

Inexhaustable Emptying

by Dana Congdon

Dana Congdon's sermon emphasizes the importance of remaining faithful to God's heavenly vision throughout the various stages of life and ministry, despite challenges and distractions.

Scripture: Acts 26:14

Topics: "Faithfulness", "Heavenly Vision"

Description

Dana Congdon emphasizes the importance of remaining faithful to the heavenly vision throughout the various stages of life and ministry, using the examples of Paul and Isaiah. He highlights how both men faced challenges and temptations but remained devoted to God, ultimately finding strength in their relationship with Christ. Congdon encourages believers to seek a fresh revelation of God's purpose and to be willing to empty themselves for His glory, assuring that true fulfillment comes from serving out of the life of Christ within. He calls for intercession for the church to regain its vision and purpose in these challenging times.

Transcript

Well, we come to the last full day of ministry. Tomorrow we return to the Lord thanksgiving. We gather together for a final time of worship.

And even though this is the last day of ministry, we ask the Lord that he might, by his spirit, make us attentive to what the Lord wants to say to us, even in this day. I'd like for us to turn to several verses this morning. The first being in Acts chapter 26, our theme verse.

We'll begin reading in verse 14. Acts chapter 26. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.

And I said, who are you Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and stand on your feet. For this purpose, I have appeared to you to appoint you a minister and a witness, not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you, rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in me. So King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first and also at

Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea and even to the Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God performing deeds appropriate to repentance.

And then let's turn to another passage, a biographical in second Timothy chapter one, beginning in verse eight, second Timothy chapter one, beginning in verse eight, therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me, his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but now has been revealed by the appearing of our savior Christ Jesus who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher. For this reason, I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day. And then we want to turn to a passage in Isaiah chapter 63 and we'll read a few verses here and there.

Isaiah 63 verse 15, look down from heaven and see from your holy and glorious habitation where are your zeal and your mighty deeds? The stirrings of your heart and your compassions are restrained toward me for you are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not recognize us. You, oh Lord, are our father, our redeemer from of old is your name. Why, oh Lord, do you cause us to stray from your ways and harden our heart from fearing you return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage, your holy people possessed your sanctuary for a little while.

Our adversaries have trodden it down. We have become like those over whom you never ruled, like those who were not called by your name. Oh, that you would ran the heavens and come down that the mountains might shake at your presence.

And then verse eight of chapter 64. But now, oh Lord, you are our father. We are the clay.

You are the potter. And all of us are the work of your hand. Do not be angry beyond measure, oh Lord, nor remember iniquity forever.

Behold, look now, all of us are your people. Your holy cities have become a wilderness. Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem, a desolation.

Our holy and beautiful house where our fathers praised you has been burned with fire. And all our precious things have become a ruin. Will you restrain yourself at these things, oh Lord? Will you keep silent and afflict us beyond measure? I chose this passage because as we're talking about Paul in his last stage, the third 11 years of his Christian life.

Here is another man who could say, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, even Isaiah. He stood nobly before King Manasseh and the people of God, expressing the things that he had seen in his heavenly vision. And in many ways, he and Paul had much in common.

Both had been undone by a vision from heaven. Both had been captured by a vision from heaven. Both had been called from this very heavenly vision.

And even more than that, both of them in their ministry basically were revealing all of that which was seen in a moment in their heavenly vision. They spent their lifetime spelling out aspects of things they had seen of the Lord enthroned above. And with all of the revelation that they were granted and all the things they saw concerning Christ and his redemption and his lordship over his people, ironically, both Paul and Isaiah

were called to go and speak to a people who wouldn't listen and who had eyes, but they wouldn't see and who had hearts that were dull.

And even as they both stood literally on the precipice of the captivity of Judea, the people had no idea what were going on in their times. And finally, it's interesting that both of these men stood before reprobate kings as they shared their testimonies and could declare, I have not been disobedient to the heavenly vision. Here, Isaiah writes these things in the reign of Manasseh, that evil king.

And of course, King Agrippa was anything but God's man upon the throne. But what I want just to emphasize. Is that both of these men, having served, having been faithful to that heavenly vision.

Have come to a conclusion at the end of their day. So wonderfully put in this intercessory dialogue of these chapters that Isaiah is having with Jehovah. And basically what he is praying is.

Lord, you have given us this purpose, but we are just clay. Our confidence is in you. Only you can do that, which you have called us to be.

There is in the lives of Paul stated in that wonderful verse there in second Timothy, I know whom I have believed and I'm persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day. And here's Isaiah at a very dark moment, praying along with his remnant prayer warriors and intercession saying, Lord, don't forget us. How long will you be angry with us? Lord, we have failed.

Lord, we are not your people, but we are your people. And you are our father. It isn't even that we're your people, but you are our father.

And so we find this heart that knows this Lord of glory so well. That he's able to argue and wrestle in intercession that the things of God would be brought to pass. Whenever we come to this subject of the heavenly vision, we realize we're talking way over our heads by the grace of God.

