

### 3,12,26 2 Cor. 12:1-15 Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: 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. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. 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.

We spent quite a bit of time last week talking about how much Paul hated to have to boast to convince the Corinthians that the false apostles who were discrediting Paul were lying and deceiving them. So, I won't go back over that again now, but there are a couple phrases in this section of 2 Cor. 12 that we need to look at because they contribute immensely to Paul's authority.

At some point around 14 years prior to writing this epistle, whether Paul actually left his body or was shown these things in a vision, Paul wasn't sure; but he *was* sure it happened and he wanted the Corinthians to know this, but he also wanted them to know that this event was all grace and was not done to make Paul some kind of super-apostle. That's why he qualifies this experience with vs. 5, "Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities." He removed himself by using the third person to identify the one experiencing this and returns to first person to focus back on what matters – his "infirmities".

As we saw last time, as amazing as it was to be caught up to heaven and shown things no man has seen, Paul considered his sufferings, not his 'spiritual experiences' to be his qualifications for ministry.

Paul doesn't care whether others believe this or not, he doesn't care if this is popular or not, or if it causes others to view him as a fool; he has walked with the Lord long enough, and has been shown enough by revelation to know, beyond

doubt, that a man who has never suffered, one who has never been broken by the Lord, can never minister life to others. We aren't here just to have 'spiritual experiences'; we're here to bring Life to others.

Paul knows this to be true by experience, by revelation and by life. So, in 2 Cor. 11:30 he wrote, "If it's necessary for me to cite my qualifications or credentials for this ministry, I will present the things which demonstrate my suffering."

In Paul's mind, nothing did more to prove his qualifications to lead God's people than what the Lord took him through to prepare and shape him for that role. Paul knew that suffering brought him into a much deeper knowledge of Christ than anything else would have done.

There's something else implied in Paul's 'caught up to heaven' experience that I don't think we should overlook, especially in this generation of Christian sensationalism. Listen to these comments by Ironside;

This man kept it a secret between himself and God for over fourteen years. This is very unlike us. Knowing myself as well as I do, if I had been in the third heaven yesterday, I would be telling you about it this morning. I would forget everything else and tell you what a wonderful time I had in the third heaven, and then if you believed me, you would look at me and say, "What a saint he must be that God should want his company in the third heaven!" But I would be getting glory to myself through talking about this. That is probably the reason Paul kept it a secret; he did not want people to think of him. He did not mind telling of the hard things; he did not mind speaking of the time when he was ignominiously let down over a wall in a basket. That was something that people would sneer at, laugh at, but such a wonderful experience as being caught up into the third heaven he would keep to himself until the proper time.

The amount of self-promotion among contemporary podcasters and pastors is off the charts, but could any of us honestly say that we'd keep something like that a secret for 14 years rather than risk taking even an ounce of glory being taken away from Christ? It just shows us, again, a very practical example of the thinking of

someone who has denied themselves and lives only for the glory of God. Everything that type of person does and says is run through the sift of “who gets the glory in what I’m thinking about saying?”

So, back to our text; the application of the Cross (which Paul calls “death”) was at work in him so that life could be brought to others;

(2 Cor. 4:8-12) We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are confused, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying (the Cross) of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then, death (the Cross) is working in us, but life in you.

This is the principle of death unto resurrection that opens the way in us for the life of Jesus to be freely manifested through us to others.

In the next section of 2 Cor. 12, Paul goes into detail explaining what the Lord did in his life to break him and in that sense “qualify” him to bring spiritual life to others. I really don’t understand how the church in general, and pastors in specific, can expect to genuinely offer spiritual life as a fragrance to either the lost or the saved while nearly completely ignoring the process the Lord has established that makes that possible.

It's been this way throughout history- no Wilderness, no Canaan, no Cross, no Resurrection. Heb. 12 makes it clear that all those God receives are trained to be effective vessels for His service through what He says, “. . . is not joyful, but grievous”. I know none of us want to go through boot camp in order to become effective soldiers for Christ, but we can’t go from infancy to maturity by pretending that the lessons learned in adolescence are irrelevant.

