

3,4,21 The Fruits of our Travail

We're going to go into greater depth tonight on the implications and meaning of Paul's thorn in the flesh.

And as we break this down, we have to keep in mind that whatever the Lord does in terms of bringing the application of the cross into our lives, it's not only for our benefit; it's also to make us vessels fit for the Master's use – to equip us morally and spiritually to effectively minister to the lost and to strengthen the Body of Christ.

(2 Cor. 2:14-16) Amplified “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph and through us spreads and makes evident the fragrance of the knowledge of God everywhere. For we are the sweet fragrance of Christ] unto God; among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing: To the latter it is an aroma from death to death [a fatal odor, the smell of doom]; to the former it is an aroma from life to life [a vital fragrance, living and fresh]. And who is qualified sufficient for these things?

(2 Cor. 4:10-13) Amplified “Always carrying about in the body the exposure to the same putting to death that the Lord Jesus suffered, so that the [resurrection] life of Jesus also may be shown forth by and in our bodies. For we who live are constantly [experiencing] being handed over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be evidenced through our flesh. Thus, death is actively at work in us, but [it is in order that] life [may be actively at work] in you. Yet we have the same spirit of faith as he had who wrote, I have believed, and therefore have I spoken. We also believe, and therefore we speak.”

Finally, (2 Cor. 12:7-10) Amplified “. . . to keep me from being puffed up and too much exalted by the exceeding greatness (preeminence) of these revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to rack and buffet and harass me, to keep me from being excessively exalted. Three times I called upon the Lord and besought [Him] about this and begged that it might depart from me; But He said to me, My grace (My favor and loving-kindness and mercy) is enough for you [sufficient against

any danger and enables you to bear the trouble manfully]; for My strength and power are made perfect (fulfilled and completed) and show themselves most effective in [your] weakness. Therefore, I will all the more gladly glory in my weaknesses and infirmities, that the strength and power of Christ may rest (may pitch a tent over and dwell) upon me. So, for the sake of Christ, I take pleasure in infirmities, insults, hardships, persecutions, perplexities and distresses; for when I am weak in human strength], then am I [truly] strong (able, powerful in divine strength).”

I want to introduce our study with some comments from an online commentary called, “BibleRef.com”

“To prevent Paul from being conceited about this knowledge, God sent Paul an unspecified "thorn in the flesh," or a "stake in the flesh." Scripture doesn't explain whether this was something physical, emotional, or connected to some temptation. All it tells us is that a man of profound faith and deep commitment was stricken, causing him to cry out to God repeatedly for relief (2 Corinthians 12:7–8). Somehow, Paul came to understand God's answer to his request was a clear and permanent "no." As prior verses indicated, Paul realized the purpose of the malady was to maintain humility. This persistent "weakness" in Paul's life helped keep him from becoming conceited. Instead, God proclaimed that His grace was fully capable of providing everything Paul needed to endure this suffering. God told Paul that His power is made perfect in weakness. The Greek word for "sufficient" implies endurance, strength, or satisfaction. Paul has written that he would only boast in his weaknesses (2 Corinthians 12:5), and now he adds enthusiasm. He will boast gladly about his weaknesses, including this thorn in the flesh. Why would someone like Paul celebrate being forever saddled with some painful struggle? Because Christ's power becomes most obvious in those areas where believers are weakest. The word translated as "perfected" refers to completion or accomplishment. The focus is on something being achieved, not having flaws removed. This reveals several truths about how God works in the lives of Christians. First, God is willing to make use of Satan and his demons to accomplish His own purposes. Their attempts to harass God's work and servants can become part of God's strategy to accomplish His exact goals. Second, God's answers to prayer are

always subject to His overall will. He may answer "no" to a request to relieve a believer's burden, whether or not that burden comes from a demonic source. If the suffering is helping a Christian to be more dependent on God, it may be accomplishing in us exactly what He wants. Third, it shows us that God's primary concern for His children is not a mortal life of ease and leisure. His first goal is that we trust Him. That means allowing Christ to be strong in places we are weak, and not to resent Him for allowing us to experience that weakness."

Paul is just one example of the way God works with those He loves and sees, in them, a heart that desires to honor Him.

Abraham became a father when he was too old to be a father. Jacob became Israel after God permanently broke his hip. Samson accomplished more when he was blind than when he could see.

It's obvious throughout the Bible that humans are incapable of truly trusting God and living for Him until something has eliminated the power of self-sufficiency.

As related to Paul's specific experience, this is where I'm probably going to struggle trying to clarify something that is an experiential paradox.

