

Compared to the heavens... -- Compared to the heavens... What Is Man?

by Chuck Smith

The sermon explores the glory of God, the creation of God, the mindfulness of God, the rebellion of man, and the redemption of man, emphasizing the importance of praying 'Not my will, but Thy will be done'.

Scripture: Psalm 8:1-4, Psalm 103:14, Jeremiah 29:11-13, Matthew 7:7, John 1:1-3, Romans 14:11, 2 Corinthians 5:1, Philippians 2:10, Hebrews 2:8-9, 1 John 5:14-15

Topics: "God's Creation", "Human Significance"

Description

Chuck Smith emphasizes the majesty of God's creation and the significance of humanity in the grand scheme of the universe. He reflects on how urban life obscures our view of the heavens, leading us to forget the vastness of God's creation and His mindfulness of us. Smith highlights that despite our smallness, God cares deeply for each individual, encouraging us to embrace His love and grace. He reminds us that our worth is not in our physical form but in our spiritual essence, and that God desires a personal relationship with us, despite our flaws and failures.

Transcript

One of the unfortunate by-products of our urbanized society with its resultant air pollution and bright lights is that we cannot see the heavens very clearly anymore. I think that everyone who lives in an urban area should get away to the desert or mountains two or three times a year to look up and be reminded of the glory of heaven. Unfortunately, we forget about the vastness of the universe when we don't see it fully. We begin to think of this world as being closed-in, but when we look at the heavens, we can realize how great the creation of God is!

The Bible declares that the glory of God is greater than the heavens themselves. The psalmist David said,

O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens... When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? (Psalm 8:1,3-4).

The sun, the work of God's fingers, is 860,000 miles in diameter. It is so large that 1,200,000 Earths our size could be placed in it. Traveling at 11 1/2 miles per second through space, the sun was flung out by God's hand.

Many stars, because of the density of their atoms, weigh much more than the sun. One of the dual stars of Sirius has such a high density, the number of atoms in a given volume, that one cubic inch weighs 1,725 pounds! Imagine what would happen if a rock-sized meteor from Sirius was laying on the ground in your path and you decided to kick it out of the way. Yet, as heavy as that star is, God has also spun it into orbit.

Our sun is one of the billions of stars in the Milky Way Galaxy. This galaxy measures about 10,000 light years wide and 100,000 light years long. In other words, if you could travel on a beam of light at a speed of 186,000 miles per second, you could circle the earth 7 1/2 times in just one second. Then, leaving the Earth at this speed, you could sail past the moon in 1 1/4 seconds and past the sun in 7 1/2 minutes. However, it would take you about 4 1/2 years to reach the nearest star, Alpha Centauri. To cross the width of the Milky Way Galaxy would take you 10,000 years and to cross the length would take you 100,000 years. If you then wanted to go to the nearest galaxy, Andromeda, you'd have to travel at the speed of light for 1 1/2 million years!

This vast universe contains billions of galaxies, one of which is the Milky Way Galaxy. In this galaxy there are billions of stars, and one of these stars we called the sun. Revolving around this star are the nine planets of the Solar System, one of which is called Earth. This planet is 7,926.7 miles in diameter at the equator, revolving around the sun at 19 miles per second, rotating on its axis at 1,000 miles per hour, traveling with the sun in its giant orbit at 11 1/2 miles per second, and (as some astronomers theorize) traveling at approximately 179 miles per second with the Milky Way. Imagine, as we just sit here, all these motions are going on!

If you have ever spun a top, you know that it can spin for a long time, but ultimately it slows down and stops. I don't know how the Lord started the planet Earth spinning, but I do know He keeps it spinning - and it's not slowing down! God has ordained it and set it all in motion.

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;
What is man that thou art mindful of him?

This little planet Earth, as a part of a group of planets revolving around the sun, a part of a galaxy called the Milky Way, which is only one of billions of galaxies, contains billions of living creatures. Among these billions of living creatures is our species called man, of which there are almost four billion.

God wants to bless you. Open your heart and receive His love!

It must have blown the mind of David when he realized that God's glory is greater than the heavens! He states,

O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! Who has set thy glory above the heavens.

Then David added, "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?"

God is mindful of this little creature called man on this little planet. Earth is in this little Solar System, part of the Milky Way Galaxy, a part of this vast universe, all of which is a work of His fingers. The fact that God is mindful of me just amazes me! The Creator of this universe is conscious and mindful of me, His creation, here on this planet!

"What is man?" First of all, he is body. But the body elements aren't worth very much. With inflation, they are now probably worth about \$2.26 in raw chemicals. Earlier, I made reference to the fact that the density

of matter is determined by the atoms per unit volume. Our bodies are made up of atoms which have a nucleus of protons and neutrons with tiny electrons whirling around it. If you could stop these electrons from whirling, they would draw into the center of the mass of the nucleus. If all the atoms in your body collapsed like this, you would immediately disappear. There is so much empty space in these atoms that you'd be smaller than a speck of dust; in fact, it would take a microscope to see you. All of us are made up of these blown-up atoms.

