

When You Can't Have It Your Way

DOES GOD EVER ASK HIS SERVANTS TO WALK WITH HIM IN PLACES THAT ARE UNCOMFORTABLE AND EVEN UNDESIRABLE? THE SCRIPTURES AND HISTORY TELL US, YES.

One of the most stunning comments I ever heard, almost a throwaway remark, came from one of the most famous ministers in the world. He said to me, "R.T., the more God uses me, the less I am able to enjoy it."

This may be incomprehensible to some, but I know exactly what he meant. God has many ways of ensuring that while we enjoy His blessing, we do not become conceited.

The apostle Paul is a hero for many of us, but he too was open to pride and to taking himself too seriously. In His wisdom God had a plan; Paul was too precious to Him to be allowed to fall into that kind of folly.

This is how Paul describes what God decided to do: "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me" (2 Cor. 12:7, NIV).

To be honest, though, I must add that there is a singular kindness attached to such an affliction. So it is with yours. It is God's hint to you that He is not finished with you yet. And there is no sweeter thought than the sheer consciousness of God's refining you and me to give us a greater anointing for His glory.

IS YOUR CALLING A THORN?

If you are a Christian worth your salt, you probably have a thorn in the flesh. For some it is a handicap or disability.

It could be loneliness or an unhappy marriage. But for others a thorn in the flesh may be an unwanted calling—when what God wants is not what you want. It is what you have to do, though it is the opposite of what you want to do.

The word “calling” in the New Testament is used in several ways. Generally speaking, there is effectual calling and what I would call career calling.

Effectual calling is the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion. By His Spirit, God calls everyone to repentance, but not everyone receives the calling.

He does this because we would never be saved if He didn’t call us. That is the effectual calling.

But that is not mainly what I am writing about here. I am referring to career calling—God’s plan for your life.

Paul said he was called to be an apostle. As soon as he was converted, he was told he was to go to the Gentiles (see Acts 9:15). But some of us discover much later what God is going to do with our lives, and we are not happy with it because it isn’t what we wanted Him to do.

A calling that is unwanted is what you get when God’s plans overrule yours. It is having to spend your life doing what you wouldn’t have preferred at all.

You may feel overqualified and frustrated or underqualified and frustrated. Perhaps your work is not even in your area of expertise. God has led you to where you are, but it seems that nothing has gone according to your plan.

Could this have been Paul’s thorn in the flesh? It could have been. After he became a Christian he had to work with his hands and with people he had been brought up to believe were second-class—Gentiles (see Gal. 2:7).

If Paul had managed to do what he wanted to do, he would have

been able to work with his own people. As long as he lived, he never got over that (see Rom. 9:1-5). That was where his heart was, but he yielded to what God wanted him to do, and it was God's plan from the beginning.

All his life Paul was looking over his shoulder, trying to reach Jews at every opportunity. I am quite convinced this is what eventually got him into real trouble. There is little doubt in my mind that when those people came to him and said, "Don't go to Jerusalem," they were led of the Spirit (see Acts 21:4-11).

Paul said, "I'm going!" He kept thinking that one day, somehow, he was going to convert the Jews. But his trip to Jerusalem was a big disaster, and his desires were not fulfilled.

Maybe you are still hoping somehow to do something else. You try to do what God won't let you do, and it just doesn't happen. Paul's lasting success was with the very people he had grown up to think very little of. It was an unwanted calling.

WHEN YOUR PLANS GO AWRY

There is a consistent pattern behind many an unwanted calling. For example, take an unwanted calling to singleness rather than marriage. Perhaps all your life you took for granted that one day you would be married.

Now if you are single, I am not saying you are not going to get married. I am just saying that there are those who won't.

The apostle Paul was probably widowed. It is believed that when he said, "I wish that all men were as I am" (1 Cor. 7:7), it meant that he was going to be celibate for the rest of his life.

Paul was making a case here for remaining unmarried. It could be that, after many years of wanting to be married, you are having to come to terms with singleness as God's choice for

you.

