

PAUL'S EXHIBIT "A" REVELATION

Part 4

Dreams and Visions

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This is the fourth Sunday evening we've been together on the theme of Dreams and Visions. I'm not exactly sure how long the Spirit would have us go. I feel at least a couple more Sunday nights.

What started me really thinking me about this series is Peter's statement in Acts 2:17-18 where after the day of Pentecost has occurred and persons have responded to the Spirit and have begun to worship the Lord and praise him in other tongues the scripture reference from the Old Testament that Peter sites to validate that experience is the prophecy of Joel. "In the last days I'll pour out my Spirit upon all flesh. Your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams." The promise goes on to indicate that the Spirit will be outpoured not only upon men but upon women as well.

It struck me that the term visions and dreams would be used to describe an experience where people were really speaking in other tongues. At first the two don't really seem to match. But yet on second insight, in looking at the other dimension to our personalities, that side of us that is spiritual in character, is vision oriented in character, is intuitive rather than logical and analytical – it's in that realm as the book of Acts unfolds, as the story of the church unfolds that we see the church, the body of Christ stepping into an arena of spirituality and experience they'd never known in their lives before. It's that arena of spirituality and direct experience with God. The Lord himself calls us.

Our culture has been marked by young people experimenting with drugs, with older people experimenting with drugs and ecstatic states, immersing themselves in sauna baths and tanks in the hope that they will have some kind of religious experience. Drowning themselves in a state of alcoholic stupor so that there might be a detachment from the normal burdens and pressures of the rational side. Lost in psychedelic states, which seek to bring persons in altered states of consciousness. In the fall of man something of our brokenness lies reflected in these various experiences that are chemical or hallucinatory in nature. All of these things are broken reflections of the true image and understanding of what God himself wanted in our nature when he walked with man and woman in the garden and was in direct and intimate contact with them. It is one thing to know about God. It is altogether a different thing to know God. If I have a covetous desire for all of us in this room it's that God would grace us with inward experiences that indelibly plant in our lives the knowledge that we have had a meeting with God.

There are young people here who perhaps have never had an experience of meeting with God. What is in your background and experience is language about God. Language that I have spoken from this pulpit, language that has been communicated to you in Sunday school classes and youth groups and Christian training missions. Language but it has not yet become an experience.

In the days when I have struggled on the rational side on the existence of God and the reality of Christ there has been time and time again an experience with God that has been so riveted in my mind I knew I couldn't escape from the experience argue as I will. I had encountered God and I knew that and I couldn't shake that. I want for each one of you to encounter God. I believe

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when all of us have an encounter with God so much change will take place in our life that all the lecturing in the world hasn't accomplished.

I was going to go on in my teaching past the actual literal dreams and visions to the whole state of opening up the subconscious life to God in many different ways. But I felt compelled this week as I prayed about this night to one more time come back to this scene that I have been tracing in regard to the scriptural validity of dreams – vision states in the evening while we are asleep. And visions which are sequences of picture images which come across to us in a state while we are awake. Rather than using a telescopic view of truth this evening and trying to cover wide patches of ground I've chosen instead to be microscopic and look at one fascinating compelling piece of scripture which is probably in all the New Testament the most mind blowing in terms of what it says about a person's individual experience with God through means of a vision or revelation.

The experience is found in 2 Corinthians 12. The whole letter reflects a time when Paul is under severe attack by persons in the Corinthian church who are seeking a place of supremacy, who are teaching false doctrine and who are using personal attacks against the apostle Paul to build themselves up in credibility with the church and to tear Paul down. If they are successful in minimizing him then they have undercut the gospel and the message, which he has preached. And if they have done that then they have captured the church for heresy.

So responding to those severe critics by persons who Paul calls super apostles Paul responds to a defense of himself. Not because he relishes that prospect and not because he is a person who likes to boost his own ego. But the status of the gospel in these believer's lives is at stake. Unless Paul defends himself a whole body of people may fall into error. Paul was not going to surrender the church.

In the contemporary church today we are locked in the same struggle. Who is going to define the essence of the church? There is a place where sometimes we must speak not from a desire to build ourselves up. But from a desire to protect the credibility of the gospel message itself.

Paul in refuting these super apostles has used in 2 Corinthians 11 the rebuttal of pointing to his weaknesses. He begins in defending himself by saying the people that are aligned against me are always walking through steal doors so to speak. They're men of action, they're men of the spirit, They're men who move mountains. But your apostle Paul is not such a man. Why he says when he was surrounded after his conversion by a political force in Damascus and he would be seized, rather than being a super apostle and walking through the guards that were stationed at the city walls, rather than going through the closed city gates, he was such a super apostle and a man of God's faith and action and prayer that they let me down in a basket in the night over the city wall. They're super apostles. I'm chicken-hearted apostle. I escaped in a rather ignominious way.

