

2 Corinthians - Commentaries by Walter Thomas Turpin

Christ: His People's Portion and Object, Chapter 7: the Artificial and the Spiritual (3:18)

2 Corinthians 3:18

It is very clear and distinct, feeble though the measure be in which the soul apprehends it, that it is only as we are occupied with Christ where He is, that we are like Him in our ways. "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."

But, I may ask, have we grasped in soul, or rather, have we been possessed by, all that is implied in these wondrous words? Do we not often detect in ourselves a lack of that spring and power of life which imparts quietness and ease and restfulness of heart? And in the absence of these, yet knowing they ought to be there, are not many forced into what I must call an artificial state of soul, which carries on its very bearing the opposite of life and the Spirit?

There is something refreshing and beautiful in the spring and freshness of life, and it matters not how diligently or carefully formed anything resembling life may be, the difference between what is artificial and what is real is at once apparent.

Light and heat are neither of them, nor both together, the tree, most necessary though they be as the soil and atmosphere, as it were, in which it is planted. A Christian is, as such, in the light, and he is moreover the object of the Father's love, even in the measure of it in which Jesus was loved—"hast loved them, as thou hast loved Me" (John 17:23).

Now, is there not a great difference between a soul held and governed in divine power and reality by these things, and one who, because painfully sensible of the mere outside owning of them, is seeking to hold them? It is just the difference between my heart keeping the peace of God and the peace of God keeping, as in a garrison, my heart. But there is more than this difference, for there is the practical effect. If the soul be not held, but seeking to hold, there is ever prominent in its state the unrest that invariably accompanies effort: disquiet and fear about almost everything, as well as uncertainty even where most was expected from God. The contrary to all this is Christianity. Unseen realities are the governing power acting on the soul, absorbing and commanding it, the affections of the man formed, sustained, and satisfied by Christ, their only object; and, as a consequence, rest, quietness, and ease in the most untoward circumstances, walking in that path which "the vulture's eye hath not seen."

There ought not to be anything forced about us as Christians; effort of any kind betrays the absence of power. The presence of Christ not only imparts to us but secures through us all that is suitable to His presence. Effort tells the tale of our being out of His presence, and is invariably resorted to for the purpose of acquiring that which is the simple result of being in His presence and of being acted upon by Himself. I do not for a moment wish to excuse anything like sloth, or ease, or self-indulgence of any kind, in anything, much less so in these things which have to do with man in the Spirit and not in the flesh: but I do feel it is a great and solemn reality to press upon the people of God that the presence of Christ can alone command the heart. What a blessed thing for a poor worm to be held by the presence of the Lord of glory! Oh, I cannot but speak of it! such glories as are indeed to be found here: to be the subject on which His presence acts, instead of our poor hearts and thoughts acting on Him; to be the subject; of light and heat, such light and love, too!

What was it that formed John? Was it not that he leaned on the bosom of Jesus? John lay there because he knew it pleased his Lord and Master; may we not do the same? How much effort was there about John when he lay there? Did he find it difficult to say, "Lord, who is it?" Peter may have felt it difficult, and was glad to use John's nearness; but as to John, the question came forth as the simple and natural result of being where he was. That bosom was everything to John: he was not thinking of being there, or of the results to him of being there; he was there for its own sake, hence he was not restless or unnatural. That blessed person on whose bosom he reclined was to John "all." Oh, to have the scepter of Christ swaying its dominion of life and liberty from pole to pole in our poor hearts! Our looks would then tell of Him, our words speak of Him, our thoughts rise and set in Him, and all so easily and naturally, that is, in spiritual power. In a word, Christ would be our life practically, as He is our life truly and really; the glory of the Lord would thus transform us into the same image from glory to glory as by the Spirit of the lord.

The Lord alone knows what searchings of heart this leads to. The heart that has passed through it alone knows what it is to rise and walk apart from all that once governed and influenced it, often, too, beyond what we suspected even; but so it is. Yet Christ is worthy. May we know what it is to be in some more full measure the subjects of His power and presence before Himself, formed by Him alone, long enough in the mount, as it were, to catch the pattern of the glory, not because of the good of it, nor even in the first instance that we may be a testimony to others, or enrich ourselves, but because of what He is in His own intrinsic blessedness and preciousness.

It is a great cheer to the soul to know that the whole power of God, by the Spirit, is for us in the maintenance of this blessed walk on earth; only as Christ alone fills our eyes and hearts are we enriched ourselves, or any testimony to others; thus it is we are at rest, having reached the haven of quiet. Another has blessedly said, "Heaven is the metropolis of Christianity"; may we know it is so in deep blessedness. If a Jerusalem or Rome were enough to divert for a moment such an one as Paul, surely much less prevails with us who have so little of that divine energy and power which characterized him in so remarkable a degree.

May He by His own Spirit so attract, win, and satisfy the hearts of His beloved people, presenting to them Him who alone can secure this in them, that they, finding their all in Christ, may be like "a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit"

(Jer. 17:8).

