who had the experience who passed along to the apostle all the relevant information.

More persuasive is the fact that it would have been entirely irrelevant to his relationship with the Corinthians for him to have cited at length the supernatural experience of an unrelated third party. He is attempting to rebuild their confidence in *him* as their apostle in the Lord. What end would have been served by referring to something that happened to another, anonymous individual? We should also take note of v. 6 where Paul says that if he were forced to boast of such a visionary experience he wouldn't be lying (“for I would be speaking the truth”). Why? Because the event really happened to *him*.

But surely most important of all, the result of this heavenly experience and revelatory encounter is that *Paul* was given a thorn in the flesh (vv. 7-10)! The thorn was to prevent *Paul*, not someone else, from exulting in a prideful way due to the things he, *Paul*, heard and saw while in the third heaven.

This necessarily leads to another question: Why did Paul describe this encounter in the third person? If it were truly his own personal experience, why refer to himself as “a man in Christ”? I think Paul was doing his best to “avoid suggesting that he was in any sense a special kind of Christian. The vision and revelation had been given to him as ‘a man in Christ,’ not as an apostle of Christ or persecuted believer who merited a reward for service rendered or suffering endured” (Murray Harris, 835). In other words, Paul wanted to dismiss any notion that this experience contributed to his status as an apostle or was relevant for their assessment of his right to speak into their life as a church body.

When did this experience occur and why does Paul date it? The timing is quite explicit: “fourteen years ago” (v. 2a). Since we know that 2 Corinthians was written in approximately 55-56 a.d., this puts the encounter somewhere in the period 41-42 a.d., or during that ten-year period in Paul's life about which we know little other than that he spent time in Syria and Cilicia (Gal. 1:21).

Paul may have dated this event in order to alert the Corinthians to how long he had been struggling with his painful and distressing “thorn in the flesh”. This often debilitating and no doubt embarrassing weakness had thus plagued him all during the time he ministered at Corinth and yet was no obstacle to his devoted and sacrificial ministry to them.

Was this an “out-of-the-body” experience? We don't know, because not even Paul himself knew! The experience was so overwhelmingly intense and so utterly shrouded in mystery that Paul was unaware of whether he was in the body or out. Although he is not certain *how* it all happened, he is quite sure *that* it did. Note his two-fold declaration that “God knows” (in v. 2b and again in v. 3b). He may be suggesting by this that the heavenly translation was so powerful that awareness of his *physical* state of being was altogether eclipsed.

He was certain that he was translated to heaven but didn't know if his body made the trip or whether his spirit entered the heavenly realm while his body remained on earth. Clearly Paul is affirming the legitimacy (even if not the normativity) of a disembodied state in which a person is conscious and rational and capable of “hearing” and understanding what is said by the Lord. This is very much in line with what

he wrote in 2 Cor. 5:1-10 where he affirmed the reality of the existence of the soul outside and apart from the body.

Also, if so-called “out-of-the-body” experiences were inherently impossible due to the unified constitution of human nature, Paul would not have said here what he did. In other words, if this sort of translation were theologically out of bounds, the sort of thing that God would never do, or perhaps even occultic, Paul would simply have said, “I know I *must* have been in my body, even if I don’t recall it, because being out of the body is by definition inconceivable.” Clearly, he acknowledges at least the potential for this sort of phenomenon, even if he remains unsure about whether that is what he himself experienced.

Notice that Paul says he was “caught up” to the third heaven. The word translated “caught up” is a form of the verb *harpazein* (used in vv. 2,4). Paul uses it in only one other text, 1 Thessalonians 4:17, where it describes the “rapture” of believers at the second coming of Christ. However, it is also found in Acts 8:39 where we read that “the Spirit of the Lord *carried Philip away*” (emphasis mine), and again in Revelation 12:5 in reference to the “catching up” of Christ into heaven (most likely an allusion to his ascension to the right hand of the Father). The word also suggests a sudden and swift translation, not a slow and gradual ascent, which may account in part for why Paul was oblivious to his bodily condition.

Most scholars recognize this as a “theological” or “divine” passive, intended here to emphasize the fact that Paul was not responsible for his experience. It was not a psychologically induced altered state of consciousness or any form of self-induced ecstasy. One cannot train for this or be taught how to bring it about. It is a sovereign and gracious work of God for which no human preparation is possible and which cannot in any way be predicted, far less expected.