It is the privilege of every Christian to see the Lord of glory and to be changed by that and to enter into an understanding of his purpose. How wonderfully Paul stated it there at the beginning of the second Timothy. We're called to preach the gospel, but this gospel has purpose behind it and so on and so forth.

It's such a wonderful thing. Every Christian should be under the heavenly vision, but even as Isaiah with his remnant were praying, he realized that the 12 tribes, most of the people didn't even know their purpose. They were just living day by day.

And so it is with us as we look at the whole of our Christian brethren. Someone needs to pray and intercede at such a time where many have been saved by the grace of God, perhaps even seen some revelation of the Lord Jesus. But living our days in this Laodicean age just for ourselves and unaware of what we were called to of the glory of the purpose.

And so I'd like us to pray before we begin our time of the message, just right along that line, would you join me? Our father, as we come to you today in the name of our Lord Jesus, we wrestle with you about this matter of purpose and vision. We use the word so often and we understand so little, but we've seen enough and been captured enough that we've been spoiled and want to pray that in these last days and a great unveiling of yourself, that you would rend the heavens and come down and shake the mountains with your presence and grant that your people may know again why we live not for ourselves, but for the great and glorious son of God. Lord, we would pray together even as we're gathered in this last time, this

last day of ministry, that you would so arrest our hearts through the rest of this day, that as we go home from this place, we find ourselves interceding on this line.

Lord, we would argue with you. This is your vision, your purpose way beyond this Lord. We know it's impossible with man, but we lay hold of the only one who can draw us in, make us participants, even bring us to where we can say we have fulfilled our ministry.

We have been found in your purpose. Oh, we want to be found in Christ and we want to gain Christ. And we ask that our ministry, even this morning would encourage us along that line.

We come to you in the precious name of our captives of our captivate or even the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. We've tried to divide Paul's life up into these three 11 year segments and tried to show both the temptations that befall somebody to be disobedient to the heavenly vision, and then hopefully just to show in some way how the Lord kept Paul faithful through these various different stages.

As we come to this last phase, the last 11 years of Paul's life, you know, these are approximate, the timeframes. This was the period of time where he found himself put in jail, languishing actually for a few years in Caesarea and then sent on to Rome, perhaps released for a while and then re-imprisoned and eventually martyred. These were years of the prisoner of the Lord.

These were years of limitation, years of suffering, and yes, again, years of waiting. And many of us here can identify with this third phase. We have been through much.

Perhaps you've served the Lord in some way. Perhaps you've been responsible in an assembly somewhere. Perhaps you've been faithful as a sister, your prayer warrior.

You have a history. We come to a certain phase where limitation becomes, in a sense, our seemingly destiny. Age and health and circumstances and finances and family begin to limit how much we can minister.

You can imagine the apostle, once incarcerated, how he had to just learn how to calm his engines down after traveling so far, doing so much, being able to be in touch with so many things. And when someone comes to this third stage of limitation, of suffering, of restriction, younger ones may think that in this third stage, at least, there would not be such a temptation. To be disobedient to the heavenly vision.

Of course, the opposite is true. We saw in the first stage, the first 11 years of Paul's Christian life, the Lord basically had him in a waiting pattern. He waited in the desert.

He waited in Damascus. He waited in Tarsus. He waited for some 11 years while the Lord gained the mastery over this strong will determined young man.

We saw that it was a time of great temptation to run out ahead of the Lord. And I think even in the book of Acts, we see some episodes where you could see that Paul's desire was definitely to jump right out into ministry, having been saved and perhaps even a desire to be a martyr for the Lord Jesus as a witness, even as he had been a witness to martyrs before him. But these years of preparation were years of the cross.

And so I tried to entitle the effect of the heavenly vision in that years awaiting as the years of a qualifying devastation. Paul had to be devastated spirit, soul and body reworked, reconstituted, built again, renewed

mind, renewed motives, renewed understanding. And so it was the Lord's good pleasure to put him through a period of time where he knew much dealing, even regarding his own sin and his own flesh and all such things.

He found this time to be such a frustrating time. It seems that the Lord is always, oh, often take somebody who's young and virile and sets them down to the weight. And certainly we could see the temptation to run ahead in such a time as that.

But then Paul entered into the running the race years. And for 11 years or so, he went from place to place and preached the gospel probably almost every day, reasoning with people, worshiping with the saints, moving from town to town, often harassed, sometimes persecuted with many stonings and imprisonments and shipwrecks and all such things as he gives account of. And we can only imagine in those years of ministry, the temptations to be disobedient to the heavenly vision.

We know our Lord Jesus himself was tempted by Satan and three very basic areas. That is the temptation of every brother, every sister who would truly try to serve the Lord. The Lord would have us move on with our eyes fixed on Jesus, but there's many things around us to distract them.

Jesus was tempted to turn the stones into bread. And so we Christians as living stones are tempted by the enemy to be distracted, turn aside and make a fortune out of our life. God's grace, God's care, God's blessing on your life.

