

Sermons @ Ebenezer Church, Singapore

Trials and Temptations – A Christian's Perspective

Sunday, 13 Mar 2011 (By Elder Ho Lye Sum)

2Cor 12:7-10

There are 3 things that I want to share with you from this passage:

- 1) True Christians should expect trials and temptations in their lives
- 2) Trials and temptations are delivered by 'messengers of Satan'
- 3) God's grace is sufficient for us in handling these trials and temptations

1) True Christians should expect trials and temptations in their lives

Paul was an exceptional Christian.

He was a great preacher.

He had the presence of God with him wherever he went.

In 2 Cor 12:1-6, he spoke of great visions he received which gave him a glimpse of heaven.

Yet, in the midst of such great spiritual experiences, he said in verse 7 that he was given 'a thorn in the flesh'.

What is this 'thorn in the flesh' that Paul spoke about?

Some people think it is an illness, weakness or disease in his body.

Apparently, this 'thorn' was delivered by 'messengers' of Satan.

Hence, some Charismatics took it that all illnesses came from Satan.

And when they make prayers for the sick, they rebuked the illness.

They would quote from Luke 4:39 that Jesus rebuked the fever of Peter's mother-in-law and she recovered.

I think that's carrying it a bit too far.

The reality is that we do not know exactly what this 'thorn' that Paul is talking about is.

It could be an illness.

It could well be someone in his life who kept discouraging him.

It could well be a temptation that he had to constantly fight against.

Whatever this 'thorn' was, it kept him humble.

That's why he said in verse 7 -"lest I be exalted above measure."

Hence, in the larger context and application of this passage, 'thorns' could well be different trials and temptations we will face in our lives.

And God gives Christians different types of 'thorns in the flesh' to keep them humble.

These 'thorns in the flesh' are also meant to help us remember not to get too comfortable with our place here on earth.

Instead, we should be working and looking forward to our eternal home.

When Paul & Barnabas travelled through the regions of Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, this is what they said to encourage them

Acts 14:21 - strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God".

So you see, true Christians should expect trials and temptations in their lives.

1 Pet 1:6-7 - In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials.. - Why?

V 7 - so "that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to the praise, honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ...

So Christian friends, expect trials and temptations in your life.

Expect all kinds of 'thorns' that will keep you humble.

And these 'thorns' will keep you looking forward to heaven and not get too comfortable with life here on earth.

That is why Paul says in 2 Cor 12:10 'therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproached, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake.'

Is your life very turbulent and full of trials and temptations?

If so, rejoice.

Hopefully, that will drive you to pray more and to long more for heaven.

2) Trials and temptations are delivered by 'messengers of Satan'

Our passage tells us that Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' was delivered by a 'messenger of Satan'.

I hope you all realise that a spiritual world exists around us.

Thankfully, our physical eyes cannot see that spiritual world otherwise you may freak out!

In 2Kings 6, the entire Syrian army surrounded Elisha and his servant.

His servant was worried and said to Elisha 'what shall we do?'

Elisha responded "do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

And he prayed that God would open his servant's eyes.

And when his servant's eyes were opened, he saw that the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire.

These were God's holy angels sent to protect his child and servant Elisha.

In Eph 6, we are reminded that "...we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age..."

I am therefore not surprised that Paul says that his 'thorn in the flesh' was delivered by a messenger of Satan.

In Job 2, we read that the illnesses of Job were Satanically motivated.

Satan accused Job of being faithful only because he was physically and materially well.

And as the history went, God allowed Satan to afflict Job.

Job 2:7 "...Satan struck Job with painful boils..."

This is one way in which messengers of Satan can cause affliction - a direct attack on the person itself.

In Luke 4, we are told that Satan himself tempted Jesus for forty days.

In Gen 3, Satan tempted Eve with statement of lies.

These are all examples of how Satan is directly involved in the temptation itself.

Now, there are also indirect ways in which Satan can affect God's people.

In Acts 16:16-18, Paul and Silas were preaching the gospel at Philippi.

There was a slave girl who was possessed by evil spirits.

This slave girl caused great annoyance and was an absolute nuisance to Paul and Silas.

So she was, in a sense, a 'messenger of Satan' causing hindrance to the gospel work being carried out.

Sometimes, these messengers may do it innocently without realizing it.

Other times, they may do it knowingly.

Judas Iscariot knew very well that he was betraying the Son of Man.

John 13:26, Jesus singled him out as the one, yet he continued his act of betrayal.

He knew he was the instrument of Satan in this matter knowingly.

