

Thinking Christianly in Dark Times

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[0 : 00] Interesting thought, isn't it? A man who's had such great experiences,! It's a contrast to the false apostles.

And he's wanting to say, don't be taken in by this. They were celebrity mad, just as we are today. And it's easy for people to be sort of hoodwinked and led down a false path. Because these false apostles didn't have the true gospel because their gospel was very one-sided sort of gospel, a little bit like the sort of health and wealth gospel. It only had one perspective to it. Paul talks repeatedly about the highs and the lows of being a Christian, about the exalted things, but also of the very difficult things that happen if you're a Christian.

And he wants Corinthians to know that that's what the Christian life is about. And that's what his life had been about. What happened? Well, we are given some idea of the chronology of this because he speaks of himself in verse 2.

[1 : 35] And he says, I know a man in Christ who 14 years ago was caught up to the third heaven. He's talking about a particular experience that occurred to him.

And because we know something of the dates, we can say it was probably about 41 to 42 AD. So that's eight or nine years after the Lord Jesus Christ had died and risen again.

And Paul had been a Christian for about six years at this time. And it's probable that this particular period was just about the start of his major missionary travels.

So it was a blessing and encouragement from the Lord that he should have had such an experience at that time. As a fairly mature Christian, he counted the Lord in a very special way.

And he looks back on that experience 14 years ago. He can remember what it was. It was an experience of the third heaven, or it's the same experience he's spoken of in verse 4, where he talks about being caught up to paradise.

[2 : 40] And in Hebrew thinking, these two ideas of third heaven and paradise mean the immediate presence of God. Immediate presence of God. And that's what he's talking about here.

It's a revelation. It's not necessarily a vision. It's not as if he said, I saw all these things. But he definitely heard things. He heard things from the Lord in this experience.

And the things that he heard were extremely precious. There were things that he said he couldn't repeat. He couldn't repeat them because it wasn't right to do so.

Verse 4. Inexpressible things. Things that man is not permitted to tell. And secondly, because he didn't want people to measure him by his experience.

So he was going to keep quiet about this. So that it shouldn't be the means of speculation and false judgment. So all he says is, I had this great experience.

[3 : 41] And it was a great experience. And he was glad to have it. And it was an experience that was given to him by God. And God and his sovereignty allowed that to happen. And it was important for Paul in his own ministry and his relationship with God.

So that's the revelation. Now secondly, we read about the thorn. And it is a thorn. That's the word that's used in the original. It could be a stake, actually.

But it's not a stake in this case. It's a thorn. Now you can all identify with a thorn. The sort of experience of having a thorn in your flesh. And this is what Paul talks about here.

Something physical, continuing and discouraging. Verse 7. To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh.

A messenger of Satan. So Satan was involved in some way. And we read of passages in the Bible, don't we, of Satan actually coming to the Lord and saying, Can't I do this?

[4 : 48] Can you give me permission to allow this to happen? And Paul himself is quite clear that whilst the hand of God is in this, it's also there's something of the hand of Satan as well.

The word torment means to punch. You can kind of think someone will be punched by this particular experience.

We don't know any more about it. As you know, it's been the subject of a lot of comments and discussion over the years about what this thorn in the flesh might be. And someone has very wisely said, if we knew what it was, then that would, in a way, distance the experience from us.

Because we would say, well, I haven't got that. Therefore, I can't identify with this particular passage. But because it's not spelled out what the thorn in the flesh is, that any kind of experience that might have something physical, continuing and discouraging about it, might come under that category and we might find encouragement from this particular word.

And our ignorance on the matter is good. Puts us in a healthy place. He sees this as a form of weakness.

[6 : 04] Verse 9. Weakness. Weakness is repeated again and again towards the back end of this passage in verses 9 and 10. So, what can we say about this apart from the fact that it was something difficult for him, something that he felt was limiting, something that he felt was probably discouraging.

This thorn is set aside the exalted experience that he's had and it really drags him down in some way. It debilitates him.

And we know it's a problem for him by the way that he responds in this situation. His reaction is to pray. He pleads. Earnestly, he cries out to God.

In fact, he cries out to the Lord, which is interesting. The Lord is in Jesus. So, he addresses his pleas to the Lord that he'd met on the Damascus Road. And three times, he pleads with the Lord to take it away.

This suggests intense earnestness of prayer. I think we all know those such times. It wasn't just that he sort of mentioned it in passing.

[7 : 22] But it became such an issue for him that he really set aside time and he pleaded with the Lord. It's almost like he knew in the sort of multitude of prayers that he prayed, he said, well, three times I remember most distinctly making this a most earnest matter of prayer.

I wrestled with the Lord on this point. Please take it away. Because as far as Paul was concerned, this could only sort of limit it's his experience as a Christian believer.

And one can ask the question, knowing the rest of the passage, well, was it right for him to pray in that way? And I have to say, yes, it was right for him to pray in that way. As we face difficulties and situations, and they seem to us to be a limitation and a restriction upon our lives and in particular for Paul and his service to God, is it right for us to pray that these things should be removed?

