

2 Corinthians - Paradoxes of the Spiritual Life

by Stephen Kaung

The spiritual life is characterized by paradoxes, such as the sentence of death vs. God who raises the dead, defeat and victory at the same time, and earthen vessels containing a treasure.

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Topics: "Spiritual Struggle", "Gods Grace"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the struggle of a person trying to overcome sin and the realization that their flesh is inherently sinful. They come to accept the sentence of death that God has given them and cry out for deliverance. The speaker emphasizes the need for the grace of God to lead individuals into experiencing this acceptance of their sinful nature. Additionally, the speaker mentions the Apostle Paul's sufferings for Christ's sake and highlights the concept of believers being earthen vessels containing the treasure of Jesus Christ.

Transcript

Will you please turn to 2nd Corinthians? 2nd Corinthians chapter 1, verse 9. But we ourselves have the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not have our trust in ourselves, but in God, who raises the dead. Verse 12. For our boasting is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in sincerity and simplicity before God, not in fleshly wisdom, but in God's grace, we have our conversation in the world, and more abundantly towards you.

Chapter 12. 2nd Corinthians chapter 12, verse 9 and verse 10. And he said to me, My grace suffices thee, for my power is perfected in weakness.

Most gladly, therefore, would I rather boast in my weaknesses, that the power of the Christ may dwell upon me. Wherefore, I take pleasure in weaknesses, in insults, in necessities, in persecutions, in straits for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am powerful.

Let's have a word of prayer. Dear Lord, our hearts are most grateful to Thee, that Thou shalt remind us once again how much Thou dost love us. Thou lovest us to the uttermost.

We do praise and thank Thee that we are Thine and Thou art ours. We thank Thee for this opportunity of gathering before Thee and waiting upon Thee to open Thy word to us, that we may hear Thy voice. Not only our heart burn, but our eyes are open to see Thee and to receive Thee into us in a fuller way.

Lord, how we do desire that Thou be all to us. We ask in Thy precious name. Amen.

Last night we shared together our 1st Corinthians and this morning we would like to share together our 2nd Corinthians. Now, spiritually speaking, the Bible classifies mankind into three groups. The natural, the carnal, and the spiritual.

You'll find that in 1st Corinthians 2.14.15 and 3.3. The natural are those who are not saved. They are in Adam. Their spirit was dead through sins and transgressions.

So they are as if they have no spirit. They have soul, their own thinking, their own emotion, their own volition, they have their body, their passions and lusts, but the spirit is dead. And of course the Holy Spirit is not within them.

So they are the natural. And people who do not know the Lord, they all belong to this class. And as the Bible tells us, the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God.

For these are folly to them. And they not only do not receive, but they cannot know the things of the Spirit. Because things of the Spirit has to be discerned by the Spirit.

That's the natural man. That's the man of the world. That's the man that we see everywhere.

And then the Bible says they are the spiritual. Now who are the spiritual? The spiritual are those who are born again. Not only they have a new spirit, our old spirit that was dead in sins and transgressions has been quickened into life, cleansed into new life, new spirit.

And in our new spirit, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit dwells. And because the Spirit of God dwells in our spirit to guide and to lead us, and to bring the life of Christ in us, therefore those who have received the Lord Jesus are supposed to be the spiritual. That is to say they have the Spirit of God in their spirit and they are supposed to be led by the Spirit of God, to walk according to the Spirit, to live in the Spirit, and therefore they are the spiritual.

The spiritual discerns all things. Because the Spirit of God in them knows the depths of God. It is the spiritual that knows God and the things of God.

Now every believer, every born again person has the Spirit and the indwelling Holy Spirit. And is supposed to be spiritual. The spiritual is not for a few.

Every born again Christian is supposed to be spiritual. That is the will of God. But unfortunately we find that even though we have the Spirit of God in us, and yet somehow we are still walking according to the flesh.

And because of this, you'll find we remain as babes in Christ. And as Paul mentioned in 1 Corinthians, that in the beginning he treated them as babes. And he fed them with milk, pre-digested food.

Because their spiritual organs, faculties are not being exercised yet to receive solid food. But after a few years, Paul said, well, you're still carnal. You're still fleshly.