He uses this in a satirical sense and in a humbling sense. Then beginning with 2 Corinthians 12 he launches into a digression. One aspect that the super apostles evidently greatly prized and boasted of was their insight and closeness to God by means of dreams and revelations. They were evidently saying things like Paul doesn't have these kinds of experiences. Indeed a leader can easily use something like his own spiritual experience or manufacture spiritual experience in order to gain a platform of respect, of spirituality, getting people to adhere to their ideas,

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enlisting support, getting finances. You could put on this badge of spirituality and visions and rend then in your four-color magazines and snow the Christian public with them. It creates an instant platform of both acclaim and listenability and financial resource. Paul contending with those persons as we do in the church today responds by giving an account of something he had not previously shared.

Do they have visions? Then listen to this vision: "I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained I will go to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up into the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know. God knows. I know that this man whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know but God knows was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things. Things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that but I will not boast about myself except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast I would not be a fool because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.

To keep me from being conceited because of the surpassingly great revelations there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power might rest on me. That is why for Christ's sake I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties for when I am weak then I am strong."

Here is a supernatural experience Paul had of a vision in which he does not even know if he was in or out of body state, the vision was so powerful. It is not a vision that is related anywhere else in scripture. We know from the book of Acts that there are five key moments in which Paul has visionary experiences that impact his life and change his course of direction. One is described in Acts 26 and actually refers back to Acts 9 to his vision on the road to Damascus of the risen Christ.

A second time that he has a vision in the book of Acts is found in Acts 22:17-21 where he recounts again back to his early Christian experience after his conversion he was in the temple of Jerusalem praying and he fell into a trance. The Lord told him that he would go and leave Jerusalem and be a messenger to the Gentiles and he obeys that vision. Very powerful experience.

Another account is in Acts 9:12 where he has a vision of Ananias coming to pray for him.

A fourth vision is Acts 16:9-10 he has the Macedonian call. A man from Macedonia stands before him in a vision saying, "Come over and help us."

A fifth vision in the book of Acts is when in Acts 18:9-10 in the middle of a very devastating and threatening time at Corinth the Lord in a vision in the night stands by him, tells him not to be afraid but to have courage for there are many people in that city.

Although Luke reports these visions, Paul in his writings never does report these visions. Perhaps an indication to us that Paul did not use visions as a means of getting his hooks into people. He did not use visions as a means of attaching spiritual credibility to his message. He

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did not use visions as a subtle means of manipulating other people, by making them feel that he had experiences that they could never have.

I find reticence in Paul to talk about his visionary experiences. Yet they are there in the scripture and I believe they're there for insight to make us hungry for intuitive experiences with God. We should be grateful therefore for the charges against Paul for that forces him there in Corinth to talk about something he has experienced.

It's clear that Paul talks out by talking in the third person. "I know a man..." who was this man? Is Paul talking about someone else or about himself? It's clear as you come to verse 7 that the incident described in verses 1-6 is none other than Paul himself for in verse 7 he says "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassing great revelations..." the surpassing great revelation of being caught up into the third heaven he has just recounted.

So what he is doing in finally being forced to talk about an experience is that at first he talks about it in terms of a 3rd person state. Only finally does he very discretely and subtly begin describing it of himself.

There's some astounding things about this vision that Paul has of God. One thing that immediately strikes me is the fact that he remembers the date. It was such a powerful experience he remembers that it was 14 years ago. When you do some detective work and look at the date for the writing of 2 Corinthians you will come to assessment that 2 Corinthians is written somewhere between the time of 56 and 58 A.D. It is at the end of all three of Paul's missionary journeys. Just before he will leave and go to Jerusalem where he's arrested and then comes into imprisonment. His missionary career is essentially at an end as he writes 2 Corinthians.

