

"The Thorn"

As a pastor I sometimes find comfort in seeing how the great missionary-evangelist of the early church, the Apostle Paul, had to defend himself against criticism and unfair accusations! I learned long ago that this goes with the territory if you're a pastor. People said Paul wasn't a true apostle, he wasn't called; that he was in ministry for the money; that he was dishonest and underhanded; that he was brave when he was away from people but chicken when he faced them. So in the letters he wrote that have become part of the New Testament, at times we find him trying to justify himself, and defend his calling and integrity.

One such section is 2 Corinthians, chapter 12. He tells about an extraordinary spiritual experience, a mystical experience, where he's caught up into heaven. That he's had such an encounter with God should help people realize he's a real, genuine apostle, he maintains. But...he says, something else happened to keep him from becoming big-headed and boastful about this tremendous spiritual experience: "Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated" (2 Corinthians 12:7).

A "thorn" in the flesh. The Greek word is "skolops", and means a stake (like a pointed wooden stake driven through his body). He claims this is a "messenger of Satan" to "harass" ("torment") him. The word "harass" or "torment" means to punch as with the fist!

What was this thorn in the flesh? Nobody knows for sure. Bible scholars have offered some possibilities. Perhaps it was some kind of spiritual temptation (the temptation to doubt or to shirk the responsibilities of the ministry). Maybe it was some fleshly, sexual temptation. It might have been the opposition that he frequently faced. It could have been his physical appearance, maybe some disfigurement that made him ugly (2 Corinthians 10:10 relates how some taunted him by saying "his bodily presence is weak"). Others feel it might have been epilepsy, or severe headaches, or malarial fever. There is some evidence from passages in Galatians that he may have had eye problems. The great Methodist evangelist, Harry Denman, once joked that it could have been a complaining mother-in-law! Well, we can't be sure, but whatever it was, Paul battled some affliction, some impediment, that to him was a thorn in the flesh that he carried throughout his life.

Any of us here who can't identify with that? We all have our thorns in the flesh, don't we? Something forced upon us - some ongoing obstacle, some impediment, some nagging affliction, forced on us for which we're not entirely to blame. *It could be some other person.* We even say things like, "He's a real thorn in my flesh", "She's always been a thorn in my side". (And this person might be saying that *we* are *their* thorn in their side!). This could be a family member, neighbor, someone at work or school - who can make life miserable for us!

Our thorn in the flesh could be some physical handicap or problem. Headaches. Allergies. Chronic back problems. Stuttering. Eye problem. Diabetes. *Or it could be our whole situation in life.* Maybe we're single and we long to marry, or we're widowed, and we're painfully lonely living alone. Or we feel we're stuck in a job we hate. *It could be any number of things that nag us and frustrate us and hurt us.*

Notice, Paul looks on his thorn in the flesh as a "messenger of Satan". "A messenger of Satan to torment me". There was this very elderly widowed lady who still lived alone in her own small home. It was near the end of the month, and she was down to last her bit of food, as she waited for her next Social Security check. It was summer, she had her windows open, and she was praying that the Lord would somehow provide her some food just to tide her over. Some neighborhood kids outside heard her. They were smart alecks, not very compassionate, and they thought they would have some fun with this. So they pooled together some money, went to a store and bought her a loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter, and a bag of apples. They then sneaked up to her house, put the groceries on her doorstep, rang the doorbell, and ran, hiding near a window. She opened her door, saw the food, and started praising God for sending her some food. The kids outside were rolling with laughter. One shouted, "Hey lady, God didn't send that food, *we brought it!*" She replied, "I don't care if *the devil* did bring it, God *sent it!*"

Jesus made it clear that Satan is out to destroy us! God wants wholeness and harmony in our lives and in society, and Satan wants to disrupt the goodness of life and destroy people. Now, keep in mind, a lot of times we suffer because of our own stupidity or selfishness or sin - but sometimes a force of evil, Satan, is responsible for suffering and the breakdown of life. *Sometimes Satan does afflict us with certain things. Satan was behind Paul's thorn!*

Understandably, Paul wanted God to take this thorn in the flesh away. Paul was man of prayer, so he prayed: "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Corinthians 12:8). That's the right thing to do! Take this affliction to God, who can heal the sick, clear away obstacles, and change people and situations. Paul said, "Lord Jesus, take this away!" *Three times he prayed that.*

People sometimes ask: How long should I keep praying for something before I give up asking? How long should I keep praying that my affliction or problem will be taken away? I've come to believe we should *keep on praying* for the thorns to be removed until one of the following things happen: God answers our prayer and takes away the thing causing our suffering; or God shows us that we're asking for the wrong thing (maybe it's selfish, foolish) and we change our request; or God gives us the inner assurance that the issue will be resolved in the future, and we don't have to ask any more; or, finally, we sense for sure that God is saying "no". No - that this is something we have to live with.

Paul prayed that his thorn in the flesh be removed. Remember what happened? **God said no.** Some of us know what that's all about, don't we? We've been asking God to take away a problem, an affliction, a burden. We pray. And nothing happens: healing doesn't come, the person who is a pain neck doesn't go away, the problem we face persists. *And much of the time we really don't know why. God's ways are not our ways; God's thoughts are not our thoughts.*

But you know, there is something more important than whether or not God solves our problems! And this is: How are we responding to the thorns in our life that don't go away? Are we growing through this suffering? Is our relationship to God becoming stronger as a

result? Is the light of our witness for Christ shining brighter in spite of - or even because of - the thorn that God will not take away?