And every writer in the Bible admits that what is gained by this discipline or training is more than worth what we have to go through to get there. It’s not just a necessity; it’s an incredible privilege and it’s the only way Christ can be formed in us, which is the whole purpose of our existence.

That's one of the reasons (as we saw in 2 Cor. 11) that Paul narrows down his personal credentials to this;

If it's necessary that I boast about what qualifies me to bring the Life of Christ to others, I will boast in detail about my sufferings which has made this happen.

And our next passage in 2 Cor. 12:7-10 is a personal example of Paul getting specific about what made Paul, Paul - and explaining why it was so necessary for him to experience this;

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. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 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. 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.

It's impossible to understand, let alone experience, the strength of Christ without first experiencing how weak we are without Him. And that can't happen unless we are put into situations that are completely beyond any hope of resolution apart from God's direct intervention.

Each of us is different, with different elements of our character potentially responsible for grieving or quenching the Spirit, preventing Him from radiating the life and strength of Christ thorough us to others. For Paul, it appears that pride (his tendency toward 'self-exaltation') was the main thing that, if unchecked, unconquered, it would block the humility of Christ from coming through him.

God knew that Paul would never be able to effectively overcome his pride no matter how clearly he saw it as a problem or how much effort he personally put into setting his pride aside. Paul was powerless against this, so God had to step in and use a thorn the flesh (some form of extreme, chronic physical pain) to break

Paul's self-sufficiency and teach him, to the core of his being, what it means to exchange his life for Christ's life.

Paul wrote things like, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (in Gal. 2:20) but knowing this as a theological principle that we are all meant to pursue does not make it happen. The only thing that can make it real for Paul or us, is what we just read in 2 Cor. 12.

We'll look at some of the words and their meanings so the passage as a whole will make sense, but as I said, even if we fully grasp what this means, that won't make it real in our soul – it won't become part of our character to live by faith, to live by dependence on the Lord, until we know in a way that is extremely personal how weak our weakness actually is, and then discover what it's like to have the strength of the Spirit of Christ sustain us.

We can take that reality, which in Paul's case applied to the problem of self-sufficiency or pride, and we can apply that to literally every part of our own character that needs to be transformed from what it is now to what it will become when our training is completed.

So, if a "thorn" is needed for the transformation of a part of who we are, then something else will be needed for all the other parts. The process began when we were saved, and in one form or another it will continue until the goal is reached. Most theologians define all of this as our "salvation" involving three phases:

Justification, Sanctification and Glorification (or perfection). Justification removes all of our sins from being a barrier to our access to heaven; Sanctification is lifelong process of having Christ increasingly formed in us and Glorification is our perfect state in eternity.

Justification frees us from the penalty of sin; sanctification progressively frees us from the power or control of sin; and Glorification frees us from the presence of sin.

Experientially we are in the sanctification segment of all this, so now, hopefully, we can have a better understanding of why our life is so filled with mystery, confusion, impossible situations and some degree of suffering of one kind or another.

Only the Lord knows what to bring us into, when to bring it, and what will be accomplished by it. We can't figure those things out and we don't have to try to figure them out – we walk by faith, not by sight. We've presented our bodies as a living sacrifice and our role is to trust that a combination of infinite love and wisdom is designing every second of our lives in the best way conceivable to take us as far as possible toward full conformity to Christ in the time we have left.

Let's get some help from others who have also attempted to explain the need of thorns in our flesh. We'll start with a reality that dawned on me as I was studying this that lays a foundation, a governing principle, for everything we go through.

The greatest demonstration of God's strength happened through a Man in the place of the greatest weakness any man has ever known- scourged, crucified and completely abandoned. The greater the weakness the greater the need and expression of spiritual strength. The only time we are strong is when we are weak and looking exclusively to God for enablement.

The weakness of the Cross resulted in the greatest demonstration and accomplishment of God's power in the history of the world.