You haven't grown. That ought not to be. Because even though you are the Lord's, and yet you still act according to man.

And not according to God. And the Bible said, the mind of the flesh is not subject to the law of God. Not only is not subject to God's law, but cannot obey God's law.

Because flesh can never please God. So here you'll find, in the middle between the natural and the spiritual, you have the carnal. And in 1 Corinthians we find that the Corinthian believers belong to this class.

The Apostle Paul said, you're yet carnal. Even though you are the Lord's, but judging by the way you live, you're just like a natural man. The only difference is, there is life of Christ in you.

But it is being imprisoned. It's not released. And we mentioned last night, because they are carnal, they live according to the flesh.

Therefore you'll find all the symptoms of the flesh, the natural, come out, sins, become a problem to them. And the reason is, after they have received the Lord as their Saviour, they have not really committed, submitted themselves to Jesus as their Lord. And allow the cross of our Lord Jesus to work in their lives.

And that's the reason why they become carnal. Now when you read 2 Corinthians, it's an entirely different picture. In 1 Corinthians, you see what carnality is.

But in 2 Corinthians, you see what spirituality is. In the life of Paul, and in those who have received the cross, working in their lives, the result is spirituality. That is, the spiritual man manifests Christ in their lives.

And I believe that this is what God wants all of us to be, and this is what we desire to be. But the Bible said, the spiritual discerns all things, but he is discerned of no one. So in a sense you'll find the spiritual is a mystery.

Now who are the spiritual? Yes, there are those people who are led by the Spirit of God. There are those people who walk according to the Spirit. There are those who are filled with the Spirit.

These are the spiritual. But who? Who they really are? How can you discern that this is spiritual, and it is not? So I believe that in 2 Corinthians, we have a number of signs telling us who are the spiritual. As a matter of fact, you'll find the spiritual is a paradox.

If 2 Corinthians is full of paradoxes, and it is with these paradoxes you realize what spiritual really is. So this morning we would like to fellowship together on a few of these paradoxes. Now number one is in chapter one, 2 Corinthians, chapter one, verse nine.

The Apostle Paul said, we have the sentence of death in ourselves, so that we cannot depend upon ourselves. But in God who raises the dead. Now that's the first paradox.

The sentence of death versus God who raises the dead. Now of course when Paul mentioned this, he referred to something that happened to him and maybe to Timothy when they were in Asia. Now we are not told what really happened to Paul when he was in Asia.

Now the only thing you find in the book of Acts chapter 19 is when he was in Asia, you remember at one time there was a riot. And because of this, Paul had to leave Ephesus. He was there for three years and all Asia heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.

God did a marvelous work there. So we really do not know today what actually happened to Paul. And he used the plural number, we, so it may include Timothy.

Now what really happened there, we don't know. But something very terrible must have happened because Paul said we are despair of life. The sentence of death is upon us.

We cannot depend upon man's wisdom to try to solve our problem anymore. We come to our end. And the only thing that we can look to is the God who raises the dead.

He said in all sincerity we can say we do not live by man's wisdom but we live by God's grace. This is our testimony. Now even though we may not experience physically the same thing as the apostle Paul experienced in Asia, but spiritually speaking, this is something that we have to experience in order to be spiritual.

And that is we have to be brought to a place where the sentence of death is in us. That is, in our flesh. You know, so far as God is concerned, when our Lord Jesus was crucified, the sentence of death is upon Him.

It is not just some sufferings. It is not just some pains and wounds. It is death.

The sentence of death was upon our Lord. And in this sentence of death, God has sentenced all who are in Adam to death. So in one sense, brothers and sisters, we are all under the sentence of death.

God has already sentenced us to death. Our flesh, ourselves, are crucified with Christ. This sentence of death is upon every flesh.

Because God said there is no good in the flesh. And it deserves death and nothing else. And God did it in Christ Jesus for all of us.

But unfortunately, we do not accept that. You know, brothers and sisters, when we are convicted of our sins, we do acknowledge that we are sinners. We have sinned.

And we need our Lord Jesus as our substitute. We accept His blood for the cleansing of our conscience that we may be justified before God. And our accuser, his mouth may be stopped and thank God for this wonderful salvation.

