

Did Paul Have an Out-of-Body Experience?

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Q: I have really gained a lot of insight on the soul, that it is not immortal, and what death really is. Thanks. But I am stuck on, where Paul talks about having an out of the body experience (II Corinthians 12:1-4). This doesn't make sense in light of the other things.

A: I appreciate your comments about the teachings on the soul and death.

I do understand your concern with II Corinthians 12. It is often hard, when approaching the Bible with new light, to be able to see clearly the true meaning of passages that have long been under the control of traditional interpretation. This passage is obviously one of those.

As you know, traditional interpretation will not allow this passage to be understood by the plain teaching of the rest of Scripture concerning the soul and death. So, let's take another look.

Since the idea that in this passage "Paul talks about having an out of the body experience" would violate other Scriptures, it *must* have another meaning.

"It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) how that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter" (II Corinthians 12:1-4).

Here is my current understanding of Paul's teaching in this passage:

#1. Whatever Paul is writing about, he clearly states three times, "I cannot tell."

Paul was unsure of what had actually happened. If Paul was unsure, obviously we can not know more about it than he did. Therefore, we can't establish any new teaching or doctrine based on Paul's own uncertainty.

#2. Whatever Paul is writing about, his words “in the body” and “out of the body” can’t violate the clear teaching of the rest of the Scriptures.

#3. The context of Paul’s words is not death, but “visions and revelations of the Lord.”

THE REALITY: According to verse 1, Paul is talking about *the reality* of “visions and revelations.”

THE SCENE: According to verse 2, *the scene* of these “visions and revelations” took place in “*the third heaven*.”

THE PROCESS: According to verses 2 and 3, Paul discusses the uncertainty of *the process* of the revelation. Paul was unsure if these “visions and revelations” in “*the third heaven*” were “in the body” or “out of the body.” He did not know whether they were received *bodily* (i.e., “in the body”) or *spiritually* (i.e., “out of the body”). In other words, he did not know if it was a *bodily* transportation into “*the third heaven*,” or whether it was a dream or trance (“out of the body” – outside of his body, i.e., outside of his natural sensory perception).

Paul was sure of *the reality* of the revelation; he was also sure of *the scene* of the revelation; however, what he was *unsure* of was *the process* of the revelation.

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