

A Thorn In The Flesh

Ron R. Ritchie

Three and a half weeks ago I was in Rome with Ray Stedman and Carl Gallivan. We had only one day to see some of the sights which normally would take several days to enjoy thoroughly, and so we had to decide what we wanted to see. Among our choices were the Colosseum, built by Titus, using 12,000 Jewish slaves whom he took from Jerusalem after having completely destroyed that city in A.D. 70, and the Catacombs, where the early Christians worshiped. Here we went through the underground chambers with candles and saw some of the ancient graves with their marks of the fish and the cross.

At one point during the course of the tour we were taking, we were suddenly thrust into the gigantic cathedral called St. Peter and St. Paul, located outside the walls of ancient Rome. I walked into this huge, empty cathedral with no one present but tourists and one or two of the local priests. On the left side of the altar was a gigantic statue of St. Peter with the keys of the kingdom in his hand. From the religious training of my youth I could interpret immediately the face and the keys and the other elements of this sculpture.

But then to my right I saw a statue of St. Paul, and a whole new thing happened to me. Here was this huge statue, equal in size to the other, a gigantic, massive man with furious eyes, and a sword in his hand. I thought, "A sword in his hand?" I could not handle it. You might say, "Of course! That's the sword of the Lord!" But it did not come off that way. Here was an image of a valiant warrior. I always thought of Paul with a pen or, as some have suggested, a trowel, because he said he was; a wise master builder.

I tried to think through what the artist had in mind in presenting such a strong, furious man. The massiveness, especially, bothered me terribly. I struggled with that. Then I thought, "Well, I guess if the artist had read of the life of Paul before his conversion, he remembered that Paul (then called Saul) stood at the feet of the Jews while Stephen was stoned to death, and that it was this Saul who sought permission to persecute the Christians, and he chased them all the way to Damascus and threw them in prison.

This Saul then became Paul, and this is where the confusion arises, because Paul means "the little one". I kept looking at that statue going up, up into the cathedral. "The little one?" I could hardly handle it. But Paul, the little one, after his conversion was so enraptured with Jesus Christ that, seeking to be obedient, he started three missionary journeys which have affected twenty centuries of human history because of the truth that he preached. He wrote thirteen letters which are still affecting our lives day after day. He started some nine churches which were constantly ministering to one another throughout the days of the Roman Empire. And I thought maybe that was what the sculptor had in mind in making such a massive statue, with this gigantic sword, and the look of "Let's get on with it," and "Move it out," and "Keep trucking," or whatever they said in the first century.

But as I read the Scriptures I became confused because I realized that Paul said, "I want you to be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ." That is a heavy statement for him to make. He actually says that in chapter 11 of his first letter to the Corinthians! "Do you want to see Christ in action? Follow me." I thought, "What a statement! I don't know whether I could say that." But Paul says, "I can say it. When I am in the Spirit I can say, 'Follow me.'" So I thought I had better research the life of Paul. I had better think through again what he was really like. For either the sculptor was right and I was wrong, or something was out of whack, and I just could not put it together.

I want to find the true image of Paul, because if I can see who Paul was, I can see who Jesus is. That is what Paul said. I discovered a key passage in 2 Corinthians, chapter 11, beginning with verse 30:

Paul Became a Basket- Case

If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the tetrarch [governor] under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.

Let me give you a little context so that you can see what the Apostle is saying. If you read this passage alone you really cannot see that he is sharing with us a weak area of his life. What Paul is saying is that the events which took place in Damascus were disastrous. He is saying, "If I need to boast a little in order to share something with you, then I need to boast in my weakness.

In the immediate background of this letter we find that, as all through Paul's ministry, he was being hassled by a group of men known as "the Judaizers". These were Jewish religious leaders who infiltrated the church and said that if the Gentiles were to be justified in Jesus Christ they had to do two things: first, they had to be circumcised, and second, they had to follow the Law of Moses. Only then would they be saved. Paul said, "Never! The just shall live by faith, period." That is what the whole book of Galatians is about.

