

Every Christian is called to ministry. The Bible makes this very clear. Paul writes, "...we [all] have this ministry..." (2 COR 4:1).

Yet most Christians' concept of ministry today isn't very biblical. We often see ministry as something that's done only by ordained preachers or missionaries. We think of ministers as seminary graduates, who marry and bury people, build churches, lead worship meetings and teach doctrine. **We see them as spiritual doctors who are meant to heal the wounds of the sick and hurting.**

God doesn't judge ministry the same way we do. Most of us judge ministry by its magnitude or effectiveness, by the number of good works that are accomplished. But in God's eyes, the issue is not how effective a ministry is, or how large a church becomes, or how many people are reached.

Of course, many leaders in the church have done incredible things through their ministries. Gifted men and women have built megachurches, raised up institutions and schools, reached multitudes with the gospel. Yet some of these same highly talented people went about their ministries with black hearts. Adulterers, fornicators, drunkards, homosexuals - all have used their gifts and intelligence to achieve many things in the church.

I thank God for every righteous minister who has built and established a ministry through godly works. From cover to cover, the Bible calls us to minister to the hurts and needs of humankind. **But the problem is, most Christians picture ministry as something we do, a work to be undertaken - and not as something we are, or are becoming.**

The Ministry of Beholding His Face

Paul speaks of a certain ministry that every Christian is called to. This ministry doesn't require particular gifts or talents. Rather, it's to be undertaken by all who have been born again, both recognized ministers and lay people. In fact, this ministry is every believer's first calling. All other endeavors must flow out of it. No ministry can be pleasing to God unless it's birthed out of this calling.

I'm talking about the ministry of beholding the face of Christ. Paul says, "*But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord...*" (2 COR 3:18).

What does it mean to behold the Lord's glory? Paul is speaking here of devoted, focused worship. It's time that's given to God simply to behold Him. And the apostle quickly adds, "*Therefore seeing we have this ministry...*" (2 COR 4:1). Paul makes it clear that beholding the face of Christ is a ministry we all must devote ourselves to.

The Greek word for "beholding" in this verse is a very strong expression. It indicates not just taking a look, but "fixing the gaze." It means deciding, **"I won't move from this position. Before I do anything else, before I try to accomplish a single thing, I must be in God's presence."**

Many Christians misinterpret the phrase "*...beholding as in a*

glass..." (2 COR 3:18). They think of a mirror, with Jesus' face being reflected back to them. But that isn't Paul's meaning here. He's speaking of an intensely focused gaze, as if peering at something earnestly through a glass, trying to see it more clearly. We're to "fix our eyes" this way, determined to see God's glory in the face of Christ. **We're to shut ourselves in the holy of holies, with but one obsession: to gaze so intently, and to commune with such devotion, that we're changed.**

Paul says the person who is shut in with Christ, beholding Him, is being transfigured.

What happens as a believer beholds the face of Christ? Paul writes, "*...we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.*" (2 COR 3:18).

The Greek word for "changed" here is "*metamorphosed*", meaning changed, transformed, and transfigured. Everyone who goes often into the holy of holies and fixes his gaze intently on Christ is being metamorphosed. A transfiguration is taking place. **That person is continually being changed into the likeness and character of Jesus.**

Maybe you come often in the Lord's presence. Yet you may not

feel yourself changing as you spend time shut in with Him. I tell you, you can know a metamorphosis is taking place. Something is surely happening, because no one can continually behold the glory of Christ without being transformed.

Note the last phrase in Paul's statement: *"But we all... are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."* (2 COR 3:18). The Holy Spirit does the work of transfiguring us. Now note the verse preceding this one: *"The Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."* (2 COR 3:17).

Do you see what Paul is saying here? He's telling us, "When you're beholding the face of Christ, there is freedom to be changed." **By being in His presence, we give the Spirit liberty to govern our lives, to do with us as He would.** It's an act of submission that says, "Lord, my will is Yours. Whatever it takes, transform me into the image of Jesus."

