

Serpents, Thorns, and Cups

I suppose it's natural for us to want *smooth paths* in life. In fact, Hebrews 12:13 commands that we "*make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*" But sometimes, if not most of the time, we beseech our Father to *remove* objects that we perceive as *obstacles* from our way that may indeed be beneficial, if not necessary, to our spiritual growth and development. For example, please consider the following....

Example #1, Numbers 21:4-9. The fledgling nation of Israel, freed from Egyptian bondage and having received the Law of God at Mt. Sinai, journeyed toward the promised land of Canaan. But their murmuring and complaining, both against God and Moses, prompted the Lord to send "*fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.*" The people quickly confessed their sins to Moses, and begged that he intercede on their behalf before God that "*He might remove the serpents from us.*" Moses did as they asked, but then an interesting thing happened. **God did not remove the serpents, but instead provided a cure for snakebites!** He did so in the form of a *bronze serpent*- formed and erected on a standard in the camp so that whoever was bitten, if they had sufficient faith to look upon it, would be healed, cf. Numbers 21:8-9. What's the point? They asked that God **remove the physical consequence of their sins**, but He instead **provided a cure that required their active participation**. Interestingly enough, Jesus used this event as an example to show the requirements of obedient saving faith in John 3:14-15, right before John 3:16!

Example #2, 2Corinthians 12:7-10. The apostle Paul said that "*because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations,*" a "*thorn in the flesh*" was given to "*keep me from exalting myself!*" While many have speculated as to the exact nature of this *thorny messenger of Satan*," the context seems to identify it with the *weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties* of v.10. If these are not "*the thorn*," then I have no idea what it was. Fortunately, identifying the correct specifics of *the thorn* is not essential to the point of the passage, or our use of it here. Rather, the point is that Paul earnestly entreated God three times that this **physical impediment**- whatever it was, **might be removed**. But note carefully the Lord's response to these requests, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.*" Paul asked that God **remove his physical hardships/impediments**; but instead, **God provided the necessary grace and power for him to overcome them**.

Example #3, Luke 22:42. On the night of His betrayal, Jesus prayed fervently three times (cf. Matthew 26:44), "*remove this cup from Me; yet not My will but Thine be done.*" None of us wants to die. And even understanding and admitting the inevitability of death (as per Hebrews 9:27), certainly everyone would want to avoid the horrors and pain of death that awaited Jesus, and that He sought to avoid through His ardent entreaties to the Father. The "*cup*" to which He referred was not just death, it was the most painful, agonizing, and degrading death then perpetrated by men upon their fellowman: death *on a cross*. Whether death in general, or the pain and agony associated with it, we too often cry out to the Father, "Let this cup pass from me!" For reasons beyond mere death itself, Jesus had to die, horribly, painfully, and shamefully on a cross. Though He prayed that His "*cup*" might be removed, and strengthened by

His Father for the daunting task ahead, ultimately He resolved to drink it, as record in John 18:11, “...*the cup which the Father has given Me, shall I not drink it?*” Jesus asked God to **remove His cup of pain, anguish, shame, and death**; but instead, **God provided the strength, resolve, and power to face and endure it.**

The Israelites prayed that God *remove the consequences* of their sin; God provided a cure. Paul prayed that God *remove the hardships/impediments* from his life; God provided grace and power. Jesus prayed that God *remove the agony of death*; God provided strength and resolve. **Are there things you are asking God to remove from your life for which He is providing a cure that requires your faith and obedience, or for which He is providing the requisite grace, power, strength, and resolve to overcome instead?** The point isn't that we shouldn't be entreating the Father to *remove* these things from our lives- we absolutely should do so, just as did the Israelites, Paul, and Jesus. **Instead, the point is that we should also be receptive to God's provision of help to overcome should His reply require such instead of removal.** Overcoming your own personal *serpent, thorn, or cup* may not be easy. It probably won't be! In fact, it may be the most difficult thing you've ever faced, or even imagined. But if it is God's will, He will provide the means necessary to overcome it, so move forward with resolute courage and confidence! (Philip C. Strong; Viking Drive Church of Christ; 3791 Viking Drive, Bossier City, LA; online at vikingdrivechurchofchrist.com; email to mrpcstrong@hotmail.com)