

## Intro:

1. Spiritual Visions are Not Something to Boast About
  - a. Many boast of their spirituality, because of visions and/or “words from the Lord” outside of Scripture
    - i. Colossians 2:18 – Defrauding us of the prize
    - ii. Separate from Christ
    - iii. “Super-spirituality” based upon visions or religious insight can lead to arrogance and abusive power
  - b. There is no profit from boasting of visions and/or revelations
    - i. NOT that they don’t exist
    - ii. Visions are particularly for the benefit of the receiver of the vision, not for authoritative truth for the church.
      1. Jesus is all that we need
    - iii. Paul speaks of himself in the third person here, so as to separate himself as much as possible from the “boasting” or even the reflection upon, these visions
  - c. Ultimately, boasting of our insight is a form of “works-righteousness” where we consider our reception of these visions as due to our “high regard by God” or to our “spiritual insight” and not due the sheer grace of God.
    - i. Notice Paul’s vision was not about what he saw, but what was spoken.
    - ii. Truth in words
    - iii. We are given NO DETAIL AS TO THE VISION ITSELF
      1. This was between Paul and his Lord
  - d. Humility is the key. Compassion is the rule. Truth must be spoken in love, if it is to be spoken at all in this instance.
    - i. He will only boast of his weaknesses
    - ii. Paul did not recollect his visions often. In fact, this is the only case apart from his run-in with Jesus at his conversion, that he mentions his own vision/revelation. Luke records the others.
    - iii. Paul wants people to believe his gospel because it is true in knowledge, not merely because it is spiritually enhanced by visions or supernatural revelations.
      1. “what he sees in me and hears from me.”
      2. Character of Christ and the Gospel of Christ
  - e. We need to be careful that we do not hold those with visions or “spiritual insight” in higher regard than others merely because they seem super-spiritual
    - i. Follow those who lead to Jesus, only to Jesus, for the sake of Jesus, by the gospel of Jesus, with the grace of Jesus, and the humility and compassion of Jesus.
    - ii. Beware of those with detailed visions that they say are for everybody.
      1. Test them against the revealed Word of God in Scripture
      2. Test them against the gospel of grace in Jesus
      3. Question whether this puffs up the preacher, or exalts the immeasurable riches of the grace of Jesus
2. God Brings Suffering to Show Us as Weak
  - a. “Pain is God’s megaphone to a deaf world.” ~C.S. Lewis
  - b. “Thorn in the Flesh”
    - i. Unknown weakness
    - ii. Probably physical – “flesh”

1. Irritating, always present, persistent pain “thorn”
  2. Malady that weakened him
    - a. Possibly made him less eloquent
    - b. Possibly made him less powerful
    - c. Definitely made it difficult for the “visionally” minded to believe that he was God’s messenger
      - i. They believe that God would heal his people
      - ii. Misunderstanding of the power of God
  - iii. Probably emotional – “harass” or “torment”
    1. Lit. “beat”
    2. Physical pains usually have a detrimental emotional side
      - a. Depression
      - b. Cynicism
      - c. Angst
  - iv. “Messenger of Satan”
    1. Satan loves to destroy
    2. God will use Satan to accomplish His own will
      - a. GOD IS STILL IN CONTROL
      - b. Simply because suffering is not removed, does not mean that God is incapable
        - i. God’s ultimate purpose is not merely to relieve temporary suffering
        - ii. God’s ultimate purpose is to show His greatness
        - iii. His greatness is exemplified in the Gospel
          1. Jesus becoming weak for us
          2. Jesus humbling himself for us
          3. Jesus losing the battle to win the war
  - v. Was given to humble Paul
    1. Because of the greatness of the revelations
    2. Tendency of the heart to become proud
3. God’s desire was for His grace to be sufficient
    - a. God did not take the malady away
    - b. Our comfort is not based upon our performance, no neither is our suffering
      - i. Suffering always has a purpose of humbling us, calling us to a loss of power (repentance), and setting us under the sufficiency and the power of Jesus
    - c. GRACE IN SUFFERING
      - i. Sometimes we believe that all suffering comes from our failure (sin) or is due to our lack of performance (not good enough)
        1. So, we blame God if we think we’ve done enough
        2. Or, we hate ourselves for our weaknesses
        3. Or, we blame the universe for being unfair
        4. Or, we blame the other person who is causing our suffering, and we hate them, or are at least embittered toward them, and we cannot forgive them (as we have been called by Jesus to forgive them).
      - ii. We don’t operate under suffering by GRACE, and our response to our suffering, and God’s answer to our repeated prayers in the midst of suffering, reveals whether or not we are

completely trusting Jesus and His grace toward us or if we are trusting our performance or lack thereof.

