

## **God's Gracious Gift of an Unbearable Burden, Part III- Increasing Our Strength**

Call to Worship: Isaiah 40:28-31

Hymn #86- *Now Thank We All Our God*

1<sup>st</sup> Scripture: 2 Corinthians 11

Hymn #26- *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past*

2<sup>nd</sup> Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Hymn #732- *I Asked the Lord that I Might Grow*

### **Introduction:**

This morning, we move on to our third consideration of the important topic, *God's Gracious Gift of an Unbearable Burden*. And once again, we will peer into the life of the great Apostle Paul. And once again, we will consider an abstract and yet, very effective example that leaves out the specific details concerning the specific nature of the Apostle's trial. And what perhaps makes this example so powerful and effective, is *recognizing* and coming to identify *with* the "longevity" of this specific trial. The two examples that we have gone over so far have carried us to a point of relief and solution. Paul and his companions were indeed delivered out of their trouble in the first example, and David and his men had overcome the Amalekites and retrieved everything lost in the second example. But what are we to do when the burden lingers or remains...perhaps, even permanently (at least in this lifetime)? Should we then begin to doubt our salvation or question the faithfulness of God, if such a difficult burden were propped upon our backs? Or can we yet still give thanks and praise to God, recognizing that even lingering burdens are God's gracious gifts to His children, meant to serve a good and necessary purpose unto our growth and His glory? Our consideration of the Apostle's "thorn in the flesh," spoken of in our text, will help us sufficiently answer these questions.

### **I. Paul's Unbearable Burden**

Sadly, the Apostle Paul is forced to defend his Apostleship to the Corinthians, as false so-called "super-apostles," have infiltrated the church, challenging the authenticity of Paul's apostleship, while seeking to advance their own selfish, ungodly cause. And Paul does this by sarcastically stooping down to the level of these false apostles, who boast in their own so-called

apostleship. Only, unlike the false apostles, the Apostle Paul speaks the truth, and seeks to confirm his apostleship *not* by exalting his personal strengths, but his own weaknesses and sufferings, which truly serve to authenticate the sincerity and office of his apostleship. And so, in chapters 11 and 12, he sarcastically boasts in his weaknesses and sufferings. And more specifically, in chapter 12, he reveals the great suffering that has come upon him because of the glorious visions he has received.

In verses 1-6, he speaks of a most memorable revelatory experience that he had encountered fourteen years ago. He was carried into the "third heaven" (probably, the same heaven that the Apostle John had entered, when he had received the *Revelation*). And there, the Apostle Paul had heard things that were so inexpressible that it would have been unlawful for him to repeat them. So glorious was his experience in this Paradise, that up to the present day, he is not even sure if he was in his body when he was carried there. It was a journey quite unfit for any human being to take, and Paul was given the glorious privilege of taking it, so that he might receive some form of a divine revelation. But that exalted experience came not without a great physical cost. You see, being the unique and privileged recipient of divine revelations can be a dangerous thing for any fallen human being to experience. You could easily begin to think that somehow you are special (in your own right). You can begin to think that you are better than everyone else and above grace, because, after all, God has taken you to places that he has not taken anyone else. Even the Apostle Paul, a former murderer and persecutor of Christ's church, could easily forget where he came from. The visions could easily get to him. And if that happened, he would no longer be of any profitable use to the Kingdom of God. And so, God had to send a painful messenger to the Apostle Paul; a gift of grace from God's standpoint, so that he would maintain a position of usefulness and productivity in the Kingdom of God. Much ground breaking work was to be done among the gentiles by means of the Apostle Paul, and this required the use of miracles and special revelation. But the bearer of such gifts, needed the constant reminder that this was all God's work and not his. And so, attached to those gifts, were painful and yet gracious, lingering reminders, that would constantly remind Paul of his own finite littleness, and God's infinite greatness. [Read 2 Cor. 12:7-10 again]

Let us then consider several of the ways in which the Apostle describes this great burden:

1) He describes it as a "thorn in the flesh," which was given to him as a means of keeping him humble, in light of the many revelations he has received.

Now, while we are not given the specific details concerning the exact nature of Paul's burden, the analogy of a "thorn in the flesh" implies at least two things:

\*First, it was irritating, constantly recognizable and painful. What immediately happens, when you accidentally prick yourself with a thorn? "Whooooaaaa!" You jolt your hand back and you pull that thing out real quick, don't you? Your body's pain receptors have no problem screaming at you, when they have been penetrated by a thorn, am I right? I mean, you don't get pricked with a thorn and say, "Oh great, I just got pricked with a thorn. No big deal...I'll just keep doing whatever it is that I am doing, and I'll pull that thing out later." No, the pain throbs, it irritates, and you cannot just ignore it. Your pain receptors will constantly tell you, "There is a thorn stuck in you...get it out now, get it out now, get it out now...etc." And so, when Paul refers to this burden as a "thorn in the flesh," he wants us to know that it hurts, it throbs, it is irritating, it constantly pulls his attention toward it, and it cannot just go away.