However, the Bible teaches that man is more than body. It teaches that man is a soul and a spirit. The body is called a "tent" in the Scriptures, because it is the temporary dwelling place of the spirit. Paul the apostle said,

For we know that if our earthly tent were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (II Corinthians 5:1).

When these tents in which we're now living return to the dust from which they were made, by the grace of God, our spirits move out. God then has another place of habitation for our spirits - not tents but houses.

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him?

God isn't mindful of me in some abstract way, He's mindful of me in a personal way. He knows when I get up in the morning and go to bed at night. He knows when some sound awakens me in the middle of the night. He who knows my thoughts, and also understands my dusty frame (Psalm 103:14); and yet, knowing my weaknesses and my failings, He still loves me!

Sometimes, Satan lays a trip on us. He tells us that once we have made a mistake or failed, or because we may continually fail, God wants nothing to do with us. Satan would have us believe that God is no longer interested in us. But God knows our frames, that we are but dust. God also knows our hearts, and the real intentions of our hearts and lives.

When you have a little child who is just learning to walk, you let the child grasp on to your fingers and steady him as he walks. Then, when you feel that he's steady enough, you let go of his fingers. The child may really be attempting to take that first step, but he may fall right away, because he isn't coordinated enough to walk yet. When this happens, you don't pick him up and scold him, saying, "You rotten little kid! Why don't you walk?" You don't punish him for falling. You grab him and hold him close. You encourage him, saying, "That's okay, angel. Let's try again." You assure him of your love.

As long as the child is trying, you continue to encourage him and love him. Even though he may fail a hundred times, you don't toss the child out. You don't get rid of him just because he has failed. In the same way, God knows when you're trying; and, if you do fail, God doesn't discard you and say, "Oh, I get so sick of you!" He picks you up and holds you close, then dusts you off and says, "Come on now, let's try again."

On the other hand, you may have a teenager sitting in the room. If you say, "Come over here. I want to show you something," and he replies, "No, I don't want to, and you can't make me," you may want to pop his head off because he's being rebellious. There's a difference of attitude between the baby and the teenager. One is an attitude of weakness: wanting to do something but not being able to, the other is an attitude of rebellion: having the ability to do something and not wanting to. If you want to serve God but lack the ability, don't be afraid that God is going to be angry at you! God loves you! He knows your frame.

He knows how uncoordinated you are spiritually. God looks upon us with love because we're His children. As a father pities his child who is learning to walk, so our heavenly Father looks upon us, His children, with pity.

However, if we're in open rebellion against God, saying, "I don't want to do it! I won't do it! You can't make me do it!" He may prove to us that He can make us do it, just as a father may prove to his teenage son that he can make him come across the room.

"What is man?" Generally, man is a rebellious little creature. He's down here on this little planet, shaking his fist at his Creator and saying, "I don't want to follow Your rules! I'll live just as I please! You can't make me live the way You want me to! I'll do what I want!" This is man, a little speck of dust, shaking his dusty fist at the Creator of the universe. How foolish it is to rebel against the Creator!

"What is man that thou art mindful of him?" The question is unanswerable. But God is not only mindful of me, He came to visit me: "And the son of man, that thou visitest him." The Gospel of John begins:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made... He was in the world, and the world was made by Him and the world knew Him not. He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name... And the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth" (John 1:1-3, 10-12, 14).

God's visiting man is a marvelous mystery, but the blindness of man's rebellion is a tragedy. Rebellion will always blind you. It is always folly to be in rebellion against God. Here is little man rebelling against his Creator. His Creator came to visit him, but man didn't even recognize Him. Even though the world was made by Him, the world knew Him not.

Psalms 8 continues in prophecy of Jesus Christ and His visit to Earth.

For Thou has made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet.

In Hebrews 2:8 this Psalm is quoted in reference to Jesus Christ. God has placed all things in subjection unto Jesus Christ, giving Him the authority over all of His created work. However, at the end of this passage the writer of Hebrews declares, "But now we do not yet see all things put under him."

The heavens do declare the glory of God... but only Jesus Christ declares the fullness of God's love for man.

As we look around in the world today, we do not see everything in subjection to Jesus Christ. In fact, we see a world in rebellion against His authority. Even as Christians, our flesh sometimes rebels against Him, but there is coming a day when God shall place all authority in Jesus Christ. Every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father (Isaiah 45:23; Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:10). We do not yet see all things in subjection,

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor (Hebrews 2:9).

May God help us to see beyond the rebellion around us and beyond the rebellion of our own flesh, and may we, this day, see Jesus! May we, this day, crown Him with many crowns, the Lord upon His throne. May we, this day, submit ourselves to His authority and to His will. May we bow our knee to His scepter and worship at His feet. May we enter into the glories of the kingdom of God by submitting ourselves to Jesus Christ, the King. May we see Jesus and, when we do, may we say with David, "O Jehovah our Lord, how excellent is Thy name in all the earth! who has set Thy glory above the heaven" (Psalm 8:1).