When Paul talks about 'being strong when he's weak', what he's *not* saying is that he's strong when God's strength has *replaced* his weakness.

There's no replacement happening; there's only a constant awareness of weakness. Paul said that it's *when* he's weak that he's strong.

I've said in the past that when the Lord is showing Himself strong through us, all we feel is our weakness – but it goes deeper than that.

The degree to which the strength (the life) of Christ can manifest through us, is based on the measure that we are weakened in ourselves.

This isn't something that's simply a concept to understand and believe, this can't be imitated. We can't 'fake' being broken. Either we are or we aren't.

I know people who *think* they are, or that they're at least moving in that direction. They talk about grace, and that only the Lord can live the Christian life. But it's

false humility; there's no evidence of real brokenness or of genuine spiritual fruit in their lives.

Talking or thinking about all the horrible things we've done and all the times we've failed, and then adding to that the belief that since we live in the dispensation of grace, and only God can enable us to obey, we'll just have to 'wait on the Lord' and hope for the best.

We all have these thoughts, so I'm not judging. I just want to make sure we're aware of the fact that self-deprecation coupled with whatever rationale we use to justify our disobedience isn't spirituality, it's self-deception.

We may have convinced ourselves that we understand how the Christian life works and that we're doing all we can to move into this life, but other people can tell it's not real.

There's a very interesting historical reality that existed in Laodicea that I was unfamiliar with until I found this explanation on Rev. 3:14-18;

First, here's the passage: "For you say, I am rich; I have prospered and grown wealthy, and I am in need of nothing; and you do not realize and understand that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore, I counsel you to purchase from Me gold refined and tested by fire, that you may be [truly] wealthy, and white clothes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and *salve to put on your eyes, that you may see.*"

It's that last phrase that this author writes about;

"In Laodicea there was a famous medical school and from that medical school all over the Greek and Roman world an eye salve went out. It was famed for this ointment for eye trouble. Everybody knew what this meant in Laodicea and yet, right there in the precincts of the place where the world was getting its natural eyes healed, the church was blind."

So, the reality, not theory, of genuine brokenness has to be worked into us over time, through suffering, obedience and breaking, to the point that our weakness, our complete inability to do anything of spiritual value, is something we know, empirically, at the core of who we are.

This understanding of dependency never becomes a rationale for disobedience. It's a deeply rooted character trait formed in us through experience which leads to an active faith-based (not self-reliance based) obedience.

And when that happens, Christ has made us a fragrance of life to life, or death to death, to others, His life is flowing through us.

The goal of what the Lord is doing in us, is to enable us to be spent for others. This isn't just about *our* life, *our* experiences – it's about being willing to lose our lives and go through anything the Lord takes us through, with compassion for others as the driving force within us.

So, conflict is raging all around us, as it did in the Lord and the apostles. Life to life; death to death.

We know that we have zero sufficiency in ourselves to have been a part of what we see happening through us.

All the theology and teaching in the world won't make this happen to a person – only “infirmities, insults, hardships, persecutions, perplexities and distresses” can do that.

This, and only this, can equip us to serve in this life and to share the throne of Christ in the next.

There is no other way for either of these to happen.

Only if, the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, can it bring forth fruit.

And *only* if we endure with Him, will we reign with Him.

In Gen. 1:26 we read;

“And God said, let us make man in our image . . . and let him have dominion.
..”

“Dominion” is rule, it's a throne. And it was God's original purpose in creating the human race to establish them in the place of dominion.

Then Lucifer stole that position from Adam through deception and Christ, the Last Adam, recovered it. The Lord now offers that same dominion, shared with Him at His side in His throne, to those who commit to His purpose.

(2 Tim. 2:12) “If we endure with Him, we shall also reign with Him.”

(Rom. 8:17) “If we share in his sufferings (we will also) share in His glory.”

God doesn't have another plan. The issue is not whether God will adjust to us and develop a different plan to compensate for our carnality.

The issue for us personally, is whether we will commit to His plan or settle for playing the game of the Christian religion, and forfeit our place in God's eternal purpose for us.

The majority of the human race since the fall of Adam has chosen to reject both God and His purpose.

And the majority of God's covenant people in every generation have rejected the criteria of true discipleship. They won't pick up their cross, and lose their lives, to follow Him.

I've had people ask why *all* believers wouldn't be qualified for this once they're sinless in heaven.

Reigning with Christ not only involves sinless people, but also people who are spiritually mature. People who have established, during their lives on earth, their worthiness of this honor by their faithfulness to the will of God.

Even Jesus, Who was sinless from birth, was not qualified to rule the universe until He first “grew in wisdom and stature . . . (Lk. 2:52) and (Heb. 5:8-9) “. . . learned obedience from the things He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.”

