

2 Corinthians 12:7b-10

I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, so that I would not become arrogant. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that he would take it away from me. ⁹And he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me.

¹⁰That is why I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then am I strong.

Weaknesses

I.

Everyone has weaknesses, don't they? Most of us don't mind admitting that we *do* have weaknesses, but we aren't willing to point them out to others. People are much more willing to list their strengths.

That's what happens when called workers of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod are asked to fill out their self-assessment forms on what's known as the “WELS Cloud.” Each called worker is to list any number of things that might be of interest to a calling body. In most cases the pastor or teacher just lists the strengths, admitting to varying degrees of ability or experience in each. A few things might be listed that the pastor or teacher is unable to do, or would really rather not try it at all.

Paul starts today's text by saying: “I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, so that I would not become arrogant” (2 Corinthians 12:7, EHV). Paul calls his weakness a thorn in his flesh.

Think about how pesky a thorn is. You *thought* you got it out, but days later its still tender. A little piece stayed behind when part of the thorn was pulled out. You get out the hydrogen peroxide and start to try again to work the thorn out of your skin.

Undoubtedly, Paul's weakness was more than a pesky thorn under his skin, but everyone can relate when it's described that way. Something in Paul's life was an annoyance. He couldn't shake it. Something in his life just wasn't quite right.

It must have been frustrating. Paul's call sheet would have been filled with strength after strength. Many were truly unusual.

Just before today's text, Paul wrote: “I know a man in Christ who, fourteen years ago, was carried up to the third heaven (whether in the body, I do not know, or out of the body, I do not know—God knows)... ⁴ [he] heard inexpressible words that a man cannot possibly speak” (2 Corinthians 12:2, 4, EHV). Who was the man who had such an unusual experience? It was Paul, himself. He said: “Therefore, to keep me from becoming arrogant due to the extraordinary nature of these revelations, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, so that I would not become arrogant” (2 Corinthians 12:7, EHV).

Unusual experiences had the potential to make Paul arrogant. There were plenty of other things, too. Paul could speak of a conversion experience like no one else. Who else had seen Jesus himself in a vision on the road to Damascus? Who else had been asked by Jesus himself why he was persecuting the Lord? Only Paul had been so blinded by the light that

he had to be led into the city to wait for the Lord to send someone to restore his sight before Paul would be sent off by Jesus on other missions.

Besides a truly unique conversion experience, Paul had just spent the previous chapter of his letter talking about his experiences as a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. While he never spoke to huge churches filled with people hanging on his every word, he had proclaimed Jesus boldly and fearlessly in all kinds of circumstances and situations. Because of his fearless proclamation of God's Word, he had been beaten, he had been shipwrecked several times, he had been in prison because of the gospel.

Strength after strength populated Paul's call sheet. He seemed to literally have it all.

But there was that pesky thorn in the flesh. Scholars have come up with all kinds of possible explanations. It could have been something brought on by malaria. Perhaps epilepsy, severe headaches like migraines. Perhaps another painful physical condition. Maybe it was some temptation he had to fight against. Even some troublesome individual he had to deal with again and again could have been his thorn.

Paul isn't specific. God doesn't give us any clues elsewhere, either. All we know is that something was always there, festering just beneath the surface.

What it was is not important. How he *got* it is another matter. "I was given..." Apparently, it was no accident that Paul had to face his thorn in the flesh. And the reason Paul had to deal with it day after day was "so that I would not become arrogant."

II.

"Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that he would take it away from me" (2 Corinthians 12:8, EHV). Paul pleaded. He was convinced it would be better if this problem would go away. If he didn't have this nagging problem, just *think* what he could do for God's kingdom with his vast list of strengths.

Three times he pleaded. Who among us would plead with God only three times that he would take away our biggest problem? Besides, the biggest problem seems more like the elephant in the room than a mere pesky thorn in the flesh. Just like Paul thought, how much good could you do for your family, and for the family of God, if your biggest problem was removed?

Paul opened by saying his thorn was to keep him from being arrogant. Perhaps one of his weaknesses was pride. That is a thorn that infects many people. Maybe you can think of plenty of things you could be proud of in your life. Maybe you even take a misguided pride in your life of faith and your own spiritual condition.

What happened after all of Paul's pleading? "[God] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Corinthians 12:9, EHV).

God's answer was, "not right now; my grace is sufficient for you." Maybe you have received answers to your prayers that are identical to Paul's. Your thorn in the flesh, your elephant in the room, has *not* gone away, despite repeated pleas to the Lord in prayer.

III.

Grace is undeserved love. God's undeserved love for all of us is seen in something Paul said much earlier in this letter: "God made him, who did not know sin, to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21, EHV). Jesus is the One who did not know sin. He had no false pride or any other sin. Jesus is the only human ever to live who never once sinned in any way. Despite his complete innocence, God saw Jesus as sin personified—God looked at Jesus as sin itself.

As Jesus hung on the cross, God didn't see his sinless Son, but every thought, word, or action that has violated God's perfect will. That's what he saw.

All of that must have run through Paul's mind when God told him, "My grace is sufficient for you." Paul had forgiveness for every one of his sins, just as you and I do. And so Paul could conclude: "Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me."¹⁰ That is why I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10, EHV).

Jesus *appeared* to be weak as he hung on the cross. He *appeared* to be powerless and unable to accomplish anything. Appearances can be deceiving. Just when he *appeared* to be powerless, he was displaying the limitlessness of his power. Jesus was paying for the sins of every man, woman, and child who would ever live. He was showing his strength.

IV.

"Whenever I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10, EHV). You and I can say the same thing as Paul. Our personal weaknesses show the strength of Christ.

What can you do to participate or help in your salvation? When you honestly admit your own weaknesses and faults, you have to admit there is nothing you can do to be saved. When the thorn of your own sin nags at you, you realize you have to turn to Jesus for the cleansing power of his forgiveness.

"Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses" (2 Corinthians 12:9, EHV). Have you ever noticed what flawed human beings all those heroes of the faith were? Peter denied Jesus. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob each took matters into their own hands, thinking that God needed *their* help in fulfilling his promises to them. Paul needed a thorn in the flesh to keep him from becoming arrogant.

Perhaps if people couldn't see that we, too, are flawed human beings, they wouldn't realize how dependant we are on the Lord Jesus for salvation. Our weaknesses are evidence that we need the grace of God poured out on us to cover our sins.

Your personal weaknesses and mine are opportunities to display God's goodness and strength in our lives. God bless you, in and through your weaknesses. Amen.