

THE THORN THAT WILL NOT GO AWAY (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)
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THESIS: To help Christians accept life's circumstances as God's will.

INTRODUCTION:

- A. The character/attitude of the apostle Paul.
 - 1. Individual of moral excellence, spiritual mindfulness, heavenward focus.
 - 2. But in 2 Corinthians we see a different Paul – see his pain, anxiety, and how his heart was broken for his desire to preach the gospel to every creature.

- B. Read **2 Cor. 11:1-5**
 - 1. Here Paul makes his case against the false teachers in Corinth who claimed Paul wasn't a real apostle.
 - 2. His concern was not for his own reputation, but that these false teachers would separate the Corinthian church from the word Paul preached and the God who authored it.
 - 3. Hence Paul resorts to "foolish" arguments or arguments from human weakness.
 - i. His pedigree (**11:22**)
 - ii. His persecutions (**11:23-25**)
 - iii. His perils (**11:26-27**)
 - iv. His pressures (**11:28**)
 - 4. **2 Corinthians 12:1-10** – Paul's last argument from weakness – his "thorn in the flesh"
 - i. Given to him because of a revelation given 14 years earlier (**12:1-6**)
 - ii. Paul had received three revelations (**Acts 9; Gal. 1:12; 1 Cor. 12**).
 - iii. The thorn in the flesh given so that he would be kept humble.

Let's examine what the Christian can learn from Paul's thorn . . .

I. WHAT WAS THE THORN?

- A. Must have been something
 - 1. Considering his trials, persecutions, etc., the thorn must have been something pretty bad or he wouldn't have even noticed it.
 - 2. We think of a thorn as an irritating little sticker – a nuisance.
 - 3. Greek word translated "thorn" is the word "stake" – a constant source of profound pain (Compare list in **2 Cor. 11**).
 - 4. Given 14 years earlier – probably around 39 or 40 AD (assuming 2 Cor. Written one year after 1 Cor., which was written around 52 AD).

- B. Guesses as to what thorn is:
 - 1. Physical illness – something that would have prevented Paul from carrying on his work of preaching the gospel, the only thing that mattered to Paul.

2. Eye disease, epilepsy, seizures, malaria.
3. Unyielding carnal temptation.
4. Rejection of Christ by the Jews (cf. **Rom. 9:1-4; 10:1**).
5. Burden of the churches (cf. **2 Cor. 11:28**)
6. All of these – none of these.

C. What we know for sure:

1. Moved Paul to plead three times for release (**2 Cor. 12:8**).
2. Probably some time between appeals.
3. He sought release from this thorn.

II. OUR THORNS

A. We can all identify with wanting release from a “thorn”:

1. *Disabling malady* – not a headache or sore back; but some physical constraint that keeps us from being what we want to be for the Lord. A constant ailment that hurts and that makes us want it all to be over.
2. *Deep illicit desire* – some carnal temptation that appeals to us and we hate it and we fight it every day and we wish it would go away before we give into it again (i.e. addictions – alcohol, drug, sex, pornography, etc.)
3. *Personal relationship* –
 - i. **Marriage** – our spouse is the constant source of our heartache. They’re bitter, harsh, unkind, unheeding and we must live in intimate contact with them day in and day out with no encouragement from them whatsoever. Try as hard as we can they won’t change.
 - ii. **Parent/Child** – Possible the parent is the one who taunts us and crushes our feelings whenever we try to do our best, it’s never good enough. Or possible the child is grown up and is saying hurtful things and living a rebellious life and we have no more influence over them.
 - iii. **Brethren** – Perhaps our nemesis is a brother or sister in the Lord, creating problems for us, putting us down, criticizing us, putting us down when we try our best, or diminishing or sense of value of ourselves.

B. We all have problems and we have to deal with them:

III. HOW PAUL DEALT WITH HIS THORN

A. He did not charge God foolishly:

1. Paul didn’t say to God, “I’m trying to serve you and all I get is troubles.”
2. This is an expression of bitterness and accusation.
3. His attitude was that God had given him this thorn (**2 Cor. 12:7**) for his benefit.
4. The thorn was given to keep Paul humble, and the devil never wanted to keep anyone humble. It was a messenger of Satan. This indicates that God allows Satan to attempt to ensnare us, but God can turn it around for His own will.