{This also appeared as “Transformation and Satisfaction” in Helps in Things Concerning Himself, vol. 1.}

Christ: His People's Portion and Object, Chapter 6: Surpassing Glory and Surpassing Power (3:7-18)

2 Corinthians 3:7-4:9

There is a great contrast introduced in this third chapter between the ministry which had its day on this earth and that ministry which is now in progress, and, I may say, very near its close. It is of importance to understand what is the character and nature of these two ministries. They are in complete contrast—the former not answering in any measure to the latter. There is a distinct and definite ministry from heaven at this present moment, which has for its object a formative character in God's people. There are two things that stand out very prominently in this ministry in contrast with the former ministry; when I speak of that, of course, I refer to that which was instituted on this earth at Mount Sinai, given to Moses with a distinct and highly definite purpose of God in it. These two things which mark the present ministry from the heavens are quite apart from, and not to be found in, the ministry from Sinai. They are spoken of in this third chapter, and cannot have escaped your attention—they are liberty and a formative efficiency. These are the great characteristics of the present ministry. I will speak presently of what the purpose of God is with respect to the character which this is intended to produce in God's people, but these are the two great features of it: liberty in contrast with bondage, and a formative power in contrast with the entire absence of anything of the kind in the ministry from Sinai.

To be simple about it: when the ministry of Sinai came, it was embodied in the ten commandments, which were written upon tables of stone, and were given by God in the character of one who was making a demand upon man as he was, he being incompetent to answer to it. That was the special characteristic of it. It was God demanding, God come to look for that which man had not to give. He looked, for instance, for righteousness, but man had none; He looked for a character suitable to Himself in the then revelation of His character, but man had not that suitability; and the consequence was that man, being unable and incompetent to render to God what God was claiming from him, fell under the condemnation and power of death which was attached to that ministry. Hence it was “the ministration of death” (2 Cor. 3:7).

And that must be always a ministry of death which makes a demand upon man in the flesh. I do not care what it is; even the most exalted ministry that could be conceived from the heavens, if that ministry were to come and claim from us on the ground of what we are, would be a ministration of death—just as the Sinai ministry was. The moment a demand is made upon man as he is, that instant condemnation is fixed upon the creature on whom the demand is made. That is the special mark of what we may now call the Sinaitic ministry—that worn-out system which is now passed away, in God's grace. The consequence of that ministry was bondage and not liberty; hence you see the apostle, in contrasting it here in this chapter, says, “The Lord is that spirit.” It should be a small s; it is not the Holy Ghost: what he means to say is that the Lord is the spirit of all that is in the Old Testament. You will find certain things represented in the former thing, in the way of types, and so on; but the spirit of it all was the Lord Himself. Then you have the Holy Ghost in the next clause, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” This marks the new position in connection with this new ministry. The Holy Ghost is there, but, if the Holy Ghost be there, then there must have been previously a ministration of the very thing that was formerly demanded, namely, righteousness; because it is the ministry of righteousness, and glory, and the Spirit, in contrast with the ministry of bondage, death, and condemnation.

Well, now, that is simple enough, at least as to the doctrinal part of it. The previous order of things, and, I may say, that which people want to revive in a mongrel way now, consisted in God making demands upon man in the flesh. And, if God do so, man must necessarily come into the condemnation which inevitably flows from it, for he has no righteousness for God—he is in unrighteousness. But now what comes out is this: that God, from the glory, from the very place where that blessed One is at the right hand of God, ministers to a creature upon this earth a righteousness that he had previously demanded from him. He ministers it to him, instead of looking that man should be up to the glory of God, from which he had fallen so far short. It is a ministry of glory, and of righteousness, and of the Spirit; that is, the Holy Ghost is the characteristic power of everything which is based upon this righteousness—the pedestal upon which it all stands.

But there is something more, an exceedingly blessed and important element, in this second ministry, far beyond even what I have spoken of as to righteousness and the Spirit. It is its formative power; the effect of being under the ministry of glory is to be transformed into the likeness of the blessed One in whose face the glory shines. The law never did that. The law never made a man like itself, but condemned him for his unlikeness. It cursed him on account of his shortcomings, and, let me say, that if it did not do that, it would cease to be the law. You will thus see the folly of taking away the penalties of the law. What good would it be if they were taken away? If you take away the penalties of the law you destroy the whole power of it. The law, without its necessary penalties, is a miserable thing—good for nothing. The principal constituent element of law, its characteristic, its very nature, was this—it condemned man for being short of its requirements. Man was short of the chief requirements of the law of God, and it condemned him necessarily because of it.

What is it that suits a poor wretched creature now, in the full consciousness of his shortness, inability, and feebleness? Just this, that the very thing that he had not for God, God has for him! Man had no righteousness; God gives him righteousness. He was under bondage; God gives him liberty. He could not stand in the presence of the glory; God ministers glory to him. And the necessary consequence of that is the formative power of which I was speaking.

I ask you affectionately, are you in the liberty of that ministry? Do you know, in your soul and in your conscience, the liberty that comes from being under that ministry? That you have got a righteousness which is suited to the presence of God, and that the glory from whence that righteousness is ministered to you, and the One in whose face the whole glory of God shines, is just the One who suits you? Besides that, as you look at that blessed One in all the glory of God where He is, do you know the transforming power and effect of that vision, producing in its feeble measure (because of the vessel upon which it acts) something of the likeness of Christ, “changed into the same image from glory to glory”?

You see, it is a wonderful thing to think of, what the purpose of God is about it—and this is where the deficiency is in every one of our souls. The thought of God is to have a people on this earth walking in the steps of His own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in the heavens. That is His thought, His present thought about His people. And, if you and I have not in our souls the sense of that, that God is seeking to have a people upon this earth, in their feeble measure the reflection of His own Son in the heavens, how can we have that communion with God which apprehends His things? If the thought of God be to have a heavenly people upon this earth, in the life of His Son, you cannot go on with this world—and, if this be not God's thought, what is? If God be seeking to have a heavenly people, a people in their practices, and ways, and walk, and character, and relationships, heavenly, if that be His thought, then we cannot possibly go on with the world. I do violence at once to the purpose of God if I do.

