

Paradise Visited

2 Corinthians 12:1–12

July 29, 2026 — New Baptist Church
Pastor Trent Eastman

Archaeological Moment: A Chronology of Paul

Before we open the text, I want to spend a few minutes on what I am calling an archaeological moment — and tonight, that moment is a timeline.

One of the great gifts that ancient historians and archaeologists have given us is the ability to anchor the life of Paul to actual, datable events in Roman and Jewish history. When you line those events up alongside the book of Acts and Paul's own letters, you get something remarkable: a chronology precise enough to tell us not just *what* happened in Paul's life, but *when*. And in a passage like 2 Corinthians 12, the *when* turns out to matter enormously.

The anchor points work like this. The death and resurrection of Jesus can be placed in AD 33 — a date supported by the tenure of Pontius Pilate, who governed Judea from AD 26 to 36, and by Caiaphas, who served as High Priest until AD 36. The stoning of Stephen follows in approximately AD 34, and Saul's encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus Road falls around AD 35. After his conversion, Paul preaches in the synagogues, then travels to Arabia — almost certainly the region around Mount Sinai — before returning to Damascus. He escapes the city under King Aretas and makes his first visit to Jerusalem, which Galatians 1:18 places three years after his conversion, putting it around AD 38. He is then sent on to Tarsus, his hometown, and there the trail goes quiet.

Acts goes on without him. From roughly AD 38 to 43, Paul is simply absent from the narrative. Scholars sometimes call these the “silent years.”

The story picks back up around AD 43 or 44, when Barnabas goes to find Paul in Tarsus and brings him to Antioch. We can date this move with confidence because Josephus records the death of King Agrippa in AD 44 — the same Agrippa whose death appears in Acts 12. Around this same period, Barnabas and Paul carry famine relief to Jerusalem, a famine also attested by Josephus. The first missionary journey begins around AD 46, and it includes the conversion of the proconsul Sergius Paulus, which can be dated to approximately 46 or 47 AD. The Jerusalem Council follows in AD 49.

The second missionary journey runs from roughly AD 50 to 52. We know this because of two remarkable pieces of evidence. First, Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome around AD 49 —

an event referenced in Acts 18 and confirmed by both Josephus and the Roman historian Dio Cassius, who records that the Jews were “constantly making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus.” Second, and even more precisely, an inscription discovered at Delphi mentions Gallio as proconsul of Achaia, allowing us to date his tenure from July of AD 51 to July of AD 52. Since Acts 18:12 places Paul before Gallio’s judgment seat, and since Paul had already been in Corinth for nearly two years at that point, we can pin the planting of the Corinthian church with considerable confidence.

The third missionary journey begins around AD 53. Paul spends three years in Ephesus, as he later tells the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:31. That brings us to approximately AD 56 — which is when Paul writes his second letter to the Corinthians.

Now look at what that dating does to this text.

“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.”

Fourteen years before AD 56 lands us squarely around AD 42 — right at the end of Paul’s silent years in Tarsus. That is not a coincidence. That is the key that unlocks this passage.

The Silent Years and the Hidden Vision

Imagine Paul sitting in Tarsus.

The excitement of Damascus has faded. The brief visit to Jerusalem is behind him. The churches are growing, but they are growing without him. Peter is preaching. The apostles are leading. Barnabas is ministering in Antioch. Meanwhile, Paul has vanished from the pages of Acts.

Day after day he wakes up in the city where he grew up. Perhaps he makes tents to support himself. Perhaps he preaches in the local synagogues. But the great calling he received on the Damascus Road seems to have stalled. I wonder if he felt like God had forgotten him.

Have you ever felt that way? You know He called you. You know His promises are true. Yet the days become months, and the months become years. Life settles into an ordinary routine. Doors remain closed. You begin to wonder whether your greatest moments are behind you rather than ahead of you.

It is during exactly this season — when Paul may have felt most forgotten, most unused — that God did something extraordinary.

God caught him up into Paradise.

The language here is important. Paul did not merely hear from God, and he did not simply receive a vision *of* God. He was *caught up*. Taken. Transported to the very place — the place he will call paradise — where God Himself dwells. For a brief moment, the veil between heaven and earth was pulled back. Paul saw realities he would never fully describe. He heard things he was not permitted to repeat. He experienced the immediate presence of God in a way so overwhelming that fourteen years later he still spoke of it only reluctantly, and almost as though he were speaking of someone else.