But strangely you find when it comes to this matter of God's sentence us to death, we do not agree. Now we do acknowledge that there are lots of bad things in our flesh. And these need to be rid of.

But to say that there is no good in us that is in our flesh, that seems to us too much. We do not agree with the Lord. And even Apostle Paul, he did not agree in the beginning.

Because if you read Romans chapter 7, now in chapter 6 he already heard the message. He said, knowing. In other words, he has the knowledge already.

Knowing that our old man was crucified with Christ. But you know, this mental knowledge is important, but you need something more than this. Because in chapter 7 you'll find he did not agree with God.

He said, I want to serve God. I'm able to keep His commandment. Now I belong to God.

It's different now. I can do it. He has full confidence in himself.

He rejected the sentence of death upon him. And he began to serve God, and to keep God's commandment. But strangely that in the Ten Commandments you'll find only one commandment that has something to do with our inward things.

Thou shalt not kill. That's something outward action. But of the Ten Commandments there is one saying, Thou shalt not covet.

Thou shalt not be greedy. Now this has something to do with our inward feeling. And Paul, he was very confident that he was not a greedy person.

He was an ambitious person, but not a greedy person. So when the commandment came, do not be greedy, he was quite sure that he was never greedy and he will not be greedy. But when he heard that commandment somehow something stirring within him.

That greediness began to come forth. Before the law he was perfect. But when the law came he found that sin began to stir up within him.

So he tried to deal with the situation. He tried to press it down, tried to overcome it. But he found that it comes up again.

And this happened again and again. Until he said, well this is not something I want to do, but I do what I don't want to do and I do not do what I want to do. Because I'm bound by the law of sin and of death.

So after trying it again and again with strong determination and so was a very strong willed person. Until finally he discovered in me, that is in my flesh, there is no good. And it is not until that point that he accepted the sentence of death.

That God has sentenced him. And when he accepted the sentence of death immediately you find he cries out and says, who can deliver me from this body of death? And immediately thank God through Jesus Christ. In other words, he finds God who raises the dead.

So brothers and sisters you find that in our spiritual pursuit how can we be coming out from this stage of carnality and into the stage of the spiritual? The first thing we need to do is by the grace of God and in a very real sense you'll find this is not something that can be told. We have been told many times. But it is something that the Spirit of God has to lead you into experiencing it.

You will not accept the sentence of death until you are brought into that feeling and discover that it is very true. God knows you much better than you know yourself. And until you capitulate and you say, Lord this is what I am, in me that is in my flesh, there is no good.

As long as my flesh is in charge, I will fall into sin. I will violate your law. I will offend you.

There is no hope in me that is in my flesh. And I agree and I accept that your sentence of death is justified. I accept it.

And when you accept this sentence of death that is to say you accept your cold death with Christ on the cross. When He died, you died in Him. And you take that position by faith.

Then, resurrection life begins to come forth. In other words, the life of Christ in you is resurrection life. It is because it is imprisoned by your flesh.

So, when you accept the sentence of death, then the life of Christ, resurrected King life of Christ within you is released. And you are now beginning to walk in newness of life. And this brings us into spiritual heritage.

So, this is the first paradox that you find in 2 Corinthians. Then, the second one is in chapter 2 verses 13 and 14. The apostle Paul, he wrote a very strong letter to the church in Corinth.

You know, the first letter to the Corinthians, after the first letter to the Corinthians, evidently Paul made a short trip to Corinth. This was not recorded in the book of Acts. But from 2 Corinthians, you find that he said, I'm going to you for the third time.

Now, where was the second time? It was not mentioned in the book of Acts. So, evidently, after he wrote the first letter to the Corinthians, things were not improved. As a matter of fact, it got worse.

So, evidently, Paul made a hurry trip to Corinth, tried to help them, but it was a great disappointment to him. He was not accepted. So, after he returned, he wrote another letter, a strong letter to them.

And he wrote a letter with many tears. Now, when we read 1 and 2 Corinthians, we really cannot see that it is a letter written with tears, many tears. So, evidently, he wrote a very strong letter, and it touched him so deeply that he cried, and he shed tears, and he was really in travail.