Now, this is from Sparks;

What is your idea of power or strength? What is your mentality concerning power? Are you clamoring for power, wanting power? Well, it all works out this way. True power from God's standpoint is Calvary power. Christ crucified is the power of God. What is Calvary power? Well, it is emptiness of self, you and I being emptied of self – and truly, that is easier said than endured! Oh, how very much there is of this self about us still! How we hate – how we suffer – being emptied of ourselves! What a terrible thing it is to *feel our inability* – to know that we do not count in ourselves. And yet our times of greatest emptiness and weakness have been the times when God has done most, and got glory by what He has done. We have learned it along various lines and different ways, but God has been working right into the very inside of us, so that the thing is done – it becomes a part of us. He does not have to maintain it by external conditions. But He frequently uses such – very often

physical – conditions, to bring us to that place of utter dependence upon Himself. That is God's way of education.

So, it all resolves itself into the need, in the first place, for what is meant by being born from above: an entirely new nature and disposition, to begin with, and then letting God do His work of conforming us to the image of His Son. I am not saying that works and words do not come in, but it is a heartbreaking business to be working and speaking with no power, and no registration of heaven. May the Lord give us light as to what He means by all this.

So, the next time we're up against something that makes no sense, maybe even seems to contradict all we've learned in the past, and appears to be impossible to overcome, it's an opportunity to discover whether or not we believe what Paul has been teaching, and demonstrating in his own life, about the "what" and the "why" of everything we're going through. If we stay the course then something vital is going to be learned and added to our character. Whether we personally see it or not, if we surrender to God's training, we're taking another step forward in conformity to the likeness of Christ.

Again, that's the underlying purpose of a "thorn" regardless of what form it takes. The second we begin to believe that somehow our strength is assisting the work of God in or through us, we are in need of a new breaking.

The "yoke of Christ" that we are take upon us is undergirded by the power of His resurrection. But only the truly weak can fully appreciate and receive that power. They are the ones who have failed so much in life that they have given up on dependence in themselves, and now their faith is directed anywhere *except* themselves. They see Christ as our only hope.

I was in a store a while back and heard the owner telling one of the people who worked there that everyone they knew was going through something that felt impossible to deal with. Personally, I think this is a growing world-wide phenomenon in our generation. Satan is conditioning the entire world to be

desperate for a 'savior' and the best way to ensure desperation and compliance is through pain and confusion.

And the pain that's encompassing this planet is not necessarily the sharp pain of an injury that eventually heals; it's the grinding pain that never ends – a body you can't escape. There's never a reprieve. It's a shattered body living among fading friends.

It's the unending loneliness and a haunting fear and emotional ache of unanswered prayers we see in the Psalms of David; the personal, combined struggle of a failed past and an uncertain future.

For us, this is the work of our thorn, our Cross, in preparation for the throne.

Whether our suffering is physical, emotional or spiritual (or all at the same time), sustained pressure beyond our ability that doesn't stop feels like it's ramping up in God's final push in this last generation to make us vessels fit for the Master's use.

Behind everything that's happening, with circumstances designed specifically for each of us based on the Lord's knowledge of who we really are, is the hand of the Potter, the spiritual Surgeon, cutting away our flesh to bring our spirit into the light. God is taking pain-racked vessels of clay as weak as babies and shaping them into spiritual soldiers as hard as iron.

And as the Father operates on us and we beg Him to stop, it feels like He has no feeling for us; that our cries go unheard. But knowing what we know about the living, organic nature of the "Body of Christ"; we know that the Head feels the pain of every part of His body. Our Savior has been literally, not merely sympathetically, suffering *in* His church for 2000 years.

The ultimate challenge for us has always been faith undergirded by vision, by spiritual understanding of God's final goal and His means of reaching that goal in us. Though He slay us, *will* we trust Him?

When we do trust, the measure of Christ increases in us and Satan loses ground; and he must lose *all* ground in us if we are to be fully, and finally, to the praise of God's glory.

As Andrew Murray writes,

Faith leads the seeking soul to depend on God alone. Faith believes God's Word, clings to Him, and waits in perfect trust that His power will work within us everything that He has promised.