Paul started the church in Corinth, and things were going well. After two years he left to go to Ephesus. While he was in Ephesus he heard of some problems the new church was having, so he wrote a letter to them (1 Corinthians) and said, "Now look, shape up, and let's move on in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let's live the life that Christ designed for us to live."

In the meantime some Judaizers had come to town, and they started attacking him in three basic ways. They attempted to discredit Paul's authority, his apostleship, and his person. Then Paul visited Corinth, only to be rejected by some of the leaders. So he returned to Ephesus and wrote another letter back to them which was apparently filled with angry admonishment. This one is lost; we do not know where it is today. Then he was very concerned about having written it. You know how it is to write a letter and then wish you had never sent it. Well, Paul was just like you and me in that respect

So he sent Titus to Corinth to find out how they received it. Titus came back and said, "You won't believe it! Their reception of the letter was just tremendous." This is good news, and so now from Philippi he writes them this letter (2 Corinthians), saying, "I just can't thank God enough for you. You're just too much! I'm so excited about what God is doing in your life." And in this letter he explains to them that he knows there are men who have come in and who are seeking to do three things: One, false prophets have come in who are seeking to teach about another Jesus. Two, deceitful workers have come in, who are sharing a different Spirit than the Holy Spirit. Three, servants have come in pretending to be righteous, but they are teaching another gospel which, as he says in Galatians, is a counterfeit. This is what had made him hurt and angry, and he still wants these issues dealt with.

He goes on to explain that these men are not only doing these three things, but they are also seeking to undermine his apostleship and authority. And he says, "I know how they do that. They come and say, 'Listen, it's true that Paul started this church. But don't listen to him, because he's not really a Hebrew. That is, he doesn't speak the Hebrew tongue that well. And he's, certainly not of Israel. Look where he lives- in Tarsus! And also he's not of Abraham. He wouldn't act that way if he were of Abraham. He's not even in the lineage. So why do you follow Paul?' "

Then Paul answers these attacks: "Listen, you've been deceived. Someone is beguiling you; someone is telling you a lie." (I love what he says in this connection in Galatians: "You have been bewitched. It's as though you were cast under a spell, as though witches had come in and sprinkled dust in your eyes and you're going blind!" And the same thing is happening here, for the Judaizers would move in every time the Apostle moved out.) Paul continues, "Listen, is this where you think authority comes from_ being able to speak the Hebrew tongue, being from Israel, being able to say 'I'm of Abraham?' Is that where you think my apostleship comes from? Is that where you think the power comes from to live the Christian life? Well, I've got bad news and good news for you! First the bad: it's bad news if you believe that. Now the good: it's good news if you listen

to what I have to share with you. There is good news coming, and I'll review it with you once again."

So in chapter 10 and up through verse 29 of chapter I I he deals with his apostleship, and defends that. He says that he will do some boasting, although he does not want to. He says, "I don't want to lay this burden on you; it's not where my heart is. But I'll just play your silly game to prove a point. I'll show you that no matter what the false teachers say, I'll be able to match them, and more." And he starts in: "I really hate doing this. I don't want to tell you I was shipwrecked three times, and beaten five times with thirty-nine stripes. I don't want to tell you about not eating, and being hungry and cold. However, match that, if you really want to play the game." And he just wipes out these false teachers with his lifestyle.

But at this moment he realizes that this is not going, to produce power. This is like the song, "Anything you can do, I can do better." He says, "I don't want to write like that; I don't want to try to outmatch you. That's not where my heart is. In fact, do you really want me to share my heart with you? Do you really want me to share with you where I'm at? Do you want to know where the authority and the power and the strength and the vision come from? Well, let me share. If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness."