What is remarkable is not merely that Paul was caught up to the third heaven. What is remarkable is that he never used it to build his reputation. He waited fourteen years before mentioning it, and even then only because false apostles had forced his hand. Throughout those fourteen years, he preached Christ, endured beatings, hunger, imprisonment, rejection, sleepless nights, and relentless hardship — without ever saying, “Let me tell you what I saw.”

Instead, that hidden encounter became a hidden reservoir.

The Damascus Road gave Paul his commission. Paradise gave him endurance. The Damascus Road told him what he was called to do. Paradise reminded him why it was worth doing.

For those next fourteen years, Paul would be stoned at Lystra, beaten with rods at Philippi, mocked in Athens, opposed in Corinth, and nearly killed in Ephesus. Yet through it all he carried within him a certainty that no suffering could erase. He had seen the glory that awaited him. He had tasted, however briefly, the joy of God’s immediate presence. And so passages like Romans 8:18 take on a different color when you remember who wrote them:

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

Paul was not speaking theoretically. He knew that glory. He had seen enough of it to spend the next fourteen years gladly suffering for Christ.

There is an encouragement here for every believer living through what feels like the silent years. God’s greatest work in your life may not happen on the public stage. Some of His deepest work in you takes place when no one notices and nothing seems to be advancing. Before God entrusted Paul with influencing the Roman Empire, He first drew him into His own presence. Sometimes the greatest gift God gives His servants is not a larger ministry but a deeper enjoyment of Himself.

And here is something worth sitting with: Paul did not spend the next fourteen years trying to get back to Paradise. He spent them helping others find Christ. Once you have truly enjoyed the presence of God, ministry is no longer driven by the need to prove yourself. It becomes the joyful overflow of having already found your greatest treasure.

The Third Heaven: What Scripture Tells Us About Paradise

Now to the second mystery in this passage — the third heaven itself.

“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.”

— 2 Corinthians 12:2–4

What is the third heaven?

The answer begins in Hebrew. The Hebrew word for heaven is *sha(nayim)*, and it is always used in the plural — never *a heaven*, always *the heavens*. Genesis 1:1 sets the pattern immediately: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” From Genesis 1 alone, we can identify at least two distinct heavens, and they point us toward a third.

The first heaven is the atmosphere — the sky above us, the expanse through which birds fly. Genesis 1:20 describes it this way: “Let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” This is the heaven of clouds and weather and created creatures moving through the air. Deuteronomy 11:11 speaks of rain coming from this heaven. It is the familiar sky we see every day.

The second heaven is the cosmic realm — the universe, the place of stars and planets and the great lights God set in place. Genesis 1:14–18 describes God placing the sun, moon, and stars “in the expanse of the heavens.” Psalm 19:1–2 celebrates this second heaven: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.” Deuteronomy 4:19 warns Israel not to worship the sun, moon, and stars — “the host of heaven” — which belong to this second realm.

Now Genesis 1 does not explicitly name a third heaven, but it implies one clearly enough. When God creates the heavens and the earth, He is already somewhere. There is a place from which He speaks and acts and sees — a place that precedes and transcends the heavens He is making. And as you move through the Old Testament, that place becomes increasingly visible. It is described as God’s dwelling place, His throne room, the realm of His immediate presence.

Solomon prays at the dedication of the Temple: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). Isaiah hears the LORD say: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool” (Isaiah 66:1). The Psalmist declares: “The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD’s throne is in heaven” (Psalm 11:4).

And the Old Testament gives us glimpses of this third heaven. Jacob sees a ladder stretching from earth to the very gate of heaven in Genesis 28. Moses and the elders ascend Sinai and eat in the presence of God, beholding the pavement beneath His feet in Exodus 24. Isaiah is caught up into the throne room and hears the seraphim cry “Holy, holy, holy” in Isaiah 6. Daniel sees the Ancient of Days enthroned in Daniel 7. These are not visions of the sky or the cosmos. They are windows into the place where God dwells.

The New Testament carries this same layered understanding into Greek. The word ο οὐρανός (*ouranos*) — heaven, sky — is used across all three registers. Jesus speaks of “the birds of the air” in Matthew 6:26 and of the stars falling from heaven in Matthew 24:29. But He also teaches His disciples to pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” (Matthew 6:9). That third register — the transcendent realm of God’s immediate presence — is what Paul means by the third heaven. And the word he uses to describe it is *paradise*.