What and where is the “*third heaven*”? Some say the first heaven is the immediate atmosphere surrounding earth. The second heaven would be the more extensive space we call our galaxy. And the third heaven would be what the OT calls “the heaven of heavens” or “the highest of heaven” (1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chron. 2:6; 6:18; Neh. 9:6; Ps. 68:33; 148:4). But there is no evidence that the language of “the third heaven” was ever used in this way either in the OT or in the NT. The bottom line is that I think Paul has in mind the highest possible or most exalted heaven, namely, the manifest presence of God himself.

What and where is “*Paradise*” and how does it relate to the “third heaven”? The word translated “Paradise” (*paradeisos*) is found in only two other NT texts: Luke 23:43 (in Jesus’ promise to the thief on the cross) and Revelation 2:7. It was used in the LXX (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) to refer to the Garden of Eden. It may well be that Paul is portraying heaven as a *restored Eden*.

Could it be that Paul was given access to what we call *the intermediate state*, that place of disembodied existence where the dead in Christ are with the Lord and worship him unceasingly (cf. 2 Cor. 5:1-10)? I find this unlikely given the fact that John communicated in great detail what he saw and heard there (Revelation 4-5), whereas Paul was forbidden from revealing anything of what he heard.

A few have suggested that the differences between v. 2 and v. 3 indicate that Paul is describing *two distinct and separate heavenly translations*, or perhaps that the one event had two related and successive stages. Some argue that Paul first went to the third heaven and at another time he went to Paradise. But it's unlikely that Paul would mention going to the third heaven if nothing of consequence occurred there. Also, a single date is given for the event and there is only one reference to the content of the experience.

As for the relation between the third heaven and paradise, observe that Paul says he was taken "*as far as* the third heaven" and "*into* Paradise" (such is a literal translation of the prepositions used). Thus the third heaven points to the height of Paul's translation and paradise refers to the depth of it. Paradise is thus within the third heaven, the place where the disembodied believers now live in the presence of Christ. But there must have been something there that was disclosed to Paul that John never witnessed. Otherwise the prohibition on Paul relating such information would make no sense.

Whereas nothing is said about his seeing anything, he did introduce this paragraph by referring not only to "revelations" but also to "*visions*". That would be odd if, in fact, there was no visual revelatory content to what he experienced. Whatever he heard or saw, it consisted of "things that cannot be told, which man may not utter," or more accurately, "unutterable utterances" (an interesting paradox indeed!).

But is Paul saying that what he heard/saw *cannot* or merely *should not* be articulated? In other words, is Paul referring to *impossibility* or simply *impermissibility*? Was there something about what he heard that by its very nature could not be expressed or was he simply prohibited by God from telling others? If the former is correct, Paul would be referring to words or images that utterly transcend human language, to which there are no earthly terms that might correspond. No human language would be adequate to properly communicate the spiritual depths of what was revealed. But if that were the case, how could Paul himself have made any sense of it? He had to be capable of processing the content and making sense of its meaning in accordance with the linguistic capacities available to him on earth.

Perhaps it was angelic speech (i.e., "the tongues of angels"; 1 Cor. 13:1ff.) that he heard. Others have suggested he heard names for God never before disclosed, or perhaps events and the timing of the end of history or indescribable blessings of the new heaven and new earth. But even if that were the case, there's no reason to think he couldn't have grasped these glorious truths by means of the normal cognitive and linguistic faculties characteristic of all humanity.

Therefore, I'm led to conclude that he heard things that *could* have been disclosed had God granted him permission to do so. Such permission, however, was not forthcoming. Let's not forget that if Paul was unable to recall what he heard in meaningful and necessarily human linguistic form, the purpose for his supernatural transport is lost. Remember that he was most likely granted this remarkable experience in order to bolster his spirits and sustain him in the face of recurring hardship and persecution. But if what he heard was incapable of being cast in human terms such that Paul could easily reflect on the majesty of what he had experienced, the event itself loses its effect in his life.

Conclusion

I've taken the time to dig deeply into this text in order to undergird and provide undeniable support for Paul's confidence in saying what he says in Romans 8:18. There is only so much I can say by way of encouragement to you as you inevitably encounter opposition, pain, and persecution. But do I need to say more? Is it not enough to remind you that the present sufferings are not worthy to be compared to the glory that God has in store for you? I hope so. Take Paul's word for it! He's been there!