Then he goes on to describe this little episode which, when you read of it in Acts 9, you never see as a time of weakness. But this whole story is one of weakness. You see, after Saul was knocked to his knees by a blinding light and lost his sight when the Lord Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, he was led into the city. The Lord told Ananias, a Christian in Damascus, "Go to Saul, for he is a chosen instrument of mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel." That was Paul's commission. So after regaining his sight, he left Damascus for some three years which he spent in Arabia. Then he came back into Damascus and he started to argue with the Hellenistic Jews. Here was Paul with all his credentials: "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, etc." arguing with these Jews, pecking away at their philosophy.

And he says, "You know what happened? [This is Paul, now, interpreting that incident. The account in Acts merely says that he left the city by a basket because he caused the Jews to be so angry they wanted to kill him.] I'll tell you what really happened. This was a time of weakness. I'll tell you about the most embarrassing thing that has happened to me. I, Paul, had to leave Damascus in a basket, let down the wall like a common criminal, and had to run away and hide up in Tarsus. I, who had all the credentials, who might have won these people, my brothers, to Jesus Christ, had to run away before I got killed. I, who am not afraid of a mob or a king, had to leave in a basket. I want you to know this is true. I stand before God the Father and I say to you that my life is totally exposed to God the Father, and God the Father leaves no stone unturned in my heart. And what I'm sharing with you right now is true! Do you want to know the source of my authority? It comes through my weakest moment."

The reason he says this is that this was the most difficult and degrading and humiliating event in the life of this powerful man, but it was the very key to unlock his whole new life in Christ. It was the very key, because it got rid of the flesh. Very clearly, precisely, and to the point, it was cut off. Paul saw that he could not walk around with his credentials showing and hope to receive power and influence and strength.

We are all caught there, are we not? We are caught seeking to produce a life which we think will impress those around us, and from that lifestyle we hope we will receive the power and authority we need to tell people about Jesus Christ. We attempt it by buying certain types of homes, driving certain kinds of cars, dressing certain ways, having certain friends, dropping certain names - we do all kinds of little things to help God! That is exactly what Paul was doing. And he really had a sincere heart about it, as he stood before God. But God said, "No, that is not the way I'm going to do it. I cannot have the flesh get in the way." Paul goes on to write, in chapter 12,

I Know A Man in Christ

Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the lord. [Then he starts to share about a certain man that he knows.] **I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago - whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows_such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how**

such a man - whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. On behalf of such a man will I boast....

Paul says, "I want to share with you about this man. This man had an experience in which he was allowed to receive visions and revelations in the very presence of God. They were of such a nature that the man could not totally express all that he saw, he was speechless in certain areas." What were these visions and revelations? He could have shared that this man met God on a road and actually talked to him. He could have shared that this man was encouraged by a vision to go over to Macedonia, and that this same man was told to stay in Corinth and not to fear the mobs. As to the revelations, he could have shared that truth was revealed to this man about the Lord's Supper, and about the whole new teaching called the "mystery of Christ", which is the church, the idea that we are all one body, and Christ is the head. He says, "Of this man I want to boast, because this man met the living God!"

On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. For if you do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that so one may credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me. And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations...

And suddenly he gives it away. "Hey, okay, I'm that man fourteen years ago. I'm the one who had all these fantastic visions and revelations from God. I stood in the very presence of God, and I don't know how it happened. I don't know if I was in the body, a trance, a vision, a dream- I'm not sure. But I was there, and I got the truth, and I was told to tell the truth.

"Yet I'm not going to lay this experience on you as a basis for my authority. I'm not going to come to you and have you set up a Sunday evening service with color slides of my visions and revelations, and great press releases, and television coverage, and "gospel blimps" I'm not going to waste time hoping you will be drawn to me because of what has happened to my life in these fantastic, inexpressible situations. I'm going to show you that power and authority come in a different way, and that's why I don't even want to talk about these other things. I want you to receive me as I am. And what you see is who I am, period. I want you to see me in my weaknesses."