You can make good money off of that. The world is looking for some people willing to sell their soul for a fortune. Many servants who had their eyes fixed on Jesus got lost somehow by this.

Aspect is a hope that they could make money, make bread, be successful. Of course, there's others who have heads have been turned by the lust for fame. If I could just jump off this place and gain a reputation, many faithful servants of God who served the Lord and had their eyes fixed on Jesus, got their eyes taken off when fame came their way.

They became proud and lost that vision that they had at the start. Still, others are distracted by this prospect that we can achieve ends by whatever means. That we can gain the mastery over people by bowing down to certain minor things.

We can have all we want and we can be successful. If we'll just bow down to Satan who comes to us, of course, in some disguise. But of course, our Lord Jesus would have nothing to do with these things.

He knew the word of God. And thank God, there's many servants who tempted to be distracted from the heavenly vision. Said, no, I live and worship the Lord only.

How precious are such servants? They've been through a test. You can be sure. And yet, perhaps those great tests having passed, we get distracted by smaller things.

And the fact of the matter is more servants of God, perhaps get tripped up by some besetting sin or by some weight that falls upon them. Some distraction. You know, it's possible to serve the Lord and be faithful to the heavenly vision and then get distracted by a teaching.

And you find yourself off in the way here and holding to a teaching, but not holding to the Lord. Or some people run the race. It seems they've been running well and then they get distracted by some experience.

And next thing you know. They've lost a sense of balance of things. They've lost a sense of restraint, running after some dead end of experience.

There's so many things out there to distract the runner. And many now are involved in special emphases, which basically have taken them right out of the heavenly vision or so easily distracted when we're running the race. There's so many resting places.

There's so many places that we can find a certain measure of success and satisfaction, except when we see again the glory of our Lord. And we ask ourselves deep within, why am I doing this? Why am I wasting my time? Well, when we come to this veteran stage, as in Paul's case now, behind bars or waiting, the temptations of these past days are still upon us. We can still turn any of those things to our advantage.

We can turn the loyalty or the appreciation of people to our advantage. We can do things. Those old temptations never go away, but a new group of temptations are added to us because along with other temptations, we have the temptations born of our history.

When you've had a history serving the Lord, it raises questions. It brings things to our mind. As our brother shared regarding Abraham, you know, there comes a time in Abraham's life where I'm sure he said, now, Lord, you promised me land.

I don't have any land. You promised me kids. I don't have any kids.

What's going on? And so some are tempted to ask. When things go difficultly, co-workers leave some discouraging situations. We realize that work and labor, you've been serving faithfully and some assembly somewhere and the assembly begins to totter and shake and perhaps even fall apart.

And you start to ask those questions. Now, you know, was this really worth it? I gave my whole life. I took a second mortgage out just to help build a building and spent long hours talking and counseling and a lot of stuff and everything's going down.

And I really don't know, is this really worth it? You add to those kinds of problems, other things like dealing with agonizing infirmities. It's interesting sometimes, even when we're quite in a bad spot health-wise and the Lord still seems to tell us to move about, to share. It becomes an agony.

I think we picture that. We see that in Paul's life, even in the latter days of his running the race. Many such temptations to say, you know, it's time for me to retire.

It's time for me to look to myself. It's time for me to settle down. This race has been long.

This race has been hard. When do you even add on to that? Ungrateful brethren. I often, as I go from place to place, the most amazing people to me, I suppose, are the brothers in leadership.

It's the most thankless job I've ever seen in anything in the world. They get no appreciation. They get all criticism.

They're making no money off the thing. It's a complete losing proposition. And anybody here who's been there knows exactly what I mean, and especially the wives who've been giving up their husbands for years.

And you start to say, is this thing really worth it? Have I just wasted my time? Not to mention the discouragement of having been in a place of serving the Lord, and now because of health reasons or something being put on the shelf. Has the Lord abandoned me? Just used me and thrown me away as the world is want to do. And so all these kinds of new temptations come up and also the discouragement and the weariness that comes because there's an interesting phenomena.

It's a little hard to describe, but it's something that happens when we have seen some revelation of the Lord himself. We've been running after him along that line, but in the running somehow we began to run in our own light. We have knowledge of the truth.

It's still the truth. This is the way we should meet. This is the simplicity.

Here's the table at the center. We see such things as that, but what happened to the life along the way? We find ourselves in this kind of gray zone where we know all the truth. We've heard all of these things before, but somehow it's in the light of our own knowledge and not in the fresh revelation of these things.

We find that can be quite wearying and just as much a tradition and boring as any other kind of a tradition you might find. These kinds of temptations will fall upon the veteran, and the veteran is tempted to quit. And Paul must have been pretty tempted to quit, but he didn't.