If we mean to go on with the world, I think it would be far more honest if we said, "No, God has not such a thought in His mind at all. His purpose is to have a people here to enjoy the world as much as they can; that is His purpose." I think it is a great deal better that we should be honest with our hearts and consciences. There is nothing God hates and detests so much as unreality. The great thing that He is looking for in His people is reality, and not to be trifling with conscience about these things. Better for you to give a denial to the fact and say, "God has no such purpose; Christ did not go up to heaven to form a people like Himself, and the Holy Ghost did not come down to keep a people like Christ." It is better to say so at once, and then go hard and fast with the world. There is nothing so miserable and detestable as a sort of truckling with this wretched, polluted world, taking just as much of Christianity as you think will suit you. This is exactly what people are doing. They take just as much of the truth of God as they think will put some sort of status upon them, but the part that cuts them, that strips them of the thing their heart clings to, they turn aside. It reminds me of what used to be done in days gone by, and is even now very common: people take and read the Word of God, the Old Testament; they find most wonderful promises and blessings, and wonderful prospects for the Jew, and they take them to themselves with the most perfect self-complacency, but what is done with the curses? They quietly leave those. This is exactly what people are doing with their consciences with reference to the truth. They take as much of the truth of God as suits them (what a terrible snare it is!), just as much as will make their consciences easy to go on with the devil and the world. But, the part that cuts them asunder, that exposes them for their worldliness, that brings them in as short of this wonderful testimony and shows them up with the light of God streaming upon them in all its brightness and glory—they turn aside from that. Believe me, you must either take Christianity or leave it. You cannot mix Christianity and earthly religion. This is what people are trying to do, but it is the destruction of the testimony of the people of God in these last times where it is the case. They are semi-Christians and semi-Jews. They find that God gave certain things to a people on this earth, and they take them for themselves, thus setting aside the heavenly character of the testimony committed to them.

But when I open such a scripture as this, for instance, a scripture that shows me the beloved Son cast out of this earth, rejected, refused, and despised, spit upon by the world and the people of the world, and the glory of God put in the face of that blessed One up there whom man despised, I have no question whatever about the character of the ministry and about the character of the glory. The very rejection of Christ upon the earth, and the very glory of Christ in the heavens, opens my heart to all the liberty that is up there, but equally shuts me up to the narrowness of His path down here. You cannot help it. And therefore I feel it is really of moment to bring people at issue with their consciences about it; I do feel it is a solemn thing to stand here and say it. I feel, before God, it is a very responsible thing, to speak any word for God in such a moment as this, but there is nothing that is working more mischief and more harm at the present time amongst the people of God than that sort of half-and-half bowing to the truth. There is a want of straightforward, open facing of the question with conscience, a turning aside of the edge and power of the Word of God from the soul. And, not only so, but some are positively seeking by the Scriptures to vindicate this degradation of the truth of God. I say it is a very solemn thing, and one which every one of us ought to seriously lay to heart. Do we really mean to be governed in our ways by the thoughts of God? May He give you and me a firmer grasp in our conscience as to what the character of the thing is that He has introduced from heaven, in connection with the glorified Man up there! His purpose is to find down here on this earth a people in some little measure after the fashion of that blessed One who is in glory. That is His purpose and thought.

And therefore you get that verse of the third chapter, which comes in in connection with this: "We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord"; not like Moses, who had his face covered that the children of Israel could not look upon it. You remember the circumstance which the Holy Ghost refers to. Moses went up to the mount to receive the tables of testimony, and when he came down the second time, his face shone. The shining of Moses' face, as he came down, was the reflection of the condemning power of that law which man could not stand, and therefore he covered his face—not when he went into God, but when he came out to man. Man could not look at him, because every ray that shone from that face made a demand upon man which he could not meet. But here is a more brilliant glory: a glory that shines, not from the face of a poor weak man like Moses, but the whole glory of God itself, the unsullied radiance of His glory, the shining forth of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of His own Son. Is not that a wonderful thing that you are positively capable of looking at the radiance of the glory of God as it streams from that blessed face? Capable of gazing at it! Why? Because I have got righteousness under my feet instead of condemnation, and the Holy Ghost in me instead of my being in bondage; and every ray of glory that shines from that blessed face in the heavens is the reflection to my soul of the completeness, and sufficiency, and fullness of His finished work—the eternal pedestal of blessedness He has set me upon.

But there is more than this. As I look at that glory, it has a formative power in me. I tell you, beloved brethren, and I say it to myself, as well as you, what we all stand in need of (I speak especially to those who have a genuine desire in their souls to be a little more after the power of this ministry) is, to be long enough in the presence of that blessed Christ who is glorified to catch the features of that Christ, and so have Him engraven upon the "fleshy tables of our hearts." That is what is wanted. It is not an effort. You might try to be like Christ in glory until you were worn out with trying, and you would not catch one feature of His. The very fact of your striving proves your inability. But what is it? It is a thing that nobody can explain. I do not believe you can ever convey to another what it is to sit engrossed with that blessed One who is there in glory. Who could explain it? It is a thing that a person may speak of out of the fullness of his own heart, but who could convey either the satisfaction of it, or the effect of it upon oneself, individually? The Word of God speaks to me of the fact, but there is no man living, nor has there been one, who could convey to another, be he ever so intelligent, or spiritual, or earnest, the sense which his heart gets while he sits as clay in the hands of that glorious potter. It is impossible to describe it, and yet it is a reality. It is a reality, that the person who sits in the company and presence of the glorified Christ, insensibly to himself, contracts moral likeness to Him.

