

THORNS IN THE FLESH

(2 Corinthians 12:2-10)

² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know – God knows. ³ And I know that this man – whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows – ⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

INTRODUCTION

When Paul opens his heart to reveal his experience, we quickly recognize a faint reflection of the same experience that came to our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul’s three-times repeated prayer is an echo of one prayed in the garden, “... **Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me...**” The answer heaven gave to our Lord was the same given to Paul. The cup was left for Jesus to drink to the last drop. And as far as we know, the thorn remained for the rest of Paul’s life. But that was not the only answer, for angels came to strengthen the Savior; and to Paul’s hurting heart came the word, “... **My grace is sufficient for you: for My power is made perfect in weakness.**”

As we consider these words, the Lord Jesus stands in the shadows, watching our reactions to similar situations. We have all lived long enough to know that sometimes the most radiant faces hide the greatest pressure; and the one who seems most blessed is being the most severely buffeted by the devil. So, this morning I would like to consider the issue of thorns in the lives of believers.

I. THE MISERY OF THE THORN

A. The severe trial

Clearly, this was a severe trial in Paul's life. The Greek word translated **thorn** is not the kind of thing you might get in your finger while gardening, which can be very painful. This word is used for a **stake** on which people were impaled to be crucified. So, again, it was a severe trial. It is speculation to imagine what it could have been. It might have been something in his environment or circumstances which seemed impossible to take any longer (I have seen proposed as "thorns" such issues as loneliness, having an enemy, a handicap or disability, chronic illness, money matters, an unwanted calling, and personality problems.) But with Paul, it was likely a physical problem, with the suggestion that he was suffering from partial, if not total blindness. What matters is that when this thing hit him, whatever it was, he was convinced that it was the most restrictive thing that had ever happened to him and was going to affect and perhaps destroy his usefulness for the ministry. And it's possible that he had suffered with this for 14 years!

B. The series of prayers

Paul felt that the only way to deal with it was to have it removed altogether. So, he went to God in prayer.

But he prayed – not merely three times, because that is the symbol of persistent agony – and said, in effect, *“Lord, take it away! I can’t live and serve You like this! O Lord, if only this thorn would be removed, then I could do Your will. If only...”* Have any of you prayed thus to the Lord in the past weeks, months, or even longer? *“Father, If only You would remove this or that thing from me...”*?

C. The strain maintained

Yet, the pressure remained. **“Three times I pleaded with the Lord...”** says Paul, with intense desire and agony, *“Lord, remove this thing!”* Do you share Paul’s conviction concerning **your** situation that the only adequate answer is that God must take the problem away, remove that person, or get you out of this situation and into another circumstance. You are so convinced that you have told God what He must do for you!

II. THE MYSTERY OF THE THORN

There came a time when Paul ceased praying because God gave him an explanation. The Word says, literally: **“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.”** And Paul goes on, **“But He has been saying unto me...”** We do not know how long this continued. Paul had been praying, *“Lord, take this thing away!”* And the Lord had been trying to get through to him. Are we so busy telling God what He ought to do about our situation that we can’t hear what He wants to say to us. We are so sure that the only thing to be done is to remove the problem altogether that we never give the Lord a moment to speak to our hearts about His alternative.

A. The Purpose in His Thorn – First, the Lord made it plain that there was a purpose in the thorn. Verse 7, **“... to keep me from becoming conceited...”**

I.E., Paul had been sure that it was not merely a useless irritation, but that it was an actual hindrance; but now he discovers that this had been in the heart of God for his life “... **to keep me from becoming conceited...**” In other words, God had sent into his life something that came at a time of wonderful revelations of the things of the Lord. At that very moment, there came the pressure of the thorn to keep Paul humble.

Truly, God knows best how to deal with each one of us. I say reverently that when the Lord called Paul to a place of spiritual opportunity and leadership, the Lord could not afford to take any risks with him. There was too much at stake. God wanted to be sure that his usefulness would never be marred and that he would be kept available, usable, and humble.

When God does that, the thorn is put into our lives to turn us upside down, to wipe us thoroughly, and to leave us in a place where we know that in us dwells no good thing, for the flesh profits nothing. I don't dare speculate about the thorn in your life, but I know that behind it there is this ultimate purpose of God at work in us.

B. The provision of grace

The **provision** was, “... **“My grace is sufficient for you,”** and the **explanation**, “**for my power is made perfect in weakness.**” Note that the Lord is saying, in effect, “*Paul, as I allow this thorn to remain, you must understand that at each moment now there is ample provision for your every need, for My grace is sufficient for you.*” Do you believe His grace is sufficient for you! The grace of our crucified, risen, exalted, triumphant Savior, the Lord of all glory, is surely sufficient for you and for me! Does that mean to say that amid the pressure of the thorn we are just going to have enough grace to see us through? I don't think so!

In the story of the feeding of the 5,000, **Andrew** said, “... **Half a year’s wages is not enough for them.**” **Omnipotence** said, “**Bring Me the loaves and fishes and give them to Me.**” **Faith** distributed them among the crowd. **Experience** gathered up 12 baskets that remained over and above – “... **My grace is sufficient...**”

C. The Powerful Explanation

“... **for My power is made perfect in weakness.**” Notice the contrast here! His **power** (**dynamis**) is made perfect in my **weakness** (**neurasthenia**). His power, my weakness, and the connecting link is **made perfect** (the same word that the Lord Jesus used when He hung on the cross and cried, “**It is finished!**”) God’s power is completely made perfect in your weakness. God does not work through those who think they are the strong! He works through those who are aware of their weakness.