And to the end, he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Before we note some particulars, let's just read two passages at the beginning of this 11 years of restriction, and then at the end of these 11 years, just to get a little taste of some of these very same matters that I have been relating. In Acts chapter 20, as Paul swings around on his, turns out to be his last journey, and he goes by and sees the elders in Ephesus, and he shares with them what lays ahead for him.

It's been made clear to him that restriction lies ahead, and so he begins to exhort them and to share with them. And let's try to enter into the depth of his feeling at this present time. In verse 17 of Acts 20, we'll read this whole episode.

I think it's a wonderful testimony. From Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church, and when they'd come to him, he said to them, you yourselves know from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews, and how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.

But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus to solemnly testify of the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that all of you among whom I went about preaching the kingdom will no longer see my face. Therefore, I testify to you to this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

Be on your guard for yourselves and for all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. The shepherd, the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

And from among your own selves, men will arise speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years, I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. And now I commend you to God, the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

I've coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me and everything. I showed you that by working hard in this manner, you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus that he himself said it is more blessed to give than to receive.

When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. They began to weep aloud, embraced Paul, repeatedly kissed him, grieving, especially over the word which he had spoken that they would never see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

Now that was the beginning of the 11 years. And then we go over to Second Timothy just to read part of chapter four and begin in verse six, where I am already being poured out as a drink offering. And the time of my departure has come, I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.

In the future, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all who have loved is appearing. Make every effort to come to me soon, where Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia and Titus to Dalmatia.

Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with me with you, for he is useful to me for service. But Tychicus, I have sent to Ephesus.

And when you come, bring the cloak, which I left to Troas with Carpus and the books, especially the parchments. Alexander, the coppersmith did me much harm. The Lord will repay him according to his deeds.

You be on your guard against him, for he vigorously opposed our teaching. At my first defense, no one supported me. But all deserted me.

They had not be counted against them, but the Lord stood with me and strengthened me. So that through me, the proclamation might be fully accomplished and that all the Gentiles might hear. Then I was rescued out of the lion's mouth.

And the Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Here's our faithful brother.

I have not proven disobedient to the heavenly vision. How does he do this? How did he remain faithful? Why was he willing to suffer and be poured out as an offering? Why was he willing to wait those years in jail? Well, there's mysteries in all of this, but I think there's three things that we can see that he found at the very beginning and his initial encounter with the Lord and that heavenly vision that became his secret for his remaining faithful, remaining alive, remaining in the Lord, fulfilling his ministry, even when he was in fact in jail. So I want us to note these three things.

They're very simple thing. The first. The first secret that kept him in life through this last stage of his ministry was this.

Over and above all his ministry, churches, success, reputation, notoriety over and above everything. He maintained a devotion to a person above all. He was not in the end devoted to a work, but a person.

He was not devoted to some church, but a person. He was not devoted to his ministry, but a person, even the Lord Jesus Christ, whom he met on the road to the mask. For sure, the light that struck him down on that road was a powerful light.

And for sure, the truth that he heard on the road was a devastating truth. But for sure, the Lord he met was a capturing Lord. And he saw the Lord Jesus in glory and was spoiled of anybody else.

And for all his days, he could say, I have loved my master and have served him. And I love him more than my ministry. There are some servants of God who serve and serve well, the Lord.

And then when they come to some time of limitation, they have some physical problem or something comes up. They deal with this issue more than anything else, because in fact, they've devoted themselves to a ministry. And when that ministry is taken away or curtailed, they feel like they have no self-esteem.

There's nothing left. They deal with the depression and all of this, they're feeling worthless. But somewhere in the midst of Paul's ministry, he made that inevitable crossover.

You know, if you serve the Lord, however you serve the Lord in some small way or larger way, when you serve the Lord, you want to do for the Lord and you want to serve God's people. And so the Lord has given you such motives, but there must be a crossover somewhere in that ministry where knowing the Lord becomes more important than ministry or else you'll find yourself disobedient and failing in the latter days. You know, it is said that many servants of God don't end well.

I'm not sure that's really true. I think we could prove just as many who seem to shine with glory as they were going home. But nevertheless, if ministry is the most important thing, if your ministry in an assembly is an important thing and it gets taken away, is that the most important thing? Well, of course, we know from Paul's testimony from jail in Philippians chapter three, we should read it.

And there we see there is this devotion to the Lord, this indebtedness to the Lord, this love for the Lord that just comes shining through. In Philippians chapter three, as he talks of his life now in Christ as a prisoner of the Lord, we could just read a few verses. This passion has obviously come to be found in Christ and to be found in Christ's righteousness and to gain Christ and not just Christ and not just loving Christ, but loving Christ and being found in this purpose, running toward this purpose.

He knew what the Lord wanted. And so we just find these familiar verses in chapter three, verse 12, not that I have already obtained or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet, but one thing I do.

That's it. It's down to one thing. Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Now let us therefore, as many as are mature, have this same mind. There we are. Pursuing the Lord.