That word is not chosen casually. When Jesus hangs on the cross beside a dying thief and says, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43), He is not describing a garden in the countryside. He is describing His own presence. When Paul is caught up into the third heaven and caught up into paradise — he uses both phrases for the same event — he is being taken to the place where Christ is. And when Revelation 2:7 promises that “to the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God,” the image is explicit: paradise is not merely a pleasant place but a restored and perfected one, centered on the presence of God.

So what does paradise tell us about heaven? Let me press into the word.

Paradise is not disembodied floating on clouds. Paul himself cannot determine whether he had a body or not — he says twice that he does not know — which suggests that the experience was so overwhelming, so full, that the question of embodiment barely registered. The point is not the absence of a body but the fullness of God’s presence.

Paradise is not a reward for good behavior. It is a restored relationship. God’s original purpose was to dwell with His image-bearers in a place of beauty, communion, and delight. Eden was not merely a garden — it was a sanctuary. Paradise is Eden restored and perfected.

This means paradise is a place of perfect delight. The Psalmist knew it: “In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11). It is a place of complete fellowship with God — the fellowship that was broken in the fall, partially restored in the covenant, and now made permanent. Revelation 21:3 puts it with stunning simplicity: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.” Paradise means the tree of life is there (Revelation 2:7), which means paradise means abundance, not scarcity. It means beauty, peace, and security — nothing unclean can enter. It means home. It means communion with the people of God and unceasing worship.

Paradise implies perfect holiness and therefore complete satisfaction. Every longing of the human heart finally finds its fulfillment in God. Augustine said it well: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in You.” Paradise is where the restlessness ends.

Paradise implies intimate knowledge of God — not knowledge *about* Him, but knowledge *of* Him, the way you know someone whose face you can see. Paul would later write to the Corinthians: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Faith gives way to sight. The partial gives way to the whole.

Paradise implies immediate, conscious fellowship after death. The thief would be with Christ *today* — not eventually, not after some intermediate process, but that same afternoon. Paul told the Philippians that his desire was “to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Philippians 1:23). Not to cease, not to sleep, but to be *with Christ*.

Paradise implies that every earthly joy is a shadow of a coming reality. Every beautiful sunset, every mountain vista, every wedding celebration, every child’s laughter, every friendship that runs deeper than words — all of it points beyond itself to the greater joy found in the presence of God. We were made for this. The longing that beauty produces in us is not an end in itself; it is an arrow.

And paradise implies that words fail. Paul says it plainly: he “heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.” The Greek suggests both *cannot* — the language simply is not adequate — and *may not* — there is a holy restraint, a sense that some things belong only to that realm. This is why Scripture describes heaven primarily through images and metaphors rather than exhaustive definitions. The reality surpasses the description.

What This Means for Us

What, then, does this passage finally tell us?

It tells us that heaven is real — not symbolic, not imaginary, not a metaphor for a state of mind. Paul was *somewhere*. It was an actual place.

It tells us that heaven is beyond our full description, but not beyond our anticipation. We can know enough to be sustained, even if we cannot know everything.

It tells us that heaven centers on God. Notice that Paul says almost nothing about the scenery. Everything converges on the presence of God Himself. Heaven is paradise because *God is there*.

And it tells us that the vision of heaven produces not pride but humility. Remarkably, Paul never boasts about visiting heaven. He boasts in weakness. The heavenly vision does not become the foundation of his ministry. God's grace does.

What Paul saw was paradise — and paradise is life with Christ. This is why he can write from a Roman prison with such stunning certainty: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). He knew where death led. He had been there. He had tasted it. He had been caught up into the very presence of the one he served.

But — and this is crucial — what Paul saw in that moment was not the final destination. Paradise is an intermediate dwelling place. It is the threshold, not the home.

God's ultimate work, His final redemption, is something even more remarkable than a soul dwelling in the presence of God. It is the restoration of creation itself — a new heaven and a new earth. John writes in Revelation 21:1: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.” Notice the Greek uses the singular — not multiple layered heavens, not a separation between God's realm and creation's realm, but a unified cosmos. One creation. One reality. Where God Himself dwells fully and permanently with His people.

This is what makes paradise not an ending but a beginning. Paul's vision of Christ's presence sustained him through unimaginable suffering for fourteen years because he knew it was pointing to something greater still — the day when heaven and earth would no longer be separated, when the veil would not merely be parted but entirely removed, and God would dwell among us in a creation fully restored.

Eden lost. Paradise visited. Creation restored.

That is the arc of redemption. And Paul lived every day of his ministry inside that story, running hard toward its conclusion.

So can we.