What is man that God would think of him? Yet He did. What is man that God should redeem him? Yet He has. What is man that God should want him? Yet He does. What is man that God should save him and make him His own throughout eternity? Yet He has!

The question we should be asking is not, "What is man?" but, "What is God?" He is infinite grace, infinite love, infinite goodness.

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart (Jeremiah 29:11-13).

3. Positive Confession

And this is the confidence that we have in Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He heareth us; and if we know that He hears us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of Him (1 John 5:14-15).

The word confidence in the Greek literally means "the boldness of speech." When we talk to the Lord we can be bold! We can be free, open, and honest. If we say something wrong, it doesn't matter. God isn't going to throw it back at us. If we say something foolish, He understands. We can pray with real boldness of speech. Praying with confidence is an exciting thing!

The boldness of speech that we have is in asking. The Scripture has encouraged us to come boldly to the throne of grace that we might receive mercy in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). That is proper and correct. There's nothing wrong with coming to God under pressure. I can't help but feel that maybe God at times has created the pressure just to get us to call on Him! There's nothing wrong with coming to God and asking. In fact, the Lord tells us to. Jesus said, "Ask, and it shall be given you" (Matthew 7:7). Again, Jesus said, "Ask, please ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24).

When I come to God, I can come boldly. I can ask God for my needs. I don't have to worry that He'll misunderstand me. I don't have to be afraid that He'll be rude or rough with me. I don't have to worry that I might be asking the wrong thing.

We have this confidence in Him, "If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." I'm so glad that qualification is there! I'm glad that this Scripture doesn't say, "Whatever we ask we receive." I'm very grateful that He inserted "according to His will." Had God answered all of my prayers, I wouldn't be here today. I would have destroyed myself a long time ago!

I have prayed for a lot of ridiculous things that would have totally ruined me. "According to His will" keeps a proper perspective between God and me. Any other way would remove the authority of God over my life. It would then mean that I was the master of my fate, the captain of my destiny. My life wouldn't be governed

by God; instead, it would be governed by me.

If I can demand that God does anything, if I can lay out demands to which God must acquiesce because I'm demanding it in Jesus' name; or if I can just make positive confessions and start laying claims to things and, by my positive confessions, create situations and things for my life, then God is no longer in control of my life. I take control by the demands that I make upon God and by the confessions I make of these things. And God becomes the magic genie! I rub the lamp and God must come out to follow my orders.

Not so! God is far too loving for that. He loves you too much to let you run your life. When you put the "I" in run, you've got the true picture: you'll ruin your life when you try to run it.

Paul tells us that we don't always know what the will of the Lord is. That's one of our problems in prayer. From past experience, I realize that I made so many mistakes in the analyses of my own needs that if God had answered some of those prayers, it would have been absolutely tragic!

What if I were in control? What if God were acquiescing to every confession that I made? People say, "Be careful not to make a negative confession! What you say is what you get." That's ridiculous!

David said, "I know one day Saul is going to kill me." Don't say that, David! That's negative confession. Now it's going to happen, because what you say is what you get! And now one day Saul is going to kill you. But Saul didn't kill David.

I have a good friend who's been saying for years, "I'll be a monkey's uncle." To my knowledge he hasn't become one yet.

"If I could have things by just making a positive confession." "If God must yield to my demands." Do you see what that immediately does? It elevates me to the position of God and puts God in the subservient position. I'm no longer serving God, but God is serving me and my every whim.

To put God in this kind of position, as Paul declares in Romans 1:21, is to fail to glorify God as God. It doesn't make God "God" anymore but some kind of servant who has to run around and do my will, follow my commands, and fill out my confessions. It puts me in control and God in the servant's seat. To exalt my demands, wishes, and my will above God's will is audacious, perverted, and insane.

Certainly, the greatest prayer any of us can ever pray is, "Not my will, but Thy will be done." That isn't a spiritual cop-out as some people would accuse. It's just glorifying God as God and recognizing that He's a lot smarter than I. I may think that something is best for me, but He knows what's best for me.

Behind every prayer I offer is an understanding with God that if I'm making a stupid request, He should please not honor it or answer it. I want God to do what's best for me or whatever is wisest in each situation. If you accuse me of a spiritual cop-out because I pray "Thy will be done," then you must also accuse Jesus Christ of a spiritual cop-out - because He's the source of the prayer!

"Not my will, but Thy will be done" is the wisest prayer I can offer to God. That's the way I always want it to be. Though I don't always articulate it, that submission to His will is always the background of every prayer I offer to God. "God, this is what I want. This is what I think I need. But, Lord, You know what I need better than I know myself. Your will be done in my life. Your will be done in this illness. Your will be done in this financial problem. Don't listen to me. I'll mess it up worse than it is. You do what is best for me, God."