The first thing we see when we're beholding the Lord is how un-Christlike we are. It doesn't matter how righteous we think we may be. The Spirit shows us how far short of God's glory we fall, how self-reliant we are, how much striving we do in our flesh.

Yet, as we sit gazing at Christ, a spontaneous work begins. We see that He has accomplished all righteousness for us. And we don't ever have to strive or sweat or plead to be holy. Indeed, we're being changed - not by anything we do, but by the work of the Spirit. The Holy Ghost has begun in us the glorious process of transfiguration.

Now everything is accomplished "by the covenant, by His Spirit." **Our part is simply to go often to His presence, fix our gaze on Him and remain in His presence.** And we're to put our trust in Him as the author and finisher of our faith. Through His Spirit, He will continually change us into the very likeness of Christ.

Many Christians profess to be filled with the Holy Spirit. **But I believe there's a test that proves whether the Holy Ghost is governing your life. The test is this: there will be a progressive**

increase of the character of Christ in you.

If the Spirit is in full control, this increase won't come in spurts. You won't have setbacks or withdraw from His presence. Instead, you'll see a continual increase of change. And the increase won't come just from crises or testings. It will go on all the time, because the changes wrought by God's Spirit are continual. **There is no such thing as stagnant growth in the work of the Spirit.**

Yet, transfiguration does come primarily through our trials and sufferings. Paul says, *"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us."* (2 COR 4:7). You may wonder: how can our fragile vessels contain and increasingly manifest the glory of the character of Christ? Especially when we're under fire?

We can't know how the Spirit will change us. We don't know what methods He'll choose to use in our lives. **But we can know this: every hardship and suffering is meant to bring about change.**

When Gwen and I first learned of our granddaughter Tiffany's terminal brain cancer, we thought our daughter Debbie would be a fragile vessel of clay. We wondered, "How will she ever endure this? She's so tender." But Debbie was a rock through it all. Everyone in our family saw the power of God manifested in her.

Where did Debbie find her strength? For months, she had been beholding the face of Jesus, through the godly writings of Madame Guyon and Amy Carmichael. Debbie had told me when she started reading them, "Dad, I just want to get to know Jesus more."

She had spent those months shut in with the Lord, beholding Him. And the Holy Spirit had brought about change that outshone to the world. He had transfigured her. We all saw this same strength in Debbie's husband, Roger. **Their faith, trust and rest in Jesus were a powerful ministry during their worst trial.**

I want to make a bold statement: All suffering, pain and trials in the life of a righteous child of God are a call to ministry.

No one on earth can place you in ministry. You may be given a diploma by a seminary, ordained by a bishop, or commissioned by a denomination. But Paul reveals the only source of any true call to ministry: *"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry."* (1 TIM 1:12).

What does Paul mean here, when he says Jesus enabled him and counted him faithful? Think back to the apostle's conversion. Three days after that event, Christ placed Paul in the ministry - specifically, the ministry of suffering: *"For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake."* (ACTS 9:16).

This is the very ministry Paul refers to when he says, *"Therefore seeing we have this ministry..."* (2 COR 4:1). He continues, adding, *"...as we have received mercy, we faint not."* He's talking about the ministry of suffering. And he makes clear it's a ministry we all have.

Paul is telling us Jesus gave him a promise for this ministry. Christ pledged to remain faithful to him and enable him through all his trials. The Greek word for "enabled" means a continual supply of strength. Paul declares, "Jesus promised to give me more than sufficient strength for the journey. He enables me to remain faithful in this ministry. Because of Him, I won't faint or give in. I'll emerge with a testimony."

Let me ask you: what did Paul see as his primary calling in ministry? Was it his persuasive preaching? His deep teaching? No. By his own admission, Paul wasn't an eloquent speaker. He said he preached through weakness, in trembling and fear. Even Peter said Paul spoke things that were hard to understand (see **2 Peter 3:15-16**).

Yet, by this time, Paul had already cast aside all his worldly training and earthly wisdom. He knew his ministry wasn't in preaching, or healing the sick, or his own human brilliance. Paul's ministry was the outshining of Christ, which was produced in him through great sufferings. The great apostle impacted his age incredibly, and still impacts even our generation, by the way he responded to his trials.

