

OUR THORN IN THE FLESH

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

INTRODUCTION: Paul knew well that the Lord and Savior he loved and served with all of his heart, life, soul, and strength was indeed a Man of Sorrows, a King Rejected, a Savior Scorned, who suffered even before He went to the cross, but endured the greatest agony imaginable as He bore our sins upon the cross.

And Paul himself was certainly no stranger to suffering. In addition to experiencing a lack of food and a protected place to sleep on occasion when he traveled on his missionary journeys, Paul often endured hostility and attack. The very first place Paul preached the gospel, in Damascus following his conversion, his hearers tried to kill him. Paul was beaten, jailed, and stoned, yet none of those things seemed to be his greatest source of sorrow and suffering. Paul said to the Corinthians

2 Corinthians 12:7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, ...

No, the thing that distressed Paul the most, so much so that Paul implored the Lord three times to take it away was what Paul called his thorn in the flesh. The word for thorn here is different than all the other places thorns are mentioned in the Bible. In the other places, the word for thorns means exactly what our English word means, like thorns on a rose bush or certain palm trees. They can be very painful, draw blood, and even cause infection, especially if they are not removed; but the word Paul uses for his thorn in the flesh is different. This is the only place this word is used in the New Testament and it means something more like a large wooden stake.

I tell you this because I do want each of us to think about what may be our own thorn in the flesh, but I do not want us majoring on minors. Paul had endured shipwrecks, starvation, and the horrible pain of the whip on a naked back. He had been left for dead after being stoned by a crowd, but his thorn in the flesh was worse than any of that. So in a moment as Paul tells us about dealing with his thorn in the flesh, and we think about our own thorn in the flesh, let's not dwell on our little aches and pains, a tough day at work, or spat with our best friend. Paul said it was like a stake that had been driven into his flesh.

Immediately **we all want to know what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. The answer is "We do not know."** I have always favored the idea that it was Paul's eye disease. We know Paul had major problems with his eyes because he refers to his vision problems. When he wrote to the Galatians, he pointed out how large the letters had to be at the end for him to write it with his own hand. He refers to his infirmity in the

flesh while with them and says they would have plucked out their own eyes and given them to him if they could. There is other evidence also that Paul had an eye problem, but what we do not know for sure is that his eye disease was his thorn in the flesh.

Some think Paul's thorn in the flesh was the rejection he experienced from the Corinthians to whom he is writing. Although Paul brought them the gospel, disciplined them, nurtured them through his letters, returned to spend time to disciple them further, and loved them dearly, many of the Corinthians had turned away to follow false teachers and prophets. This broke Paul's heart, and some think this was his thorn in the flesh.

But we do not know for sure, and the reason I believe the Scripture does not make it clear is that we are better off not knowing. **If we knew for sure** what it was, **we might only apply this teaching to our own grave difficulties if they were of the same nature as Paul's**. And that would miss the point.

Our thorn in the flesh is the source of our serious and persistent sorrow. It is the most difficult and painful trial we experience in our lives. It is that thing that tempts us to ask if God really cares about us. Our pain and vulnerability in it humble us. If you have a thorn in your flesh as Paul did, you know right now what I am talking about. You are not wondering. You may not know Paul's, but you know yours. If you do not know what yours is, you probably don't have one, ... yet.

- If you have a thorn in the flesh, listen most carefully; this is a word for you.
- If you don't, this word is a very helpful and much needed word for dealing with lesser difficulties and challenges as well, which we all have, all the time.
- If we use this instruction in dealing with the lesser challenges, we will be better prepared to use it if and when the thorn pierces our side.

Folks, there is not a single one among us, including myself, that does not need to hear and to heed these words.

Let's read now how Paul dealt with it and what God did.

2 Corinthians 12:7–10 7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore 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.

Note these things with me.