A person who's afraid to pray "Thy will be done" is a person who doesn't truly understand or know God. If you really know God then you have no problems praying that way at all. Unfortunately, many people have a lot of false concepts of God.

Satan has done a tremendous job of lying about God and His nature. So many people think that God's will is the most terrible thing that could ever happen to them. They think that whatever you don't want to do is just what God will make you do when you say, "Thy will be done." If you say, "I don't want my nose rubbed in the dirt," the first thing that's going to happen is that God will rub your nose in the dirt. Oh, what a blasphemous concept of God to think that He would do some horrible, ugly thing just because you've submitted to His will. God's will for our lives is so glorious and marvelous that I'm afraid to have anything less than God's will for my life!

If God should come to me and say, "Chuck, I've been thinking about you lately. I'd like to do something special for you just to show you how much I love you" - what would I ask Him for? Oh, what will it be? Let's see I might pay off the mortgage on my house. "Lord, what about twenty grand?" No. Before I get that far I'd stop and say, "Lord, just give me whatever You want." You see, I might be thinking of twenty grand, but He might be thinking five hundred thousand! Why should I cut Him short?

God delights in giving good gifts to His children. He's more anxious to give than we are to receive! If you can have the proper concept of God then you can, with confidence, totally cast yourself upon Him and say, "Here I am, God! It's Your problem now! Take care of it. Whatever You want, whatever You wish. My life is Yours. You work out all the details and circumstances. I'm going to relax and let You do it!" You won't be able to believe those things He desires to do for your life - just because He loves you! No way am I afraid to say, "Lord, Thy will be done in this situation." That's all I want.

We must remember that there is a limitation to our asking: "...anything according to His will." The Scripture isn't just a blanket promise. God has put a limitation to our asking - a blessed limitation!

4. The Healing Doctrine

Can Healing Be Guaranteed?

Recently a woman, struggling awkwardly with her aluminum crutches, came up to me. An unfortunate victim of multiple sclerosis, she had tear-filled eyes that mirrored the pain in her heart. She asked, "How can I explain to my Christian friends that I still love the Lord and am not hiding sin in my life though I'm crippled like this?" My heart ached for her as I realized that she was one of the thousands of victims of the latest wind of doctrine sweeping across the Church body today - the "Healing" doctrine.

Many evangelists and ministers have begun to proclaim a new doctrine that sounds more as though it came from the pen of Mary Baker Eddy than from the Bible. They're teaching that we must make only positive confessions of faith and should never confess to being sick or feeling ill, because our words are a powerful creative force and we become what we say. Thus, no matter what our sickness, if we make a confession of faith, we will become well. All illness, they assert, is a result of our negative confessions or lack of faith.

Comforters, Old and New.

As with all false teachings, much of what this healing doctrine says is true. Many Christians today are guilty of harboring negative attitudes and defeatist complexes. I cannot deny that many people have been

helped and healed by making a positive confession of faith. Yet, to say that it is God's will that none of His children be sick is wrong. And to say that they're sick because of a lack of faith, sin in their lives, or something amiss in their relationship with God is also wrong. I've known too many carnal Christians with marvelous health and too many deeply spiritual Christians with poor health to ever subscribe to such a heresy.

When I see the bad fruit from this doctrine, I can judge it to be false. I feel sorry for the couple who, at the encouragement of a healing evangelist, took their diabetic child off insulin and by faith began claiming his healing. When their child died they were charged with manslaughter, but the evangelist went free.

This doctrine has also led some beautiful saints of God to doubt their salvation because of their cancer. I've seen arthritics lose the joy of Christ because they were told something was lacking in their lives or faith which kept them in that painful condition. Tragically, those who are sick and in need of the greatest encouragement suffer the most from these extremist teachings.

Although in some cases a lack of faith may result in poor health, some of the Christians with the greatest faith and most positive attitudes have suffered physical maladies with no relief. Unquestionably, God does heal people today. Yet not all are healed.

I know of sinners who have received marvelous healings and of true saints who have died of cancer. I don't believe that death from a disease is necessarily a defeat; nor do I believe that if someone had offered the prayer of faith or had held on in faith then death would have been averted. Being a Christian or serving the Lord doesn't provide us with an immunity from sickness, the natural aging process, or death.

Since the time of Job, and perhaps before, men have sought to understand the problem of suffering and sickness and how it relates to our relationship with God. Job's friends, who came to comfort him, may have been gifted in worldly wisdom and philosophy, but they were ignorant of the ways of God. In the end, God rebuked Job's comforters for their counsel without knowledge and declared His anger against them, because what they said about God wasn't true. They had been telling Job that his problems came upon him because of a wrong relationship with God. If Job got right with God then all would be well in his life. But they failed to recognize, as do these modern false comforters, that God often allows suffering to work His purposes in our lives. I agree with Job: "Miserable comforters are ye all!"