When Moses came down from the mount, though it was the mount of condemnation, there was a glory streaming from his face which no one could look at, but there was only one man in the whole of that company who was insensible to the fact that there was glory in his face, and

that was himself. Where did he get that glory? He went up and he was alone with God in the mount, and the glory, though it was connected with the ministry of condemnation, was reflected upon his face when he went down. You and I, with unveiled face, no veil either on us, or on that blessed One up there (for I think the passage will bear the thought of that), there is neither the veil upon Christ nor upon us, everything is open, unveiled; as we by faith look at that blessed One, as we sit before Him, as we are sufficiently passive in His presence, He is engraved on our hearts by the Spirit, and when we come down there is the reflection upon us.

You know perfectly well what it is to meet a person who gives your heart the sense that he has been with Christ, who reminds you of Christ. But how seldom is it the case! What I feel so deplorable, and what one mourns over, is that, even with reference to the very best of things, we leave so much the impress of ourselves upon them, instead of Christ. That is what is so sad. In what is done for Christ, we are more impressed with the one who is doing it than the One for whom it is done. What one longs for, what one's heart yearns after, is to be just like clay in the hands of the potter, as our hymn expresses it:

God's thought is that we should be as clay, absolutely passive, so that the potter might leave the mark of His own beautiful hands upon us. What a wonderful thing it would be if that were the case with us, as we move through these scenes of sorrow, and difficulty, and trial, and temptation, and besetment, surrounded by all that is in this poor, wretched, miserable world, which the devil will head up with his masterpiece of iniquity against Christ; if we were distinguished, not so much by what we say and do, as by the way that hand governs us, controls us, guides us—the hand of the potter. That is the meaning of this last verse of the third of Corinthians. As I said before, it is not effort, it is not grasping after something, it is not seeking to possess yourselves of anything, it is simply this—“We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image.” That is the clay entirely under the hand of the blessed potter.

It is a wonderful thing that God should take such a thing as clay in which to reflect His glory. I will speak of that more fully presently, but what I want to press now is that there is this formative power in this ministry. Instead of demanding or seeking for anything from us, it brings to us from the heavens the thing we could not give, and, besides that, it transforms us into the image and likeness of Christ, as we are sufficiently like clay in His hands.

Now, may I ask you affectionately—and I do not want to make anybody depressed or morbid—but, I ask you, how much of your time do you really sit down in the Lord's presence? How much time and leisure have you, not merely from the business of this world, but, even supposing your service is for the Lord, how much time have you for this that I am speaking of? Do you not know that in order that there may be great outgoings, there must be great incomings? There will be no outshining if there is not in-shining. What is it then? Simply this, that my heart and soul have leisure enough, both from the things without and within, to sit down in the solitude of the presence of that blessed, holy, glorious person who is in heaven, finding my delight in Him for His own sake. Now what do you and I know about that? What do we know positively, in our own souls, of that blessed, wonderful retirement, sitting in the company of Christ, blind to all else save His beauty and His glory, deaf to every other sound but that of His voice?

Would not a person fresh from a scene like that be redolent of Christ?

Someone once said to me, speaking of another, “I like to be in the company of so-and so.” I replied, “Why?” The answer was, “Because he always reminds me of a third person.” “Who is that?” “The blessed One in glory.” Oh, what a blessed thing it is to walk through this world, and, as we meet each other, in our business, our households, or domestic relationships, to remind each other of that One in glory, to have the fullness of that Christ in measure reproduced in poor, wretched creatures like you and me! It is a most blessed thing—the most marvelous ministry that could be conceived.

Well, now, if we come to the fourth chapter, there are only three things I will speak of in connection with this ministry. They are in the seventh verse. He says, “we have this treasure,” and it is “in earthen vessels,” and there is what is called “the excellency of the power,” or, as I believe it should be, “the surpassingness of the power.” These are three wonderful things to get before our thoughts.

“This treasure,” what is it? I do not think the treasure is so much the estimate that my heart forms of Christ as the value that God has found in Him. That is the reason, I believe, why it is called a “treasure.” I do not deny the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ is to be a treasure to His people, because you get the scripture elsewhere: “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” but here the treasure, which is, of course, Christ, is presented more as it is looked at from God's side. It is the treasure in God's estimation. It is what the thought of God is as to this blessed One. Christ is His treasure. How did that treasure come into the vessel? Look at the sixth verse for a moment. He says:

“For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

That is the way the treasure comes in. It is not that I have possessed myself of the treasure. It is a wonderful thing—it sustains one's heart—to think of the sovereignty of the grace of God; to think of that sovereign grace in its actings as well as its purposes. How, then, did this treasure find its way into our hearts? Let me ask, how did light come into this dark world? Remember this, the sun was not the creature of the first day; it was created afterwards. How then did light come? What was the light of the first three days in the old creation? This: “God said, Let there be light; and light was.” Just so spiritually in our hearts: God, in His wonderful, blessed, sovereign way of dealing, God Himself, who commanded that out of darkness light should shine, is the God who has shone in our hearts. It is not merely a ray from Him, or some emanation from Him, but God Himself shining. That is a very different thing; God Himself shining in a man's heart, in all His blessed illuminating power, for, or in order to “give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Take an instance of it. This very Saul of Tarsus himself, on the road to Damascus, a persecutor, who had never had a good thought of Christ, nothing but hatred, a man who thought he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth, suddenly, in a moment, without the slightest warning, saw “a light from heaven above the brightness of the sun.” A light that put out the sun, shining in his noonday splendor, and a Savior in glory was revealed in his soul. He is thus the living instance of the way this blessed treasure is deposited in a man's soul. Paul himself, who was writing this, is the living instance of the way in which God would command the light to shine out of darkness in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. The whole glory of God is thus expressed.

And you cannot understand one single thing about the glory of God, except as you understand how it is seen in the face of Jesus Christ; it is in the presence of that glory that my conscience is dealt with. If you think you can learn God in any other way, you are seriously mistaken, because the moment you bring your understanding or your mind to bear upon the things of God, apart from your conscience, there is the greatest danger of shipwreck as to faith. If I really see the whole glory of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ, I cannot help being challenged in the depths of my conscience, and that is the blessedness of it. There are royal roads to learning in other things, but not in this. The moment you have to do with God and Christ, you are convicted, and the earliest expression of your heart in the presence of that glory must be, "I abhor myself." And yet, as I said, this leads to confidence, and is the only thing that is formative in our hearts.

That is the first thing. Next observe where this treasure is placed; that is the second point in the verse: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." You may have often observed that when man has anything valuable, he generally encases it in something that is far more valuable. The outside coverings of man's valuable things are generally a great deal more brilliant and valuable than the thing that is inside. The casket eclipses the jewel. Not so with God. He takes His treasure, the costliest thing, the most valuable and precious to Him, and puts it in the most contemptible vessel that you could conceive, that is, a poor, fragile vessel of clay. This is what he calls an earthen vessel; a poor, perishing, fragile vessel of clay.

But then He has a purpose in this; it gives Him the opportunity of doing two things. First, His delight is to make everything of the treasure, and, second, He is pleased to bring out the surpassingness of the power. There is not only the surpassing glory of the treasure, but the surpassing power with which He works in the vessel—the vessel broken to atoms. Indeed, it is not worth anything until it is broken to pieces, but, behind this poor vessel, there is surpassing power. This, indeed, is a wonderful sight to look at. The whole power of God goes along with the poor vessel into which He puts this treasure. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassingness of the power should be of God and not of us." But, we have not only to accept the breakings that God brings upon us, but, besides that, and in addition to that, we must keep the sentence of the cross, the death of Christ, which has given us liberty from the condemnation to which we were exposed—we must keep that death upon ourselves. God breaks the vessel, but we must keep the sentence of death upon it as well, in order "that the surpassingness of the power may be of God, and not from us" (DBT).

I do not pursue this further but would ask you to think of these three things which are connected with this ministry: first, the vessel of clay, just what you and I are; secondly, a treasure placed in it of surpassing glory; and thirdly, a power that is surpassing in its efficiency behind it, and that power ever working in company with nothingness and weakness and self-abnegation, as well as a complete, utter, thorough denial of the flesh and the world. You cannot have power otherwise; there is no manifestation of Christ, no shining forth of Christ, except as this vessel is entirely as clay in the hands of the potter. There is no shining in, or shining out either. It must be clay for Christ, the treasure, to shine into, and clay for the Holy Ghost to bring the features of Christ out of; so that others may see them.

The picture alluded to here is no doubt Gideon's army.

They put the light into the pitcher, but the light never shone out until the pitcher was broken. They had to break the pitchers, and then the light shone. And, no doubt, the Spirit of God alludes to that fact here. You have the shining in of the glory and you have the surpassing power working that it may shine out. These two things go together, namely, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ shining into our poor earthen vessels, or pitchers, and the surpassing power of God that works through these vessels for the display of the brilliancy of Christ.

How little our hearts are really up to God's wonderful purpose in giving such ministry as this from those opened heavens! How little of affection there is in our hearts to enter into the purpose of God and into His thought, that, in a world which rejected His Son, cast Him out, despised Him, and nailed Him to the cross, there should be those who should be the expression, the manifestation of that blessed, wonderful One whom the world rejected, but whom God glorified. Do your hearts desire that? Is that what you long for? Is that your purpose and object? Is that what you propose to yourself? God will help you if you have such purpose of heart. Can you say to Him, I have only one desire, that I should be upon this earth a vessel in whom the display of the glory of Thy Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, should be found in every circumstance here? God delights to help us, and you will have the comfort, the sustainment, of being in communion with His thought. I do not know any greater comfort in the whole Word of God. Oh, the blessedness and rest of having, through grace, common mind with the Lord in any little measure! God and His people of one mind about those things that relate to the glory of His Son. It is most wonderful grace on His part to bring us into such a place that we can have like minds with Him, and to enable us by such surpassing power.