He had to leave some things behind. You know, back in the old days when he met the Lord on the road to Damascus, he had to leave behind all of that that he thought was gain regarding his heritage. But now

here he is in jail and he has to discard some stuff.

But now this leaving behind stuff is probably mostly good stuff, like the miracles he's performed, the churches that have been started, the things that he's achieved, the letters that he's written, the gospel that he has proclaimed, all that. He says, you know what? I'm forgetting what lies behind. I am.

I'm not in this place of ministry. I once was. I put that behind me.

Now this is a new phase and here's my new phase. I'm ministering, but it looks like my audience has come down to one. I'm ministering to the Lord Jesus.

My aim, my goal. I'm going to gain him. He gained me and I'm going to gain him.

I'm going to talk to him, wrestle with him, intercede with him, ask him to show me more, show me thy glory, show me thy glory. I'm going to wear him out. Paul had found the secret of life that never lets us down.

Ministry may let us down. Situations let us down. Assemblies may fall apart.

And if not fall apart, everything eventually gets shaken and shaken good. Are you pressing on? There's only one reason you're pressing anyway. One thing I do, boy, to get the reduce to one thing.

This is, this is amazing. And yet we can see it. What a debtor he's become to the Lord.

How wonderful this is. You know, and the more you have a history, when you look at it or write, the more you are a debtor to his love. Because, you know, with history, you not only have things you're leaving behind of success, but of course you have those failures.

And when you have failure, what you discover as you all have. You discover the mercy of God, maybe discipline, but he never throws you out. Even if he throws you, he just throws you back on the wheel.

Where it begins to shape you again. Such mercy, such mercy. Paul says, by the mercy of God, I think not.

Behind those words is a history of self-acknowledged failures and mistakes. But the Lord's been merciful to him. Then there were times of defeat, as he recounts in second Corinthians, the time he was supposed to preach the gospel in Troas.

But he, he was so constrained in his spirit over not knowing where the Corinthians were, that he basically closed it down and went to look for Titus. But you know what he said? You know, God took my defeat and turned it into triumph. He always leads us in the triumph.

Even when we do something, we suffer defeat, still it turns into triumph somehow. Because of who the Lord is, he can turn anything around. Even our defeats.

And in the midst of all of the ministry, you know, dear saints of God, we know perhaps the most precious consolation to us as we're teaching the children in Sunday or we're serving in whatever way the Lord has given to us. It's those little intimate moments where the Lord lets you know, you're my friend. He reveals little secrets to you, little personal things, little tiny blessings that you'd almost feel foolish telling anybody else about.

But just the way some things came together. And you know, that every once in a while I get to have, as a consolation of ministry, some pretty good chuckles with the Lord. How he did that, I'll never know.

I couldn't figure out what I wanted to say. And then something came into my mind because of something. And it just makes me laugh.

The Lord is so good. And his tender mercies toward us, those personal intimacies, the little secrets between you and him. Consolation, even if you're doing jail time like the Apostle Paul.

Oh, he was pressing on. He had a personal goal now. It's because he had a personal devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And when somebody loves the Lord Jesus with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, I tell you, things can be hard and you can get weary, but you won't quit. Because you, because you've been laid hold of by something that keeps pulling you toward himself and pulling you toward glory, no matter what's going on. Oh, may the Lord help us to always remember it's all about him.

The second secret really has to do with the first secret, but let's turn to 2nd Corinthians in chapter three. I find Lance steals a lot of my stuff. I should have disallowed him completely from using any scriptures of Paul's, but, but then he just says, let's look at a scripture of Saul.

And then he gets me anyway. It does no good, but we all know, let's read verses 17 and 18. So wonderful of 2nd Corinthians chapter three.

Now the Lord is the spirit and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. And we all unveiled face beholding as in a mirror, the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the spirit. Well, now here's the second thing that we discover as we come to the, to the latter days, perhaps of ministry in life, we have found the secret way back when it wasn't just that he saw the Lord there on the road to Damascus and loved the Lord, but the whole key was he kept going back to the Lord and consecrating himself before the Lord.

And there's a secret. He came to the Lord. Oh Lord, I I'm thinking about this whole call to the Gentiles.

Lord, I need some scriptures to understand this better. Why is this such an important matter? He would just come to the Lord, consecrate himself before the Lord and there in the Lord's presence in perceptively day by day transformed from glory to glory until we find in such a servant that there has been quite indeed quite a transformation, a spiritual enlargement. It has not just come through crises moments, but daily consecration.

As our brother Lance even shared last night, this verse here in 318, every Christian claims it, but it's actually speaking about those who have given their all and are being led by the spirit of God. These are the ones in whom you see this transformation. It's interesting that how things work out.

Paul gets into this stage of his life where he's basically restricted for most of these remaining 11 years. And it's just about the time that Paul has gained the full confidence that you can't restrict me. It's interesting.

You get restricted just about the time you've learned you can't be restricted. So just about the time he gets incarcerated, he begins to learn some lessons. You see now we realize there's something very precious when you serve the Lord, his life comes through you.

