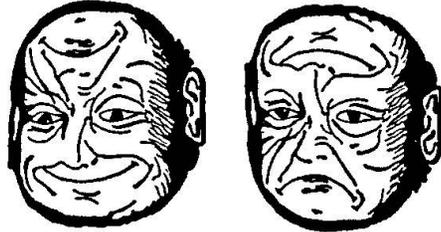


Look at Life from God's Perspective!

“Lord, if I was healthier, I could get more done. Lord, if I was stronger, I could teach more classes. Lord, if I had more energy, I could do more outreach. Lord, for the sake of your kingdom, grant me health – restore, strengthen and heal me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.” Three times the Apostle Paul prayed specifically and intensely for relief. He had some physical ailment [a “thorn in the flesh”] which kept him from doing as much ministry as he wanted. And each time, the Lord made it very clear that the answer was, “No.” He wanted Paul – and us – to look at life from God’s perspective.

If anyone could ever have been proud, it was Paul. As an Apostle, God spoke to him directly and he could perform miracles. His missionary journeys take up most of the book of Acts. It would have been very easy for Paul to become proud and think, “Look at all the great mission work I did.” But then Paul would not be focused on the Lord, which would be bad in so many ways. So, the Lord, in his infinite wisdom, permitted Satan to afflict Paul with some physical ailment. The Devil thought that he could harm God’s kingdom if he afflicted God’s greatest missionary. Once again, though, the Lord flipped the tables on the Devil and used it against him.

Optical illusions play tricks with our eyes and minds. From one perspective, this looks like a sad fellow. From another perspective, he is happy. From Paul’s perspective, his physical ailment kept him from getting the gospel to more people. From God’s perspective, though, his physical ailment kept him humble and focused on the Lord, and that was good for him and everyone else.



We do not know what Paul’s affliction was. For the sake of illustration today, let’s say that Paul stuttered. That would be a problem for a preacher. His preaching would not be smooth. So then, when Paul saw people being brought to faith and believing what he told them about Jesus, he knew that it was NOT because he was such a great public speaker. Paul would be amazed at the power of the Holy Spirit to work through God’s Word and bring people to faith in spite of his stuttering. The result of Paul’s thorn in the flesh – whatever it was – is that Paul kept the spotlight shining on Jesus

and not on himself. People saw what the Lord was doing through Paul in spite of his physical problem and they also praised the Lord. From God’s perspective, Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was a good thing.

It seems odd to say that something bad from our perspective was really good. Some might say that God’s ways are backwards, or upside down. Really, it’s our human race that is upside down. Things were right side up when God created Adam and Eve. They had perfect bodies, a perfect spouse and a perfect home. They were only focused on love for God and for each other. But then they sinned and turned the world on its head. Loving God and one another, which is supposed to be at the top, ended up at the bottom. We are born turned in on ourselves. Our human nature is so corrupted that we constantly focus on what we want. Certainly, God wants us to take care of the body and mind he gave us. But so, so often, our focus goes far beyond taking good care of ourselves and becomes selfishness as we focus on what is going to make us momentarily happy instead of focusing on our loving Lord and what he wants us to do.

America loves a winner. We eagerly check to see how many Olympic gold medals the American athletes won. In our world, the rich and powerful and famous are the greatest. Popular phrases include: Work hard; Don’t give up; Pull yourself up by your bootstraps; Meet every obstacle with resolve; Never admit defeat, and on and on. Still one more: “Everything is within your power, and your power is within you.” (Janice Trachtman) No matter how rich and famous someone may be, everyone gets old and dies. Why do you think the “self-help” section in bookstores is so popular? Talk about being turned in on yourself. Everyone will have to stand before the Lord and if you are focused on yourself, you are on the path to an eternal dead end.

The story is told about a man who got a job working a machine in some factory making some sort of widgets. His machine broke down. He did not want to admit that he needed help. (You know what those male egos are like.) So, he tried fixing the machine. He turned screws and opened panels and pretty soon the machine was just a mess of parts. Embarrassed and afraid of getting fired, he had to tell his supervisor what happened. In his defense, he stammered, “I did the best I could.” The angry supervisor snapped, “Around here, doing your best means asking me for help.”