The biblical character Joseph was bred by his father to be the firstborn. That meant special treatment in ancient times, including a double portion in the inheritance.

Actually, Joseph's brother Reuben was the firstborn. But Jacob was unhappy with Reuben and turned to Joseph. So Joseph's brothers were jealous of him and plotted against him.

Joseph, who had never worked a day in his life, became a slave in the house of Potiphar, an Egyptian officer. He must have thought, What on Earth is this all about? But the Bible says, "The Lord was with Joseph" (Gen. 39:2). That is what matters.

You may have an unwanted calling, but is the Lord with you? That matters! The day came when Joseph could say, "God meant it for good!" (Gen. 50:20). Oh, did God ever have plans for Joseph.

And God has plans for you. Perhaps He has given you a mission you didn't ask for.

One must take into consideration the providence of an unwanted calling. Hebrews 11:8 says, "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going."

Abraham became one of the greatest men in all history. He is known as the father of the faithful, yet He had no idea what his mission would lead to.

Do you feel that life is passing you by? It is not over yet!

As Abraham followed God, there was a lot for him to discover and accomplish. The same can be said of you if God directs your path.

It hurts when things don't go according to our plans. But

there is great potential in an unwanted calling.

If you could always do what you wanted to do, you would never know your full potential in other areas. God can see a potential in you that you can't see, so He leads you in a way, which, at first, doesn't seem to make sense.

Moses is an example of someone who was trained to do something completely different from his unwanted calling. He was educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians, but his career was going to be with his people, the Hebrews (see Acts 7:22).

Years later Moses would face Pharaoh. Having been trained in the wisdom of the Egyptians and raised in the palace, he knew how Pharaoh's mind worked. All the training he had received years before was brought back at the exact moment God wanted to use him.

At the moment, we cannot always understand the way we are being led, but time shows the purpose and meaning in it all. So it will be with you.

GOD KNOWS YOUR POTENTIAL

Although your experience may seem wasted at first, one day you will see a reason for all you have learned and the explanation for all your training. An unwanted calling has the potential of showing what you are capable of becoming and doing.

The reason for an unwanted calling is the reason Paul gave for the thorn in his flesh. He said it was to keep him from becoming conceited (see 2 Cor. 12:7). God directed you differently from what you wanted in order to give you the usefulness and intimacy with Him you would not have otherwise experienced.

If you are like me, you would have been too proud if you had gotten what you wanted. I hate to think what my life would be like today if I hadn't remained at Westminster Chapel in London, where I pastored for 25 years.

It was not what I wanted. But that is not the whole story.

If I had returned to America, I doubt I would ever have needed to know how to dignify a trial or forgive those who have hurt me. I might not have learned how we can grieve the Holy Spirit by bitterness. These insights changed my life.

The book of Philippians was written after Paul's disastrous trip to Jerusalem (see Acts 21-26). Nothing happened as he had hoped. He alludes to this in Philippians 1:12, saying, "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel."

It is as though he says, "I may not be in good shape in some ways, but my trials advanced the gospel." That is what it is all for.

In Philippians 3:10, Paul wrote: "I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death." God doesn't care whether I am seen as a great success. He cares that I get to know His Son.

Everything that has happened to us happened because God wants us to know His Son. The potential you have for intimacy with God would never be discovered if you got to do only what you wanted to do.

In other words, the thorn of an unwanted calling is the best thing that could happen to any of us. Painful and puzzling though it is, the thorn in the flesh is in a sense our salvation—from ourselves.

Presumably Paul stopped praying about the removal of his problem after only three times because the Lord stepped in and said, "'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Cor. 12:9). Paul realized that that thorn in the flesh was God's instrument for a greater anointing.

There is potential in all of us that would never be discovered if we always had things our way. We all need a thorn to save us from ourselves. At the end of the day, Paul could say, "It was worth it all!" Or as Joseph put it, "God meant it for good."

Read a companion devotional.

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