Yes, it is right. It's right and proper for us to do so. And though he was a spiritual man, he didn't know the mind of the Lord at the time when this problem came to him.

He didn't have an instant revelation that this was clearly something that God had in mind for him. But it seemed to him most natural and right that he should pray for deliverance from this.

[8 : 44] And he didn't pray just once, but twice and three times. And I believe he prayed in the spirit. He prayed with God's help that there should be this deliverance.

So we may be facing situations in our life that just seem to be debilitating and a hindrance and a barrier to us. And I would suggest that it's absolutely right that we should pray.

Not only to pray your will be done, but to pray as Paul did, please take it away. Please take away this thing which is getting in the way.

And in God's mercy, he gave an answer at the right time. So there was the Lord's response and the Lord spoke to him.

He spoke to him in a very clear way and we're reminded in a way of Paul's experience on the Damascus Road and how he'd heard the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ whom he'd been persecuting.

[9 : 51] It's hard, said Jesus, for you to be kicking against the goad, kicking against the pricks of conscience.

And here, 14, no, 20 years later, he's coming to the Lord again and he's talking about another pricking, as it were, another thorn that he's experiencing himself.

And the Lord speaks to him in a very clear way. Verse 9, the answer is essentially no, I'm not going to take it away. But positively, my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Two aspects of that we have here. Firstly, that God's grace is sufficient. God's grace is sufficient. And, well, it's easy for that to roll off the tongue, isn't it, in a way, just to say God's grace is sufficient. But, that's what the Lord Jesus Christ gave to Paul at that time. And, it was a personal word to a personal situation. And, it was something that Paul was able to hear and able to receive and quieted his heart.

[11:06] My grace is sufficient. Must have been said with such conviction into Paul's life. It kind of settled the issue for him.

for, he goes on to say, my power is made perfect in weakness. So, there's another thought here. The sufficiency of grace is one thing, but, the Lord Jesus was saying to Paul here, actually, in terms of ministry and testimony, I want you to know that my power is going to be evident in your weakness.

Not in your strength, but in your weakness. Not only will you be sustained, but there's going to be an evidence of the power and presence of God in your life that would not be the case if this particular thorn in the flesh did not exist.

God's purposes in Paul's dark times. There was something for him. We rather rushed over verse 7, but I want to point out what he understood.

It isn't actually said in the words of Jesus to him, but it's something that he came to understand that there was a real connection between the great experience that he'd had and what he was now enduring.

[12:38] And he says in verse 7, to keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.

He didn't see that to begin with, but it was something that he began to realize was important. That God was that concerned about Paul's own heart and his attitude and to stop him becoming conceited it needed a thorn in the flesh.

Godly people need thorns in their flesh in order to keep them humble. I just went on to the web this afternoon thinking about Spurgeon.

It came into my head because I'd remembered how Spurgeon suffered from depression quite badly in his ministry and I was quite struck by something that a modern writer has said about this.

This particular writer went through a period of enormous depression in his life. Charles Spurgeon would probably win the most popular preacher of all time award if you only allowed pastors from the last 150 years to do the voting.

[14:05] He's known as the prince of preachers and before microphones existed would regularly preach to more than 5,000 people at a time. He published more than 150 books and was able to speak about Jesus more eloquently than most people.

He was a full-time preacher for more than 40 years but his health was incredibly poor and he suffered greatly from depression. Spurgeon on average missed one out of every three Sundays. Can you believe that? Over the course of 40 years there was consistently a 30% chance your pastor wouldn't be able to get out of bed on any given Sunday. He spent a lot of time walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

Here are just some quotes from Spurgeon. The strong are not always vigorous the wise not always ready the brave not always courageous and the joyous not always happy.

My witness is that those who are honoured of their Lord in public have usually to endure a secret chastening or to carry a peculiar cross lest by any means they exalt themselves and fall into the snare of the devil.

[15:21] Most of us are in some way or other unsound physically. Here and there we may meet with an old man who could not remember that ever he was laid aside for a day but the great mass of us labour under some form or other of infirmity either in body or in mind.

As to mental maladies is any man altogether sane? Are we not all a little off balance? Some minds appear to have a gloomy tinge essential to their very individuality.

Of them it may be said melancholy marked them for her own. Fine minds withal and ruled by noblest principles but yet most prone to forget the silver lining and to remember only the cloud.

Pain has probably in some cases developed genius. hunting out the soul which otherwise might have slept like a lion in its den. Any simpleton can follow the narrow path in the light. Faith's rare wisdom enables us to march on in the dark with infallible accuracy since she places her hand in that of her great guide.

[16:36] plenty more of that in Spurgeon's book lectures to my students of which there's a copy in the church library. To keep me from becoming conceited something for him there was something for others in this as well verse 9 says my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me. So a rather nice phrase in the original which is that Christ's power might tabernacle in me. It's a bit like the Shekinah glory of the Old Testament days and God's glory coming upon the meeting place. What a wonderful thing if God's power was to tabernacle in us. And Jesus says to Paul it's through the weakness that you have because of your thorn in the flesh that my power can tabernacle in you.