Do you know what the Corinthians were saying of Paul? "He writes good letters. Sometimes he's furious in his letters. He can really chew us out! But when he shows up and walks among us, he can't even speak properly. In fact, his very presence is contemptible- we don't even like to look at him." And Paul, the little one, says, "I know, I know. But I'm going to show up anyway, because I love you." You see, Paul is writing to these Corinthians out of a heart of love.

Earlier in chapter 11 he had said, "I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin." That is, "I am like a father who is getting a daughter ready to marry Jesus Christ. I love you so much! And I realize my words are hard, at times. But you are going to see me as I really am, not the way you might hope I would be. I don't want you to say, 'Here comes Paul, the one who had the visions and the revelations. Wow! Too much! Is he walking on the ground or is it a little above?' No, when I walk into town, I hear you- 'Listen to him speak - he can hardly talk! Gosh, he's ugly!' But that's okay. I will share with you where my authority comes from."

When I Am Weak, Then I Am Strong

And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me- to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness. "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

"Look," he said, "I had these revelations, and I came out of these lofty situations, got down to earth, and immediately I was given a thorn in the flesh." Usually when you think of a thorn you think of a rose bush- you go to pick a rose for your wife and you get this thorn right in the finger. "Ouch! That smarts!" And you stop to pull it out. "Wow, that hurts," you say. About an hour later it still hurts a little bit, but pretty soon it goes away. That is not what Paul is talking about. The Greek word translated "thorn" here is "skolops" and it means "splinter" or "stake". Paul had a stake in the flesh. The word is also used of the stakes the Romans would drive into the ground and upon which they would impale criminals. Now, that is a little bigger than a thorn, isn't it?

Paul said, "God gave me a stake in my body, and while it was in my body, which affected me physically, he then gave me a messenger from Satan who buffeted me." Do you know what that means? Figuratively, it was as though Paul were slapped back and forth across the face all the time, and all the time he was being slapped, Satan was suggesting to him, "Go ahead, Paul, ask God why. Ask him, 'Why me, God? Why are you picking on me? I want to be a messenger of yours. I want to go throughout the world and tell the truth. I want to tell them who you are. So why are you doing this to me?'"

"So," Paul says, "I prayed three times," which is an idiomatic expression for "repeatedly, ceaselessly, continuously". The idea is that he just kept praying, "Lord, take away the thorn, take away the messenger; take away the thorn, take away the messenger," over and over again. God finally answered and said, "NO." And here it is, fourteen years later, and Paul says, "Guess what? I've still got the stake, and I've still got the messenger from Satan. But I also have an answer from the Lord. It's 'No, I'm not taking it away. Because if I take it away, you won't need me. And Paul, I want you to know that you need me.'"

This is a denial which stems from love, not hate. The Lord says, "I don't want to take it away, because I want you to see from this that my grace is sufficient, just as it always has been, and that it always will be sufficient, for as long as you live. My presence, my program, my tapestry- of which you are a part- is enough. It will carry you through. Understand that I am in charge of your life. So don't panic, don't worry about it. I have given this affliction to you so that people will see Jesus Christ in you, Paul."

I don't know if it was epilepsy or migraine headaches or eye trouble - I don't know what Paul had. He never mentioned it... which is just great! Because I know what my "stake" in the flesh is, and you know what yours is. It really does not matter what it is. The point is that it is a mess, and it fouls us up, and it drives us nuts, and we keep going to Jesus and saying, "I just wish you would take this away so I can be the man (or woman) of God I want to be for you." And, as he said to Paul, God says, "Beautiful! But no! My power is perfected in weakness. When they see you, Paul, they're going to be so confused!"

The Corinthians were looking for this six-foot-two, two-hundred-and-fifty pound hero to come into Corinth with both guns loaded and say, "All right, Corinthians, this is it!" And they would all say, "Wow, we've got to obey! Look at the authority and power emanating from that giant!" But when they looked again, here was this little, shriveled up guy- probably balding by now, sunbeaten, wearing rags - saying, "I just talked to the Lord, folks, and he wants me to tell you some good news!" He had none of the pomp and pretentiousness these false leaders had, none of it!