It is heartless, unscriptural, and cruel to tell a person with a chronic sickness that he's not right with God, his confession of sickness is wrong, or he lacks faith. A couple whose son died of leukemia was told that if they'd only held on in faith their child would have been healed. They were told that their surrender to God by praying, "Thy will be done" made them responsible for their son's death. Another couple whose child had leukemia was encouraged to make positive confessions. They claimed the healing and refused to acknowledge the child's illness. When their child died they were spiritually destroyed. Some sicknesses persist because of a lack of faith, but not all. Some situations are helped by positive confessions, but not all.

Scriptural Comfort.

In seeking to discover the truth about a doctrine we must turn to the Bible. When attempting to use the Scriptures to prove that God wants all of us to be healed, these false comforters point to III John 1:2; "I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." In context this verse is not an expression of God's will for all His saints. Rather, it is John's personal wish for his

friend, Gaius.

In Mark 11:22-23 we read,

And Jesus answering saith unto them, Have faith in God. For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, "Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea;" and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith.

This is the basis for teaching the importance of someone making the right confession, with the emphasis on having whatever "he saith."

These questions then arise in my mind: Where does God's will come into the matter? Can I command God to work contrary to His own will? Is the purpose of prayer ever to get my will done? What kind of God would acquiesce to my demands doing for me what is contrary to His own will and what He knows to be bad for me, simply because I'm persistent in my demands?

Still, these modern-day "prophets" would have us feel guilty and accuse us of a lack of faith when we pray, "Thy will be done." But this prayer of commitment - resting my case with God's will - takes much more faith than demanding my own will to be done. If we're wrong in praying "Thy will be done," we're in good company. Jesus prayed it!

When we consider the relationship of our health to our faith, it is enlightening to look at Elisha, that Old Testament prophet of great faith. I don't know any other Old Testament saint who had more miracles of faith surrounding his life. Yet, we read in II Kings 13:14, "Now Elisha was fallen sick of his sickness whereof he died." Men of great faith also get sick. Paul wrote to Timothy not to drink water but to use a little wine for his stomach's problem and his constant weakness (I Timothy 5:23). Paul also spoke of Epaphroditus, his brother and companion in the Lord's work, who was so sick he was "nigh unto death" (Philippians 2:27).

Although some of the Gospels speak of occasions where Jesus healed all that were sick, Mark's Gospel speaks of occasions where "many" were healed (Mark 1:32-34; 3:10). The inference is that not all were healed.

Paul's Thorn in the Flesh.

In the history of the Church one of the greatest leaders and men of faith was Paul the apostle. Yet, he testified of his own infirmity, his "thorn in the flesh" (II Corinthians 12:7-10). During his ministry Paul had undergone a "life-after-death" experience. Paul himself says that he wasn't sure if he'd had a vision or if he'd really died. But Paul did know that he was caught up into heaven where he heard things so marvelous that it was unlawful for him to try to relate them in human language. (II Corinthians 12:1-4). As a result of the abundance of revelations, Paul also received a thorn in the flesh to keep him from being exalted above measure.

There is a constant danger for the man who is being used by God to begin to look to himself for the cause of God's blessings in his life. God is the source of every blessing that we receive - not because we're worthy or deserving, or because God can trust us. God bestows upon us such abundant mercy, grace and power only because He is gracious and merciful.

Paul warns everyone, "...not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly" (Romans 12:3). Whenever God begins to use us there's always that tendency to say, "I finally discovered the secret of faith!" (or the secret of commitment, or the secret of positive confession). We're always trying to point back to ourselves rather than to God's abundant overflowing grace.

Pride is a very dangerous trap. In fact, it tops the list of things that God hates (Proverbs 6:16-17). It's also the sin that caused Satan's downfall. Proverbs warns, "Pride goeth before destruction" (Proverbs 16:18a). Spiritual pride is the most damnable of all. "I'm holier than you. That's why God is able to use me. That's why God has touched me and has blessed me. I've done things right. You've done things wrong. That's why you're in the bad shape you're in." That concept is horrible and ugly!

If you receive any blessings from God - good health or a healing - don't look to yourself as the cause. The grace of God is the only cause of blessing. It's not because you believed or trusted. It's because God is gracious. Remember that.

Because of the abundance of revelations in Paul's life God put a thorn in his flesh to keep him from being puffed up. What was Paul's thorn in the flesh? The word "thorn" in the Greek actually means "a stake," a reference to a big tent stake. Don't think of Paul as having a little pesky thorn in his side. He had a tent stake driven in! It wasn't a minor irritation - it was a major disability!