By faith the church advances into the enemy's fortress; and the gates of hell will not prevail against us. The Cross is the path to ascension and eternity will manifest God's glory in those who have been crucified in this life.

This is the result of our momentary suffering. As Paul tells us in Romans 8:18; ". . . the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that shall be revealed in us."

And as we saw in 2 Cor. 4:7-11;

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. . . Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we who live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh.

I've seen my daughters crying and trembling in pain; I've felt their loneliness and their fear. I've seen the burden of responsibility in my son's face, and I've seen the deep hurt, like chains in the soul, in their mother's eyes. Because when our family hurts, we die inside. I will cry for them until the Lord returns.

But I also know their hearts, better than they do. And God knows their hearts better than anyone; that's why they are suffering; He is entrusting them with the path of God's Son in this world.

Maybe you remember this poem I shared some time ago by Amy Carmichale;

Hast thou no scar?  
No hidden scar on foot, or side, or hand?  
I hear thee sung as mighty in the land,  
I hear them hail thy bright ascendant star,

Hast thou no wound?  
Yet, I was wounded by the archers, spent.  
Leaned me against the tree to die, and rent  
By ravening beasts that compassed me, I swooned:

Hast thou no wound? No scar?  
Yet as the Master shall the servant be,  
And pierced are the feet that follow Me;  
But thine are whole. Can he have followed far  
Who has no wound nor scar?

Our wounds are intended to cause the impurities within us to be drawn out of the gold submerged in fire. As these impurities surface under the heat, they become the only thing we see. We see our mixed motives, our unbelief, our confusion, fear, our sinfulness and desperation. What we feel is pain; what we see is failure; what we experience is fire and impurity. All of this seems to be our constant companion.

This is how gold is refined. God is making overcomers in the only way that overcomers can be made.

Which is why most Christians run from the Cross and choose a Christianity that makes sense to them and offers a life of relative comfort with occasional trials. But the Lord won't give that option to those who truly desire to grow spiritually, because He sees to the core of who they are and what they *really* desire; which is Him – not Christianity.

Peter tells us in 1 Pet. 5:10 that “. . . after you have suffered, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.”

I believe that before this generation is over, we are going to see Christ formed in His remnant and revealed *through* them to the world, giving the world one last glimpse of the glory of God in His overcomers before the darkness falls on them.

Now, in vs's 11-13 Paul steps back into defense mode, and once again, uses sarcasm to drive his point home;

I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong!

There are some very interesting principles that come out of this in the original language. For example, the first vs. "I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me", could be translated; "You compelled me to become completely senseless in boasting about myself to you. . . ." Implying, that anyone who really understands their own sinfulness and God's mercy and grace would be insane to take credit for anything that has true spiritual value.

But by labeling Paul an imposter and a manipulator, the Corinthians have forced him to remind them of reality. They should be commending him; they should know that God used him to bring Life to them. As one commentator put it;

The Corinthians were silent when they should have been supportive, and the situation was crucial because the error (and the influence of the error) of the false apostles would eventually "lead them astray (morally or spiritually corrupt) from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." Paul had to act to defend his apostleship and take a stand for truth, not to impress them; but to protect them.

And Paul adds the comment, "though I am nothing" to help the Corinthians realize that Paul is very aware that if anything good has come through him, it was not because of the awesomeness of Paul – it was pure grace. As Paul said in 1 Cor. 15:10, "I am what I am by the grace of God."

So, when Paul says, ". . . in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles" he doesn't point to himself, he reminds them of the "signs and wonders" God did through him. God did His works through the humanity of Christ. Even the Corinthians were smart enough to know that those (quote) "signs of an apostle"

were not done by the supernatural power of the apostles – they were evidence that Christ was working through them.

I'm sure you remember John 15:5; "Apart from Me, you can do nothing." Even Christ, in the days of His flesh, said, "Apart from the Father, I can do nothing." Christ didn't come to glorify Himself; He came to glorify His Father. (John 8:54 & 14:9-10) "If I glorify Myself, My glory means nothing . . . He who has seen Me, has seen the Father . . . The words that I speak to you, I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works."