And, most likely, he sent this letter to the church in Corinth by Titus, and he made an arrangement with Titus to meet at Troyes, to hear what happened after the Corinthians received that letter. So, then he began to travel, and at appointed time he came to Troyes. And he was ready to see Titus there, to bring him the news about the result of this strong letter, whether the Corinthians received that letter and repented, or whether they are still strongly against him.

But when he came to Troyes, now in 2 Corinthians 2 you find that the Lord had opened the door for the gospel there, but he had no rest in his spirit, because he couldn't find Titus there. He was so worried, grieved, about the situation in Corinth. Even though the door was wide open for him to preach the gospel, but he had no heart to preach the gospel.

He had no rest. And therefore he left. By all appearance he failed.

He should. The Lord opened the door of the gospel. How could he leave because he had no rest in himself? It was a failure.

But strangely, immediately after he said he had no rest, therefore he left. He said, Thank God that he led, lead him in triumph everywhere. Victory in Christ.

Now defeat and victory at the same time. Another paradox. You know, brothers and sisters, in our concept the spiritual is a person who is always above his circumstances.

He is never being overwhelmed. He is a superman, always in control of his situations. That is a spiritual man.

In other words, a spiritual man is not a man. Now that is our concept. But the Bible tells us a spiritual man is still a man.

He is not a man of wood or a man of iron. No feeling. No weakness of any kind.

No, he is still a man. There can be restlessness under certain situations. And it can be so overwhelming that he is not able to fulfill his duty.

But thank God, he does not remain there. Because he is still a man, therefore he will have to go through all these things. And yet you find he bounces out of it quickly.

Think of our Lord Jesus. Think of the scene in Gethsemane. We will think that our Lord He came for that purpose.

And He knew it all along. And yet, when He got into that garden, He was so oppressed in His spirit, so weary, sad in His soul, almost unto death. And He begged His three disciples to watch with Him, to help Him.

And He even prayed, Lord, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me. Does He not know that this is for Him? A perfect man. His self is sickness.

His flesh is sickness. And yet, you find being a man, He has to deny Himself. Even in that garden.

He has to struggle for it. He has to pray. And when He prayed, His sweat, and His sweat came out as blood.

Such agony. And He said, if the angel does not come and strengthen Him, He might die in the garden. And yet, after three times He said, if it is Thy will, Father, let it be done.

Now this is spirituality. So, dear brothers and sisters, do not think that the spiritual is not a man. You have emotion.

You have feeling. You can be hurt. Deeply hurt.

You can agonize. You can have restlessness. You can have weakness, even to the point of neglecting your duty.

And yet, the life of Christ within you is so ascendant that you bound back in no time. Wherever you go, you still spread the fragrance of Christ. Because it is not you.

It is Christ in you. Now I think that is the second paradox you'll find in 2 Corinthians. And the third one you'll find in chapter 4. I think it's verses 7. Verse 7. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the surpassingness of the power may be of God and not from us.

The Apostle Paul said, we are earthen vessels. We are made of earth, so naturally we are earthen vessels. Cheap, opaque, easily broken, common.

That's what we are. But the strangest thing is, God put a treasure in earthen vessels. We'll never do that.

If we have a treasure, what will you put that treasure in? A gold box? Embroidered? That seems to be fit. But God does the most wonderful thing. He put the treasure in earthen vessels.

Nobody will do that. And of course we know the treasure is our Lord Jesus. That is the gospel.

Not because the treasure is in us, therefore we are no longer earthen vessels. We are still earthen vessels. Cheap, common, fragile, opaque.

We are still earthen vessels. But thank God this treasure is in us. And the point is, the treasure in the earthen vessel.

What is the point of it? Why is it in that earthen vessel? God's purpose is that the radiancy of that treasure may be manifested. Now if you want to have the light of the treasure to be manifested, you don't put it in an earthen vessel. Without the earthen vessel, that treasure will really shine.

Christ without us, He will shine. But strangely, God put Christ in us to shine. That's the mystery.

You know, and because of this, in order that the radiancy of the treasure may be manifested, that the power may be of God and of not man. Now this earthen vessel has to be broken. There must be crack.

And God, by the Holy Spirit, arranges our circumstances to crack us, to break us. So Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4, verse 9, verse 8, Every way afflicted, but not straightened, seeing no apparent issue, but our way not entirely shut up. Persecuted, but not abandoned, cast down, but not destroyed.