- d. The Work of God's Grace is His Changes *Within Us*
  - i. Jesus is glorified as He changes our hearts and our attitudes TODAY, not merely when we are perfected when He returns
  - ii. His Holy Spirit is working to help us fit our suffering into His plan and His gospel of grace

*"A believer may be in the saddest and darkest condition imaginable. Even so, the Holy Spirit is able to break through all this and bring to mind the promises of Christ. By this work, the Holy Spirit enables Christians to sit in dungeons, rejoice in flames and glory in troubles. If he brings to mind the promises of Christ for our comfort, neither Satan nor man, neither sin nor the world, nor even death itself, shall take away our comfort. Sometimes disasters and distresses appear which are so full of horror and darkness that saints are tempted to give up in despair. So how greatly are their spirits revived when the Holy Spirit brings the words of Christ to their minds for their comfort and joy. Thus, believers are not dependent upon outward circumstances for their happiness, for they have the inward and powerfully effective work of the Holy Spirit, to whom they give themselves up by faith." ~John Owen*

#### 4. What do We Do?

- a. Place your suffering within the larger context of God's ultimate plan of redemption
  - i. See Joseph (Gen 42:21) and Elisha (2 Kings 6:13-23)
    - 1. Elisha was rescued immediately by God when he asked
    - 2. Joseph was just entering into much suffering as a slave in Egypt
      - a. BUT, God was redeeming many people through his suffering
      - b. God answered "not now" to his prayer
    - 3. *"It would turn out that God had been as watchful in his hiddenness as in any miracle. The two extremes of His methods meet in fact in Dothan, for it was here, where Joseph cried in vain, that Elisha would find himself visibly encircled by God's chariots."* (Derek Kidner)
  - ii. Romans 8:28 – He is working all things together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose
- b. Place your suffering into the light of the Gospel
  - i. GRACE – Not Performance
    - 1. God's work of suffering in your life may prove to be a great act of redemption within His greater plan, just like it was with Jesus
    - 2. Don't ever assume that you've blown it so greatly that God will never restore your joy! The pain and misery that Joseph and his brothers brought was surely great, but God used their sins to weave a great tapestry of redemption that truly stupendous and valuable.
  - ii. Do I trust Jesus, even though I cannot see the good outcome right now?
- c. See your weakness as an opportunity to share in the life of Jesus
  - i. Jesus suffered greatly, and he didn't deserve it
    - 1. Don't be surprised if you do, too, and trust God to make it right some day
    - 2. People hated Jesus, they will hate His followers, too
  - ii. Jesus lost his life, so that he could take it up again
    - 1. You may lose your life, but Jesus will take it up again
    - 2. Keep your eyes on the horizon of eternity, not the mere temporal

- iii. Our weaknesses show that we are not chosen, saved, redeemed, because of our strength or superiority of wisdom, perfection, power, or intelligence.
  - 1. We are saved by grace alone because Jesus is THAT AMAZING
  - 2. We ARE the fools of the world, the ignoble, the weak
  - 3. Your suffering is a wonderful opportunity to show the tremendous love and indescribable grace of Jesus toward you
- d. SEE JESUS
  - i. Philippians 2:5-11
  - ii. The Suffering Servant, Selfless Savior, Perseverant Prince, and our Resurrected Redeemer
  - iii. Merely cling to Him if that is all that you can do! Hold onto Him! Listen to Him, and be silent before Him as He answers you. Don't cling to your righteousness or take your stand upon your own performance, but rest in His and trust Him, that He is working within you and will bring righteousness.
  - iv. 1 Cor 1:30-31

“But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption,<sup>31</sup> so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."

Conclusion: Simply because God has not removed your suffering when you ask Him does not mean that God does not care for you, nor does it mean that you are not obedient. To think such things it to treat God with the fickleness of an idol. It simply means that there is greater glory in His work of redemption in and through your suffering that you cannot see at this moment. The question becomes, “Do you trust His promises?” If you're having trouble seeing the goodness of God in the midst of your suffering, let us look into the inner sanctum of God's heart and His plan of redemption. In the memorial of Communion we remember the place that suffering holds in God's work of redemption. For it is in Jesus' blood that we are set free. It is in His sacrifice that we are cleared of guilt. It is in His suffering that our sins are atoned for. Let us now see suffering for what it is: the way of the Kingdom, the normal walk of the Christian, to suffer for the sake of Jesus. To be seen as weak and powerless is to follow in the steps of the Master, so that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ may be proclaimed in all the earth as more than enough for all that we need.