Suppose I see one turning his back upon everything in this world, who looks for nothing in it, who has no interests here, who does not expect anything, and would not take anything from the world. I say, What surpassing power is displayed in that man! If I see a poor, feeble creature lying on a bed of sickness, racked with pain, the poor body pressed down with disease, morn, noon, and night, and one who might be tempted to say, What good am I, a trial to everyone about me, and a burden to myself? Yet, if I see, amid all the weariness and pain, instead of complaint, satisfaction, instead of querulousness, rest and quietness, instead of quickness of temper, the blessed manifestation of Christ in meekness and endurance, I say, What a surpassing power there is there!

That is what this ministry is able to do, beloved friends, and that is God's thought about us in relation to it. There is not a circumstance in life, a detail in our history, or a position that we can be called into, whether sickness or health, pain or its absence, prosperity or loss, trial or ease—there is not a single thing too many for the one who is satisfied to be clay in the hands of surpassing power. And more than that, it is in these very circumstances that Christ is endeared to us, for He alone is our sufficiency for all. Also, it is where we are, not where we would be, that the blessed God desires to have His Son seen in us.

This is the testimony that is really lacking at this moment. Everyone has heard us speak of doctrines, and we are supposed to be clear about them, but people are amazed to see so little of the doctrines practiced, because they fail to see anything correspondingly in us. Oh, for the manifestation of the truth, that exhibition of Christ which would stop the mouth of the rejecter and commend itself to the consciences of men! And hence, says the Holy Ghost, "by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (4:2). Men would be forced to say, Though I hate those people because they are so narrow, yet at the same time my conscience is bound to give this testimony, that they seek to please God. Herein is the efficiency of the power manifested, that in every circumstance, every service, everything I have to do, I am to be an expression of the skill of the hand that is handling me.

The Lord, by His Spirit, give our hearts to desire to be His handiwork, to say in reality, and to act it as well, Lord Jesus, take me, and form me after the fashion of Thine own heart, place me where Thou wilt, only grant me this desire, that Thou mayest be magnified in my body, whether I live or die! Oh, may our hearts prize more than ever this blessed ministry, characterized as it is by such glories as we have had before us!

Christian Truth: Volume 29, Third Heaven, The: Words of One Who Was Caught Up (12:1-10)

(Read 2 Cor. 12:1-10)

Every Christian is "a man in Christ." There is no such thing as a Christian not being a man in Christ; the moment I can say of one that he is a Christian, in the sense in which it is spoken of here, there is a man in Christ—a man who as to his standing has entirely parted company with man in the flesh. Of course if I am not watchful and self-judged always, the flesh will get power over me; but there is a great difference between being what is called overtaken by the flesh, and being a man in the flesh. As a man in Christ, I am in a new place altogether.

We must see the difference between standing in the old thing, and standing before God in a new condition in Christ. Paul refers to the time when they were in the flesh, but now he says, "Ye are... in the Spirit." So it should read, "I know a man in Christ"—not "I knew a man in Christ." Observe he does not speak of himself as Paul; this is very blessed. If he had anything humiliating to say of himself, he spoke of Paul; he said, "Through a window in a basket was I let down by the wall"; there was nothing very elevating to a man in that. It was a humiliating position, so he said, "I." But the moment he came to speak of that which was elevating, it was no more "I"; it was "a man in Christ"—that which is true of every Christian. "I know a man in Christ."

After this he speaks of that which is not true of every Christian. Every Christian is a man in Christ, but every Christian is not "caught up into Paradise" (J.N.D. Trans.). None of us have been caught up as Paul was; it was a distinct thing peculiar to himself. And then he heard words not possible for a man to utter. "Possible" is the word, rather than "lawful." He means to say that as soon as he returned to the consciousness of being in the body, he found he had no vehicle of communication with which to express the greatness of the things that he had witnessed. And so it is, the deeper a thing is in our souls, the greater the difficulty we find in speaking of it; we cannot convey to another the sense, the impression, of that which we have got ourselves. How difficult it is when we have received anything from God Himself, to convey to another anything like what it is to our own heart!

This is one thing. And then comes another thing which brings out the watchful care of God for His servant, and is most solemn to see. The blessed God, knowing that the flesh in Paul was just the same as before—his having been in the third heaven did not change it in the least; it was there ready to rise at the first opportunity—anticipates the working of it by "a thorn in the flesh."

I do not know anything in Scripture which gives a greater idea of the preventive watchfulness of God. We all know that He restores our souls when we fall; but do we enough think of all the little things that occur in our daily life that He has prepared and arranged to the end that we may not fail? It is "lest I should be exalted"—not bringing me back after failure but preventing its occurrence. It was a grievous thing for Paul—a messenger of the devil. Who but the blessed God could use Satan against Satan? This very thorn, this messenger of Satan, took away from Satan the power to work upon Paul's flesh. Is it not a blessed thing to think that God can do it? We are very prone to the language of infidelity, and apt to say, This or that happened to me. Would it not be more blessed to say, God sent me this or that? Is there not a sweetness about anything, however grievous, when I can say, My Father's hand in watchful love brought me this thorn? "There was given to me a thorn in the flesh"; it was not a crushing trial that happened to Paul; it was a given mercy.

