

“Third Heaven, a Thorn, and Grace”
2 Corinthians 12: 1-10

If you have watched a production of the wildly popular Broadway show “Hamilton,” you will notice an air of competition, keen competition, between each of the characters portraying Founding Fathers. “Ah but” you say, “those are fictionalized characters, molded for stage and screen!” Perhaps. But it was my privilege to go to Philadelphia in August of 2008 and tour the historic sites where most of America’s founding documents were drafted. As I heard a guide speak to us in Independence Hall, the early American statesmen came to life, and one thing was apparent: they were fiercely competitive, sometimes wanting to appear more important than others—like the giant John Hancock signature for instance on the Declaration of Independence—as one way to shine above others even though he was far from the major writer of the document. The major writer’s signature—Thomas Jefferson—is quite small toward the bottom. Jefferson—we were told on that hot day in August when I visited there—would go home and write the major parts of the declaration bringing his revisions back for votes until he and the Continental Congress were satisfied with it. . According to a Constitution Center blog from last August 2, it wasn’t until August 2, 1776 that:

56 members of the Second Continental Congress started signing the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia. Officially, the Congress declared its freedom from Great Britain on July 2, 1776, when it approved a resolution in a unanimous vote. After voting for independence on July 2, the group needed to draft a document explaining the move to the public. It had been proposed in draft form by the Committee of five (John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson) and it took two days for the Congress to agree on the edits. [Some things never change!] Thomas Jefferson was the main author [but one would never know it by looking at the size and order of the signatures on the document!] [*Interactive Constitution*, Scott Bomboy, August 2, 2020]

Whether an actor is on stage and wants the spotlight, or children are lining up on a playground to the cries of “Me first! Me First!” competition is alive and well in the human race. But that didn’t go on in the Bible, does it? Of course it! Do remember that Jacob stole the birthright from his brother Esau in Genesis 25? Today’s scripture from 2 Corinthians shows a competitive spirit guiding his words, words that have puzzled people over the ages. Let’s unpack it here today.

Before we dig into 2 Corinthians 12, let’s get the backstory. There was a group of people who allegedly came from Jerusalem to Corinth and they were known as “Super apostles.” Really! Pastor John T. McFadden, who I referenced last week, put it this way: “Self-professed ‘super-apostles’ had captured the imaginations of many in the Corinthian church with their tales of their personal experiences in the spiritual realm. One has only to click through the television channels to be reminded that contemporary super apostles still seek to establish their authority through vivid descriptions of personal revelations that demonstrate their privileged relationship with the Almighty. One influential televangelist has even taken to delivering an annual set of ‘predictions for the new year’ received via his own hotline to heaven. Today, as in Corinth, some find such tales persuasive.” [*Feasting on the Word*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009, p. 206.]

With that background, we find Paul showing his competition chops: he describes going to the “third heaven.” “Paul, who years earlier had been blessed with a profound vision of the heavenly realm, was clearly tempted to go toe to toe with the super apostles by offering vivid descriptions of his own (2-4). But, he knew that a ‘my vision is better than your vision!’ shouting match would only concede his opponent’s arguments that inward spiritual experience is a valid basis for religious authority.” [McFadden, p. 208.] So he described a realm that had mystical

connotations drawn from his thorough knowledge of scripture: The “third heaven” or “heaven of heavens,” alluded to in Genesis 28:12; Deuteronomy 10:14, and First Kings 8:27. It was imagined to be a spiritual realm that was very unique, where angels dwelled with God. Generally such a place is heaven, but Paul wanted to be on top of the comparisons with the super apostles, so he pulled out the “third heaven” term, (an experience he may have actually had) and said it in a challenging way so the Corinthians might trust *his* words again instead of theirs. It can be a challenge to regain authority from another person or group. But then Paul must have taken a breath, put his ego in check, and humbled himself as he had learned from his Lord. He alluded to a mysterious “thorn in the flesh,” (never intending to really describe whatever it was,) but as a way to ground himself again. It is good advice when your sense of competition for spiritual gain and authority is starting to make you feel like bragging. It is then that we all should remember whatever we think of as our “thorn in the flesh” is and ground yourself with it. Paul’s wake-up call from his Lord he shared with the Corinthians: Jesus told me, ‘My power is made perfect in (your) weakness.’ That is the key. Jesus’ power is made perfect in our weaknesses. As mentioned earlier, even televangelists over the years have clearly let their own egos take charge in certain instances. And certain even the framers of our Constitution, and the writers of the Declaration of Independence had egos on display. Looking back at Normal Rockwell types of paintings, we may not see the big personalities, but then again, we might. People through the ages who have stopped striding in their *own* strength but resting in the strength of the Lord, find their peace and their purpose.

Finally, from the Forward in Eric Metaxas’ book *Amazing Grace, William Wilburforce and the Heroic Campaign to end Slavery*. There it is written: “History’s landscape is littered with great people whose names have disappeared from our collective memory. Such has been the unfortunate fate that befell the heroic William

Wilburforce—humanitarian, parliamentarian, and the voice of the voiceless—fatefully receded somewhere into the far-off memory of Americans over the past century. Wilburforce and his name used to once stood as monuments to freedom, faith, and humanity. [*AMAZING GRACE*, New York: HarperOne 2007, Forward.]

Even on this Independence Day, let us recall and even research the people of principles—and especially the people of faith—who founded our nation, and give thanks when purpose prevailed over ego. Pray that God keeps shedding holy grace on America, for God's grace and providence is needed now as in the past. And thanks be to God for the Apostle Paul; for honesty about himself and the forthright messages he offered to change the world for Christ. May we acknowledge our own weaknesses in our daily prayers as well. May God bless us, and may God bless America.

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