I. THE THORN AND THE PAIN IT BRINGS MAY TAKE US BY SURPRISE.

2 Corinthians 12:7 And **lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations**, a thorn in the flesh was given to me,

Fourteen years before Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians, Paul had just returned from Tarsus to Jerusalem, and before long he would be beginning the missionary journeys. In preparation for that, God gave Paul an advance trip to heaven where he saw and heard things so wonderful, he was not later allowed to describe. Paul says, "I don't know if I was in the body or out of the body, but this was real. God brought me up to the third heaven to Paradise, and it was real!"

"But soon after the most glorious and exhilarating thing that ever happened to me, I got this thorn in the flesh."

A preacher I used to like to hear was Ron Dunn. He himself is in Paradise with Jesus and Paul right now. But Ron used to say, "The trains of triumph and tragedy travel on parallel tracks, and they often arrive about the same time." Paul would have said, "Amen." That is true! Karen and I have found that to be true in our lives. Often times while we were still enjoying the glitter of some great triumph that the Lord had allowed us to experience, came a thorn that took away some of the exultation of the victory.

II. ALTHOUGH A MESSENGER OF SATAN MAY DELIVER THE THORN, GOD IS RESPONSIBLE FOR ALLOWING IT.

2 Corinthians 12:7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, **a messenger of Satan to buffet me**, lest I be exalted above measure.

We see this clearly, do we not, in the story of Job? Satan wanted to destroy all that was precious in Job's life, but he could only do what God permitted him to do.

Paul knew this. He said a messenger from Satan brought this to me to beat me down.

Satan stirred up King Herod to try to kill Jesus while still a toddler and provoked the people of Nazareth to want to drive Jesus off of a cliff, but the Father would not allow it. But when the religious leaders burned with envy of Jesus, God let all manner of

men be bribed, pressured, and blackmailed in order for His own Son to be nailed to a cross and killed, because that fulfilled the purpose of the Almighty.

I hope you understand clearly that while God does not directly cause all things, evil men and even demons do their wicked worst for their own sinful purposes, but God remains in control to bring about His sovereign purposes.

The same rules still apply in the universe today.

Therefore ...

III. WHEN THE THORN COMES, CRY OUT TO GOD!

2 Corinthians 12:8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

That is what Paul did! He pleaded with the Lord for it to depart!

Three times!

Do you remember Jesus in Gethsemane on the night before the cross?

Three times Matthew tells us Jesus prayed, Matthew 26:39 ... "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; ..."

I do not want to press the point that in both of these examples, three times they cried out to the Lord before they surrendered to the answer they did not want to hear. So I am not saying we are only allowed to ask God three times, but I do think the biblical point is that there comes a time to recognize that God is giving an answer that does not include removing the thorn in the flesh.

IV. IF GOD DOES NOT REMOVE THE THORN, RECEIVE THE GRACE TO BEAR IT.

2 Corinthians 12:9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." ...

Giving us grace to bear the thorn and all of its pain and sorrow is as much of an answer to our prayer as is removing the thorn.

Giving us grace to endure the thorn is a gift that is as good as taking away the thorn.

God's grace

- Is undeserved. That is what grace means – “undeserved favor”
- Is sufficient – it will be all we need
- brings strength

Folks sometimes we observe people with Job-size troubles, or Paul-size trials and we think, “I could never endure what they are going through. I just could not do it!”

And we are right. We could not, ... unless God were to give us the grace to endure it.

But He will. If He allows the thorn in the flesh to come, and if in His wisdom He knows it is best to not take it away although we plead with Him, then God will give us the grace we need. It will be sufficient. It will give us the strength we do not have.

V. THESE INSTRUCTIONS APPLY EVEN WHEN OUR TROUBLES ARE NOT AS SERIOUS AS THE “THORN IN THE FLESH.”

2 Corinthians 12:9b-10 ... Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore 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.

Not every one of these troubles were thorn in the flesh sized troubles. But Paul did the same thing.

For those of us who have trusted Christ, here is the way we are to deal with trouble of all sorts:

- **Pray** – ask God to take the trouble away. But if after a season of prayer, God does not take it away,
- **Receive His grace** to give you sufficient strength and power to bear it.
- **Rejoice, be glad in the sufficiency of His grace and power to sustain you** in the difficulty, knowing that it is in our weakness that the power of Christ makes us strong!