In another incident after Jesus was arrested, when Peter was sitting by the fire, the servant girl seeing him said 'This man was also with him'.

That led to Peter committing the sin of an outright denial of Jesus.

Did the servant girl do it innocently?

Maybe, but that servant girl was the instrument that led to Peter's sin.

Then there was the case of Peter himself.

In Matt 16:21, Jesus taught His disciples that He had to suffer and die but be raised on the 3rd day.

Innocently, Peter took Jesus aside and said 'Far be it from you, Lord; this shall not happen to you'.

But Jesus rebuked him in verse 23, "Get behind me Satan! You are an offense to Me for you are not mindful of the things of God...."

Was Peter possessed by Satan?

No, he was still the same Peter.

But this Peter was conveying something in the spirit of Satan, whose chief aim was to distort the will of God.

Peter did not realize it; but he became the 'instrument' by which discouragement could have come to even Jesus.

Let us be very careful that we don't end up being 'messengers' or 'instruments' of Satan without realizing it.

Is this possible? Church history tells us it is.

John Wesley had a wife who was totally unsupportive of his ministry.

She was suspicious of all the women John Wesley had to counsel and critical of everything he did in his ministry.

That probably kept John Wesley very humble.

But it also limited his ministry.

You see, we can either be a blessing or a curse to the people around us.

Pray that you will be a blessing and not an instrument of Satan.

Parents in our midst, are you innocently discouraging your children in their spiritual progress?

Perhaps you have not demonstrated by your example in terms of whether you would choose spiritual good over material pursuit.

Children, are you causing grief to your parents and making it difficult or impossible for them to serve God?

If you are not submitting to their authority and constantly arguing with them and being

disrespectful to them, whose influence do you think you are under, the Holy Spirit or Satan?
Husbands and wives, are you an encouragement to your spouse so that they become useful instruments of God?

Members of the Church, are we an encouragement to those who serve the Lord zealously?
Or have we innocently become 'messengers of Satan' without even realizing it?

Jesus said in Matt 18:6-7

Matt 18:6-7 "whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses. For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!"

When Jesus says 'woe!', you better take heed!

Let us examine ourselves.

Let us be people who are instruments of the Holy Spirit to bring good to those of the household of God?

Let us be people who are instruments for the furtherance of the gospel and conversion of souls.

Let us never be 'messengers of Satan' knowingly or innocently.

3) God's grace is sufficient for us in handling these trials and temptations

Finally, I want you to notice that Paul's victory in his circumstances did not come by the removal of the 'thorn'.

Instead, Victory came from his acknowledgement of God's sovereignty, grace and mercy.

Paul actually prayed for the removal of this 'thorn' from him altogether.

Very often, we pray similar prayers don't we?

Sometimes, when we pray, we even ask and expect God to do exactly as we dictate in our prayers.

God answered Paul's prayer.

But He did not answer it in the manner Paul asked.

God changed Paul's view of this 'thorn' instead of removing it altogether.

God made Paul realize that this thorn was placed there by His sovereign will.

And because He placed it there, He had full control of it.

And because He had full control of it, He will be glorified through how He helps Paul handle it.

When Paul had come to accept this, he was then finally able to say 'when I am weak, then I am strong'.

'I will boast of my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.'

Friends, God is glorified when His creation submits to His rule.

The angels rejoice in heaven when a sinner repents and returns as a prodigal to his heavenly Father.

The angels don't rejoice when one sinner wins an argument or a battle over another.

God is glorified when there is repentance and humbling of hearts.

God said to Paul and to all of us "My grace is sufficient for you".

My strength is made perfect in weakness.

My friends, we all have our different thorns in our life.

I do not know how you have been praying about them.

Perhaps you may have been asking for their removal the way Paul did.

But the thorn had not been removed in the same way Paul's thorn was not removed.

What could God be teaching you if this is the case?

Is there repentance or acknowledgement of sin required?

Friends, let there be humbling of hearts and not hardening.

Let us submit to what God wants to change in us rather than what we want God to change.

Let us be able to rejoice in God just like the apostle Paul:

'my grace is sufficient for you and my strength is made perfect in weakness'.

'for when I am weak, then I am strong'.

Let us close by recalling our 3 points for today:

1) As Christians, expect trials and temptations in your life.

2) Trials and temptations are often delivered by 'messengers' of Satan.

Let us be careful not to be messengers of Satan.

Instead, let us be messengers of the Holy Spirit.

3) Finally, let us rejoice that God will glorify Himself in our trials and temptations.

It may not come from their removal.

It comes from our repentance and submission to His sovereignty.

Let us sing a hymn in closing.