Now the first thought with the Apostle was, Could not I get out of this difficulty? Saints think if they could only get out of their circumstances! But do you not know that if you did, you would take with you the nature that makes the circumstances in which you are so trying to you? That which makes the present ones so trying would soon make just as much difficulty in the new ones. Here the Apostle goes to God to change his circumstances; we often change them for ourselves. He said, in substance, Take it away, Lord, three times. What a contrast between the thrice repeated prayer of the blessed One to His Father, ending with, "Not My will, but Thine, be done." It was the perfection of Christ to shrink from drinking that cup. Paul, imperfect, feeble, prayed, Lord, change my circumstances. The answer came in this—Do you want Me to put you in circumstances where you will not need My power? "My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness." To any pressed one I would say, Would you take from God occasion for displaying His power in your weakness, and from yourself all opportunity for turning to and leaning upon that power? This is really the answer of God here. He says, I will not take away the thorn, but I will give you My power. It is not only relief; it is that I am positively put in the place of power at His own side. "My grace is sufficient." Weakness is the platform on which it displays itself; the thorn becomes the blessed occasion for Christ to show how His strength comes in. What a wonderful thing to move through the world leaning on the power of Christ!

Occasional Papers, "My Thoughts Are Not Your Thoughts" (12:1-10)

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

It is an interesting fact that there are three instances in scripture, two in the Old Testament and one in the New, of saints making requests to God earnestly, which God did not answer; three distinct instances of unanswered prayers; and these too, as I say, offered by His own beloved servants.

But, while He did not answer them in their way, He gave them, as He ever does, that which was better for them, and at the same time infinitely glorified Himself; and that is far beyond merely meeting our need. So that, whether it be desires of the heart that are expressed in

His hearing, or unexpressed longings, His thought for us is to bless us according to the measure of His own glory and His affection for us—the children of His love; and if He bless us according to this measure, are we not blessed? If God gives, He gives as God. It is not only One who hears and answers, but One who meets me after the desires of His own heart; and the love in which He has revealed Himself to us in Jesus Christ is the spring from which it all flows.

Let us look at the three instances to which I refer. The first is Deut. 3:23-27. "I besought the Lord at that time, saying, O, Lord God, thou hast begun to show thy servant thy greatness, and thy mighty hand; for what God is there in heaven or in earth that can do according to thy works, and according to thy might? I pray thee, let me go over, and see the good land that is beyond Jordan, that goodly mountain, and Lebanon. But the Lord was wroth with me for your sakes, and would not hear me; and the Lord said unto me, Let it suffice thee; speak no more unto me of this matter. Get thee up into the top of Pisgah, and lift up thine eyes westward, and northward, and southward, and eastward, and behold it with thine eyes; for thou shalt not go over this Jordan."

"I besought the Lord": it is very remarkable; almost the very same words as those used by the apostle in the Epistle to the Corinthians. But his earnest prayer was not granted; the only answer was, "Speak no more unto me of this matter." There was a double reason, no doubt, why His servant Moses should not cross the Jordan and enter the land of Canaan. Dispensationally the law could never bring the people of God, such as they were, into the rest of God; it remained for Joshua, the type of Christ in resurrection, to do this. And the moral reason, of course, every one is acquainted with; "he spake unadvisedly with his lips." You may ask, How did God do a better thing for him than giving him his request, when He took him up to the top of Pisgah, instead of letting him go into the land, allowing him to see it all, which could only tantalize him? But do you not remember how in the New Testament, we read, that when the Lord Jesus Christ was seen on the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses was seen there with Him; there he stood in the land; he saw it in company with Christ in glory, and was not that far better than if in Israel's days he had crossed the Jordan? He did not say one word about it now; he could only speak about Christ. He got a far better thing than his heart could have conceived or his lips uttered. And it is just the same principle with God and His people now.

The second instance is in 1 Kings 19. "And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to-morrow about this time. And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers." Here we find Elijah, the servant of God, having lost all courage through the difficulties that connected themselves with the people of God, not his own difficulties. It is not trial in the world; it is trial in the midst of God's own people. And let me say affectionately, that nothing tests the saints of God like the troubles of the people of God; people who can meet their own difficulties, are often overcome by difficulties connected with the testimony of the Lord, and give way before them. It is these that bring out the true strength of the heart. We can meet our own personal difficulties in the strength and power of God, but these try the heart in an extraordinary way. Whilst all was smooth with Elijah—whilst he could call for drought at one time and plenty at another—all went well; but if a Jezebel come in and threaten to put the iron heel of oppression on him, why, then he goes to God and says, as many a man has done since, Take away my life; I cannot go on. What a contrast is Elijah in chapter 19, to what he is in 18! in the one, he is a man remarkably above his circumstances; he has neither chariot nor driver, but he has God, and everything under his feet in the power of God. In the other, he is like a disappointed child; he goes under a juniper tree and prays that he may die. And does he die? God takes him up by a whirlwind into heaven—a chariot of fire and horses of fire! Nothing had ever entered into his heart like that! And when Moses stands on the mount with the Lord Jesus, Elijah is there too. He, too, is in the land, and that in the scene of the glory of Christ, when He reaches the highest point that it is possible for a man to reach on earth. Thus both these petitions were set aside, and far more than that which was asked was given; they were answered according to God's thoughts about them.

And now in this passage of Corinthians, that we have read, God does not take the thorn away. Let us look at the chapter for a moment; there is in it a point or two most important for our souls. The first thing we find is, what is true of every Christian; every Christian is "a man in Christ." There is no such thing as a Christian not being a man in Christ; the moment I can say of one that he is a Christian, in the sense in which it is spoken of here, there is a man in Christ—a man who, as to his standing, has entirely parted company with man in the flesh. Flesh and spirit are contrasts; if I am in the flesh, I am not in Christ; if I am in Christ, I am not in the flesh. Of course if I be not watchful, and self-judged always, the flesh will get power over me; but there is a great difference between being what is called overtaken by the flesh, and being a man in the flesh. As a man in Christ I am in a new place altogether.