It's so precious. This is what it means to serve by the grace of God. You serve the Lord and life comes out of you in a situation and you see the Lord touching some things and you realize this is the Lord.

But Paul has been transformed. His mind has been renewed and he's come upon a secret and it's this you can throw him in jail. But the same life he had when he was present with you in ministry, he still has and is effectual in ministry, even when absent from you.

So I have to prove that I suppose we look in Colossians chapter one is just an example that Paul now in jail is still ministering. In fact, limited by not being able to be there in Colossi, he confesses that, in fact, he's still ministering in an effectual way. In chapter one, after talking about the hope of glory, which is Christ in you, he says in verse 28 of Colossians chapter one.

Now we proclaim him admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom so that we may present every man complete in Christ. And for this purpose, I labor agonizing, wrestling according to his power, which effectually works within me. Now here's Paul, you can imagine, and the church in Colossi is going through some problem, which we won't go into.

And yet here's what Paul says. I'm sorry I can't be with you, but let me tell you, I'm wrestling for your perfection in prayer and in intercession, and it's a factual ministry. Now, in the earlier days, when you think your voice is the ministry or your hands are the ministry, then when you're absent from a situation, you're out of sight and out of mind.

But now Paul realizes, no, it's the same life of Jesus. And I still have the keys to bind and loose in that situation in Colossi, even though I am not physically there. You see, he's learned that the life of the Lord, that he has known as his source of ministry is not limited by time and space.

So there he is in prison. And you know, of course, what else he says, right? He says, well, I'm in prison, but the word of God can't be imprisoned. Every time some poor old soldier came by, he was shouting out the window.

Hey, do you know Jesus? You know, and you're just watching the soldiers get under conviction and Caesar's household basically getting saved. Well, you know, that's a renewed kind of thought regarding ministry, isn't it? And of course, brothers and sisters, I think those of you who've been around for a while realize that if there is any progress in our assemblies and any spiritual growth we discover, there's usually some dear saints, often thought to be old and limited and on the sideline, who are actually praying these things into being. Sometimes without us even realizing it, you know, when you're young, you don't think if you've got gray hair, you're of much count.

But there are some folks there who've been praying interceding and sharing that little word of counsel. You know, you used to think, ah, preaching, preaching, that's what you got to do. You come to a place where, you know, well, even if you have wisdom, people don't want to hear you anymore.

You're out of fashion, you know. But does your ministry end? No. Those few wise, scriptural words of counsel are all the more precious to those who are being raised up.

And the Lord still has use for you. Paul's been being transformed. His mind is being renewed day by day.

He's seeing greater things of glory. And so, just as a testimony, we have to acknowledge that probably his most important letters, at least when it comes to this matter of God's purpose, were penned while he was

in jail. There he was in the jail, and he's still pursuing this Lord who pursued him.

And he's coming and saying, Lord, tell me more about you. And you see how Paul and Colossians, you know, this letter has, as they say, the highest Christology of all of the New Testament writings. We see that Christ is not only the Savior, and Christ not only has a kingdom, but that Christ is the purpose of creation, and the creator, and the reconciler of all creation, and His macrocosmic view of Christ is huge.

And that's why this book is so precious to us. How could Christ not be all-sufficient to us when He is everything? He is all and in all. What a revelation.

That renewing mind, gaining more understanding of that Christ He met on the road. Now the Christ of glory, the Christ above all, the Christ victorious over all. What a tremendous expansion of understanding this was.

And then, of course, Ephesians having to do with God's eternal purpose in His church. There again, Paul saw that right back there on the road. And now working it out in such clear fashion that we who would pursue heavenly vision have some insight as to how the church should function, because we have seen it there in that book.

Well, these are all things written while he was again in prison. But more than just the change of mind, the growing within his mind, there was the change of character. The Lord does transform us.

And I think probably everybody here would testify that if the Lord has changed you, you're pretty unconscious of that change. It's imperceptible stage by stage. But Paul, by this latter stage of his life, could say with modesty and conviction, we have the mind of Christ.

My affection for you is out of the heart of Christ. I fill up that which is lacking of the sufferings of Christ. I carry in my body the dying of Jesus and upon my body are the marks of Jesus.

Now, these are things that he does not share with the saints for the sake of their adulation. He's just telling the reality of a transformed life. Paul was Christlike in so many ways.

I was recently reading that section there in Acts chapter 20, and I was taken not only with those brothers in Ephesus and how they wept and hugged them. Can you imagine working with Paul for three years? I think when Paul left, everybody would say, oh, bye-bye, Paul. Bye-bye.

Whew, finally. This guy's on us every day and night. Ah, a little breathing room.

But no, there was something obviously so humble and so communicable about Paul. He wasn't some rough, tough. We get the idea that he just kind of went in and chopped up the shop, that he was so well-loved.

And then after leaving there, they touch base on a few seashores as they're heading back to Jerusalem. And there on the seashores, he's kneeling down with families and children, and they're all hugging his neck. There was something approachable about Paul.