\*Secondly, the "thorn *in the flesh*" analogy, tells us that Paul's burden here, was a *physical* burden. Whatever this thorn in the flesh was, it was *physical* in nature. There was some form of an irritating, painful, lingering *physical* trial that the Apostle was undergoing. And right from the outset here, brethren, we can see that Paul did not buy into the stoic philosophy that seeks to act as if anything physical, such as pain, is irrelevant. Indeed, our bodies and our souls are connected, and where there is physical pain, it can and does affect us spiritually. Paul did not deny the reality of his pain, rather he prayed and wished it gone, at first, seeing it as a hindrance to his kingdom progress.

Suffice it to say then, brethren, this burden involved some form of physical pain.

2) Paul refers to this thorn as a "messenger of satan to buffet/beat me, lest I be exalted above measure." Again, we find two additional things implied by this statement.

\*First, the physical burden that Paul was bearing here, was delivered to him (it was laid upon his back) by a messenger of satan. In some way, satan was attempting to use this throbbing, irritating, lingering pain as a means of hindering the Apostle from smoothly

performing his ministry. Satan was involved in this. And yet, at the same time, we know that God Himself had ordained to use this very thorn as a means of keeping the Apostle humble, because of all of the revelations he had received. To be sure, this messenger of satan intended to frustrate and cripple the ministry of the Apostle Paul, and yet, God sovereignly ordained even to use the evil intentions of satan to accomplish great things in the heart and life of the Apostle, so that he would maintain his usefulness unto the Kingdom of God.

Isn't it great to know brethren, that God is sovereignly ruling over all things, and that even when our enemies mean to harm us for evil, God may allow that harm to come upon us, but only as a means of doing us good (Rom. 8:28 is *always* true). God even shapes the wicked intentions of satan into blessings for His children. Satan's arrows of hatred are God's roses of love. Joseph's brothers sold Joseph into slavery with wicked, jealous motives, but God ordained and used their wickedness to bring about the future deliverance of Israel and the world, when the great famine had come. Judas greedily betrayed Jesus unto His enemies, but God ordained and used Judas' wicked intentions to ultimately bring about our salvation. Satan sent a messenger to torment Paul through some ailment in the flesh, but God ordained to use that thorn as a means of keeping Paul humble, in light of the many revelations he had received. Let it always be a refreshment to the soul, brethren, to know that all of the blows that we receive from our enemies, are also ordained kisses from God. What they mean for evil, God always means for good, and if it is not for our good, then the evil will never reach us.

\*Secondly, Paul's statement here also further confirms that whatever this physical ailment was, it was very, very painful. Notice, this "messenger from satan" was sent to *buffet/beat* him. This was not simply a cold, the flu, a few stitches or a headache. This thorn involved some form of weighty pain; the type of pain that constantly reminds you that it is there. Paul was in the boxing ring, receiving some weighty blows to the chin, head and solar plexus.

3) Paul moves on to say that he *pled* with the Lord three times that it might depart from him. Again, just simply note two things about this final description of Paul's thorn.

\*First, again we note the intensity of the pain and the level of irritation that this thorn was causing Paul. He *pled* with the Lord three times to have it removed from him. Paul, who was no alien to pain, found himself begging God to relieve him of this particular burden. His prayers

were not casual, when he addressed this matter. No, he agonized in prayer three times that this thorn would be pulled out; that it would depart from him. This messenger of satan was really affecting Paul, and so, he turned to the One who has power over all things, to have it depart. The pain, agony, irritation and interference were unbearably making Paul's kingdom progress very difficult.

\*Secondly, we simply note that this burden was a "lingering burden." In fact, the impression we are given here, is that the Apostle was *still* suffering with this thorn in the flesh. Unlike our previous two examples, there is no resolution to this burden. Paul must simply bear it. And the only comfort he can receive while doing so, is the comfort of understanding why it was necessary for him to bear it, at this time. You see, sometimes, simply knowing that there is a divine purpose in our sufferings; simply recognizing that God's love for us is the ultimate origin, even of every harsh providence that comes upon us, is enough to give us some comfort, and to strengthen our backs, so that we can bear our burdens and sufferings for whatever duration of time, God calls us to bear them. You see, your trials and sufferings, brethren, are not random or haphazard or off of God's radar screen. Even burdens carried and delivered by messengers of satan (those with ill motives) only reach you, because God aims to use them for your sanctifying good...do you see that, brethren?

