

Thanksgiving Eve, 2006

II Corinthians 12:2-10 (NIV)

² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴ was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.

⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.

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.

⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "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. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Is it really enough?

II Corinthians 12:2-10

Thanksgiving is a time that we set aside nationally to be thankful for all that we have. Religiously, we take this opportunity to thank God for all the blessings He has sent our way. We thank Him for providing jobs, money, and food for us. We thank Him for overcoming illnesses and for our health. We thank Him for all sorts of good things we have received from His hand. And we should do this. But sometimes I think that we forget that these are merely bonuses. We often forget the most important thing to be thankful for. In Lidie Edmunds' hymn "My Faith has found a resting place" the last line says, "It is enough that Jesus died, and that He died for me."

In his letter to the church in Thessalonica, the Apostle Paul said,

¹⁶ Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (I Thessalonians 5:16-18 / NIV).

It is God's will for us to give thanks in all circumstances. Listen to what kind of circumstances Paul gave thanks in,

²³ ... I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in

danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

... ³² In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. ³³ But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands" (II Corinthians 11:23-33 / NIV).

It would be one thing for a person to say, "Give thanks in all situations," if everything was going well in life, but to say that when his life was one suffering after another is quite another thing. For Paul, it was enough that Jesus died for him. In our passage tonight, we can see that in addition to all the persecution from the outside, Paul had a great deal of personal suffering.

In verses 2-5, Paul talks about a fantastic religious experience. He says that he doesn't know whether it was an out-of-body experience or not. He says that the experience took place 14 years earlier than the time of his writing this letter. The experience could have been his conversion experience. Paul was headed for the city of Damascus to expose, capture, jail, and kill Christians. All of a sudden there was a supernatural lightning strike and a supernatural clap of thunder. It surrounded Paul. The people that were traveling with Paul only saw the flash of light and the clap of thunder. But Paul encountered the risen Jesus. Jesus confronted him and in that moment Paul was converted to Christianity. The experience left him temporarily blind.

Before this experience, Paul was on top of the world. He had the best education, he was in the political elite, and he was on his way to the top: religiously, academically, and politically. What he didn't realize was that even though he was physically alive, he was spiritually dead. Even though he was very religious, he was headed for an eternity in hell.

When he surrendered his life to Jesus that day, he was made spiritually alive and his eternal destination was changed from hell to heaven. From that point on, Paul was thankful for grace, for the finished work of Christ on the cross for him, and for the new life he had in Christ. He would say things like, "*For me to live is Christ and to die is gain,*" and in another place, "*I am crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me.*" For Paul, it was certainly enough that Jesus died for him.

How much time do we spend thinking about the fact that Christ died for us? Every night before we go to bed, shouldn't we thank God for the grace and love He has shown for us in sending Jesus to die for us? Shouldn't we preach the gospel to ourselves every day? It truly should be enough that Jesus died and that He died for us.

Let's think about how thankful Paul was for his salvation. In verse 7 he tells us that in order to prevent him from becoming conceited, God allowed Satan to torment him with a thorn in the flesh. Now if he received this thorn shortly after the supernatural experience, then he was carrying this thorn in the flesh around with him for 14 years. In other words, in addition to being persecuted, starved, beaten,

left for dead, almost drowned, and all sorts of other suffering, he was constantly tormented by this thorn in the flesh. The world for *thorn* in Greek is *skolops*. It could mean the pointed end of a stake, the end of a fishhook, the point of an arrow, a splinter, or a thorn.

Further, we know that the torment was multiplied by the fact a messenger from Satan personally tormented him with it. The thorn has been broken down into basically three different categories.

The first is **spiritual**. People who believe the thorn was spiritual believe Paul could have been constantly tormented with doubts, temptations, or depression.

Other people believe the thorn was **persecution**.

Others however believe the thorn was **physical**. We know he had eye trouble. Some speculate that Paul had epilepsy or stuttered. In an apocryphal book titled *Acts of Paul and Thecla* the author describes Paul like this:

"And he saw Paul coming, a man little of stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked."

Other ancient descriptions had him hunched over with other deformities. Think about this. Paul was constantly betrayed by his fellow countrymen. People spread all sorts of lies about him. He was threatened, jailed, beaten, and left for dead: not just once but several times. In addition to all this, he carried around this personal illness that tormented him constantly. And yet, he is the one who says to give thanks always.

I don't think Paul was thankful for the beatings, the torture and the illness. But he was thankful that he was headed for his final destination, heaven. He was thankful that Jesus gave him new life. We can tell if we are maturing in Christ by the way in which we give thanks. The more we understand the wonder of the incarnation of Christ, His death on our behalf, and His resurrection, the more our spiritual life and our eternal destiny consume our thoughts.

I say that I don't think that Paul was thankful for the suffering per se because in verse 8 we learn that he asked God to take the suffering away; not once, but three times. Here is a man totally committed to serving God. Paul is preaching and teaching. He is being persecuted in every possible way for the gospel. He has given everything up in order to serve Christ. He asks God for one little favor, to make him well. God responds, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* What? Does that sound reasonable?

Maybe I'm extra sinful, but I'm not sure that is what I would want to hear. And yet to the very end, Paul exhorts us to thank God in everything. Again, the reason Paul can do this is because he is focused on the wonder and the power of the gospel. Paul was dead but Jesus made him alive. Paul was headed for hell. Jesus changed his final destination to heaven. That is all that mattered for Paul. He was now in a right relationship with God.

I think that we miss the miracle and the wonder of the gospel because we think we are better than we really are. Nothing else mattered to Paul. Look how he ends this section. He says,

"^{9b} Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong"
(II Corinthians 12:9b-10 / NIV).

Do our eternal destinies mean that much to us? Do we even think about the fact that we were headed for hell when Christ came to rescue us? Paul was persecuted and it seems that he suffered with this thorn all the way to his grave, and yet he continued to preach and teach about the goodness of God in Jesus Christ.

I have a friend who is a pastor. I have always admired him. He is a gentle person, kind, patient, and never complains. One day we sat down to chat, and he told me his story. When he was young, he and his wife went to their first church to serve. Within a year, his wife started to have an affair with one of the leaders in the church. She divorced him and married the man. To make things worse, she and this man did not leave the church. They chose to continue to attend his church while he was the pastor. He left, but was totally devastated. Now even though this event had taken place over 30 years ago, you could still see the pain in his eyes. He said to me, "John, I learned a very valuable lesson for life." He went on to say, "You will never know that Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have."

Let me suggest tonight what Thanksgiving should be all about for those of us who have received salvation from Jesus. As Lidie Edmunds penned it, "I need no other argument, I need no other plea; It is enough that Jesus died, And that He died for me."