There was something of counsel about Paul and something of transparency about Paul that I think we miss sometimes when we try to define who this man was. He was a man who, if you knew him and worked with him, you loved him like your soul. It's because he was Christ-like.

And it was in that very transformation that even when he went under this time of restriction, yet he didn't sense limitation in his life, because it was the Lord's life, and he continued to minister even in limitation. And then the third secret, which I mentioned the first time I spoke, I said that the three stages were marked by three different phenomenon. The first stage was the qualifying devastation, and the second one was eccentric originality, which I understand has still not been successfully translated among the Chinese.

And now the final thing that I want to say that Paul in this last stage obviously manifested what I'm calling an inexhaustible emptying, an inexhaustible emptying. So again, we turn to the Philippians prison letter and just read some verses in Philippians chapter four, Philippians chapter four verse 10. But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last you've revived your mind for me.

Indeed, you were minded before, but you had lacked opportunity. Not that I speak from want for I've learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with a humble means.

I also know how to live in prosperity in any and in every circumstance. I've learned the secret of being filled and going hungry and of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me and my affliction. You yourselves know Philippians that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, but you alone or even in Thessalonica, you sent a gift more than once for my needs. Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek the profit, which increases to your account.

But I have received everything in full. I'm full. I have a fullness.

I am fully supplied. Having received from Epaphroditus, which you have sent a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. And my God will supply all your needs according to his riches and glory in Christ Jesus.

Now to our God and father be the glory forever and ever. Amen. Paul has found the secret of inexhaustible emptying.

You know, in the early stage, that first stage of preparation, there's sort of a building up. You're being founded and grounded. Those first 11 years when Paul was living mostly in Tarsus, being founded and grounded, being mastered by the Lord, being exchanged in his life, learning the life of Christ in him, discovering revelations that became his gospel.

It's a time of increase. It's a time of preparation. It's a time of storing up.

Then the second phase, that time when you're running the race, is what I call a zero balance time. That is to say, you go to the Lord and say, oh Lord, fill me. What is this? Give me revelation.

Give me a word. You get the word. You share the word.

Freely you have received. Freely you give. Kind of zero balance, you know.

You're keeping yourself right here in a wonderful fullness of the Lord. You're receiving things. You're sharing things.

The third phase is marked by many people by an emptying, a pouring out. Even as Paul's life was being poured out as an offering in this stage, perhaps almost even a squeezing out. But the strange result is from this pouring out, from this emptying, from this squeezing out, the result is Paul has never known such fullness.

It seems like a strange mystery, and here is one area where we're tempted sometimes. When one gets older and you're called upon to serve in some way, you say, you know, if I really got anything, I feel pretty empty. Ah, but Paul has found the secret, and I'd like to suggest the secret is simply this.

Have the mind that was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God did not think equality with God was a thing to be grasped, but he emptied himself. And what did Jesus find in that emptying, that saving, redemptive emptying, that pouring out on our behalf? What did he find? Wherefore, God has highly exalted him and given him a name above every name. Because of his faithfulness and emptying, he's now been filled full with glory and honor.

Now, Paul experienced in his life and throughout his life a continual emptying. He had to let go of things he thought were gain. And even in his ministry experience, he just shared and shared and poured out his life.

And even here at the end of his life, pouring out his life on behalf of the Philippians, this whole letter to the Philippians is Paul. Now, if you can picture this, the Philippians are okay, they're back home, Paul's in jail, he's in need. But this whole letter is a consolation to the Philippians, trying to help them, encouraging them, giving them testimony of how his imprisonment is working out for the Lord's good, thanking them for the gifts, encouraging Euodia and Syntyche, those two sisters to have the same mind that was also in Christ Jesus.

As a matter of fact, I believe it's 10 times in his book of Philippians. It talks about that mindedness, that attitude, which spelled out simply is being willing to empty yourself. And the secret is when one is willing to empty themselves, Paul has found that you never can be emptied because someone who's come to this stage has realized you don't have to reach up to heaven and sort of suck down something so that you can give something because you've been centered in Christ who dwells within you.

And it's that life that can pour out of you any moment and it's always full. As you can see from my thin frame, sometimes I like things like milkshakes. We drove down from New York, we stopped at a place called Jess's Lunch, one of my favorite places my wife and I go to in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

Anyway, they got the best hot dogs there and it costs about a dollar, so you can't beat it. We both get two hot dogs and then we split a milkshake. Now, they make those milkshakes thick.

And even though they give me a big straw and I want that chocolate, oh, I love that chocolate milkshake. So I suck on it until my cheeks hurt, you know, because this milkshake is so thick and I want it so bad. And of course, you know what I do, right? Take out the straw.

It's too much, too much. I can't take it. Well, maybe in our early days, when it comes time to ministry, we go to the Lord, as it were, with this little straw and suck and suck.

