

Biblical Change 5 – The Opportunity For Change

2 Corinthians 12:1 It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: 2 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. 3 And I know such a man-- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- 4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. 5 Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. 6 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. 7 And 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. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 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. 10 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. (2Co 12:1-10)

When is the best time to change? John Greenleaf Whittier wrote, "Of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these: it might have been." It might have been – lost opportunity. A missed opportunity. A missed opportunity is something that could have been used for our good, but we don't see it, or mistake it for something else, or don't capitalise on it.

I wonder how many Christians will look back on their lives in eternity and see how many missed opportunities there were for change. Too many Christians have this idea that they will begin working on Christian maturity, on Christlikeness, on godliness, in the very near future, just once they are over this hurdle here, once they have solved this pressing problem.

Most often, the problem they just want to get past, the issue they think they must solve so as to move on to spiritual growth, is actually the opportunity for change. Too often, we miss the opportunity God gives us for change. We often mistake the opportunity for change as an obstacle to change. We come to see the situation God creates as the main problem to be solved, when God is simply using it as a vehicle to solve the problem in our hearts.

We see our biggest problems as being around us, but God sees our biggest problems as inside us. We see our biggest problems as temporal, physical, circumstantial. But God sees our biggest problems as eternal, spiritual, internal matters of the heart.

And unless we click into God's way of thinking, we will be like infants who cannot understand why some medical procedures are being done to them. Two of my children had to have identical operations on their fingers. I well remember having to stand there in the operating theatre as the anaesthetist placed the gas mask over their faces, and they began to scream in terror. They were too young and too immature to understand that the trauma was a means to healing.

Some Christians never get out of the trauma stage, because they never understand why a good Father brings the pain. They, like small children, expect a good God to take away all the bad, painful stuff, and cannot understand why He doesn't do so when they ask Him to.

But in Scripture we find that God brings pain into the lives of His people to create change. It's this failure to recognise what God uses, and how He uses it to produce change in us that leaves so many Christians fighting against the very instrument of change. We bite the vet's hand, we fight against the syringe giving us the shot, we fight with the X-Ray machine that is showing us what's inside.

Paul, perhaps the model Christian, went through this. And he wrote down his experience for us so

that we could have a shortcut to change. Instead of wasting time fighting against what God has deliberately placed there, we can come to understand its purpose, work with the Holy Spirit to see change take place, and trust God to adjust the situation as He sees best.

I. The Reality of the Thorn

It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: 2 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. 3 And I know such a man-- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows--

4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. 5 Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities.

6 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.

7 And 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.

To fit this in context, Paul has been defending his apostleship against some critics. And to add one more proof of his chosen status, he speaks about the unique visions and revelations that God has given him. He speaks of himself in the third person, but describes a time when God actually allowed Paul to view the glories of Heaven itself, what is here called the third heaven, or Paradise. And isn't it interesting that unlike these books we hear about today where a person supposedly died and went to Heaven and came back and describes it and then writes a bestselling book, Paul says it is not lawful – he is not allowed – to relate much of his experience. And he's relating this not to glory in himself, but to actually show how God humbled him through it.

Because in verse 7, we're told that to keep Paul humble, a thorn in the flesh was sent to him. It's called a messenger of Satan, and its purpose was to buffet Paul. The word for *buffet* means to mistreat, to assault. This thing was there to deliberately harass, torment, and make life hard and difficult for Paul.

What was this thing? Paul has been deliberately vague. Too specific, and we would not relate. The image of a thorn in the flesh helps us understand its effect. Imagine a thorn that has gotten into you. The pain annoys and stabs at you, crying out to be removed. *Messenger of Satan* shows that it was seemingly hostile, like an adversary, an enemy, opposition.

Commentators have speculated on what this was for Paul. Some have thought it was a physical affliction that Paul had. It's possible that Paul had some kind of ongoing affliction in his eyes. He says to the Galatians that he wrote a large letter with his own hand, something which he would do if he had trouble seeing. Some eye conditions would have caused a continual flow of tears or infection, and the sight of a man whose eyes are filled with pus, reddened, watery is not appealing, which could explain why Paul says that some people said of him “ his bodily presence is weak” (2Co 10:10)

Others have suggested that this thorn was actually a person. Perhaps it was a very vocal and powerful and persuasive opponent of Paul, who seemed to dog Paul's steps, criticising Paul, attacking him, writing against him, perhaps slandering him. This would certainly correspond to the idea of a messenger of Satan – a person who knowingly or unknowingly was doing Satan's work by opposing Paul.

Now whether it was some kind of eye trouble, or whether it was personal opposition, the result is the same. Paul had something in his life that he didn't want. It was painful. It was annoying. It

harassed him. It tormented him. From any human perspective, he was worse off in having this thing.

For you and me, it might be a very different kind of trial. It might be a relationship scarred by conflict and division, major difficulty at work, the stresses of parenting, a financial pressure, chronic unemployment, the expectations of others, an overbooked schedule, a health problem. Like Paul's it is painful, it annoys, provokes, and we want to get rid of it.

Now we see the two responses Paul had to his trial.