I have read several versions about this, and I like something like that. One is being at our wish end, but not at our life's end. And the other is, knock down, but not knock out.

Now I like this very much. You know, brothers and sisters, why is it that God allows us to be brought to our wish end? Often times we find we come to our end, we don't know what to do now. That's the end of it.

Why? Why is it that we have been knocked down so often? Why? Is there something the Lord trying to tell us? That we all like to keep our integrity. We all like to keep ourselves intact, hold on to ourselves. And because of this, Christ is imprisoned.

His radiancy cannot come forth. His power cannot be manifested. And the only way God will do is crack us, break us.

But thank God, we are finished. But Christ shines. We bear in our body the slaying of Christ.

That the life of Christ may be manifested, not only in us, but upon others. And that's the way that God is doing. So again you'll find it is a paradox.

Brokenness until release. Now that's the third one. And there is the fourth one.

Paul mentioned in chapter 12 of 2 Corinthians. You know Paul, in chapter 11 and chapter 12, as he opened up himself, as it were, to the Corinthians, because of their misunderstanding of him. So he had to act like a fool and just open himself.

Ordinarily he would try to hide himself, because he is to preach Jesus Christ and not himself. But he was forced to act foolishly and he began to tell us of himself. And when you read chapter 11 and chapter 12, you'll find this man, what sufferings he had gone through for Christ's sake.

It's almost beyond our imagination. He suffered much more than most people will ever suffer. And not only that, but what revelation he received.

He was caught up to the third heaven and he was caught away to paradise and heard things that could not be shared. What a man in Christ he was. And because of the greatness of his revelations, God allowed Satan to attack him and put a stake into his life.

Now we do not know what that stake is. Some people think it is physical because Paul travelled in areas full of malaria and evidently he caught malaria. And with malaria, you know, when the attack came, you shake, you tremble.

So he said, I'm with fear and trembling. And also malaria can hurt your eyesight. And Paul said, you know, his eyesight was so bad, so he had to write in big letters.

And malaria make him weak. And being a messenger of God, travelling among the Gentiles, and he feels that he has to be strong physically. Otherwise people say, now you preach the gospel of salvation and you look at yourself you know, such a poor specimen.

And for the glory of God he prayed and asked the Lord to take away that stake. Take away his weakness. He wanted to be strong.

Strong for the Lord. And that's what he should be. So he prayed and prayed and prayed.

And after three times the Lord told him, my grace is sufficient for thee. I'm not going to remove your stake. I'm not going to make you strong in yourself.

I will allow the enemy to attack you and allow you to be in weakness. But my grace is sufficient for you. In your weakness I'm going to manifest my power.

Now are you able to accept that? Now brothers and sisters when we are weakened what is our prayer? Make me strong. And we have good reason. Not just for myself.

For your sake. Because people look at you and well that's a poor specimen of the power of the gospel. How can you preach the gospel with such weakness? But God's way is always higher than our way.

His thought is higher than our thought. He knows better. Are you willing to be kept in weakness? That the power of God may be made perfect in you? We cry, we weep over our weakness.

But Paul said, I boast of my weaknesses. When you begin to boast of your weakness you experience the power. So it is a paradox.

Brothers and sisters God has no intention to make you strong. But He has every purpose that the power of Christ may be made perfect in your weakness. Are we willing to accept weaknesses? So Paul said, I boast of weaknesses, of sufferings, of tribulations, of afflictions.

I boast of them. Because when I'm weak, then I'm strong. The Lord Himself is released.

So when you read through the second letter to the Corinthians, you find in a sense Paul is revealing his secret to us. How can we be spiritual as we should? It is a paradox. The flesh has to come to death so that Christ's life in us may be manifested in fullness.

So, this is the secret of spirituality. Shall we pray? Dear Lord, we do want to thank Thee for revealing Thy secret to us. We do pray that we may really understand and open for it.

How we praise and thank Thee that it is Thy will to glorify Thy Son in us. And Lord, we want to offer ourselves to Thee and say, Lord, may Thy will be done with us. In the name of our Lord Jesus.

Amen.

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