If you back date 14 years from 56 to 58 A.D. the time would be fixed at 42 to 44 A.D. that time would place Paul at Tarsus. It would be before any of his missionary journey's would have been taken. Long before the Macedonian call. Long before the revelation at Corinth. It would be even before Barnabus came and brought Saul of Tarsus to Antioch where from there Paul would launch his missionary career. He had drifted up to Tarsus now in SE Turkey. There he had parked himself in his hometown. Somewhere as his time in his hometown comes to a close just before he is to launch out on a missionary that in 15 years will catapult him into apostleship and put him down in the pages of history as the mighty apostle to the gentiles and the writer of 13 of the 27 works of the New Testament. Just before he is ready to launch into that incredibly expansive time in his life there comes this overpowering vision of the Lord. He cannot shake himself from it. So if and when there needs to be a time when he recites his visionary experiences he refers not to the road to Damascus, not to the experience in the temple, not to the Macedonian call, not to the experience at Corinth. He refers back instead to this moment when he would have still been at Tarsus.

People who have dramatic experiences with God dare those experiences. Time is marked by those experiences.

I know that I met with God at two significant moments in my youth – at the age of 10 and as a junior in college. I can never shake those meetings with God. They are an indelible part of my own life history.

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A second astounding feature of this experience and one that at first we're not tempted to take literally. But we must as we look at Paul's staggering to describe it. He does not know whether the experience he had was an in the body or an out of the body experience. He literally does not know whether for a period of time he left the flesh, the body. And actually as a spirit entity was caught up out of the soma, the body into the third heaven, the paradise of God. Look at how he staggers to describe this. "I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up into the 3rd heaven." Literal language of the Greek: "Whether it was in the body I know not or out of the body I do not know, God knows." He's used the verb "know" four times. Verse 3 "And I know that this man whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know but God knows." 3 more times he uses the verb "know." In the course of 2 verses he has used the verb "to know" 7 times. To indicate as he reflects back upon this experience he cannot actually figure out still to that very day 14 years later whether he had left his body or remained in his body when he had the experience.

He says he was "caught up into the 3rd heaven." The verb that is used here for "caught up" has dramatic reference other places in scripture. It means to take suddenly, to snatch or to be taken in such a way that no resistance is offered. Acts 8:39. When they came up out of the water the Spirit suddenly snatched up Philip." 1 Thessalonians 4:17 "After that we who are still alive and are left will be snatched up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." Revelation 12:5 uses this verb of Jesus in a telegraphic comment of the Lord "And her child [Mary's child] was snatched up to God and to his throne." A reference to the ascension.

Here in these references of snatching up Paul employs that word to describe an experience so real only God knows the condition of his spirit being.

A third remarkable thing about this vision is the insight it provides into the work that Christ did in his death and his resurrection.

Paul says that he was caught up into the 3rd heaven. Then later in verse 4 he will describe himself as being caught up to paradise. Therefore one would understand that the 3rd heaven and paradise are synonymous. There is a remarkable statement when you look at the Christian or the biblical record of where people go when they are dead.

The Jews thought the third heaven as the dwelling place of God. The first heaven was the atmospheric earth that we live in. We look up and see the blue sky. The second heaven was the galaxies, the stars and the solar system. We would call it space. The third heaven was beyond that. The dwelling place of God. People didn't think of 7th heaven. There is from biblical reference no 7th heaven. There's just the 3rd heaven, the highest heaven where God is.

In scripture when you look at the word "paradise" you will find that when Jesus died on the cross said to the thief "Today you will be with me in paradise." Yet when he speaks to Mary in John 20 after the resurrection and she starts holding him he says to her, "Don't go on holding me. I have not yet gone to my Father." On the one hand he told the thief that he was going to paradise and he would meet him there that day. But on the next hand he is telling Mary don't go on clutching me for I have not yet ascended to my Father. Yet Paul says when he was caught up to paradise he was caught up to the 3rd heaven where God is.

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If you look more closely at the scriptural record you find that in the Old Testament people thought that when they died they went to *Sheol*, the place of the dead. All people went to *Sheol*, the good and the bad. Jacob knew that when he died he'd be gathered to *Sheol*.

Later on as God granted other revelation in the scripture people began to understand that there was a righteous side of *Sheol* and a wrathful, wrongful, punishment side of *Sheol*. That is reflected in Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus where Abraham's bosom contained Lazarus. The rich man was in Hades and a great gulf was fixed. Notice Lazarus was not in God's presence, he was in Abraham's bosom and the Jews used paradise, the walled garden, the place of good estate. But going down to paradise, going down to Abraham's bosom as a distinguishment from the place of the damned.