II. The Request About the Thorn

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

Paul wanted the negative, the pain, the discomfort of this thing removed from his life. So he prayed and asked God to take it away. He asked God three times. Since most of us ask God to take something out of our lives numerous times, Paul must have very deliberately, pointedly prayed about this on three occasions, looking for relief.

This is a natural response. It is as natural as flinching from pain, as getting away from intense heat. We are made to want to pursue what is comforting and pleasurable and enjoyable, and want to get away from pain and discomfort and hurtful things.

There is nothing in this passage to tell us that what Paul did in asking for this to be removed was sinful or evil. There is a kind of false spirituality that says that the noblest and most pious Christians love suffering, they accept all their circumstances as coming from God, and do not try to change their circumstances. No, Paul wanted his circumstances to change, and he felt so confident that it is okay to want negative circumstances to change, that he was willing, in all good conscience, to ask God in prayer, to change those circumstances.

Whatever your thorn may be, it is understandable that you want it changed. You want it removed, and as soon as possible. You want the health trial to end and the body to heal. You want the conflict in marriage to stop. You want the rebellious teenager to submit. You want the financial pressures to end.

There is no problem in wanting that negative thing to change. The problem comes when we do not understand or see why God is keeping it there.

When God keeps the trial there, it is like heat. As you heat something up, there is going to be a reaction. And very often, what begins to come out of us is sin.

We don't know if Paul had any sinful responses. We do know he faced all kinds of thorns: *23 Are they ministers of Christ?-- I speak as a fool-- I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. 24 From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; 26 in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; 27 in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness-- (2Co 11:23-27)*

You can really think of sinful responses in two modes- blowing up and clamming up. *Blowing up* is all forms of anger, malice, vengeance, bitterness, becoming hypersensitive, prickly, returning evil for evil, angrily excusing our own actions

Clamming up is all forms of running away, denying, escaping, avoiding the problem. We escape into alcohol, drugs, overspending, overeating, TV, overwork. We can choose to become paralyzed and captured and give in. We can choose responses like catastrophizing, magnifying the problem, living in depression and hopelessness, making our suffering the lens through which we see everything.

Whether we blow up or clam up, it is a sinful heart's response to the pain, the problem. It is sinful because we become so fixated on the painful problem being removed, we cannot hear what God is saying to us, why He is keeping it there. If our best efforts to remove the thorn have not succeeded, if our prayers for it to be removed have not been answered with a yes, the right thing to do is to consider what God is doing through that trial.

C.S. Lewis said "God whispers to us in our pleasures,...but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Fortunately, Paul was able to listen and to understand why God had not taken it away.

III. The Reason for the Thorn

9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

As Paul asked God to take this away, God told Paul what He would be giving him instead. God was not going to take away the thorn. He was going to give Paul grace. Here *grace* means God's enabling power, God's strength. Into Paul's trial, as it hurts him, harms him, torments him, God is going to pour His help, His strength, His power.

At this point, we need to ask, strength to do what? Well, the answer has to be, strength to change. Strength to respond to the trial in a Christlike way. Did God have the power and the strength to remove the thorn? Yes. But that's not the strength or the power God is going to use here. God is going to give Paul the power to change. He is going to give the grace for Paul to change within, to respond to the trial in ways that please God. The trial is exactly what provides this opportunity. God said to Paul, "My strength is made perfect in weakness." God's enabling grace to change is most effective when the humans receiving it are needy, humbled, even desperate.

God left the heat on Paul, so that what would eventually come out of Paul was humility.

To put it another way, when we are physically well, facing no opposition, when all men speak well of us, when there are no problems to solve, no crises, no threats, no dangers, no uncertainties, no needs, how much do we cry out to God for grace? How much change do we want when everything is going well?

But when things go wrong, when things crumble, when we are harmed, threatened, abused, denied, opposed, when we are exposed to physical pain, financial poverty or uncertainty, conflict in relationships, loneliness,.. that's when the test is on. That's God's deliberate use of heat.

You see, the very same sun can do very different things, depending on the substance that its heat affects. The sun can soften and melt wax, or ice, or butter, or chocolate. But that same sun will harden cement, or clay, or concrete. The same heat will bring very different responses.

And this is how God works. God brings into your and my life the heat of some trial. Something

painful, distasteful, uncomfortable. And the first thing God is doing in that action is to bring out of our hearts what is evil and sinful and wicked. He uses the heat of the trial to show us what is already in our hearts.

The trial doesn't make us angry, malicious, impatient, unkind, despairing, discontent, murmuring, blaming, negative, critical, cold.

The trial merely reveals that what is already in our heart. (Mk 7:21-23) God uses the heat to bring out those evil responses, so we can see them and deal with them. We think this thorn is making me sin. God says, no, I am leaving that thorn in your flesh to bring out and show you your sin.

When God brought great loss of health and loved ones and possessions to Job, what came out of his heart? Some good responses at first, but by chapter 38, what was coming out of his heart was a low view of God, murmuring, and an immature view of God's justice and grace. But he didn't know that about himself, until God applied the heat.

