

## DO YOU HAVE A “THORN IN THE FLESH?”

By Danny Tunnell

“Even in the excellency of the revelations, that I might not be arrogant, a thorn in the flesh, an agent of Satan, was given to torment me, so that I might not be arrogant. I begged the Lord three times about this, that it might leave me, but He told me, ‘My grace is enough for you, because strength reaches completion in weakness.’ I will therefore boast in my weaknesses most gladly, so that Christ’s strength will remain in me. For this reason I am content in weaknesses, in insults, in necessities, in persecutions and troubles, for Christ’s sake; because I am strong when I am weak.” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10, McCord’s.)

Many theologians have assumed that the thorn in the flesh was likely some physical ailment. Various theories have arisen: stammering speech, arthritis, malaria or poor eyesight.

Some today may say, “My long-term physical malady is like Paul’s thorn in the flesh. I’ve prayed about it, but God hasn’t shown any relief.”

They know that Paul had a thorn in the flesh. (2 Corinthians 12:7.) They know that Paul once told Timothy to take a “little wine” for his “stomach’s sake.” (1 Timothy 5:23.) And they also know that Paul left someone sick somewhere, but they may not remember his name or the place, or in which chapter of the Bible it is found. “Trophimus have I left in Miletus sick.” (2 Timothy 4:20.)

Instead of speculating that Paul’s thorn in the flesh was a physical problem of some kind, why not compare scripture to scripture? Let the Bible be its own best commentary.

We read in Numbers 33:55 that God spoke to Moses to drive out the inhabitants of the land. God warned him that if he didn’t do that, “those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell.” God is using imagery, and “thorns in your sides” is a figure of speech. These were not physical ailments at all! They were people who would cause problems to God’s people, those who would

trouble God’s people and try to entice them in their lusts and wickedness to serve their gods. (Judges 2:3.)

Do you have a thorn in the flesh? All faithful children of God have some thorn in the flesh! It is unavoidable. It is inescapable! There will be those who will try to trouble you if you choose to follow Christ unreservedly and in full commitment.

How do we know? The Bible tells us so! “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.” (2 Timothy 3:12.) But be assured, what God told Paul, He is telling us: “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9.) And we can say with Paul, “I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:10.)

— Miami, OK

## Whom Can You Trust?

By Joe Slater

Scottish novelist George MacDonald said, “To be trusted is a greater compliment than being loved.” That’s true. Jesus teaches us to love everyone – even our enemies.

But whom can you trust?

The Pharisees “trusted in themselves, that they were righteous.” (Luke 18:9.) Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector to quash that notion. Paul was once a Pharisee, but he learned that neither his righteousness nor his strength was from himself; so he trusted “in God who raises the dead.” (2 Corinthians 1:9.) Unfortunately, self-trust is still with us today.

The Pharisees’ self-trust also involved trusting in their ancestry. “Abraham is our father,” they bragged to Jesus. (John 8:39.) Paul could have

out-boasted them all had he wished to do so. “If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so.” (Philippians 3:4.) Paul’s pedigree was amazing, but it made not the least difference in his relationship with God. Too many in the church today are trusting their pedigree: “My grandfather was an elder.” “My dad was a deacon.” Wonderful! How are you serving?

Perhaps the most common misplaced trust is not in a person, but in our material wealth. Paul wrote to Timothy: “Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.” (1 Timothy 6:17.) Jesus warned of this very danger: “Children, how hard it is

for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God.” (Mark 10:24.)

Trusting in self is vanity gone to seed! Trusting in your ancestry or wealth is folly. But “The Lord redeems the soul of His servants, and none of those who trust in Him shall be condemned.” (Psalm 34:22.)

— Justin, TX

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the Lord and depart from evil. It will be health to your flesh, and strength to your bones.” (Proverbs 3:5-8.)

# Old Paths

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“ask for the old paths” (Jer. 6:16)

## AMAZING EQUALITY IN CHRIST

By Milton Smith

Speaking of the unique human relationship created by the church, Paul wrote in Colossians 3:11, “There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.” In the first century, Jews and Gentiles experienced almost no interaction, much less fellowship. As a matter of fact, the Jew was forbidden to eat with a Gentile or even enter his house. The Gentiles felt much the same toward the Jews, regarding them as inferiors. The Lord’s church brought together both Jew and Gentiles into the one body of Christ. This was truly an amazing accomplishment!