B. Turned to God for help:

1. Paul pleaded with the Lord three times (**2 Cor. 12:8**).
 2. Paul trusted God cared and that He could do something about it.
 3. What Paul never forgot was his gratitude to God for forgiving him, the chief of sinners (**1 Tim. 1:15**).
 4. When we forget what God has already done for us in our forgiveness, then we will forget what God is doing for us today.
 5. Paul was confident of God's benefit to work out the situation for the better.
 6. Even preachers and church leaders have problems to overcome.
 7. Instead of worrying and complaining – we need to get down on our knees and ask for God's help.
- C. Paul realized God was smarter than he was:
1. The answer from God was “NO” (2 Cor. 12:9).
 2. We need to be glad for God's “no's”.
 3. Maybe God is smarter than I am and knows what I need better than I do.
 4. Paul was told -- “It's never going to stop.”
- D. Paul accepted that answer:
1. “My strength is made perfect in weakness” (**2 Cor. 12:9**).
 2. Purpose of affliction was to trust in God instead of self (**2 Cor. 1:8-9**).
 - i. Paul was brought low that he might trust in God.
 - ii. God must be our ONLY resource (never self).
 3. Even Paul had to grow spiritually (Phil. 4:11).
 4. God wants us to grow – but sometimes our hands are too full.
 5. We must be emptied so God can then fill us.

IV. HOW PAUL USED HIS THORNS

- A. Two-year imprisonment at Caesarea
1. **BAD** – Paul arrested in the temple in Jerusalem and imprisoned (**Acts 21:27; 23:23ff**). While the world is dying and going to hell, Paul sits in prison in Caesarea.
 2. **GOOD** – He uses imprisonment to preach to Felix and Drusilla (**Acts 24:24-27**); He preaches to Festus, Herod Agrippa II and Bernice (**Acts 26:29**).
- B. Voyage to Rome
1. **BAD** – On voyage to Rome Paul suffers shipwreck (**Acts 27:41**); He spent three months during winter on the island of Malta (**Acts 28:11**).
 2. **GOOD** – He healed many people (**Acts 28:9**).
- C. Roman Imprisonment
1. **BAD** – Spent two years in custody while awaiting a hearing before the Roman emperor (**Acts 28:30**).
 2. **GOOD** – Despite all of this Paul says these things have turned out for the furtherance of the gospel (**Phil. 1:14**).

3. **BAD** – Some evil brethren at Rome began preaching to prove they’re better than Paul (**Phil. 1:15-18**).
4. **GOOD** – Paul’s response is to be glad the gospel is being preached (**Phil. 1:19**).

V. WHAT DO WE DO WITH OUR THORNS

- A. We all have thorns (never-ending trials)
 1. The thorns may be of the body, mind or spirit.
 2. Having thorns does not give us the right to quit trying and be overcome with self-pity and act as if God doesn’t care.
 3. No matter how tempting it is, we cannot crawl into bed with our face to the wall. To do so is nothing less than turning against the God we serve.

- B. There is power to overcome
 1. We cannot look to ourselves to succeed (**2 Cor. 12:9**).
 - i. Looking to self makes us egocentric and man-centered and ultimately weak.
 2. We must look to God as our source of strength.
 - i. Listen to Paul: “Christ will also be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death” (**Phil. 1:20-21**).
 - ii. Paul died with that “stake” still embedded in him.
 - iii. How did he endure? By looking to God for grace and allowing Him to be the source of strength.
 - iv. Keep praying – if the thorn is not removed, then for strength to endure.
 - v. Acceptance of our thorn as God’s will is the answer.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

- A. We must trust in God’s grace -- one day at a time.
- B. No matter how difficult the “thorn” we must continue to do the next right thing.
- C. Words inscribed in a prison locker – “bloom where you’re planted”.
- D. Serenity prayer – “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”
- E. “When I am weak, then am I strong” (**2 Cor. 12:10**).