Paul refers to his thorn as a "...messenger of Satan to buffet me." The word "messenger" in Greek is *aggelos*, which literally means "an angel." Paul had an angel of Satan to buffet him. His thorn in the flesh may have been a very painful eye disease causing his eyes to run continually. There are several allusions to this in the Scriptures (Galatians 4:15; 6:11). But whatever Paul's thorn was, it was an emissary of Satan who was continually buffeting him. And Paul prayed for deliverance.

When Paul's thorn in the flesh originally came, he probably didn't think too much about it. "After all, I can always pray and trust God to heal me." But after he prayed and the problem still hung on, he began to think twice. "Lord. I asked You to heal me. Maybe You didn't understand, Lord. Get rid of this messenger from Satan! Stop him, Lord!" Paul prayed three times. But the weakness continued to persist. After the third prayer Paul received his answer. Was it deliverance from the thorn? No! He got something better. He received God's all-sufficient grace, power, and strength in his life!

God doesn't always give us what we ask. He oftentimes gives us more than what we ask. Many times the things we ask God to remove are the very instruments He uses to accomplish His purposes in our lives. God gave Paul an understanding of the thorn. "Paul, I'm going to allow you to be weak that you might constantly rely upon My strength. I'm going to allow this messenger of Satan to buffet you so that I might bestow upon you My all sufficient grace" (II Corinthians 12:8-9).

As we look at Paul we think, "What a shame. That's tragic. I don't know how you endured that, Paul." We offer our sympathies to Paul for this ugly thorn in the flesh. But Paul answers, "Don't feel sorry for me. I take pleasure and glory in this weakness!"

Sometimes, you feel you've entered into real victory because you've learned to tolerate a condition in your body or in your own life. But God has something better for you. Don't just learn to live with it. Let it become the instrument of God's grace and power in your life. "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities for when I am weak, then am I strong" (II Corinthians 12:10).

Your Thorn.

Maybe today you're plagued by some thorn in your flesh. Maybe today you have comforters, as did Job, who are telling you to stop making negative confessions and to start making positive ones, "then things will be okay."

They say, "If you'll just believe and have enough faith, you'd be healed! Surely there's something wrong with you to be afflicted like this. Confess it to God and forsake your sin!" So you've confessed everything you can think of and you've made your positive confessions of faith - yet the thorn is still there.

Now Satan comes in and says, "God doesn't love you. If God loved you, surely you'd be well. If you were in the will of God this wouldn't be happening to you." So you begin to feel guilty, unloved, discouraged, and defeated because you don't know what's wrong. You don't know why the weakness persists.

Listen, God is saying, "Just trust in Me. My grace is sufficient for you, and My strength is made perfect in your weakness. I've got more for you than healing. Receive today My abundant all-sufficient grace."

A Gift Better Than Healing

God's ways are beyond our finding out. We'll never understand why some people are healed and others are not, why some notorious sinners enjoy marvelous health while some sincere Christians suffer from chronic illnesses.

To try to understand these things with our human reasoning places us in dangerous position, as the psalmist discovered in Psalm 73. He speaks about his feet almost slipping because he was tripped up by the health and prosperity of the wicked.

But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. For I was envious of the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

He began to draw the wrong conclusion: it doesn't pay to serve God.

It wasn't until he began to view these afflictions in the light of eternity that he was once again established. "Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end." He received the assurance that God was indeed holding him, that God would guide him and afterward receive him into glory.

May we, with the psalmist, learn to commit our ways fully to God and stay close to Him. For, if He doesn't heal us, then He'll surely give us His all-sufficient grace to sustain us.

Nevertheless, I am continually with thee; thou hast hold of me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel and afterward receive me to glory (Psalm 73:23-24).

5. God's Refining Process

Because the Jewish nation had forsaken the covenant of the Lord, walked in its own path, and would not harken to the Lord's voice - God proclaimed, through Jeremiah the prophet, the judgments to come against Judah. Jeremiah then turned to the Gentiles and prophesied the judgments to come against their nations.

Jeremiah 48 tells us that destructions are determined upon the Gentile nation of Moab. Its cities were to be made desolate. Its armies would be slaughtered and destroyed. Verse 11 tells us why:

Moab hath been at ease from his youth, and he hath settled on his lees. and hath not been emptied from vessel to vessel, neither had he gone into captivity; therefore, his taste remained in him, and his scent is not changed.

1. Change

One thing that you must declare concerning the Gospel of Jesus Christ: it changes people. What you were before you met Christ is not what you are after you have met Him. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (II Corinthians 5:17).

There is something radically wrong with the person who claims to know Jesus Christ and has not had any changes in his life - who still walks after and according to the things of the flesh and minds the things of the flesh - because Jesus Christ will change your life. You cannot be the same person after you have met Him if you have truly experienced His power in your life.

One of the sad testimonies of the Church is that many of the people who attend church, take the name of Christian, and say their prayers faithfully have never had the change in their lives that Christ effects in a man.

