

13. The visions and the thorn

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Ever met one of those people who seems to have it all together? Someone who has the looks, the brains, the talent and the personality, all rolled into one? You are probably thinking about the popular guy or gal from your high school. You can be assured that that person is no longer hot like before. He or she probably became overweighted average working American.

Intelligence, giftedness, and spiritual depth are all blessings from God, to be used for His purposes and glory. No matter how great our abilities, regardless of how well honed our skills, every good thing about us is a gift from the Father. The problem is that we face a daily temptation to glory in our own accomplishments – the sin of pride.

In my opinion, 2 Corinthian chapter 12 is the zenith of this Book. So far, apostle Paul challenged the Corinthian Christians, encourage them, instructed them, but now he is flashing his visions and revelations that he had not mentioned before as the last resort.

A. THE VISIONS & REVELATIONS FROM THE LORD

2 Corinthians 12:1 It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord:

Paul saw the glorified Christ on the very day he was converted – Acts 9:3 & 22:6.

He saw a vision of Ananias coming to minister to him – Acts 9:12.

He also had a vision from God when he was called to minister to the Gentiles – Acts 22:17.

During his ministry, he had visions from God to guide him and encourage him. It was by a vision that he was called to Macedonia – Acts 16:9.

When the ministry was difficult in Corinth, God encouraged Paul by a vision – Acts 18:9-10.

After his arrest in Jerusalem, Paul was again encouraged by a vision from God – Acts 23:11.

An angel appeared to him in the midst of the storm and assured him that he and the passengers would be saved – Acts 27:23.

Along with these special visions that related to his call and ministry, spiritual revelations of divine truth were also communicated to Paul. God gave him a profound understanding of the plan of God. Certainly Paul understood the mysteries of God.

2 Corinthians 12:2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago--whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows-- such a one was caught up to the third heaven. 3 And I know such a man-- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- 4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. 5 Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. 6 For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me.

This dating by Paul does little to help us know when this happened, because scholars are not in agreement regarding when 2 Corinthians was written exactly.

Suggestions have been made the experience he describes happened during Paul's ten years in Syria and Cilicia, or at his stoning in Lystris that was mentioned in Acts 14:19, or during his time in Antioch from Acts 13:1-3. Some insist that this would be the period in Paul's life between right after his conversion and his visit from Barnabas in Acts 11:25-26.

The important thing to notice is that Paul kept quiet about this for fourteen years, and now he mentions it reluctantly.

It's helpful to think of this statement in terms of horizontal and vertical meaning. Horizontally – among people – it is sometimes necessary to display our credentials. There are times when people may need to see our resumes. But vertically – before God – it is never valuable. In fact, it is downright laughable. Can you imagine the Creator of the universe being impressed by our pitiful list of accomplishments?

When I was working for the Yellow Pages as a graphic designer, I used to design ads for doctors and lawyers who are so impressed with themselves, their own credentials and accomplishments. I am not discounting their achievements by any means, but wanting to show them off every time they turn around is bit much.

At this point in History, it was necessary for Paul to show his resume to the Corinthians, even though they'd seen it before. But this time, he reveals something that he's never mentioned before, an event that is not recounted anywhere else in the Scriptures – the revelation of the third heaven.

Many might ask, what really happened to Paul? Was he carried up in the body to heaven, or did his spirit separate itself from his body and go there? The whole point of the passage is that if Paul didn't know, we can't know. Therefore, speculation at this point is useless. I go back to the same principle I mentioned to you before: "Where the Bible is silent, we need to be silent."

Apparently, Paul had been in the literal presence of God Himself. Most people who have had this kind of unusual experiences are ready to sign book deals before the ink is dry in their manuscripts. Paul, though, gives only the sketchiest details, and even then, he explains them in modesty.

Paul adamantly wanted his readers to understand that he is nothing more than what they've known him to be. Just a sincere, devoted man of God, with flaws and weaknesses like theirs.

B. THE GIFT OF THORN FROM THE LORD

2 Corinthians 12:7-8 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

The Lord knows how to balance our lives. If we have only blessings, we may become proud. So He permits us to have burdens as well. Paul's great experience in heaven could have ruined his ministry on earth. So God, in His goodness, permitted satan to buffet Paul in order to keep him from becoming proud.

Theologians have speculated on what the "thorn" symbolizes, although Paul wasn't specific. John Calvin suggested that it represents 'spiritual temptations'; Martin Luther

says 'temptations and persecutions'; Some believe it was 'sexual temptation' – since Paul was celibate. Others have guessed disfigurement or disease such as epilepsy, malarial fevers, or severe headaches. Some speculate that it was a speech impediment. The most common theory is that it was failing eyesight, in light of his comment in his letter to the Galatians 6:11.

Galatians 6:11 See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!

What is a thorn in the flesh? When we think of a thorn, we think of a somewhat minor irritation. But the root word Paul uses for thorn here describes a 'tent stake', not a 'thumbtack'. Even a thumbtack would hurt me. I get irritated by a underwear T-shirt tags. I love tagless T-shirts.