It is often treated in this way as if the cross of Christ does something to elevate the man. What a delusion! So far from the old nature being improved, the moment a person enters into the blessed relationship of a child of God the virulence of his old nature is ready to show itself. Who are those most worried by Satan? No doubt Christians are, and that because they are in a place where they are out of his grasp, and where all he can do is to worry. Those who are in his power he ministers unto, so that instead of anything like a diminution of the virulence of that which is opposed to God in a Christian, Satan seeks by it more than ever to worry him just because he is out of his power. We must see the difference between standing in the old thing, and standing before God in a new condition in Christ. He refers to the time when they were in the flesh: "When we were in the flesh"; but now he says, "Ye are in the Spirit." So it is "I know a man in Christ"—not I knew. Observe he does not speak of himself as Paul; this is very blessed. If he has anything humiliating to say of himself, he speaks of Paul; he will say, "through a window in a basket I was let down by the wall": there was nothing very elevating to a man in that; it was a humiliating position; so he says "I." But the moment he comes to speak of that which is elevating, it is no more "I," it is "a man in Christ"—that which is true of every Christian. "I know a man in Christ."

After this, he speaks of that which is not true of every Christian. Every Christian is a man in Christ, but every Christian is not "caught up into paradise." The first is the real status of every Christian, the last is the possible state of a Christian. None of us have been caught up as Paul was; it was a distinct thing peculiar to himself. And then he heard "words not possible for a man to utter." "Possible" is the word, rather than "lawful." He means to say, that as soon as he returned to the consciousness of being in the body, he found that he had no vehicle of communication so as to express the greatness of the things that he had witnessed. And so it is, the deeper a thing is in our souls even the greater the difficulty we find in speaking of it; we cannot convey to another the sense, the impression, of that which we have got for ourselves. How difficult it is when we have received anything from God Himself to convey to another anything like what it is to our own heart!

This is one thing. And then comes another which brings out the watchful care of God for His servant, and is most solemn to see. The blessed God, knowing that the flesh in Paul was just the same as before—his having been in the third heaven did not alter it in the least, it was there ready to rise on the first opportunity, anticipates the working of it. I do not know anything in scripture which gives a greater idea of the preventive watchfulness of God. We all know that He restores our souls when we fail, but do we enough think of all the little things that occur in our daily life that He has prepared and arranged to the end we may not fail? It is “lest I should be exalted above measure,” not bringing me back after failure, but preventing its occurrence. It was a grievous thing for Paul; a messenger of the devil. Who but the blessed God could use Satan against Satan? This very thorn, this messenger of Satan, took away from Satan the power to work upon Paul’s flesh. Is it not a blessed thing to think that God can do it? We are very prone to use the language of infidelity and say, This or that happened to me. Would it not be much more blessed to say, God sent me this or that? Is there not a sweetness about anything, however grievous, when I can say, My Father’s hand in watchful love brought me this thorn? “There was given to me a thorn in the flesh”; it was not a crushing trial that happened to me; it was a given mercy.

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To any pressed one here I would say, Would you take from God occasion for displaying His power in your weakness, and from yourself all opportunity for turning to and leaning upon that power? This is really the answer of God here. He says, I will not take away the thorn, but I will give you my power. It is not merely relief; it is that I am positively put in the place of power at His own side. “My grace is sufficient”; weakness is the platform on which it displays itself: the thorn becomes the blessed occasion for Christ to show how His strength comes in. What a wonderful thing to move through the world leaning on the power of Christ! Such a poor wretched creature, if I go on at all, people can but say, What wonderful power to take such a one through! When did Jacob get the blessing? When he was crippled. He prepared for Esau, he prepared for every one save the mysterious One he was to meet, and who touched him in the hollow of his thigh, in the very place of his natural strength. And then he would not let Him go. I cling to the One who has withered me up, crippled me, so that He might have His place in my heart. Then it shows that it has done its work. He says, I glory in being crippled, I glory in being made nothing of, I glory in being broken down, I glory in my weakness. Why? “That the power of Christ may rest upon me”—may tabernacle over me.

Thus we get in the apostle an instance of the two great parts of Christianity; a man in Christ, man taken out of his old standing altogether, and then Christ in him manifested before the world. I, in Christ before God up there where He is, and Christ in me down here before the world.

Is it so with us? Or are we struggling against God’s guidance? We often pray God to make us what He would have us, and then when He begins to answer we draw back. I do not think there is anything more unreal than we are in our prayers. We pray to be made like Christ, and then are afraid of the way He will take to do it. I know it is so often said, If I were to say such things, God would take everything away from me: He would strip me like a tree from branch to root. Is that the thought you have of God? I tell you that He would not take away a single thing from you that would be good for you. It is in His heart to give you everything that He sees best. I know that I must get my motives, my springs, my ability from God. But God says, If you want to get spring, power, ability, everything from Me, then I must set aside that which is contrary to it in your heart. The antidote to Christ in us is our own will, and God helps us practically to get rid of that. What a wonderful thing, that poor creatures such as we are, should be left here that the grace of Christ may be shown out in us as we pass through this world! The Lord grant that His own Son may be displayed in us according to the power of His blessed Spirit for His Name’s sake.

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