Oh, Lord, fill me. I need something. But as you find out, one of the secrets of serving, Hudson Taylor came to it.

Hey, you're a branch in the vine. It's already there, ready to flow. And your only obedience is empty, empty in Jesus name.

And you'll find that there's more stuff to flow in. You can't exhaust yourself when you are serving out of the life of Christ who dwells within. What a tremendous secret.

And I would just say this is an area where the Lord has to discipline his servants, because often either we do things that he's not commanded us to do. And funny, there's not resources for that. Or we do things in our own strength.

And either way, we become exhausted servants. But when you realize I'm just a branch in this thing, the Lord wants me to empty, then in Jesus name, I empty. And you empty with a fullness.

And people say that's full. And you find yourself still full. Oh, precious lessons, precious Lord.

These things are just some of the wonderful experience of running after this glorious Lord. Well, we come to the end, and I just want to come back to Isaiah's intercession one more time, because many here are part of assemblies and part of groups that have been following the Lord for years. The Lord originally apprehended, perhaps some people with real vision, and we've been going along.

But I just want to touch on this one aspect. As I mentioned, it's possible to have begun well with the Lord and somehow down in our history, we come to the place where we are living, serving, gathering under our own light. We have learned the truths.

But we're living out of them and not the Lord, and we need the Lord to render heavens once again and reveal himself when we fellowship around the table and talk here as we come to this conference. It's the same that I've heard over the years, and it's something along this line. You know, we want to be faithful to the Lord.

We meet in an assembly or we meet over here or there. And we see something of the Lord, and then we go home and we're serving and in our serving, we're serving and out of our understanding, we're serving. But somewhere along the line, the life kind of gets lost in the shuffle and we're doing things the right way, the way they're supposed to be.

We know it's true. We understand that knowledge, but we're living just in the light of that knowledge, and we need that touch of life again. And if it weren't for this conference, where would I be? But I come to the conference year after year, the Lord opens the heavens, kind of reconfigures us.

Wait a minute. It just isn't this knowledge here. It's before him that we're together.

And having been freshly touched, so we go on serving and hopefully being able to say we're not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Now, if we want to make such a testimony, then we have to be sure that we're under his life and his light. Even if we receive something some years back, you know, we can run in the steam of that.

You remember Habakkuk was told to stay up on there, up on the wall, see the vision clearly, so that the people may run under that vision. You know, when we have such vision, we have that restraint, and there's also that impartation of life that enables us to run under it. But, you know, we can get running down the way a certain way, and we can lose that initial understanding, that initial revelation.

When it becomes doctrine, we've already sort of gotten to a second-hand kind of experience. We all know the talk. Some of you guys are such veterans.

You've been here for years and years. There's no new phrase you can hear except perhaps eccentric originality. But you've heard it all, but the only way it can be fresh and living is if we're under the Lord Jesus again, and hearing him, and seeing him, and seeing the glory of it.

If you've gotten sloppy in your ministry where you assemble, ah, what's the use? Sunday morning, you put in a half hour and throw some message together. You need to get back under the revelation and realize the importance of what you're doing, and the purpose behind all this that's going on. But we have to see that under the Lord, you see.

You can't just exhort people. They don't see it. And so I come back to that prayer of Isaiah, and believe that there's some in this assembly gathered who have such an intercessory heart.

My dear brothers and sisters, how we need to pray for the whole church of God. It may be in ruins, and they may not know who they are. But if we've seen a little bit about who they are, then let's pray that the Lord would rend the heavens in this last day, come down and shake the whole thing up with his presence.

That's what we need more than anything else. May that be the prayer of our hearts as we go. Our Father, we come to you.

We thank you for the testimony of our brother Paul, faithful in so many ways, also confident that you who began the good work will complete it. Also confident that that which he has committed unto you will be kept. Oh, Lord, Paul has seen as he looks in that vision of your purpose and glory that it's impossible with man, but he has all confidence it's possible with you.

Oh, Lord, grant us this same kind of faith to lay hold of you, understanding that you're the one who began it, and you're the one who can end it. Lord, we believe in you. We've had too much history to believe in ourselves, but we believe you can apprehend the people, and you can rend the heavens, and you can come down in your presence.

Lord, I pray that those people who may be wobbling a little bit because they're working under their own light may see a fresh revelation from heaven, and may sense the impulse of that life as they recognize the value and the glory of our life together as saints. Oh, Lord, do recover us. Lord, we want to be recovered, but unless you recover, unless you turn us, we cannot be turned.

Lord, you turn us, and we will be turned. You open the heavens, and we will see, and we will consecrate, and we will empty ourselves according to purpose. Oh, grant us, Lord, to see again afresh what that purpose is.

We give you all praise and glory and honor. We realize that this purpose is much higher than man. Your ways are so, but they're full of mercy, and still you call.

You reach even down to us, and would draw us up in this heavenly calling. Oh, have mercy on us and help us in this hour, we pray in Jesus' name.

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