In a strange way, the thorn was given by God, but it was also a messenger of satan. I am sure that satan jumped at God's permission to afflict Paul. But God had a purpose in it all, and allowed satan's messenger to successfully keep Paul from being exalted above measure.

Satan was permitted to buffet Paul. The word 'Buffet' means "to beat, to strike with the fist." The tense of the verb indicates that this pain was either constant or recurring.

The mystery of human suffering will not be solved completely in this life. Sometimes we suffer simply because we are human. Our bodies change as we grow older, and we are susceptible to the normal problems of life. The same body that can bring us pleasures can also bring us pains. The same family members and friends that delight us can also break our hearts. This is a part of the "human comedy."

Sometimes we suffer because we are foolish and disobedient to the Lord. Suffering also is a tool God uses for building godly character. Certainly Paul was a man of rich Christian character because he accepted God's way to be mold through the painful experiences of his life.

Was Paul sinning when he prayed to be delivered from satan's buffeting? I don't think so. It is certainly a normal thing for a Christian to ask God for deliverance from sickness and pain. God has not obligated Himself to heal every believer whenever he prays. But He has encouraged us to bring our burdens and needs to Him.

There are those who want us to believe that an afflicted Christian is a disgrace to God. "If you are obeying the Lord and claiming all that you have in Christ," they say, "then you will never be sick." I have never found that teaching in the Bible. If Paul had access to "instant healing" because of his relationship to Christ, then why didn't he make use of it for himself and for others?

What a contrast between Paul's two experiences! Paul went from paradise to pain, from glory to suffering. He tasted the blessing of God in heaven and then felt the buffeting of satan on earth. He went from ecstasy to agony, and yet the two experiences belong together. His one experience of glory prepared him for the constant experience of suffering, because he knew that God was able to meet his need.

C. GOD'S GRACE IS ENOUGH

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather

boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The Greek term for 'Perfected' means "complete." It is the same word Jesus cried out as He hung on the cross: "Tetelestai!" – "It is finished!" The reason the pain couldn't be removed is that it created in Paul a necessary incompleteness and a dependency on God. God used Paul's weakness to demonstrate His own grace and sufficiency despite the circumstances. Once Paul understood, he stopped asking for this weakness to be removed.

It sounds like we have a sadistic God who gives pain to a human and telling him to live with it. That is the picture that non-believer would see. But once we see the picture from the point view of God, it is a completely different story.

To explain this, we must go all the way back to the Garden of Eden. The first couple sinned against God in spite of perfect setting by God Himself. Because of their sin, they could not come to God. So He sent His only begotten Son to bridge the gap. To build a bridge between the fallen mankind and God, it required a tremendous expense. Jesus, the Son of God and the second person in Godhead paid it with His own life.

In other words, grace is "God's Riches Available at Christ's Expense."

When Paul, a former persecutor of Christianity became an apostle of Jesus Christ, he chose to be whatever God wanted him to be. God, in His infinite wisdom and love, used His own Son to build the bridge between God and man, He used His apostle Paul to show us that His grace is sufficient for everything by giving him the revelation of the heaven and the thorn to keep him humble.

We really don't believe God's grace is sufficient until we believe we ourselves are insufficient. For many of us, especially in American culture, this is a huge obstacle. We are the people who idolize the "self-made man" and want to rely on ourselves. But we can't receive God's strength until we know our weakness. We can't receive the sufficiency of God's grace until we know our own insufficiency.

Grace is the favor and love of God in action. It is easy to believe in grace for the past and the future, but to rest in it for the immediate necessity is true faith.

In the Christian life, we get many of our blessings through transformation, not substitution. When apostle Paul prayed three times for the removal of his pain, he was asking God for a substitution: "Give me health instead of sickness, deliverance instead of pain and weakness." God transformed Paul's weakness into strength.

Paul won the victory, not by substitution, but by transformation. He discovered the sufficiency of the grace of God.

God uses many things to shape us into Christlikeness. Here are a few; no doubt you can add several more:

- 1) By meeting our needs when we are helpless, God teaches us **TRUST**.
- 2) By making us wait for what we need or want, God teaches us **PATIENCE**.
- 3) By stretching us beyond the realm of the familiar, God teaches us **VISION**.
- 4) By taking us through the consequences of wrong choice, God teaches us **VALUES**.

- 5) By allowing us to fail and make mistakes, God teaches us **WISDOM**.
- 6) By permitting pain and affliction, God teaches us **HUMILITY**.
- 7) By involving us in the lives of difficult people, God teaches us **UNSELFISHNESS**.

Do you see the one characteristic every item on that list has in common? They are all unpleasant or uncomfortable. The difficulty of life send us on our knees before the Father and provides the motivation to depend on Him and change our ways to His.

D. APPLICATIONS

- 1) Instead of focusing on what we can't do because of our inabilities, let's focus on how that inability can lead to a greater dependence on God.
- 2) Instead of reacting to pain as an enemy, let's remain teachable.
- 3) Instead of thinking of physical affliction as a barrier to being an effective Christian, let's use that difficulty as our stepping stone to reach out to the non-believers around us.