But isn't being 'sinless' the same as being 'perfect'? Sinless is innocence and the absence of the flesh cranking out new sins.

Perfection or full maturity, is the development of integrity and endurance over a lifetime of learning obedience under pressure.

This is why the Father exalted Him, not just because He was born sinless.

(Phil. 2:8-9) “He humbled Himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross. Therefore (*therefore*) God exalted Him to the highest position and gave Him the name above all names.”

Christ is the ultimate overcomer.

The non-overcomer enters heaven sinless, but is disqualified for the throne. Heaven will be filled with spiritual 10-year-olds. They will grow unrestricted by the flesh, but by their mediocrity and pride here, they will have sacrificed what could have been theirs in God's kingdom.

The tested believer is the one who sees as God sees, and thinks as God thinks. He's the child of God that the Lord can entrust with the responsibility of carrying out God's will in a position of authority.

Ok, back to our discussion of weakness as the path to strength.

I mentioned that there's a connection between weakness and travail. Here's what I meant by that, listen to these words by Sparks:

“There is the fantasy of Christian life but, that is mere glamor; all the enthusiasm and interest of Christian activity; but it is not what we are before men in this matter that counts, but what we are before God in the secret place, having true concern for the Lord's testimony. Have you a burden, a passion? Is the breakdown in the Lord's testimony in the earth among those upon whom His Name is called a heartbreak to you? We shall never get anywhere till, in measure, His travail is entered into by us. Ministry (service to others) in its real, abiding, eternal value, will depend upon the measure in which the travail is entered into by us. This is a day for travail: whether it be a travail for the unsaved or for the Lord's people; every true spiritual activity is born out of travail, and those who have been most used of God in every time have been men and women who had this travail in their soul, in their secret life with God. Ask the Lord to bring you into *His* burden; stretch yourself out before God to be brought into His burden for the time in which you live.”

The reason I'm including this idea of travail as we look at weakness, is that as God breaks us and takes away our strength, a growing desire to reach others and to see Christ honored begins to form in us and, in a sense, overpowers us.

This moves way beyond Christian service as a duty or necessary part of our religion. Now it's who we are. It's no longer the outside of the cup, it's the inside.

The action we take to serve others is motivated from within, by the formation of Christ in our souls.

I'm going to draw out a couple of phrases from the church at Ephesus in Rev. 2 that I think will be helpful.

There are nuances in some of the wording that can clarify what we're looking at.

Ephesus was the first church in the seven-stage development of church history. So, it would make sense that "first love" would be the one thing this church needed to restore more than anything else.

What we need to see, though, is that securing this kind of love is more than the 'priority love' concept we looked at in past studies.

We need to see how 'first love' connects to sharing the Lord's burden and travail; how a person can go from having this kind of love in an elementary way, to having it so thoroughly that it becomes our motivation for life and service.

It's *not* by striving to get this quality of love through some kind of emotional self-discipline. Where would the idea of 'weakness' fit in then? How could the yoke of Jesus be 'easy' and 'light' if it's up to us? It's not our *strength* that gets us there – its revelation.

When we see His love for us, loving Him is no challenge at all.

(1 Jn. 4:19) "We love Him, because He first loved us".

It seems simple, He died for us; He has saved us, of course we love Him.

C.T. Studd once wrote, "If Christ be God and died for me, there is no sacrifice too great that I could make for Him."

True, but even the youngest believer is aware of these truths, and their love is far from perfected. They may be excited, but they aren't consumed.

Here's where experiential weakness comes in.

Those who realize their own moral and spiritual poverty (by revelation, not just through defeat or failure), understand how far our Lord had to descend to save us. These people see God's love in a whole new light.

You remember what Jesus said about the prostitute who poured oil on His feet in Lk. 7:47, “Therefore I tell you, because her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, she has loved much. But he who has been forgiven little, loves little.”

As I said earlier, this kind of love doesn’t come by trying to love like this, or by feigning humility by saying things like, “I’m just so horrible; I’ve failed so much”.

Love engenders gratitude and obedience, not self-deprecation.

A person can talk about regret and failure all he wants, but that’s neither true humility nor genuine repentance.

If it were *genuine* repentance, it would manifest in works that demonstrate that repentance.

(Matt. 3:8 Amplified) “Bring forth fruit that is consistent with repentance [let your lives prove your change of heart].”

If the work that God has done in our souls is deep and growing, we don’t have to scramble to prove our loyalty by works. The fruit John the Baptist is speaking of doesn’t *precede* repentance, it follows it.