I have to laugh whenever I think of his speech problem. I have a friend who knows every word in the dictionary. Not only does he know them, he pronounces them correctly! I'm amazed at his ability to articulate. When I write my name, I'm not sure if it has a "t" in it or not! I can't spell, therefore I can't pronounce. And I have this phonic problem which won't go away. I wrote a letter to resign one day and I couldn't spell "resign"! I got so mad I never wrote the letter! But I have to live with that. "My power is perfected in weakness. Paul, I want people to see Jesus Christ in you. I don't want them to walk away and say, 'Boy, isn't that Paul something else? He's too much! I'm so impressed by Paul!' No, I want them to say, 'I don't get it. Why does God use people like that, when I'm over here?'"

I love a song John Fischer has written based on 2 Corinthians 4:7. It goes, "I'm a pot; I'm a vessel...." Jesus Christ is looking for any old pot. He doesn't care what you look like. All he wants you to do is be empty so that he can use you. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power

may be of God and not from ourselves." ... So that when people walk away from us they are thoroughly convinced that whatever happened had to be God's doing.

I love verse 9:

And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness. " Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may in dwell me.

As John the Baptist said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." I think that is the whole substance of John's new covenant message to us. I le was a living example of what it means to die, so that Christ might live. And then verse 10:

Therefore I am well content with weaknesses [Why? Because I have to depend on Jesus Christ], with insults [Let them say what they have to say. My authority and power and compassion and gentleness do not come from my visions and revelations; they come from a living Christ who lives in me right now. I know I'm a mess, and that's what's so much fun about the whole trip, because I see God at work)] with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I an' weak, then I am strong.

Spiritual power lies in the hearts of people who realize they can do nothing apart from dependence upon a living Lord within. The weaker you are, the stronger Christ can be. I am intrigued by a dear friend of mine who blesses me whenever I see her. She is a small woman. and so physically weak from some medical condition which I don't understand that she hasn't the strength to open the door. When I go to her house, she tells me to open the door. Do you know what it is like when I walk in? It is like being with Jesus! Here is this beautiful grand woman, sitting in a chair. I sit down with her and you know what she talks about? Not about her weakness. She says, "Ron, let me tell you what I'm learning about Jesus. Let me tell you what Jesus is teaching me. Let me tell you what's happening to my life because of Jesus." Every time I go there I walk away saying, "I think I've just been with Jesus. In fact, I'm thoroughly convinced I've just been with Jesus!" That is my dear friend, Betty Bloomer. She is living this Scripture' and I know 'hat her life is a very real picture of what Paul is talking about. I didn't say that Betty Bloomer was perfect, did I? I said she understands that power comes out of weakness, and she is teaching me what that really means. I thank God for women, and men, like that!

And that is where Paul was. Weakness? Yes. Why? so that Jesus might be seen. Do you feel in your heart that somehow you got gypped, that God sent Satan's messenger to the wrong person, that he should have gone two blocks down and one over? Do you get angry and bitter at God over the "stakes" which are in your life? Don't do that. Thank God for them. "Because of that stake, and because of that buffeting," Jesus is saying "they'll see me, and that is what it's all about. Let them see me, and don't complain. I'm weaving a tapestry, and when it is all finished I'm going to let you see it. And I'll show you the very spot where you pulled it all together for me, along with the rest of your brothers and sisters."

When you see that tapestry spread out throughout eternity, you are going to stand there in your redeemed body and say, "You're too much, God; you're just too much! Thank you so much for the stake, thank you for Satan's messenger. Thank you that I learned the lesson that your grace is sufficient for me, in whatever state I find myself." And you can say right now, "I shall be content, Lord, wherever I find myself, with the insults, the difficulties, the persecutions, the weaknesses. I shall be content because I know you're in charge of the whole program."

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, we rest. We simply rest in you. Lord, sometimes we want to strike out, to cry, "Why?" We want the stake removed. But you've already said, "No." And so we trust you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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