The barbarians and the Scythians were considered uncultured by the Greeks, Romans, and Jews alike. Of the two, however, the Scythians were seen as the worst. According to the 5th century Greek historian, Herodotus, the Scythians “drank the blood of the first enemy killed in battle, making a napkin of his scalp and a drinking vessel of his skull.” The Jewish historian, Josephus wrote, “The Scythians delight in murdering people and are little better than wild beasts.” Origen wrote that there were no laws more impious than the laws of the Scythians. Yet Paul told the early church that all people (including the barbarians and Scythians) were to be accepted on equal terms in Christ.

Aristotle called the slave “a living tool.” Slaves were thought of as nothing more than human objects. But when a slave became a child of God, he became an equal brother in Christ with his Christian slave owner! A slave might even serve as an elder, deacon, or teacher in the local congregation where his slave owner might attend. This caused Christians to begin viewing slavery in a much different light. Many scholars believe that Paul’s letter to the slave owner, Philemon, regarding his runaway slave, Onesimus, might have been the most astounding social document written during the first century.

Truly amazing is the deep impression the gospel made upon the world. No other institution in history has affected mankind as has the Lord’s church. Every Christian should rejoice to belong to such a Divine institution!

— Tulsa, OK

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (Galatians 3:28,29.)

## JESUS ON THE ECONOMY

By David Deffenbaugh

Economic and financial specialists talk about “economic indicators” that tell us whether things are going to get better or worse. Did you know that Jesus also talked about investing and economic indicators? Really. Jesus warned about falling stock markets and failing corporations. No, not in exactly those words. Instead, He spoke about thieves, moths and rust. (Matthew 6:19-21.) Those were the threats to financial investments in His day just like corporation executives and panic-driven stock markets can have a devastating effect on mutual funds and 401K’s today.

Jesus said that a much better, much safer investment than treasures on earth are treasures in heaven. Just exactly how does one invest in heaven? What’s the ticker symbol for this on the New York Stock Exchange? HEAV? Let’s just say this is a unique investment opportunity. There’s not another like it. A stock broker won’t be able to tell you about it either.

The Bible, though, explains it quite clearly: “. . . give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” (Matthew 19:21.) “Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, not to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come.” (1 Timothy 6:17-19.)

Using one’s earthly treasure to care for those in need and to do good is how treasures are laid up in heaven. Is that really a good investment? Let’s talk about return on investment. How about worth that exceeds all the world’s wealth combined? (Matthew 16:26.) How about a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory? (2 Corinthians 4:17.)

This also serves as an economic indicator. It is the location of our treasure that identifies our heart’s home. (Matthew 6:21.) We may say or claim or wish that our heart is in the right place, but one sure-fire way to find out is to see where our treasure is going. Our heart will follow our treasure.

How’s that for an economic indicator?

— Oklahoma City, OK

## BUILDING BETTER MARRIAGES

By Wayne Robbins

Over the course of my ministry I have counseled many couples with marriage problems and I have conducted many, many funerals. As I reflect back on these occasions, I wish I could get one point about funerals across to troubled couples. In all the terminal illness cases that I have been associated with, the only thing in that person's mind has been the spiritual. That is the point that I would like to drive home to young couples today.

It seems that married couples today involve themselves in so many material and social things. They are working so hard in trying to maintain a certain lifestyle that they do not have time for the basics that make for a strong marriage and family. They are chasing elusive rainbows of happiness - things that are temporal in nature. Thus, happiness is always in the future.

Worldly pursuits burden today's homes with so many difficulties and problems!

If husbands and wives could only see that the most important things in this life are spiritual and not material! When the spiritual is lived and maintained, it brings happiness and peace now. But it provides so much more - eternal blessings.

The desire for material things and social status never brings real joy. In fact, pursuing temporal things robs us of the time needed to build a strong spiritual life. Jesus made this quite clear when He said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:19-21.) Paul also wrote that one who pursues material things will pierce themselves through with many sorrows. (1 Timothy 6:10.)

I believe I can prove the point rather easily. Just imagine that tomorrow you received word that you had only three months to live. What would be your most prized possession at that moment? Would it be your car, home, or bank account?

Or would it be your soul?