It’s not *production* that God is after; its love gained by revelation of ourselves, and by revelation of Christ.

All genuine Christian experience and life begins in the spirit, not in external Christian observances.

We can see something of the genuineness of the Ephesian believer’s first love for the Lord in Acts 19:18-20;

“Many also of those who were now believers came making full confession and thoroughly exposing their [former deceptive and evil] practices. And many of those who had practiced magical arts collected their books and] burned them in the sight of everybody. When they counted the value of them, they found it amounted to 50,000 pieces of silver (about \$9,300). Thus, the Word of the Lord grew and spread and intensified, prevailing mightily.”

You can see by their actions that something amazing had taken place in their souls. Their works weren't religious obligations; they were the fruit of genuine repentance.

That's why, even as growing believers, we continue to seek to understand and to have the Holy Spirit reveal Christ to us. Because we don't want our lives to be comprised of dead works, energized by guilt, regret and fear.

We want to see fruit in our lives that springs naturally from a growing and deepening love for the Lord.

If we allow Him to break our outer man (the religious man) there is a release of the inner man created in the image of God.

That's when love begins to take hold in us and becomes the driving force of our relationship with Lord.

It comes from gaining a true appreciation of Him.

Regardless of how far we may progress in our love for, the Lord, we never leave the necessity for full dependence on Him and the recognition of weakness in ourselves. As this author puts it,

"One essential if you are to come to that for which the Lord has apprehended and chosen you, one essential is and must remain, a sense, a deep sense of your own insufficiency, of your own need, of there still being far more in Christ than ever you have discovered or possessed."

I'll give you a practical, historical illustration of this;

"Charles Haddon Spurgeon, known as "the prince of preachers," felt he delivered his sermon so poorly one Sunday that he was ashamed of himself. As he walked away from his church, the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, he wondered how any good could come from that message. When he arrived home, he dropped to his knees and prayed, "Lord God, you can do something with nothing. Bless that poor sermon." In the months that followed, forty-one people said that they had decided to trust Christ as Savior because of that "weak" message. The following Sunday, to make up for his previous "failure," Spurgeon had prepared a "great" sermon—but no

one responded. Solomon said in Psalm 127:1, "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it."

Strength is perfected only *in* weakness. It's through death that we enter into life.

(2 Cor. 13:4) "For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God . . ."

I'll close with some comments by Sparks on this verse in 2 Cor. 1:9 "We had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead."

"When we get into God's hands (we discover) that we are not much good, we cannot stand up to things, we cannot go through. Our natural life and resources do not count here. The course of a true Christian life in the hands of God is that of being more and more brought to the experience of helplessness. Do not think things have gone wrong if that is becoming your consciousness. You may take it that you are in an immature spiritual stage if you have *not* come to that realization that in the realm into which you have been introduced in your relationship with God, you have no resource. You are as a dead man. The death fact is brought home to you, is made real. But on the other side, resurrection is taking a certain form over against that. With that background and with that basis, more and more the child of God is being brought to the position where he or she has to say: "That was the Lord, it is the Lord; I cannot account for that, I am not the one who accounts for that, it is all of God," and you know quite well that resurrection is all of God. You can go a long way in many things, but you have not got as far as raising the dead yet. That is God's prerogative. That is only God. And so, in the hands of God the child of God is being brought progressively more and more to the place where they have to say, "It is of God, it is all of God" and that is the testimony coming out. The Lord did that, the Lord is doing this. it is the power of resurrection Life."

The entire Bible from the fall to eternal state, is God's work in bringing man back to the relationship with God that existed in the garden. In the cross and resurrection of Christ and through Him, as the 'second man', the formation of a new spiritual race in the likeness of God is a restoration of the dependency of man upon God, and of God forming His image in man.

Whenever we step out of that relationship of faith and dependency, we step out of the purpose of God for the ages and for us as His children.

If Adam had not failed, he would have gone on to have the dominion he was offered.

God's original intent, and ultimate goal, is to have a race conformed to His image sharing His throne as the Sovereign of creation.

For us to take part in this destiny, we have to pass through the cross and into the power of Christ's resurrection.

This is what God is doing in those who commit to His purpose and surrender to the means He chooses to use in our lives to ensure our arrival at that goal.

One last commentary on Rev. 3:20;

“That is the great object and goal for which people are saved; to take them to a place of sharing with Him, their Lord, the throne of government of this universe. That is the meaning of Christianity. That is in the heart of the Lord in giving the gospel, in appealing to men. It is that, dear friends, that is in view in our Christian lives. Nothing less than that. A great calling, an on-high calling, a wonderful prize: throne-sharing with Christ in the governance of creation.”