It's a stirring thought isn't it? So that Christ's power may rest on me. What a blessing it is for a congregation where the individuals of that congregation have the presence of Christ's power tabernacling in them.

[18:19] what a blessing on the preaching of the word when Christ's power is tabernacling in the speaker. What a blessing in the prayer meeting when Christ's power is tabernacling in the prayers.

What a blessing in the handshakes and the warm welcomes and the words of encouragement when Christ's power is tabernacling in that. And here is the word telling us that in order for that to happen in some of our lives there may be some tough experience for us to go through.

Something for us to experience so that we in our weakness are made to depend on the Lord more and people are not seeing so much us as him.

There's something for God. Verse 10 that is why for Christ's sake I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.

Not because he's a masochist but because he realizes that in all these troubles and situations it is an opportunity for him to put his hand more firmly into the hand of Jesus Christ and to exercise the life of faith all of this is to the glory of Jesus Christ.

[19:47] Glory is brought to Jesus Christ. That's a great place to get to. I don't think I know much about that.

But it's certainly a place that Paul got to and began to realize that it was important for him to tread the path his saviour had trod. To walk as he'd walked.

As Christ suffered so Paul needed to suffer. And that is the pathway that Christian people are called to go. He himself says earlier on, we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.

God and I suppose for anybody in public ministry especially, what a temptation it is to receive the applause of people. And indeed, what a hunger there is in the human heart to receive a claim all the time.

And how important it was for Paul to be under the suppression of his weakness so that he constantly needed to call out to God for his help. And he knew himself that if there was any blessing and fruitfulness out of his ministry, it was only due to God's grace.

[21:13] So what about us? What about God's purposes in our dark times? Because we will have dark times. Well, please God, may he answer prayers to take away a hindrance.

I've already encouraged you. If there are things in your life that you feel are just getting in the way, absolutely right and proper, you should pray about them.

Pray about those situations. But we pray with the expectation that God will answer our prayer.

Something for us. Something for us in the dark times that we might be made more like Christ.

If I could just say a little bit of personal testimony at this point. Over the last few months, I've, there were a couple of things.

I preached here on the issue of words. And I've had real struggles in that area subsequently. I thought it was okay in that area, you know, in a sense.

[22:20] I know how to be careful with words. But I have really struggled in that area. And I found sort of attack in that area, difficulty. And I, like many of you, have been filling in the spiritual gifts questionnaire.

And if you haven't done it, please do so. And I fill in the questionnaire and I think, I know what I'm like. I think I know what I'm like. But I'm defining the very things where I felt I feel strength.

The very areas where I've been under attack or felt my weakness, frailty. It's almost like the Lord saying, you know, don't rate yourself.

Be very careful. So you don't sort of put yourself up in any sort of way. So I'm just saying this is a matter of sanctification.

The heart is so treacherous, isn't it? The heart is so deceitful. You go on being Christians for a long time in your life and you get very used to certain things, being in certain kinds of ways.

[23 : 20] And every so often, pulled up sharp by some incident, something happens and you just realize, I need grace.

I need forgiveness. I need God's help. John Newton writes a hymn we don't sing. But it's a great one and I'm going to read it to you.

I ask the Lord that I might grow in faith and love and every grace, might more of his salvation now and seek more earnestly his face. T'was he who taught me thus to pray and he I trust has answered prayer.

But it has been in such a way as almost drove me to despair. I hope that in some favoured hour at once he'd answer my request and by his love's constraining power subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this, he made me feel the hidden evils of my heart and let the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part. Yea, more with his own hand he seemed intent to aggravate my woe, crossed all my fair designs.

[24 : 32] I schemed, blasted my goods and laid me low. Lord, why is this? I trembling cried, will thou pursue thy worm to death?

Tis in this way the Lord replied, I answer prayer for grace and faith. These inward trials I employ from self and pride to set thee free and break thy schemes of earthly joy that thou may seek thy all in me.

thee. He was a wise gentleman, John Newton, a physician of souls and in those words there he very well expresses how often our paths and desires diverge from the Lord's intentions and the Lord has the most wonderful but sometimes very painful way of drawing us back to himself. something for others, testimony evidence of God's help. Well isn't it great when we can share with each other in the dark times that God has helped us and able to tell each other of that.

What an encouragement that is. We need that, we need to be inspired by each other's testimony and bear one another up. Something for God because we want to bring glory to him.

[26 : 01] And P.S. please turn to Romans 8.17 where we read this.

Now if we are children then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. If indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

That's the way. he's bringing many sons to glory. And thank God and by his mercy we're numbered with that.

And he's looking after us as his children. And he knows the way to bring us up and to bring us safely home. Amen. Let's pray.

Let's pray.