

DESIGNED REASON #2 FOR EVIL AND SUFFERING—THE REFINING OF GOD’S PEOPLE

INTRO

Eric Liddell, “The Flying Scotsman” of the movie *Chariots of Fire*, was a missionary in China when the Japanese invaded that country in 1937. In 1941, life in China was becoming so dangerous that Liddell sent his pregnant wife and two daughters to Canada. They said their good-byes, none of them realizing at the time that Liddell would never “meet” his yet-to-be-born daughter—or see his wife and other two daughters ever again. Two years later this faithful missionary was imprisoned by the Japanese and two years after that—at the age of 43—he died of a brain tumor in a filthy, disease-riddled prison camp.

Randy Alcorn writes: “Why did God withhold from this great man of faith a long life, years of fruitful service, the companionship of his wife, and the joy of raising those beloved children? It makes no sense.” (If God is Good, 442).

And it doesn’t—if we only look at it from one side of the equation. But if we look at it from *another* angle we see an entirely different picture. We see children at this same prison camp—hundreds of them—separated from their parents. We see parents praying for their children, asking God to provide a father-figure to watch out for them. And we see one Eric Liddell, sorely missing his own girls, but loving the hundreds of children God had sent his way. He organized games for them, taught science to them, and most importantly, taught them God’s Word and lived God’s Word.

Alcorn writes: “I’m convinced Liddell and his family would tell us—and one day *will* tell us—that the sufferings of that time are not worthy to be compared with the glory they now know...and will know forever” (443).

“Why does a good, All-Powerful and All-Knowing God, allow evil and suffering in the world?”

There is the **declared** reason—the sin-cursed earth and the sin-corrupted heart are the consequences of the fall of man. There is also a **designed** reason—God can use evil and suffering to reveal His glory—the *endless greatness of His perfectness*.

--Praise is ascribed to God when a man like Eric Liddell suffers joyfully in a prison camp and reaches probably hundreds of children for Christ

--Praise is ascribed to God when a man like Joseph, hated and sold by his own brothers—can love them, forgive them, and reassure them that although they meant it for evil—God worked it for good.

--And praise is ascribed to God when a man like Stephen, whose only crime was preaching Christ and telling his listeners they needed to repent, can ask God to forgive the very ones who are killing him....

There is another purpose—another **designed reason**—for evil and suffering; that being **The Refining of God’s People**. Text this morning is found in II Corinthians 12. Why did Paul have this thorn in the flesh? To refine him—to burn away the dross of pride and to keep him dependent upon God.

BACKGROUND

In the way of background, there were some in Corinth that thought Paul’s life of suffering was proof that he was **not** a true apostle of Jesus Christ. There were some, it seemed, that even way back then were preaching the “health and wealth” gospel—the idea that if you live for God you will always be blessed with material abundance and good health. The problem with that teaching is that it is not true—and Jesus Himself said as much. “If the world hate you,” Jesus said, “ye know that it hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18). Jesus also said in John 16:33 “These things have I spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

Paul, then, sets out to defend his apostleship by demonstrating that the very thing they despised in him—his physical weakness and appearance—was what God used to keep him humble in light of the abundance of the revelations God had given him.

1. **The Revelation** (verses 1-5)

--In verse 1 Paul says it is not expedient—it is not profitable or helpful—for me to glory (brag).

--Notice verse 11: “I am become a fool in glorying (bragging); ye have compelled me.” What Paul is saying is that “you believe visions are what prove apostleship. I didn’t want to go down that road, but since you brought it up ‘I will come to’—I will now write about—‘visions and revelations of the Lord.’”

A. Who received the revelation?

--v 2 “a man in Christ” that Paul knew

--v 3 “And I knew such a man”

--v 4 This man “was caught up into paradise”

--v 5 “Of such an one will I glory”

Paul is talking in the third person and, it seems, he is talking about someone else—but someone he knew. He “knew” the person all right because as we continue reading, we find out that **he** is the man! Between verses 5-11, we see no less than 28 references to himself!

