

Paul's thorn in the flesh

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Date: 01 January 2000

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[0 : 00] bless. Turn to the chapter read, 2nd Corinthians chapter 12. That verse 5 Of such an one will I glory, yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities. For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool. For I will say the truth, but know I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he saith me to be, or that he heareth of me. And lest I should be exalted above measure, through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

We shall seek to consider to our spiritual advantage this episode in Paul's spiritual experience. first of all, Paul's secret. And then Paul's answer in terms of his spiritual revelation. And thirdly, God's provision to counterbalance these revelations in the Apostles experience. First of all, Paul's secret. Paul had a secret. He had guarded it jealously for 14 years.

[2 : 49] And no doubt, those who are spiritual, those who are spiritual and wise, no doubt they have many secrets.

There is a kind of folly which divulges everything.

And after 14 years, Paul revealed this secret which he had so jealously guarded for 14 years.

He revealed it to the church of Corinth. Because he was jealous over them.

With godly jealousy. He was jealous with godly, not ungodly.

[4 : 08] Jealousy. What is jealousy? As it is set before us here. What is it?

It is love in action. That's what this type of jealousy is.

It is the extreme of love in action. This is set before us in the spiritual song, the song of songs.

Love is strong as death. Jealous. Jealousy is cruel as the grave.

Jealousy there is just fervent love. Love the uttermost of love's action.

[5 : 23] He was jealous over them then with godly jealousy. Why? Lest their minds should be corrupted by the subtlety of sin and by the subtlety of the evil one.

There is always a collusion between sin in us and the temptation of the devil.

He has ground in us on which he can work. And we should always realize that and we should always beware of that.

Lest they should be corrupted by the subtlety away from the simplicity that is in Christ.

The more spiritual a person becomes, the more simple he or she becomes in the best usage of that word.

[6 : 46] God himself is essentially simple. The omnipotent, omniscient God is simple.

In this magnificent respect that sin cannot get near him. And that is the real simplicity of being as far away as you can be from sin.

And the reason for this jealousy, the reason for this are the causes that went in front of this.

There were mischief makers wreaking havoc in the church of Corinth.

They were preaching another Jesus, whom Paul and his fellow workers had not preached.

[8 : 05] They were inviting the Corinthians to receive another spirit, which they had not received.

And another gospel, which they had not accepted. And sadly, many of the Corinthians were being beguiled by the hypocritical subtlety of these pestilential fellows.

See, wherever the gospel is being ministered in purity, heretics want to get in there.

This is of the nature of evil. This is of the nature of evil. These false preachers were preaching themselves.

They are preaching themselves. They were preaching themselves. They are preaching themselves. They are preaching themselves. They are saying, they are adding or subtracting from the word of God.

[9 : 37] They are preaching themselves. these false preachers they were glorying in their own wisdom and in their own ability and in their own strength and they were wanting their own authority remember what Paul says that there is a grace which never wants itself that the greatest of the graces never wants itself what does that mean it never makes a parade love never parades itself if you see anyone or anything parading itself that certainly cannot be love because it never never does that they were wanting then their own authority they were parading their own appearance and their own powerful speaking and there are terrible dangers in that and in doing this they were making mock of

Paul they conceded that his letters were weighty and powerful but they maintained that he was trying to frighten the Corinthians by these letters and they further maligned him by saying that his bodily presence was weak and that his speech was contemptible what was wrong with these false preachers they were using a totally a totally wrong measure in spiritual things this is what they were doing they were measuring themselves by themselves and comparing themselves among themselves they were antinomian what is an antinomian what is an antinomian an antinomian is a person who has no real place in his or her experience for the law of God who makes this kind of excuse God in Christ has freed me from the law in every respect not realizing that God's people have the law of God written on their hearts

Christ came to magnify the law and to make it honorable and there is no measure in God's church but God's law in the gospel of Jesus Christ they were antinomian they had no real spiritual cognizance of the word of God or of the law of God or of the Son of God they go together the word the law the Son of God and they were especially boasting of the splendor of the spiritual visions which they had had all visions are good visions are excellent if they are within the bounds of the bounds of the word of God our visions must always be brought before the scrutiny of the word of God that is the only measure for visions as it is the measure for everything else of the love of the Lord otherwise our visions will lead us into the folly of thinking that we are more spiritual than others when we are totally otherwise and that we are even more spiritual than the rule of spirituality God's word secondly Paul's answer in terms of Paul's revelations well Paul had a spiritual answer for these misguided men and for all those who were up to join them he had an answer it is so easy if we are not grounded in God's word to strain to paths of error with calamitous results this is what he says I have had visions as well as you

I also have had visions oh he expresses this so delicately so beautifully so humbly he is talking about himself and yet he is not talking about himself he is talking about the Paul who lives yet does not live he is talking about a man in Christ he is talking about the Christian life and how it should be lived I know and that's how the first language expresses it not I knew but I know I know a man in Christ he magnificently says

[17 : 38] I know a man in Christ above 14 years ago whether in the body I cannot tell or whether out of the body I cannot tell God knoweth such an one caught up to the third heaven that is transported translated whether bodily or otherwise I cannot tell and he insinuates nobody else can only God so it is futile to ask whether he was in the body or out of the body he himself did not know and he avers that no one else knew but God the vision was as spiritual as that the man in Christ was caught up to paradise and heard unspeakable words which it is not lawful for a man to utter of such a man I will glory yet of myself I will not glory but in mine infirmities and Paul tells why and the point to remember here is that he is talking in terms of men who were glory in the abundance of their revelations and who were therefore causing the church at Corinth to go astray