Paul spoke often of **"Christ in me."** By this he meant, **"You see a**

human being standing before you. But God has led me through great trials, and those sufferings have produced in me the character of Christ. That's what you see outshining from me. Only the faithful enabler can produce this in anyone's life. Only He can give His servants a song and a testimony in the midst of every trial."

Here is how Paul sums up his ministry: *"We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh."* (2 COR 4:8-10).

Paul wasn't superhuman. He knew firsthand the meaning of despair. He faced troubled times that he never thought he would survive. He testifies: *"For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, inasmuch that we despaired even of life. But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us..."* (2 COR 1:8-10).

Do you understand what Paul is saying? He's telling us, "We were pressed down, beyond all human strength. And we were utterly at a loss to understand it. We came to the point where we thought it was all over."

This was Paul's most trying time. He was staring death in the face. Yet at that very moment, Paul remembered his ministry and calling. He reminded himself, "The whole world is watching me. I've preached many sermons on God's power to keep His servants. Now everyone is looking to see if I believe that."

Paul rose up once again to lay down his life. He cried out, **"Live or die, I am the Lord's! I trust in God, who raises the dead."**

Afterward, Paul tells the Corinthian church, "It was your prayers that helped us. You enabled us to come through it all with a song of victory." He writes, *"Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the*

gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf." (2 COR 1:11).

I can't say this strongly enough: **we can never take lightly the matter of praying for our brothers and sisters in need.** Paul says the Corinthians' prayers were a gift to him. They were more precious than money, or words of comfort, or even good deeds of love.

Our family knows such gratitude for others' prayers. For thirty days, our granddaughter Tiffany lay dying in our home. It was the most trying time of our lives. We knew the meaning of Paul's testimony: sudden trouble had come upon us, and we were pressed out of measure, facing a trial we could never humanly understand.

In the last hour, as Tiffany took her last breaths, we gathered around the bed, holding hands and singing, "God Is So Good". In those moments, we felt the power of the prayers of God's saints. It was as tangible to us as each other's hands we clutched.

Our family can boldly testify that we were undergirded by the prayers of those who lifted us up. And like Paul, we can say to all who prayed: "You helped so much by your prayers for us. You gave us the gift that helped us glorify God in our most trying hour. We weren't crushed by our trial. We came through it."

The time may have come when the only message that will impact an insane world is the ministry I'm speaking of.

I'm convinced Paul described our day when he wrote to Timothy: *"I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ... Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry."* (2 TIM 4:1-5).

Paul was telling Timothy, "Men will be so given over to their lusts, they won't endure sound doctrine. **But keep preaching the Word. Reproof is needed. So, rebuke**

the disobedient, and exhort everyone to do good."

We must continue with powerful preaching, sound doctrine and godly reproof. But soon the world won't want to hear any of it. **Humankind will become so obsessed with pleasures and lusts, they'll totally ignore the church. Preaching and doctrine will have no impact at all on a narcotized society.**

In fact, I believe we've already come to this point worldwide. The nominal church has been rendered totally irrelevant. It no longer impacts any nation, or even individuals, in many cases. **I ask you, what ministry will reach a world that's gone insane?**

Thank God, there is still a ministry that speaks to atheists, Muslims, unbelievers of all kinds. **It is the outshining of Christ through deep, hard suffering in the lives of believers.** For centuries this has been the most powerful witness of God's people. Believers have been shaken and twisted by disease, persecution, suffering of all kinds. And through it all, it was the outshining of Christ's character that touched those around them.

Look closely at Paul's exhortations in this passage:

"But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions..." (2 TIM 4:5). He's saying, "A world of unbelievers is watching you. **So be careful how you react in your times of affliction.** Don't allow your trials to crush you into a whimpering, faithless complainer. You'll discredit every word you've ever said about God's faithfulness."