## **II. The Glorious Purposes Served by Paul's Lingering Thorn** [Read 2 Cor. 12:8-10]

Brethren, note several glorious purposes served by the Apostle's lingering thorn:

1) It kept him humble. It was a constant reminder of his *visible* frailty, so that he would be ever mindful of his dependence upon his *invisible* God. God is invisible and yet, He works in our world through visible means. He is the Master Architect and Builder, and yet, he uses redeemed, but fallen, visibly "prone to be proud" souls to accomplish His will. And the danger in that, is that *we* tend to lean in the direction of forgetting about God and robbing Him of His glory, when the glorious structure of this plan comes together. The utensils and tools, which are visible, sadly are more apt to receive the credit and glory for the product, which both belong to the invisible Builder. And so, God, the Builder, must do something to constantly remind the tools that they are just tools, and that His hands bring about every victory and accomplishment,

even by means of these tools. The tools themselves (which, in fact, are naturally defective and broken) are only effective because of how the Master Builder uses them. This "thorn" kept the Apostle from being exalted above measure. When people looked and said, "Behold, the mighty miracle working, revelation receiving, Apostle Paul," this thorn would help inspire the Apostle to continually say, "Look, I am the least of all Apostles and not worthy to be called and Apostle. I am the chief of sinners, and what you see, is the work of Christ, and not me." And so, this thorn provided Paul with the gift of humility.

2) It kept him strong. "For when I am weak, then I am strong." God's strength was made perfect in Paul's weakness. So irritatingly disruptive and painful was this thorn, that Paul knew that he could accomplish nothing for the Kingdom of God, while bearing it. And that is exactly the state that God wanted Paul to be in, because in such a state as this, God could make His power known in Paul's weakness. Paul's weakness would constantly remind him that every step of progress he made was only achieved by the divine strength and power of God. The *invisible* would provide the *visible* with real, tangible, strength, leading the *visible* to rely on and prosper by means of that strength. By means of his thorn, the Apostle would be forced to do, what he could never naturally do without it, namely, constantly turn to God for His strength and His grace, to accomplish the task that was set before him. And that is the best place for all of God's children to be in! And the infinite grace of God *purchased by* and *granted in* Christ, guarantees and carries them toward inevitable success. Paul was weak, but in his weakness, he could even move mountains by the divine strength that was always available to him in Christ. He would have to endure the necessary suffering, in order to receive and sustain this strength, but God's grace (God's resolute favor to prosper Paul and to do him good, in Christ) guaranteed a victorious outcome. Paul was hindered, but God was not, and a hindered Paul would be far more powerful than an unhindered Paul, because a hindered Paul finds divine strength in his human weakness. He finds, in God, what he cannot naturally produce in himself.

3) It made him useful. Paul was only useful, in so far, as the power of Christ rested on him. And that power could only rest on him, when he was humble and naturally weak. Independent, self-strong people, are useless to God's work. The flesh is powerless in the kingdom of God. Divine power is necessary to defeat satan and to break through the gates of hell. And divine power is accessed, where our confidence in the flesh is put off. And so, as

painful as they were, the Apostle had learned to boast in his infirmities and hardships, recognizing that it was through his own physical hardship that he could access the power of God. If the power of Christ continually flows through the hoses of broken humanity, than Paul would gladly boast in his brokenness, for it is by this means that he is made useful unto serving and prospering the Kingdom of God, and bringing glory to his Beloved Savior.

### **III. Bringing it Home to Us**

Perhaps some of you are presently suffering, or will someday suffer from a *lingering* burden/thorn? Like the Apostle Paul, the pain of this burden seems so overwhelming, that you can hardly believe that you will be able to finish your race with it on your back. And so, you plead with God again and again to remove it, but it seems to no avail. You wake up everyday, and the burden is still there. The back pain is such a hindrance; the depression is such a heavy weight; the marital problems are so severe; the illness is near crippling; the financial lack is so overwhelming...etc. What do you do? How can you effectively serve God while bearing such a burden as this?

Brethren, the answer is right here! Hear the Word of the Lord to you, this morning: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." "For when [you] are weak, then [you] are strong." In other words, brethren, if you are in Christ, then go forward and do all that you are called to do for the Kingdom of God, and watch God work wonders in and by you. Often times, it is at your weakest moments that you are rendered most effective for the Kingdom of God. And so, don't miss it! Don't miss your usefulness by allowing the enemy to convince you that you are somehow ineffective because of your physical weakness. Rather, see it as a great opportunity to take advantage of the power that rests in Christ, and press forward for His glory! Have faith in God, and take steps forward in that faith, and watch mountains move out of the way for you. Humble yourself under the mighty hand of God and He will lift you up. You see, God is in the business of taking naturally crippled, defective, ailing, suffering soldiers, and setting them on His front lines in the battle. For, when we are weak, then we are strong. Then God's strength is made perfect in us. Rejoice to this end, and invest your life in prospering the Kingdom of God in your home, in your local church body, at work, and wherever God has

divinely appointed you to bear the light of Christ, in this dark and fallen world. Storm the gates of hell, for Christ will build His church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it!

AMEN!!!

**Benediction:** Jude 1:24-25