The basic difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is that the non-Christian is ruled by his flesh and by his fleshly desires. In talking about our pre-Christ experience, Paul the Apostle said:

In times past you walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works among the children of disobedience; among whom also we all had our manner of life in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh (Ephesians 2:2-3).

A person who hasn't met Jesus Christ is a person whose life is dominated by his flesh and fleshly desires. A person who has come to the Lordship of Jesus Christ is a person who knows and acknowledges the supremacy of the Holy Spirit and lives according to the Spirit. The Bible tells us, "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God" (Romans 8:14).

It's possible to call Jesus "Lord." It's possible to have all the religious vernacular, go to church, sit and listen to the messages, but never be touched in the deeper area of your life. You may have the head knowledge. You may have the spiritual jargon down pat. But if it hasn't come into the area of your life where it affects your will - your religion is vain.

God's refining process is based on love! He won't let us stay settled in the dregs of the flesh. He has something better for us than the empty, fruitless life we often seek.

If you're not being led by the Spirit of God, you're not a son of God. You're still mastered and dominated by your flesh and still living after the flesh. The Bible declares that the mind of the flesh is sin and death, but the mind of the Spirit is life, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost (Romans 8:6).

You can't go out all week sowing wild oats, then come to church on Sunday and pray that they'll never grow. "Oh, God, kill all the seeds I've sowed this week! Don't let them grow." That can't happen. "Be not deceived, God is not mocked, for whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7). If you're

living to the flesh and sowing to the flesh, of the flesh you're going to reap corruption.

Jesus was crucified for making this declaration. He asserted the supremacy of the spiritual over the material. The people couldn't handle it, and they finally put Him to death. Yet it's true. When Jesus Christ comes into your life He changes you from the old flesh-ruled life to the Spirit-ruled life.

Jesus said, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself" (Matthew 16:24). That's the very first step. You've got to deny the old life, the old flesh, the desires of the flesh. Deny "himself" is the very first thing. Many people have come to Jesus Christ in theory, but they haven't yet come to Him in practice. They're saying, "Lord, Lord," but they're not obedient to the will of the Father.

2. Purification

The second thing the Gospel of Jesus Christ does to a person is purification. The Bible says that we are pure even as He is pure (1 John 3:3). God is going to work in your life to purify you. God wants to bring you into purity. This purifying work is explained in Jeremiah 48:11, where he is describing the process by which wine is made. Jeremiah said that Moab had been at ease from his youth, had settled on his lees, and had never been poured from vessel to vessel. This was his problem. Moab had never been disturbed.

When they were making wine, the people would pour the juice into a vessel. They would allow it to set in that vessel until it fermented. The sediment, known as lees or dregs, would settle to the bottom of the vessel. Once the dregs settled, they would carefully pour the wine out of that vessel into another vessel, so that the settling process might again take place. As the dregs sank to the bottom, the wine makers would pour the liquid back into another vessel. Back and forth from vessel to vessel, each time being careful not to pour out the dregs. They were coming to a pure, clear product of the vine. This was their method of making excellent wine.

If the people didn't pour the wine from vessel to vessel but allowed it to set too long in the collected dregs, the fermented juice would begin to develop the taste of the dregs. The wine would become bitter. Then it would begin to get the smell of the dregs, a rotten smell. It would also begin to take on the color of the dregs. It's tragic when Christians get settled in the things of the flesh, the flesh walk, the flesh life. At one time in their Christian walks they were shocked that people could do such evil things of the flesh. They'd say, "I would never do that!" After a while, you find them doing the same things and becoming settled in them.

This impurity actually begins to permeate your whole life. Your life begins to be colored by the flesh. Your life begins to smell of the things of the flesh. Your life begins to just taste of the things of the flesh. Rather than bringing spiritual refreshment, all you're talking about is the latest chatter of what's happening here, what's happening there, this new movie, that new fashion. Your mind is caught up in the things of the flesh. In reality, you become no more than a heathen. Jesus said that you shouldn't be taking thought about what to eat, what to drink, or what to wear. He said, "For after all these things do the Gentiles [the heathen] seek" (Matthew 6:31-32).

If your life gets caught up in that trip - what shall we eat, what shall we wear, what new thing to buy, always interested in the adornment of your body, buying clothes and keeping up with the fashions, or always in the eating and drinking crowd, seeking to delight yourself in the fancy foods, a gourmet - you're no better off than the heathen. These things occupy their minds. They live after the flesh.

It's tragic when Christians settle down in these kinds of dregs so much that their lives are colored by it. You can't have a spiritual conversation with them. They're so interested in some new thing they purchased last week - "Wait till you see it!" It's all a flesh trip. Settling in the dregs of the flesh, they are colored, they are scented, they are tasting of the things of the flesh. It is a flesh life, not the life of the Spirit. God wants to purify us. God wants to clean out those dregs. God has something better for you than that empty, fruitless life of the flesh. You need to experience the purifying effect of the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

It's tragic that many people who have spent their entire lives in church or under its influence, attending very regularly, are still spiritually "babes in Christ." Paul calls them "carnal" (I Corinthians 3:1-4). They've never developed in their spiritual walk. They've been at ease. They've settled into the dregs. They haven't been poured from vessel to vessel.

