

The Transcendence of the Minister

Chapter 10

Audio Lesson: New Testament #53



Objective: To understand the experiences of Paul and how God reveals Himself to and through His servants.



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. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 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. 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.

—2 Corinthians 12:7-10

It is impossible to understand the life of the Apostle Paul apart from his experiences. In addition to his experiences before he became a Christian, he encountered Jesus on the Damascus road, learned from Jesus in the Arabian desert, and was taken into heaven and given revelations too deep for words. Paul's experience in heaven left a permanent mark on his life. From then on, it was as though he always had one foot in heaven and one foot on earth. He spoke frequently of his desire to depart from earth to be with Christ, counting his life on earth as less valuable than the glory of being with Christ in heaven. This experience impacted the view of life he shared with others.

Paul told the Corinthians that he was given "a thorn" in his flesh, a messenger from Satan to hurt and bother him. No one knows exactly what this thorn was, but it is clear that God allowed and used it to keep Paul humble and to use Paul's weakness to show His strength. God likes to demonstrate His adequacy in the showcase of our inadequacy. God will use our limitations to show us and others that our life in Him is not a matter of who or what we are, but a matter of who and what He is. Serving God is never a matter of what we can do but of what He can do through us.

1. True or false? Paul boasted in his strengths because he was proud of the gifts God had given him.
2. True or false? Paul was commissioned to be an apostle to the Gentiles.
3. True or false? Paul encountered the risen Jesus on the Damascus Road and in Arabia.
4. True or false? Paul remained in Arabia for three years before entering into public ministry.



Unless otherwise noted, choose one answer for each question.

5. Who commissioned Paul to be an apostle?
 - a. James
 - b. Peter
 - c. Jesus
 - d. No one

6. How did Paul get much of his revelation?
 - a. By meditating several hours a day
 - b. From supernatural experiences with the Lord
 - c. From books written by Peter and James
 - d. By extreme self denial practices

7. According to Paul, when will we be able to live in a heavenly dimension?
 - a. When we discipline ourselves to be righteous enough
 - b. When we have made enough pilgrimages to win favor with God
 - c. Not until we die
 - d. Right now, even while we are living on earth

8. Why did God not remove Paul's "thorn in the flesh"? (choose all that apply)
 - a. Because Paul had not prayed with sufficient faith
 - b. Because Paul sinned and needed to be disciplined
 - c. To prevent Paul from developing pride from the revelations he had received
 - d. To demonstrate His own power through Paul's weakness
 - e. To help Paul live according to the Spirit and not depend on the flesh

9. What tools does God give us to help us fight our spiritual battles?
 - a. Just the same common sense He gives all human beings
 - b. Powerful spiritual weapons like prayer and faith
 - c. Secret spells and incantations and mantras
 - d. None, because if we really have faith, we will not have any battles.

10. Which of the following best describes Paul's attitude toward the Corinthians?

- a. He was very emotional and opened his heart to them.
- b. He remained detached and did not express any feelings.
- c. He was strictly logical because faith is only an intellectual issue.
- d. He was much too harsh and rejected them completely.

11. Which experience did Paul eventually forget about and grow away from?

- a. His Damascus road experience
- b. His Arabian desert experience
- c. His heavenly experience
- d. None of the above



What do you think are some of the weaknesses in your life? In what ways do you think God might show Himself strong in your weakness? How do your weaknesses help you depend on His strength and not on your own flesh?



Thank God that He encounters us and reveals Himself to us in different ways and at different times. Ask Him to continue giving you the experiences you need to become a more effective minister for Him. Thank Him also for your weaknesses and His strength, and offer Him both your strengths and your weaknesses for Him to use however He chooses and to display Himself in you.



Going Deeper

1. According to 2 Corinthians 12: 7-10, why was Paul given his thorn in the flesh? _____

2. Relate to and apply the responses Paul received, “My grace is sufficient for you,” and “My strength is made perfect in (your) weakness,” (verse 9), when God told him why He was not going to remove the thorn. _____

3. What were the physical manifestations Paul lived with every day because of his thorn in the flesh? (Consider 1 Corinthians 2: 1-5; Galatians 4: 13-15) _____

4. How can you personally apply the reality that, when Paul received his third “No” from God, he not only accepted these limitations but gloried in them? (Consider 2 Corinthians 9:8; Romans 5: 2-5) _____

5. How can you relate to and apply the heavenly experience of Paul to the emphasis in his letter to the Ephesians on the expression, “in the heavenly places,” by which he taught that we can be in the heavenly dimension now, while living on earth? (Compare this with the Gospel of John 3: 12-13) _____

6. How do you believe God could use your weaknesses as a showcase in which He can exhibit His strength? _____

7. How can you personally apply this to the great metaphor of Jesus: *as we are branches joined to Him, our Vine*, so that we might be more fruitful, His Father sometimes cuts us back to improve the quality and the quantity of our fruit? _____
