

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

### WHAT ABOUT THORNS?

A man went to his doctor and complained of constant headaches. The doctor asked him if he smoked. “Yes, I do,” said the fellow. “Well, stop smoking,” suggested the physician. So he stopped but the headaches persisted. He went back to his doctor. “Do you drink?” “Yeah, I drink considerably.” “Stop it.” So he stopped. The headaches reoccurred. He saw his physician again. “Are you engaged in stressful situations at your work place?” “Yes, I am.” “Then, quit your job.” The man quit his job and took another position with another company, but his headaches did not go away. Every day the pain pulsed through his head. Some time later, it was discovered that he was wearing a size 15 shirt collar around his size 16 neck. No wonder he always had a headache! (Charles R. Swindoll, *Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Back*, pp. 44-45)

Wouldn't it be nice if all of our aches and pains could be solved or fixed that easily? But real life isn't like that. There are problems and pressures that afflict us quite often and they may linger for days, weeks, months, and even years. Some illnesses are chronic in nature and we learn to live with the physical malady on a daily basis for we really don't have a choice in the matter. Other pains may be manifested by physical ailments but the real cause is mental, emotional or spiritual in nature. We know the pain of divorce, the death of a loved one, or the loss of a job. Sometimes we live with guilt, anxiety, depression, loneliness or emptiness. And, sin eats away at the soul.

If it's true that “misery loves company,” then we can feel a real kinship with the Apostle Paul for here is a classmate in the school of hard knocks. Paul had endured and survived imprisonments, beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, danger from robbers, his own people, Gentiles, sleep deprivation, hunger, thirst, and exposure to the cold.

On top of all that, Paul alluded to some “thorn in the flesh.” He didn't identify his particular ailment but speculations include: epilepsy, migraine headaches, malaria, possibly glaucoma, perhaps stuttering or a physical disfigurement. Could it have been some type of mental illness, depression, or temptation toward pride or impurity?

Whatever his “thorny” problem, Paul reminds me of the notice in the “Lost and Found” section of the classified ads in the newspaper: “Lost – pet dog. Brown and black fur with several bald patches due to hot spot. Walks with a limp due to auto accident. Cataract in right eye. Bobbed tail – didn't get out of the way of the door. Stitches on back left hip – got too close to a bull. Left ear bitten off in a dog fight. Cat scratches on the nose. Answers to the name *Lucky*.”

The Apostle Paul probably didn't think of himself as “lucky” but he did consider himself to be *blessed* by God! Years earlier, while en route to Damascus to persecute the Christians, he met and was saved by the risen Lord Jesus Christ, who, in turn, called Paul to be a missionary to the Gentiles. And, in the lesson for today, Paul disclosed that he had a wonderful, mystical, spiritual experience; he was transported somehow to the heavenly realm where he saw visions and heard spiritual truths too deep to be recounted.

These divine revelations underscored Paul's appointment as a chosen leader in the Church by God and refuted his critics, who had tried to dispute Paul's claim to be an apostle. Paul didn't want to boast but, if forced to do so, he would boast - only his boasting would be done in the Lord! Paul gave credit where credit was due!

But, what can be said about Paul's thorn in the flesh, and what about our own thorns for that matter? Where are the blessings to be found within those daily frustrations, irritations, and pains? It's important to note up front that Paul never attributed his pain as being caused by God. Paul said, instead, "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." The thorn came from that evil power that opposes God. Twice Paul said the thorn prevented him from walking around "high and mighty."

Three times Paul asked God to remove the thorn. Rather than get the answer he wanted or hoped for, instead, God told Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." More than anything else – whether our pains are removed or not – God will always be with us; although we may feel alone, God will never, ever abandon us! God stands by us to help us in times of trouble or need.

Furthermore, the thorn kept Paul focused on his need for God. Paul was utterly dependent on God and the strength God alone would provide for Paul at all times. The thorn, while it was a pain in the neck (or elsewhere!) to Paul, it kept him humble and, even more, it made Paul trust in God. The old preacher use to say that sickness has its value, because, when you're flat on your back, there's no place to look but *up!*

We don't yearn for pain but, when it comes, pain can lead us to God and teach us that God's grace is sufficient. Then, we can understand better the paradoxical nature of Paul's statement that "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." Thorns help to put life in perspective. When we understand that there is a fine line between health and sickness, life and death, then we are more apt to treat each day as a precious gift from our loving God. When we are faced with difficulties that do not go away, God's Spirit enables and empowers us to face the day with more courage, patience, faith, hope, love, compassion, strength, and endurance.

Along with our dependence upon the Lord, God will surely lead us to interdependence within the community as we "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (which is love – see Gal. 6:2). Those of us who are wounded or afflicted by thorns can be used by God to relate to and help others, who are going through similar difficulties. We help each other down the road and, together, we rely on the One who is our refuge, strength and help in times of trouble. Despite our thorns, we can rise above them to become effective witnesses to the love and compassion of God.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper reminds us anew that Jesus, by his death on the cross, secured our salvation from our sins; and, by his resurrection, God gave us the gift of eternal life. Jesus' crown of thorns gave way to a crown of glory. And, Paul's thorn in the flesh eventually led to the crown of righteousness. We can be assured that whatever thorns invade our lives, God, who is so loving, good, and powerful, can and will wrestle good out of bad and transform our suffering into saving grace.

Do not waste your suffering by turning away from God or those whom God sends to help you (your family members, friends, or this fellowship of believers). Instead, grow in spite of your thorns; grow into the deeper knowledge that God's grace is sufficient, that God's power is made perfect in weakness, and, that whenever we are weak, then we are strong. And, let us keep on praying, relating to, and trusting in the Lord our God – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Randall C. Stevens - First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA – July 5, 2009)