Scriptures go on to tell us that when Jesus died he went down into Hades, Acts 2:27-3. But Hades could not contain him. Not only that 1 Peter tells us that he preached, 1 Peter 3:19 to the spirits that were in prison who had rebelled in Noah's day. Ephesians 4 tells us that when he came up out of the grave he led captivity captive. The only inference therefore I have to make by doing this little sketch is an insight of what Paul is caught up to here in 2 Corinthians 12, that because of Jesus' death and resurrection paradise was relocated. But until the time of Jesus' death and resurrection when people died they sort of went to the holding place of spirits. But when Jesus rises again from the dead he leads captivity captive and brings with him a host of redeemed. Therefore when Paul is caught up into paradise it is not a matter of Abraham's bosom. It is a place equal with the third heaven, the dwelling place of God. Paul does not in his writings look toward going *down*. Nor does he look to being gathered with Jacob's people. He looks to going up. "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." A remarkable detail floats back to us from this vision.

Another remarkable thing about this vision is whatever he heard or learned in this visionary experience he was forced to sit on it. He said he heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.

That is correspondent to what John experiences in Revelation 10:4 when in the panorama of unfolding prophetic events he talks about the sounding of seven thunders. He says "And when the 7th thunder spoke I was about to write but I heard a voice from heaven say 'Seal up what the 7 thunders have said and do not write it down.'" No one can ever tell us what is going to happen in the next human events of history until they know what's in the 7 thunders. In spite of all the books that have been published. When they can tell me what were in the 7 thunders then they can tell us what's going to happen next.

There's some experiences with God that are so sacred and so powerful and so overwhelming that they are meant to be matters of personal individual experience and that what happened in them was never meant to be shared.

There are some deep implications for us in this. One is that a spiritual experience with God on the visionary side may be so strong that it could even be an out of body experience.

Second, a vision or a revelation of God may come to us so powerfully that that vision or revelation remains with us the rest of our life.

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Third, since our existence is in God our real world is in his home not ours. There will come a day when all of us will be caught up into that third heaven if we have trusted in Christ.

Fourth, we might expect when God is ready to thrust us into some new responsibility or work that he will give us a powerful experience with him to sustain us in that work.

And fifth, the greater the spiritual honor the greater the personal price.

Paul says that because of the abundance of revelations that were given him a thorn in the flesh was also given to him, a messenger of Satan. Thorn in classical Greek was not used to refer to a thorn but a pale or a stake, a sharpened stick used to impale someone on. Or drive through them. Paul says it was in his flesh. And it was an agent of pain, a messenger of Satan. To keep him from being too exalted in his spirit because of his surpassing great revelations this thorn in the flesh tormented him. Buffeted. Smote him with fists. All this suggests that whatever the thorn was in Paul's life and many people have argued about what the thorn in the flesh was, whatever it was it was painful, it crippled his enjoyment of life, it frustrated his full efficiency, and it may have been humiliating to him personally.

God refused Paul's request to take it away and told him that his grace would be sufficient. Therefore Paul says when it comes to boasting I will boast about my weaknesses. He will marvel anew that God is able to do his most dramatic work for the better man of mankind in him through weaknesses than through his strengths. His visions were a source of personal encouragement to him or a source of personal direction to him. But they were not the primary means that others saw God at work in his life. The super apostles were all the time saying, "Have the vision and see God at work in my life. Here are my latest visions. Here are the three angels I've talked to lately and what they shared with me about affairs in the glory world!" But Paul did not base the work of God in someone else's life on what he was experiencing in his visionary states. Instead what he is saying is this: when people were moved, when they came to God, when they saw Christ in me, it was not that they saw the visions I saw, it was not even that they received the testimony of any vision I had. It was they saw me in my weakness. They saw when I was hurting. They saw when I was struggling. There were times when Paul struggled in so many ways, struggled to know the will of God and experience it, struggled to rise back up and go into a town after he had been pelted with rocks and his life nearly taken from him. Struggled with sin where he cries out in Romans 7 "O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death." His life was a life lived out in weakness where people saw the surpassing greatness of God coming through his sufferings, his weaknesses and saw that God was triumphant in his life and that this thorn in the flesh as mighty as it was could not defeat the grace of God in his life, could not frustrate Paul from going on, from doing God's work. And in the midst of that weakness God's power was continually made present as a benefit and as a blessing to others.

It is therefore with that spirit he returns to the rest of 2 Corinthians 12 to go on to boast about his weaknesses. It was through them that others were coming to an understanding of the truth. It is still in boasting of those weaknesses that we can look at Paul's last letter. His letter to Timothy, 2 Timothy, and find in that letter some very pathetic and poignant requests. He asks Timothy to bring him some things. Here he is the great apostle of the church and he's lonely. In prison, a basement kind of holding tank, in Rome waiting for execution. He asks Timothy, "Bring me the

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books, bring me the parchments, and bring me my cloak before winter. Come before winter.” He’s cold and he wants something to keep him warm.