If we look at the Scripture in 2 Corinthians 12, Paul tells us several things that happened as a result of his having to live with this thorn in the flesh. First of all, **it made him more humble.** 2 Corinthians 12:7 "Therefore, to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh." Paul had a lot he could have bragged about: a brilliant mind, great success in ministry, a tremendous leader, but there was this thing, this thorn, that kept him from being filled with pride. Imagine you are extremely good looking, you have a great body, your mind sharp as a tack, you've got a successful career, more money than know you know what to do with, you drive expensive, high end cars, you own gorgeous big home, you've got a great personality, charming, winsome, and on top of this you are deeply spiritual....(maybe you're thinking, "Hey, that's me you're describing!). If this were you, wouldn't it be easy to be arrogant, prideful?

But Paul's thorn in the flesh also drove him to rely on God and on God's power. He says, "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' so, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may swell in me. therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

John Ortberg is a gifted Christian pastor, teacher, and author. I've done some of his small group studies. When he was just out of seminary and first attempted preaching he fainted in the middle of his message. Can you imagine that! The next time he tried, the same thing happened. You just can't preach effectively when you keep fainting! There was no physical explanation. Every time he preached he didn't know if he'd make it. As a result, he says that every time he now speaks there is always a dependency on God for every word. Sometimes after preaching a sermon that seems to resonate with people, and if I get some positive comments from those in the worship service, I can be tempted to get a bit of a swelled head. But truthfully, that doesn't last long. Because I know who I am, and I am well aware of shortcomings, temptations that constantly remind me of my limitations, and my dependence on God. If you only knew some of the struggles in my life! And as I get older, I'm even more aware of my physical limitations. These thorns in the flesh serve well in keeping any pride in check!

Life is full of inspiring examples of people who have achieved much, in spite of "thorns" in their life - disabilities, limiting circumstances, disadvantages. Actor Burt Reynolds tells of a time when both he and Clint Eastwood got fired from Universal Studios. Burt Reynolds says, "I was told I couldn't act, and Clint was told he walked too slow and his Adam's apple was too big. As we were walking to our cars, we were quiet - but then, it's always quiet around Clint. Finally I said, 'You're in trouble Clint. I can take acting lessons, but you can't get a new Adam's apple.'" But in spite of a big Adam's apple and a slow walk, Clint Eastwood made it in Hollywood!

I know a lady who at young age developed degenerative eye disease - she was slowly losing her eyesight. It was hereditary - her father had had the same condition. Yet Connie went on to be a teacher and leader in the public school system, she was the organist and directed the choir in her church, and she even composed music.

A college professor named Gayle Pickwell was stricken with MS. Doctors gave him 10 years to live - he lived 18 years- radiantly! When he could no longer walk, he taught from a wheel chair. Later, when confined to his bed, he dictated books and articles. He lost his eyesight, but that didn't stop the march of his spirit. The college yearbook dedicated to him said, "The self-assurance of a strong leader, the insight of a philosopher, the winsomeness of a child - these qualities made of Gayle Pickwell a man never-to-be-forgotten by any who came within his magic circle. He accepted life's every challenge."

Millions of people have been inspired by Joni Eareckson Tada, the Christian lady who early in life broke her neck in a diving accident that left her a quadriplegic. Her thorn is a particularly debilitating one. No teen-ager wants to face a lifetime of paralysis. But she went on to be an author, artist, radio host and noted conference speaker, and a wife. Joni tells of being in the ladies room during a women's conference when a well-meaning woman, who was putting on lipstick in front of the mirror said, "Oh Joni, you always look so together and happy in your wheelchair. I wish I had your joy!" Several other ladies agreed and one asked, "Yes, how do you do it?" Joni replied, "I don't do it. Let me tell you how it works. After (my husband) Ken leaves in the morning at 6 a.m., I'm alone until I hear the door open at 7 a.m. That's when a friend arrives to get me up. While I listen to her make coffee I pray, "Oh Lord, my friend will soon give me a bath, dress me, sit me up in a chair, brush my hair and teeth, and send me out the door. I don't have the strength to face this routine one more time. I have no resources. I don't even have a smile to take into the day. But you do, Lord. May I have yours? God I need you so desperately."

"So what happens, then, when your friend comes through the bedroom door?" one woman asked. And Joni replied, "I turn my head toward her and give her a smile straight from heaven. It's not mine, it's God's! And so," she said gesturing toward her paralyzed legs, "whatever joy you see today was hard won this morning."

Paul wrote to the Corinthians Christians, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take (this thorn) away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Corinthians 12:8-9).

Bill Bouknight is a pastor who tells this story of visiting a special boy. "Years ago I visited a boy of about 12 in a facility for children with major medical problems. Tony was born with a spinal deformity; he was paralyzed from the waist down. Because of multiple surgeries he had spent lots of time in a body cast. More of his young life had been spent in institutions than at home. Tony had a handsome face and a quick smile. On the day that I visited, Tony had been watching his beloved Clemson Tigers on TV just before I arrived. He was able to see the TV by looking through a mirror. We had a friendly chat. His morale was amazing. Then I suggested that we have a prayer. And just before I uttered the first word of the prayer, Tony said in a soft and very sincere voice, "God sure has been good to me."

"Well, I tell you, I had trouble speaking. Those words caught me completely off-guard. Something in me wanted to cry out, 'Are you kidding me, Tony? God's been good to you? I can't see how. Look at what you have had to endure! But Someone greater and wiser whispered to me this message: 'Bill, don't be surprised at Tony's words. I have been here with him night and day. Remember, he belongs to me. I love him even more than his parents do. I have been 'gracing' that boy.'"

What's your thorn? Your handicap, your burden, your problem that won't go away? The important thing is not that we have it, *but what we will do with it!* We can gripe or complain. We can fall into the pit of self-pity. We can let this thorn run and ruin our life. Or we can surrender it to God - who will give us the strength to bear it - and even more: He will turn it into something good - something that will bring blessing to others and glory to God!

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