Paul wrote (:10), “**When I am weak, then I am strong.**” When Paul admitted that he was weak – that he could not bring people to faith by his own skill and effort, or that he could not do anything that would impress God and earn him some sort of spiritual credit – then he was truly strong. The “thorns” in our lives remind us that we are weak. And when we know we are weak, then we can be strong – in Christ. We lean on him. A summer storm

will easily knock over a sapling of a tree. But if that sapling is tied to a strong pole driven deep into the ground, it will stand firm. It will be “strong” even though it is weak. When you give up trusting in ourselves and, through faith, hang on to Jesus for dear life, then you are strong. You will stand firm for eternal life.

In reluctant love, the Lord permits the Devil to bring hardships and difficulties into our lives, sometimes very painful and frightening situations so we reach a point where the only thing we can say is, “Help, Lord.” Our lives are not free from stress, struggles, pain and problems. Inevitably, every Christian encounters something that puts their weakness on display – a problem they can not solve, a situation they can not control, a temptation they can not overcome, a guilt they can not escape. Thorns come in different shapes and sizes. Have you gone through some difficult times? Have you shed a few tears? Have you had your share of heartache and headache? Have you been tired and worn out? The Lord, at times and in his wisdom, gives us situations where we can not solve everything with hard work and good decisions. Maybe it’s a serious medical issue. Maybe it’s financial. Maybe you are depressed and lonely even though you are surrounded by lots of people. In those times when we can not solve our problems, we have to fall back into the Lord’s arms and trust in him. In the way and at the time he knows is best, he will relieve you from that situation until he finally relieves you in your greatest moment of need – when you face death. From our perspective, pain is bad. From God’s perspective, pain is a way he draws you closer to him. There is a purpose in your pain.

Our God, the God of the Bible, the only true God, is unlike any other god which other religions have made up. The true God shows his power in weakness. A baby lying in a manger does not look powerful. A carpenter’s son rejected by his own people does not look powerful. A “king” riding on a donkey does not look powerful. A man beaten and bruised and mocked and spit upon and dripping with blood doesn’t look powerful. A “savior” nailed to a cross and lying in a tomb does not look powerful. But God’s power is made perfect in weakness. Jesus’ humble life and death may have looked weak, yet there has never been anything more powerful. Who else has lived a perfect life on behalf of everyone else? Who else has resisted temptation and sin? Who else has had to carry the sin of the world? Who else has gone toe-to-toe with Satan and won? Who else has risen from the dead never to die again? Jesus looks so weak! “What good is a God who dies on a cross?” the world thinks. But through this supposed weakness, God’s power and grace was made perfect, complete. Jesus won forgiveness, salvation, and life in heaven for you.

There is nothing more that we could ever want or need than salvation through Jesus. When we have family problems, when we are struggling with money, when we are sick and tired of being sick and tired, when we are weary from battling sin, when we are worn out from living in this world, God wraps his loving arms around you and whispers in your ear (:9), “**My grace is sufficient for you.**”

I know of a lady who had the world before her. Her career was going great. By every standard her life was a success until she had a serious stroke at age 24. For the rest of her life, her mouth would droop, her arm would hang limp and she would drag one leg. No matter how hard she tried, she could not undo what happened to her. She stopped trying to make her life a success according to the world’s standards. She fell back into Jesus’ arms and let him drive. A few months later, she told her pastor that she thanked God for her stroke because it led her to hang on to Jesus every moment of every day. Lord, grant us such faith. And he does. And he will.

A few months ago, I was talking with a man whose life was falling apart around him because of difficulties with his wife. What was going to happen to his marriage? His family? His job? I said a quick and quiet prayer and shared the gospel with him as best I could. I checked in a few days later and he said, “I thank God for this predicament because it is teaching me to trust in God even when I can not see a solution.” Lord, grant us such faith. And he does. And he will.

So many of you members here are such an encouragement to me. The way you hang on to Jesus even though you are hurting and struggling humbles me. I think of the many members who used to sit in these pews but are in heaven now. The way they faced death with such bravery and even joy, inspires me. Lord, grant us such faith. And he does. And he will.

The world would not describe you and me as rich and famous. What of it? We have the kingdom of God. Yes, we struggle and hurt. What of it? We are headed to heaven. From an earthly perspective, we look like poor Cinderella with tattered clothes as others took advantage of her. But when the Prince married Cinderella she became radiant with beautiful clothes and a kingdom before her. When you were baptized, when you were brought to faith, Jesus became your heavenly bridegroom. He connected himself to you forever. His perfect life became your life – you are precious and pure. His death is your death – your sins are paid for. His resurrection is your resurrection – you will live forever with a glorified body. No matter what you endure, look at life from God’s perspective and he will turn your frown upside down here and eternally. Amen.