Jonah thought he was a pretty good prophet, telling the northern kingdom about the victories they would have. But when he was called to preach to a people he didn't love, what came out of his heart? Rebellion. Racism. Hard-heartedness. Cruelty. But he wouldn't have known that had he not faced the heat of a command he didn't want to obey.

Peter thought he was a strong and loyal disciple. But then God applied the heat of personal danger, of being arrested and tortured and killed, and what came out of Peter's heart? Lying. Cowardice. Denials.

Abraham thought he loved and trusted God. But then God applied the heat of his aging body, of years of unanswered prayer, of an impatient wife. And what came out of Abraham's heart? Unbelief. Pragmatic solutions.

Once the heat of the trial has exposed what is in there, we can see what needs to be changed. Job saw his unbelief, and in chapter 42 he repents and realises that he has lived with head knowledge of God, but in repenting of his childish and legalistic view of God, he has come face to face with God. He changes, putting off unbelief, and putting on a robust view of God's sovereignty and goodness.

Peter repented of his denials, was humbled by his failure, and put on a new kind of courage – God dependent courage. And when persecuted, when beaten, and eventually when crucified upside down, what came out of his heart? Faithfulness, steadfastness.

Jonah repents in the middle of the book, but since it is very likely that he wrote the book of Jonah, we can be sure that he wrote it to show what God had revealed to him about himself. He cared more for plants than for people, was cruel and racist. In writing the book, he had put off that old and put on compassion, mercy, love for his neighbour.

As Abraham saw how his sin had only brought havoc and conflict to his home, he recognised how he had doubted God's Word. But then he put that off, and put on complete trust in God's Word. And what came out of his heart when God told him to sacrifice Isaac? Faith.

Your trial is not what is stopping you from changing. It is the thing that is showing you what needs to change. It is not an obstacle to change, it is the opportunity to change.

But the change only happens when the heat first shows us what is evil. When we use that heat as an opportunity to grab the sin by the scruff of the neck, call it sin, and cry out to God for His enabling grace to put on Christlike responses in that sin's place, that's when we change.

And then we find that the same sun which hardens the clay, melts the wax. The same heat, the very same problem, which was bringing anger, discontent, murmuring, despair, hatred, anxiety, unbelief,

out of our hearts, now, by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, will now bring out thanksgiving, peace, trust, patience, gentleness, courage, humility, joy. The heat of imprisonment brought Paul and Silas to sing praises to God at midnight. The heat of imminent death brought courage and trust out of the hearts of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

So then look at the list of negatives that Paul describes in verse 10: “ *10 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. (2Co 12:1-10)*

Infirmities: this refers to all kinds of bodily weakness, including sickness and disease and weakness related to age

Reproaches: all forms of insults, attacks, criticisms, or any form of mistreatment which you receive from others

Needs: this words refers to any situation which causes distress, hardship, any unwanted trouble that is forced upon you. Unasked for trouble that you have to deal with.

Persecutions: suffering for your faith in Christ, being harmed or deprived of something because of openly confessing Christ

Distresses: this refers to any situation of high pressure that makes you feel constricted, stretched, pressured and in anguish.

I can't think of a trial that is not covered by these five. Bodily weakness, attack from others, the pains and necessities of life, the loss from naming Christ, and situations of great pressure where you have limited options and limited resources.

Paul says, “I take pleasure in these.” Now has Paul become a sado-masochist? Does he now find pleasure in pain? Does he now enjoy what the rest of the human race hates? No, otherwise he would no longer call those things distresses and needs and reproaches. He still experiences their pain, and their discomfort, but he now takes pleasure in the opportunity they bring. He knows the weaker he is, the more stretched, the more under pressure, the more troubled, the more attacked, the more afflicted, the more likely he is to turn to God, to ask for grace to change. He takes pleasure in the heat: because once the heat has brought his evil to the surface, it can be dealt with, and it can be replaced with Christlikeness. He takes pleasure that these trials are opportunities for change.

This is why James tells us to count it joy when we fall into various trials, knowing the trying of our faith produces patience. It is why Paul says in Romans 5 that we glory in tribulations, knowing it produces perseverance.

But because we do not think this way, we miss the opportunity for change. Instead of fighting with our trials, after we have done what we can naturally to change our problem, we need to ask these questions:

- 1) What is coming out of my heart in response to this problem that is sinful?
- 2) What does my heart desire that is leading to these sinful reactions?
- 3) What does God want me to know and believe about this situation?
- 4) Even if this problem doesn't go away, what kind of responses would glorify Him?

I was thinking about who from church history illustrates this, and my mind went to a hymn which we haven't sung in our church, but you couldn't say it better than Isaac Watts did.

*I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of his salvation know,*

And seek more earnestly his face.

*I hoped that in some favored hour,
At once he'd grant me 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 the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.*

*Lord, why is this? I trembling cried;
Wilt 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,
To break thy schemes of worldly joy,
That thou mayst seek thy all in me.*

Right now, everyone in this room is experiencing one of Paul's five. You're either emerging from a trial, going into a trial, or in the middle of one. Your opportunity to change is not in the future sometime, but right now.