Solomon spent much of his life indulging in material and social things. His conclusion though, at the end, was that mankind should "fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all." (Ecclesiastes 12:13.)

Understanding life's true purpose will go a long way in making marriages stronger.

— Arkansas City, KS

EDITORIAL . . .

## AS MARRIAGE GOES, SO GOES A NATION

By Dalton Key

I once heard a tale about a preacher, who in the course of an otherwise ordinary marriage ceremony, had come to the time for the exchange of vows. He looked to the groom and asked solemnly, "Will you take this woman, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer?" The nervous groom, apparently taking it as a matter of multiple choice, stammered, "I'll take better, healthy, and richer!"

Whether apocryphal or not, the story makes a valid point. Too many spouses come into marriage with the same desires, the same expectations, the same demands as this addled groom. They are determined to make a go of it . . . unless something goes wrong. All is well until problems arise.

And arise they will. The time will come when the honeymoon is over, dirty dishes are piling up in the sink and the baby won't stop crying in the crib. The time will come when bills are many, money is short, tempers are flared, and the back door seems the best and easiest way out. The going gets tough and those who should be tough often get going - in the wrong direction!

When marriages become as disposable as diapers, something has gone terribly wrong.

The British historian, Edward Gibbon, listed five primary reasons for the collapse of the Roman Empire, the first of which was "the rapid increase of divorce, with the undermining of the sanctity of the home, which is the basis of society." During the reign of Nero, according to Seneca, women were measuring the years by the number of their husbands. By the time Rome fell, marriage had become completely severed from morality and was considered little more than a legal construct.

When marriage fails, so goes a nation! A people cannot long survive when "as long as we both shall live" is replaced with "as long as we both shall love."

The words of our Lord still ring true and are long overdue for attention: "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?' So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." (Matthew 19:4-6.)

(OLD PATHS FAMILY CAMP is coming up, May 30 - June 1, on the site of Flint Hills Christian Camp, just north of Sedan, Kansas. Make plans now to be with us for a time of biblical instruction and rich Christian fellowship. For more information, write in care of this paper, or call (620) 506-6155 or (918) 587-4023.)



## WHEN EVANGELISM SEEMS TO FAIL

By Hardeman Nichols

greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7.)

On the heels of such fantastic results came the chilling effects of persecution, which caused the Jerusalem church, except for the apostles, to scatter in search of refuge elsewhere. Jesus had forewarned, "because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold." (Matthew 24:12.)

Some may have concluded, "Evangelism has failed!" Evangelism does not fail. In the parable of the sower, it was not the seed that failed. The seed was "incorruptible." (1 Peter 1:23-25.) The trouble was the soil. (Luke 8:11-15.) If those who hear fail to obey, the failure is theirs, not that of the seed. The Bible urges, "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." (James 1:21.)

There have been times when the Gospel did not produce the desired results. Instead of large numbers turning to the Lord, the opposite occurred. People heard and walked away unmoved or worse yet, they rejected the truth and persecuted the ones who came to teach them the saving message of the cross.

The apostles knew occasions like that. Not all of their preaching resulted in three thousand being baptized as on the day of Pentecost. For a while, everyone in the church was praising God as they were "having favor with all the people." (Acts 2:47.) That favor no doubt made it easier to have the marvelous harvests on that great beginning.

Soon, "believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women." (Acts 5:14.) Luke says, "The word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied

## TO SING OR PLAY?

By Bobby Key

I know of no act of worship acceptable to God unless the Bible authorizes that act to be done. Christians are told to sing. I know of no passage of Scripture in the New Testament that talks about mechanical instruments of music in New Testament worship. Therefore, I can have no faith on this subject. "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." (Romans 14:23.)

Since when did God allow the majority in a congregation to determine the kind of worship that pleases Him? When did He ever give elders the authority to legislate concerning the type of music to be used in New Testament worship?

The only way we can know what pleases God in the New Testament age is by reading what God has revealed in the New Testament. It is never wise to speak where God has not spoken.

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

Our duty is to evangelize. "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15.) In giving this commission, Jesus knew some would reject it so He added, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."

Evangelism does not fail. It is more imperative that we do not fail in evangelism! God has assured, "For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth the bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it." (Isaiah 55:10-11.)

— Dallas, TX

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