"...Do the work of an evangelist..." (2 TIM 4:5). When I was a young minister, I didn't understand why I couldn't simply walk the corridors of a hospital, pray in faith, and see miracles of healing take place. I thought, "What a testimony that would be. Any doubter would be convinced if he saw patients get up out of their beds."

I've since learned that this probably wouldn't be the most effective kind of evangelism. Think about it. Who has the greater impact on those around them: the smiling, healthy Christian who walks into an unbeliever's room and preaches, reproves, and presents sound doctrine? Or the humble Christian across the hall who's recuperating

from a double mastectomy? **This woman is never without pain. Yet she has no fear. She smiles at the nurses, lighting up the room with her inner peace. Even the most cynical, unbelieving doctor is curious about this peaceful woman.** He sees her suffering, yet he's drawn to her, because **he wants to know the source of her peace.**

I'm not putting down hospital ministry. It is a high calling, and a vital work that every body of believers must undertake. But I can tell you firsthand what had the most impact in our home during Tiffany's final days. A workman was coming and going in our house during that time. He knew our granddaughter was dying. After three weeks, he told his wife, "There's something about those people. I see them crying at times, but I can't understand the peace they have. I've got to know about it." **Nobody had witnessed to this man. He simply saw the Spirit of Christ outshining from our suffering family.**

"...Make full proof of thy ministry..." (2 TIM 4:5). The Greek word for proof here means completely assured, fully prepared. Paul is saying, in essence, **"Be prepared before your trial comes suddenly upon you. Make sure you're well equipped, full of spiritual resources, so you don't run out of oil."**

I see many Christians today falling apart during their trials. Hard suffering sends them into a tailspin. As you listen to their pitiful questions and protests, you would think they've never known God. The fact is, they've known Jesus only as the author of their faith, not as the faithful finisher. **These people haven't been transfigured by their sufferings. Instead,**

they've become disfigured, in spirit and character.

We are all changing, undergoing metamorphosis.

A transfiguration is taking place in all our lives. The truth is, we're being changed by what obsesses us. **We're becoming like the things that occupy our minds. Our character is being influenced and impacted by whatever has hold of our hearts.**

Consider the gay life. I've seen a steady degeneration of character in many homosexuals I've known, as they pursue their lifestyle. There are dramatic changes in their countenance, their voice, and their mannerisms. And there's a constant increase in their boldness to sin.

Two years ago, several hundred homosexuals in New York City swore they would never march in the Gay Pride Parade down Fifth Avenue. They claimed, "We don't agree with being exhibitionists about our sexuality. We could never do that." Yet this past year, a large group of those very same men led the parade, half-naked.

Consider the changes that result from pornography. Some men start with pictures of nude women and end up spiraling into child porn. Married men can't get enough of their lust through porn, so they take up affairs. They swore they would die for their children, but now they're willing to walk out on their families with no shame or regret. **How quickly their character disintegrates. They have metamorphosed into different men.**

I thank God for everyone who feeds his mind and soul with spiritual things. Such servants have fixed their eyes on what is pure and holy. They keep their gaze fixed on Christ, spending

quality time worshipping Him and building themselves up in faith. The Holy Spirit is at work in these saints, continually changing their character into Christ's.

Only these believers will be ready for the hard, explosive sufferings to come upon the earth. Slothful, lazy, prayerless Christians will suffer heart failure or breakdowns. They'll be crushed by their fears, because they don't have the Holy Spirit at work in them, transfiguring them. When hard times come, they simply won't make it.

If you're going through a fiery trial right now, you can know you've been placed "into the ministry" by the Lord Himself. So, be careful not to give offense to your calling by turning into a complaining, sniveling coward. Here is Paul's final word on the matter:

"Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed: But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, In stripes, in imprisonments... As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich..." (2 COR 6:3-5,10).

How do we "make many rich"? By outshining the hope of Christ from the midst of our sufferings. We offer true riches when we cause others to ask, "What's his secret? How can he endure this trial? Where does he find such peace?" **Begin by preparing your heart right now. Fill your storehouse with resources, by getting alone with Jesus and fixing your gaze on Him. Then you'll be ready for anything. That is our ministry in these last days.**

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