Of King **Uzziah**, it was said, “... **he was marvelously helped until he was strong...**” and when weakness, personal insufficiency, and utter inability are consciously felt and known, then the power of God and His purpose for the thorn have been fulfilled. God works through weakness. I Corinthians 1:27-29 says: “... **God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, has God chosen, yes, and things which are not, to bring to naught things that are: That no flesh should glory in His presence.**”

God works through the man who has been wiped clean and turned inside out, his life emptied before the Lord until he is hopelessly weak, that no flesh might glory in His presence.

III. THE MINISTRY OF THE THORN

A. Transformation of Weakness into Strength

“...That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses... For when I am weak, then I am strong” (v. 10). And **“I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me”** (v. 9). Note the word **“rest”**: When the Lord Jesus came, John says, **He tabernacled among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth** (John 1:14). He dwelt among us – that is the word. **“... I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may tabernacle on me.”** This means that weakness was turned immediately into strength as Christ’s power dwelt in Paul. What a wonderful thing it would be if in the place where we have been so weak, where there has been breakdown in our faith, the place where we have failed to glorify God, we could be even stronger!

How did it happen to Paul? He doesn’t tell us. But there was a deep relationship between the thorn God gave Paul and the cross God gave our Savior. **“... My strength is made perfect in weakness.”** Paul had only to think about Gethsemane, a mock trial, a cruel cross, a grave, and the death of One of whom he wrote: **“... was crucified in weakness.”** At that point of absolute weakness, Jesus was met by the mighty power of God as He raised Him from the dead. Was the pressure of the thorn in Paul’s life a reminder of the cross? Did it remind him that Jesus went to the place of absolute weakness, and that God raised Him up to the throne?

When Paul was aware of the severest pressure, was he also aware of the presence of God in Christ, who had been weak but was raised to the place of all power?

Herein lies a mystery, because Paul says, **“... I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me...”** But I am sure of this, that in every thorn and in every pressure like this, God and the devil are both equally concerned. If God gives it, Satan seeks to distort it; if Satan gives it, then the Lord seeks to sanctify it. If the pressure stems from heaven, Satan will seek to make it the opportunity to destroy us, whereas God sends it to prove us. It seems that the very weapon, which was the messenger of Satan, by which he was planning to overthrow the Apostle, was turned into a weapon to overthrow him! When Satan sent that thorn to buffet, his desire was that the old nature might express itself and be stimulated and roused into sinful action by it. The pressure continued, and Satan watched to see if it might be the means of rousing the self-life and the flesh into rebellion against the will of God. That is why it is called Satan’s messenger. But he found that all it did was to drive Paul to a new depth of trust, obedience, and faith in God.

And the pressure of the thorn and the power of Calvary became so completely bound together that Paul could say, **“... when I am weak, then I am strong.”** Unseen, the Lord Jesus watches His children and does not take the pressure off. He intends it to remain, perhaps for the rest of our lives. The Lord Jesus allows the pressure to continue that, in the severest moment of testing, it may drive us to His wounded side and teach us that for overwhelming pressure there is adequate grace. Stop praying for the removal of the thorn and understand the transforming power of the cross.

B. Transformation of Misery into Happiness:

“Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.”

I am so thankful, he says, for this thing that keeps me humble and dependent as God's trusting and believing child, I am so glad for it all, for if God does grant me blessing and success in any measure, it drives me constantly back to Him. There was nothing lovely about the cross and the crown of thorns that God gave to the Lord Jesus, and there is nothing lovely about the thorn that you have either. The cross seems so cruel and so dreadful. Your trial is all that, I am sure, almost too much to bear. But Paul says, **"... I was given..."** – all the time I have been trying to thrust it away, the Lord has been handing it back to me, saying, *"Take it, My child, this is from Me."*

In **Psalm 106:15** we read: **"... He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their souls."** If you keep saying, *"Lord, take the thorn away!"* and refuse to submit to its discipline, He may will do that very thing and send leanness to your soul. The thorn is the gift that is useful, necessary, when it comes from our Lord.

The Lord Jesus holds out His hand of love and says, *"Here's the thorn, my child. Will you lift your hand tremblingly, yet in faith and accept it?"* Look up, as Jesus did when He said, **"Father, not My will but Thine be done."** By faith say, *"Most gladly will I glory in my infirmities!"* When you do, you will rejoice in the ministry of the thorn, and to see God's glorious purpose for it, for He does not send any affliction unnecessarily to those He loves.

In the May/June 2025 edition of *Alliance Life* there is an exit interview with John Stumbo, reflecting on his past 12 years as president. In it, he encapsulates what I have been trying to say this morning. Dr. Stumbo was asked – **what has God taught you personally during your time as denominational president?** Here is his response:

“Being placed into this role made it... obvious that my leadership will be no better than my day-to-day listening and obedience to the Holy Spirit.

“At the time when I was first elected in 2013, I was barely physically strong enough to consider the role, having just had that health crisis and the healing that took place. God had miraculously touched my body, but it wasn’t like suddenly I was running ultra-marathons... There was a lot of recovery still needed.

“On the day of the election at Council 2013, I joined a time of prayer and fasting. I got alone... over in a corner and, with my face on the carpet, prayed, Lord, if you are calling me to this role, wouldn’t you give me one more healing to give me the strength that I need to do this? And what I sensed in my spirit was His response, ***No, I’m not going to give you another touch of healing. Instead, I’m going to give you everything you need for every day.***

Then Dr. Stumbo continues: “A thousand times since then, I’ve laid my head on the pillow at night after not knowing how I was going to handle some things throughout the day, and said, ***Well, Lord, You did it again. You gave me everything that I needed today.***”

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And the Lord grants the same amazing grace to you and me as we trust Him fully!

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- B. The series of prayers
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