

In Duties and in Sufferings Too

Benjamin Beddome (1717–1795)

In duties and in sufferings too,
Thy path, my Lord, I'd trace;
As Thou hast done, so would I do,
Depending on Thy grace.

With earnest zeal, 'twas Thy delight
To do Thy Father's will;
O may that zeal my love excite
Thy precepts to fulfil!

Un sullied meekness, truth, and love
Through all Thy conduct shine;
O may my whole deportment prove
A copy, Lord, of Thine!

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Tried with Fire: Lest I Should Be Exalted

Kevin T. Bauder

The apostle Paul was not given to self-aggrandizement. He understood himself to be the chief of sinners, rescued only by God's grace. Only when forced to defend his ministry and apostleship was he willing to talk about his gifts and attainments—and even then he spoke with a kind of wry embarrassment.

Nowhere did Paul talk about himself more than he did in 2 Corinthians. Under attack by the "super apostles," he adopted the tactic of ironically measuring himself against their claims. They held letters of recommendation from the most important figures; Paul saw the Corinthians themselves as his living letters of recommendation (2 Cor 3:1-3). They invited people to look at their appearance; Paul invited people to look at his heart (2 Cor 5:12). They were admired for their height; Paul told his readers to measure his height by the miles he traveled to take the gospel to them (2 Cor 10:12-13). They were eloquent orators; Paul responded that even if he wasn't an orator, he actually knew what he was talking about (2 Cor 11:5-6).

At the apex of these comparisons Paul came to visions and revelations of the Lord. False teachers like the "super apostles" typically claimed some sort of advanced revelation to which only they had access. At this point, however, Paul deployed a secret weapon—an event that he had never talked about before. Indeed, even now he refused to discuss it as his own experience, narrating it transparently in the third person. Undoubtedly, however, Paul was speaking of his own past.

What was the experience to which he appealed? Paul claimed that he was "caught up to the third heaven," or Paradise, where he heard "unspeakable words" which he was not even permitted to repeat (2 Cor 12:1-5). This was an astonishing claim—to have actually visited heaven itself. No "super apostle" could surpass that revelation.

Paul's critics were given to boasting, but their fantasies came nowhere close to Paul's reality. He was tremendously blessed, gifted, and privileged. He not only held the office of apostle but also had better grounds for boasting than any of his condescending critics.



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Given the high position in which Paul stood, he must have faced a very practical problem. What the first Baron Acton observed concerning power also applies to privilege: it tends to corrupt. Those who enjoy privileges may begin to believe that they deserve those privileges, then to demand them. To believe that one deserves privilege is pride; to demand it is hubris. Could even Paul have possibly stood in danger of these temptations?

According to Paul's own words, he could. He noted the danger that he might be "exalted above measure" (2 Cor 12:7), a Greek idiom that means to "have an undue sense of one's self-importance" (BDAG ὑπεραίρω). This temptation was particularly perilous in view of the abundance or greatness of the revelations that Paul had received. His privileges, while great, also opened a temptation to arrogance that might have brought him into spiritual disaster.

So it is with us, too, though our blessings, gifts, and privileges seem rather shrunken in comparison to Paul's. We fail to remember that we are the recipients of favor that we did not deserve. Once our blessings begin to seem commonplace, we easily forget that they are unmerited gifts and instead take them as a normal and expected part of our lives. If something interrupts our enjoyment of these privileges or our use of these gifts, we become annoyed—as if we claimed these things by right. We even begin to suspect that our blessedness elevates us above ordinary people. We find ourselves looking down upon the masses who do not share our privileges.

This neglect shows that our depravity is still with us. Nothing is easier for us than to slide into pride and hubris. God, however, knows our weakness, and He is prepared to protect us against it. We glimpse His protection at work through the example of Paul.

"Lest I should be exalted above measure," said Paul—by which he meant, "Lest I should think too highly of myself in view of the great revelations that I received"—something else was given to him. Besides his other gifts, God granted Paul a powerful endowment that would protect him against pride and hubris. What was it? Paul himself describes it as a "thorn in the flesh" and a "messenger of Satan to buffet me" (2 Cor 12:7). Twice Paul states that this thorn or messenger was God's gift to keep him from thinking too highly of himself.

What was this thorn in the flesh, this messenger of Satan? Some have tied it to Paul's supposed eye trouble. Others have theorized that Paul was epileptic. The words "messenger [angel] of Satan" may indicate demonic involvement. The fact is, however, that nobody knows exactly what Paul meant by his "thorn in the flesh," except that it must have included a painful and probably humiliating physical affliction. In other words, when Paul faced a possible temptation to arrogance, God protected him by giving him suffering.

For Paul, suffering was not the result of sin. It was armor against sin. God knew that the humiliation of suffering was necessary to protect Paul against a form of self-aggrandizement to which he might otherwise have been tempted. Paul needed the kind of shield that only suffering could supply, and so God granted it to him.

When we suffer, we might ask whether our sufferings are designed to balance out the blessings, gifts, and privileges that we have been granted. We already know that we are inclined to pride, so we should anticipate that the God who protected Paul from this temptation will also protect us. We should plan for God's blessings to be accompanied by the pain that He uses to keep us from arrogance. Under these circumstances we can embrace our afflictions, just as Paul embraced his, because they arrive as a gift from our Father.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