B. How did he receive the revelation?

--v 2 “whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth”

--v 3 “whether in the body or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;”

Did Paul have an “out of body” experience? Maybe—and maybe not! But if **he** didn’t know, I most certainly don’t know and neither do you!

C. What was the revelation?

--v 2 being caught up to the 3rd heaven

--v 4 “caught up into paradise”

--v 5 “heard unspeakable words”—words that can’t be spoken because they would not do justice to what he saw and heard OR words that ought not to be spoken

What did he *hear*? We don’t know because he didn’t say.

What did he *see*? Again, we don’t know because he didn’t say.

Was it wonderful? I believe we can say a resounding “YES” because the thorn in the flesh was given “lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations” (v 7)

2. **The Refraining** (verse 6)

--v 6 “For though I would desire to glory”—if I wanted to brag about this—it would not be empty, foolish bragging—it would be truthful.

--I’m not going to do that, however—I’m going to refrain

--I’m not going to say things that I cannot prove just to have the praise of men

--Go ahead and judge me based on what you see me to be and what you hear from me.

Barnes suggests Paul’s thought process is this: “I do not wish that my character among people shall be determined by my secret feelings; or by any secret extraordinary communication from heaven which I may have, and which cannot be subjected to the observation of my fellow men.”

Although Paul had this marvelous revelation from God when he visited the very abode of God, he was not going to brag about it or give the details about it because of....

3. **The Reminder** (v 7) “And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh”

A. What was the thorn?

The *suggestions* are varied—earache, headache, poor eyesight, paralytic disorder, stammering speech and maybe even a distorted face—but they are just that: merely suggestions. We don't know for sure because Paul didn't say for sure. What we do know is that it was as painful and annoying—emotionally, physically, or both—as a literal thorn in the flesh would be—and that Paul wanted it removed.

B. Why did he have it?

Although we don't know *what* the thorn was, we do know *why* he had it—to keep him from becoming proud. Verse 7 both begins and ends with “lest I should be exalted above measure.”

God hates pride—and wanted to keep Paul from having it. Why does God hate pride?

--Pride keeps us from **prayer**. James 4:2 “ye have not, because ye ask not.” Why don't we ask? Because we don't sense our need. Like those in the church of Laodicea, our attitude is that “I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing” but God says we “are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev 3:17)

--Pride keeps us from **praise**. Moses warned the people before they entered the Promised Land that when they got there, they would enjoy cities that they didn't build, and wells that they didn't dig, and vineyards that they didn't plant, and when they had eaten—and were full—that they would forget God (Deut 6:10-12). Paul reminded the Corinthians in his first letter to them: “For who maketh thee to differ from another....I Cor 4:7)

--Pride prevents God's **blessing**. Psalm 115:1-2 “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory for thy mercy and for thy truth's sake. Wherefore should the heathen say ‘Where is now thy God.’” Isaiah 42:8—“I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.” Stealing praise from God prevents God from blessing us the way He wants to.

--And pride keeps people **out of heaven**. Psalm 10:4 “The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God. God is not in all his thoughts.” Jesus said in John 14:6 “I am the way, the truth, and the life...but by me;” yet people of all ages, races, and wages conger up their own way to get to heaven. Jesus says “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” yet more **refuse** to come **than do** come. And Jesus said in John 5:40 what I believe are some of the saddest words in the Bible: “And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.”

None of us is immune to pride. Barnes wrote: “There is no danger that more constantly besets Christians, and even eminent Christians, than pride. There is no sin that is more subtle, insinuating, deceptive; none that lurks more constantly around the heart and that finds a more ready entrance, than pride.”

Why was Paul given a thorn in the flesh? To keep him from getting proud.

C. How did Paul view his thorn in the flesh?

--First, as a gift from God: “there was given to me a thorn in the flesh.” Although it does not plainly state it was from God, it is certainly implied. It was designed to keep him from pride—a desire that God would have for him, not Satan. Paul also believed it was from God because that is Who he asked to remove it, then accepted the “no” answer that he got from God.

--Second, he realized it was something Satan could use—it was “the messenger of Satan.” ‘This thorn in the flesh God gave me is something Satan is trying to use to “buffet me”—to smite me with the hand—to punch me in the face or gut—to turn me against God.’