The mighty apostle of the church has no miracle wand to wave over the prison and no angel came to him like as did with Peter to release him from prison. But in the midst of that weakness he cried out with words penned that encourage us all: “I have fought the fight. I have finished the course. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.” In the midst of his suffering and his weaknesses golden apples of revelation and truth witness to hearts from then until now.

I saw all of this as a word of counsel that when I continue speaking on experiencing God through experiencing God in dreams and revelations and walking on that side of spirituality that brings us into the realm where things can’t be figured out, that while we deeply want that and desire that we must never turn our eyes upon that as a test for our own effectiveness, or a test for being elevated to positions of responsibility and service in the kingdom of God.

Search as you will through the scriptures and you will never find persons assigned places of leadership in the body of Christ because they’ve had some spiritual gift such as a dream, a vision, or a revelation. They are put there because of spiritual, moral and ethical qualities. Our life has to be in balance. We have to have the hunger for the Lord in our deep inner being and with that our life must be planted on firm soil and growing in spiritual and moral character so that others can see Christ in us.

I have not had such an experience as Paul’s. But I covet the direct experience of God in my life. With that I recognize at the same time that when I look at the times when God has been most effective in my life personally and in my ministry it has been those very times I have been the weakest, the most under stress, and pressure, tired and the most consumed with personal perplexing problems for which I did not have solutions. In those times I have found the grace of Jesus Christ sufficient and powerful and you will find it too.

Our heavenly Father, we bow our hearts in your presence. We look at this man Paul again, your faithful servant, from the tunnel of time of centuries. We look back. We marvel that anyone’s experience could be so profound that they could be caught up in a revelation such as he was. There is desire in our heart to experience all that we’re capable of experiencing in you. To soar into the heavens in your presence. Some of us need to be lifted into the heavens because the world we’re living in is more like hell. There needs to be a time of rest within our being. Where we come apart from ourselves and withdraw from the anxiety and tension from the rooms in which we live into thy dwelling place. We take a moment to breathe deeply and relax. In our inner vision see you, the Lord of glory. So many images come floating across our mind as we think of being in your presence surrounded by millions of angelic and human beings who worship you at the center. We are struck in our hearts by the splendor, which compares to the poverty of our own existence. Our hearts in seeing that are at rest as we gather in your presence there. The image changes and becomes a garden, a paradise. A place where gentle shepherd gathers lambs on green hillsides and flowing brooks. We feel caught up, surrounded, picked up by you. Lord we have been hurt. Like a little lamb our leg has been broken, our wool has been matted. We have been very exposed to danger, to wolves. We know the fright of that exposure and the harm of that fall. Lord, we see you. Hold us. We hear again the word of the scripture coming from a man who

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knew what it was to be caught up into that third heaven, telling us that we are now seated with you in the heavenlies. That whether or not we have an overpowering vision that is so strong that we don't know whether we're in the body or out of the body. Our existence is now and with hands we reach out and touch material, and sit on things but there's another dimension of reality that is true. Simultaneously while we are here there is another place that we are – seated with you in the heavenlies, already in Christ, already reigning, already ruling, already anticipating the consummation of the ages when we'll be at rest. The struggles that we struggle with and the wars that wage about us will be over. Our home will be forever in you. Already, Lord, you move that into the present. You take us past the present time of fear, the fear of age, the fear of death, the fear of youth, the fear of what we will be, the fear of what will happen to our life. We move past all of that fear into your presence, caught up there, seated with you in the heavenlies. There we know that with us it will be well for you rule and so do we. You reign and so do we. You are at rest and your work is finished. So are we. We thank you for that. Lift us past the struggles. Lift us past the uncertainties. Lift us past the dilemmas we have in personal relationships, which ache and hurt. Let us see again that we're always in your presence. Thank you for being our high priest and for in the heavens wearing the vesture of a high priest. You who have us on your shoulders with our names engraved as precious writing on precious gems, you who as in the priesthood of old, wear us on your heart with our names inscribed on the vesture of your garment, on the precious stones that adorn your breast. We're in that place with you – a place of rest, a place of victory, a place of surety. Let us see that, Lord. And let us hold on to that. That we are now with you in the heavenlies. We thank you for your love and your mercy and your grace and your assurance in our hearts. We magnify the Lord and praise you. Hallelujah! We worship you.

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