3. Deliverance

The third thing the Gospel of Jesus Christ does is deliverance. The power of Jesus Christ can set you free from the power of the flesh. Some of you today have become slaves to your fleshly desires. It's amazing what a strong grip and hold it can get on your life. The very first time you tried it, it was just for a kick. You were just searching for a little diversion.

We have many people in our church who are alcoholics. How little did they realize the power it would get on their lives, the grip it would hold over them. Thank God they know. They know better than to take again that first drink. They've experienced the delivering power of Jesus Christ. Having been delivered from the entanglements of the world, don't be so foolish as to go back and be entangled again with that yoke of bondage.

Unless we're poured from vessel to vessel, our lives begin to "smell" of the things which we have settled into!

We have many drug addicts. Maybe the first time they took a pill was to ease the appetite a bit. Maybe it was to alleviate some pain or to calm their nerves. But the drug began to get a hold of them until, finally, they came under the power of that substance, unable to free themselves. They found themselves bound in that drug. How little did so many realize, when they took that first fix, the hell it was leading them into.

They know now. Thank God for the power of Jesus Christ to deliver us from the bondage of corruption in which we found ourselves through our own folly and foolishness. The power of Jesus Christ can and does deliver man from the bondage of sin and death.

Today, maybe you find yourself entangled in a situation where you never thought you'd be. Maybe today you find yourself caught up in an adulterous situation. It started off so innocently, just as a little flirtation. Now, you're all involved. You never intended to be, but you opened the door to the flesh, and it took over. Now that situation is mastering your life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ can set you free. He can deliver you. Maybe you're hooked on drugs, or maybe you can't stop drinking. You've come to the place where you need that shot when you get home in the evening. Then, worse, you need it when you get up in the morning.

Maybe you have been bound by some desire or lust that has overwhelmed you and made you its victim. Moab was in this sad condition, because it had been at ease. Moab never had any problem, never was in captivity, never knew what it was all about. It grew up rather sheltered and protected. It settled into this

condition as a result of no waves, no stirring. Moab had never been poured from vessel to vessel.

But, you know, God loves you. If you come to that place in your Christian experience where you start to relax and settle down into the dregs of the flesh, God's love won't allow you to get by with it. God will upset your position. Maybe someone who is very dear to us, someone we've come to rely upon, is suddenly taken away. "Oh, God, why is he gone? What are you doing, Lord?" He's now pouring you from vessel to vessel.

Maybe the boss suddenly says, "Hey, we're going to transfer you to Spokane."

"Spokane?" you say. "I don't know anybody in Spokane! All my friends are here. My children are in school here." A total uprooting - new friends, new associates, new environment, new schools. You cry out, "What are you doing God?" He's causing you to trust and rely upon Him. God is going to strip you of whatever has created your ease. Maybe it's your retirement, maybe it's your possessions, maybe it's your bank account. You've settled at ease in these things, your lees. But God doesn't want you to be dominated by your flesh. God will deliver you from the bondage of corruption.

God uses disturbances. They are the tools of God to bring us to Himself, to take away our trust and our reliance in other things. He doesn't want us to have job security, social security or security in man, government, bank accounts, or ourselves. He wants us to find our total security in Him. And so He pours us from vessel to vessel.

"For the mind of the flesh is death, but the mind of the Spirit is life and peace" (Romans 8:6).

Maybe this knowledge has disturbed some of you. Praise the Lord! You see, He wants to shake you up from that little smugness and ease in the flesh that you've fallen into, the trap of trying to find the answer in the things of the flesh.

We have been created for His pleasure (Revelation 4:11). He can't enjoy us when we smell of the flesh. He can't enjoy us when we taste of the flesh. It is only as we walk in the Spirit, as we live in the Spirit, as we move in the Spirit, that we become what God would have us be - a pure product that He can enjoy.

A Time of Change

You go to work. The foreman walks up to you and says, "I don't know what's wrong, but here's your termination notice." You think, "Termination? What do you mean 'termination'? I've got house payments, car payments, and television payments. What do you mean termination? Oh, God! What are You doing?"

He's got your attention now. He's pouring you from vessel to vessel. You see, you began to rely on and find security in your job. You were settling down into the dregs. You weren't walking after the Lord. You weren't searching after the Spirit.

God doesn't want you to smell of the flesh. So, God pours you into another vessel. God will not let you get entangled in the things of the flesh. If you start doing it, if you start meddling, if you start giving over to the things of the flesh, your day is coming. God is going to pour you from vessel to vessel to purify you.

And, suddenly, there you are. You're brought into a new relationship with God - being refined and purified through these disturbances that He brings into our lives.

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