Was it a physical infirmity that God allowed Satan to inflict on Paul—like in the case of Job—or was it something that God directly gave for one purpose that Satan attempted to use for another? Difficult to say—and that is not the point. The point is this: was this thorn going to push Paul toward God or away from Him?

In the way of application, how do you and I view the tragedies and trials that God allows into our lives? Are we going to view them as God loving us and wanting to draw us to Himself by showing us how needy we are—or are we going to view them as God hating us? God resists the proud—and giveth grace to the humble. Confronting us about our pride is an act of love and mercy from God—not a sign of hatred!

4. *The Request and the Response* (v 8-9a)

A. The request is plainly stated: “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.” Is there significance in asking 3 times? We can’t say for sure, but it is interesting that while in the garden of Gethsemane prior to His crucifixion Jesus prayed three times that, “If it be possible, let this cup—my upcoming death—pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done” (Mt 26:38-44).

B. What is God’s response to Paul’s request? Notice the first part of v 9: “And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” Although God did not flat-out say “No;” “No” is certainly implied because God said His grace would be sufficient—and Paul said he will “glory in his infirmities,” meaning they would be remaining.

It was as if God said: “I’m not going to remove it—but I’m going to give you the grace and strength to deal with it. It will keep you weak and dependent on **me** instead of dependent upon yourself and your own strength.”

J.C. Ryle wrote: “There is nothing which shows our ignorance so much as our impatience under trouble. We forget that every cross is a message from God, and intended to do us good in the end. Trials are intended to make us think—to wean us from the world—to send us to the Bible—to drive us to our knees. Health is a good thing but sickness is far better if it leads us to God. *Prosperity* is a great mercy; but *adversity* is a greater one if it brings us to Christ. Anything, anything is better than living in carelessness and dying in sin.” (Alcorn, 451-2)

Lastly, let’s consider

5. *The Rejoicing* (v 9-10)

Notice the second half of verse 9—“Most **gladly** therefore will I rather **glory** in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I **take pleasure** in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then am I strong.”

Why did Paul boast in and take pleasure in infirmities? Because God delights in showing Himself strong and He can do that best when we are weak and at our wits end. God’s strength is not imparted to those who feel they are strong and have no need—it is imparted to those who recognize they are weak and needy.

It is as if God came to Paul and said, “Paul, you have a decision to make. I can take away this thorn in the flesh so you can have a trouble free-life, but you will have to give something up.”

Paul undoubtedly asks, “What is it, Lord? What would I have to give up?”

“Well Paul, you’d have to give up the **comfort** that I give you when you feel unloved,
and the **encouragement** that I give you when you feel discouraged,
and the **peace** that I give you when your whole world is upside down,
and the **strength** that I give you when you feel you can’t go on,
and the **wisdom** that I give you when you are overwhelmed and perplexed.

“No, Lord—that is **not** a good exchange; I value those things too much. If giving up this thorn means giving up your comfort, and encouragement, and peace, and strength, and wisdom—I’ll take the thorn; I will “rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”

Kevin Inafuku captures Paul's heart-beat in the song "Whatever it Takes"

*Whatever it takes
To keep me tender toward You,
Whatever it takes, Lord
I beg You to do.
Whatever You must lead me through
Whatever it takes, Lord,
There's too much at stake, Lord.
Whatever it takes, Lord ... do.*

Are you willing for God to do whatever it takes to keep you tender toward Him?

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:

1. How do you look at the difficulties and trials in your life? God's design—His desire—is that they bring you **to Him** and that you find Him as a source of strength in time of need. Do you look at trials as a curse—or a blessing? Do you let them drive you from God—or do they push you to God?
2. Are you saved; are you 100% certain you have been forgiven by God and will go to heaven when you die? Enduring trials—with or without joy—does not "earn" entrance into heaven. There is no such thing as "You've suffered long enough in this life to pay for your sins" so now you have earned heaven. There is no **earning** of heaven; eternal life is a gift from God received through faith—not a payment given to man for his efforts or suffering.