If the sinless Son of God did not take credit for what the Spirit of His Father did through Him, how much less should we ever take credit for what Christ does through us?

Paul had that settled in his mind a long time ago; he didn't have to 'check himself' and make sure he wasn't manipulating people to be impressed with Paul. He knew exactly what he was capable of in the flesh; he had no doubts at all; Rom. 7:18, "In me, that is in my flesh, dwells *no* good thing . . ."

There is a great deal of inner freedom when we come to the place where we realize that self-expectation is not only blindness and fruitless, but unnecessary. Christ is meant to be all in all; resting in Him is what removes the burden of "*thou shalt*" from our shoulders.

Now, Paul's sarcasm I mentioned earlier comes out in vs. 13, "For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong!"

Let me paraphrase that; "In what way were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I did not personally become a burden to you." Other churches had helped support Paul financially, and from the viewpoint of many of the Corinthians, that meant that Paul had "burdened" those churches.

But as we already saw with the Macedonians when we studied 2 Cor. 8, supporting Paul wasn't a burden for them, it was both a sign of their gratitude for the spiritual instruction he was giving them, and it was a privilege to be a part of Paul's ministry.

Paul discouraged the Corinthians from sharing in that privilege until they reached a place where they understood the principle behind it and no longer saw it as a “burden.” The principle itself is very simple and was summed up in 1 Cor. 9:11;

"If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your material things?"

As one author explained it, “This principle asserts that those who provide spiritual guidance and teaching are entitled to material support from those they serve.”

That’s not complex and it appears that most of the believers Paul had provided teaching to over the years were fully on board – but not the Corinthians, so expecting anything from them was something that Paul willingly gave up because their motive in giving to him would have been Law-driven, rather than Grace-driven. And Paul would rather go without, than put any group of believers under the Law.

In vs. 14-15 Paul even goes so far as to write this to them;

Now for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.

He wouldn’t be a burden to them; he wouldn’t ask for anything; he wanted to be a spiritual father to them and is hurt because the more he sacrifices for them and loves them, it seems like the less they love him. They *could* help support him like the Macedonians did, but they had no desire to do so.

That whole give-and-take principle of Paul giving them spiritual instruction and receiving support from them in return is simply set aside in this church. Paul says he will “spend and be spent” for them expecting nothing in return.

Adam Clarke adds some comments that were very confrontative about this;

He who labors for the cause of God should be supported by those he serves; but woe to that man who aggrandizes himself and grows rich by the spoils of

the faithful! And to him especially who has made a fortune out of the sacrifice of the poor! In such a man's heart the love of money must have its throne. As to his professed spirituality, it is nothing; he is a whited sepulcher, and an abomination in the sight of the Lord.

Finally, Allan Redpath noted that "Paul wanted their hearts *before* accepting their money, and it should always be that way."

We'll need to close, but I came across a good overview by Robert Utley of what Paul was facing with the Corinthians and how he responded. I'm sharing this because it doesn't just apply to this delicate situation in Corinth, it also shows the heart of someone who genuinely views the saints as Christ does;

Such a sweet, joyous attitude is a reflection of Paul's total surrender to His Lord. Paul is willing to spend his time, energy and strength; and in a sense, to be worn out for the Corinthians. The verb used means literally to be spent completely (used up totally, exhausting one's account so to speak) and here is used figuratively of Paul's willingness to sacrifice his life to help the spiritual condition of the Corinthians. This is a powerful statement affirming Paul's heart for the them. The NLT paraphrase is a good rendering "I will gladly spend myself and all I have for your spiritual good." The International Bible Translation has "So, I am happy to give everything I have for you. I will even give myself for you." This is the heart of Jesus towards us. We often think that what God wants is what we have; but what He really wants is us. Jesus selflessly seeks our good, and His heart is for *us*, not for what He can get *from* us.