Paul says God in Christ himself taught me in this situation of abundant revelations God in Christ taught me I also was in danger of exalting myself just as these men are doing among you I also was in danger of being exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelation but something was provided to keep me from over exaltation and we shall look at God's provision

God's provision to counterbalance these revelations in the experience of a sinful man if there are revelations in the experience of a sinful man they must be counterbalanced and God's provision is set before us here under three names we shall briefly look at each of these three names are given to God's provision firstly firstly it was a thorn in the flesh Paul does not particularize any further than that it was a thorn in his flesh he tells us the why and the how but he does not particularize we

would have liked him to be more specific but it was because he was more spiritual that he was not more specific some Christians reason as if every Christian had a specific thorn but have they? has every Christian got a specific thorn? every Christian has not been given super abundance of visions like Paul so why should every Christian be given a thorn?

certainly every Christian has a cross to bear in following Christ every Christian has to enter in some spiritual measure into Christ's sufferings but that could be different from this thorn there have been various conjectures many of the saints many of the saints have given us their own interpretation some say that it might have been in Paul's eyes some defect of sight they conclude this from an allusion that the apostle makes to the Galatians the Galatians had had such regard for him that they would readily have torn out their own eyes and bequeath them on him

[23 : 49] Spurgeon that great that great preacher that great man of God Spurgeon surmises that it was a petty annoyance which dogged the apostle and made his life a mystery through constantly getting the better of him there is a strange failure which characterizes us have you noticed this Christian?

we are able to be reconciled to great disappointments great calamities and yet petty little things they get us down this is an enigma of the experience of the church certainly some very great men have had and I suppose do have very peculiar weaknesses which lesser mortals are stranger to secondly it was the thorn in the flesh was the messenger to buffet the apostle Luther in his bold spiritual way says that it was the devil striking Paul with his metaphorical fists and Luther goes on to say that if the devil had not thus assailed the apostle fresh from the abundance of revelations that Paul would never have learned theology that's what Luther the theologian says about Paul the theologian

Paul would have been incompetent as a theologian according to Luther if revelation in his experience had not been countered by the messenger of Satan to buffet him Luther was speaking out of the abundant measure of the light of revelation given to himself and this countered in his own experience by the dark dealings of the adversary there is a mystery of the iniquity of the adversary there is a mystery of iniquity friends which every Christian and every theologian must find in his or her own members a mystery of evil a mystery that is directed against God and against being evil directs itself against God and against being against those who are made in God's image we see then the devil the devil or the devil's messenger with the thorn in his hand burying it deeply into the apostles flesh and as it were declaring you have experienced revelations you have experienced abundance of revelations

Paul but I will bring it about through this thorn that I will remove you further than ever you have been from the God of these revelations and bring you nearer myself this is the purpose of the evil one and we see that Paul was in agreement with the devil in this conclusion Paul thought that this thorn this messenger would render him useless in the church of God he was in agreement with the devil in this conclusion and therefore this is how he expressed himself initially I must get rid of this thorn I must I must get rid of it please God rid me of this thorn it will render me of no avail in all spiritual service and he besought the Lord thrice that the thorn the messenger might depart from him but there is another name for the thorn in the scriptures besides being the thorn and the messenger of Satan can you divine what that other name is he says there was given to me and the question arises who gave it none but God himself or someone might say that's a very brash conclusion it is not in terms of the contest why was it given lest I be exalted

[31 : 05] God himself gave him the thorn so that the thorn the messenger of Satan was over and above those names it was the gift of God and we see a marvel here we see the devil's hand the adversary's hand pressing this thorn further and further into the flesh of the apostles but we see another hand an infinitely greater hand we see an eternal hand we see a mediatorial hand we see a saviour's hand we see a nail pierced hand a hand sealed with blood holding the very devil in that glorious hand in that glorious hand to effect God's special work here and why not because God has used the devil for his eternal purposes in effecting the special work on Calvary's cross and this hand speaks it has words to declare and the answer to Paul's prayer is no and the marvel of it is that God's no's are never negative they are full of the positiveness which is in God

God's no's to his people are never negative in reality the promises of God are yea in Christ Jesus in Jesus Christ there is not nay and yea but yea and the promises are yea and amen in Christ Jesus so of God if you have a prayer and God has said no to you be thankful to him that answer is full of himself it is for your good for your profit and this hand also declares as it says no to Paul it says no

devil you think you are that you are effecting any special work for yourself but in reality I am making you the instrument of any special work for me far from removing Paul further from me by this visitant as both he and you are concluding I will bring Paul nearer to myself through the revelations and the thorn remember they go together they go together through the revelations and the thorn the messenger of Satan I will bring him nearer to myself than he has ever been before and therefore remove him further from you his answer the Lord's answer to Paul my grace is sufficient for you the fullness of God's grace and Paul realized his error and transferred himself to the almighty's manner of thinking he had made a great advance in the kingdom of grace had the apostle

God's strength my weakness most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me grace God's marvelous grace the first meaning of the word in the first language is beauty but it means more than that what is grace they asked the great theologian Augustine and the answer of the great man was before you asked me I thought I knew but now that you ask me

I'm afraid I don't know it was why did he say that because he realized that it was inexpressible the grace of God the grace of God the marvel of his grace oh friend do you know anything of it yourself the grace that is in Christ Jesus oh that the almighty would give each one of us here to know his wondrous grace in our own lives so that we would follow his manner of reasoning

[39 : 07] God's strength my weakness and he that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out come therefore if you have not come come now come speedily come to himself Amen let us pray in your Lord we bless thee that there is eternal power and eternal sufficiency to meet our every need and as we confess the greatness of our need and the depth of our poverty grant that thy strength would take hold of us and that eternal riches would fill our lives with God's salvation go before us and keep us for Christ's sake

Amen