

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

⁷Therefore, 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. 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.

Thorny Situations

I.

You thought you had gotten it out. Three days later the area is still tender. The reddened skin still hurts when you apply the tiniest bit of pressure on or nearby. A little piece must have broken off inside your skin when you pulled out the thorn days ago. Sighing, you grab the little brown jug of hydrogen peroxide for the follow-up you know you are about to need, take out a needle and sterilize it the best you can, and set to work on the thorn in your flesh.

No doubt that’s not the kind of thorn in the flesh Paul was referring to, but almost everyone can relate when it’s described in that way. There was something in Paul’s life that was an annoyance. He just couldn’t shake it. Like a thorn under the skin, it didn’t keep him from functioning, but it was an ever-present reminder that something just wasn’t quite right. Why was Paul bringing this up? Let’s look at some background information to see.

In the opening verses of this chapter Paul says: “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).

He was speaking of himself. You can tell because Paul opens our lesson by saying: “Therefore, to keep *me* from becoming arrogant due to the extraordinary nature of these revelations, I was given a thorn in my flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7, EHV emphasis added).

There were so many things that could have made Paul an arrogant man. He 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 had been asked by Jesus himself why he was persecuting the Lord? Who besides Paul had been so blinded by the light that he had to be led into the city to wait for the Lord to send an emissary to lay his hands on him and restore his sight before Paul went off to learn more about Jesus?

Besides his conversion experience, Paul could list all kinds of trials and tribulations in his life as a Christian, as we mentioned several weeks ago. His litany of trials was in Chapter 11 of this very Letter. Paul could boast about such things because he had endured them for the sake of the gospel. While he didn’t preach to amphitheaters filled with teeming masses of humanity like some 20th and 21st century televangelists, he spoke about Jesus boldly and fearlessly in many and diverse circumstances and situations. Paul was a champion of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who was called the “apostle to the Gentiles” (Romans 11:13, EHV). His letters comprise 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament and have proclaimed the gospel to countless millions throughout the centuries.

When you picture Paul you think of someone tall and strong, bold and fearless. He had

so many gifts, so much ability. He could literally do *anything* for the Lord and for the message of the gospel. Paul had it all.

“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). What was it? Scholars have come up with all kinds of possible explanations: malaria, epilepsy, severe headaches—like migraines, some other painful physical condition. Some have suggested that it was some particular temptation he had to fight against. Others have said it might even have been a particularly troublesome person he had to deal with consistently. Paul isn’t specific, and God doesn’t give us any further clues anywhere else, either. Some nagging problem was always there—nagging and festering just beneath the surface.

What it was is not important. *How he got it* is another matter. “*I was given a thorn in my flesh.*” It was no accident that Paul had to face this thorn, whatever it was. God *gave* it to him “so that [he] would not become arrogant.”

“Three 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’” (2 Corinthians 12:8-9, EHV).

Paul tried to get out the spiritual tweezers and needle and bottle of hydrogen peroxide to get that pesky thorn out. He prayed to the Lord that it would be taken away. *Paul*, in his infinite wisdom, thought it would be better for everyone concerned—especially him—if this thorn were taken away. If he didn’t have to deal with this nagging problem just *think* about what good he could do for the Kingdom of God!

God disagreed. In *God’s* infinite wisdom—which, after all, is far greater than that of Paul or anyone else—God decided it would be better for Paul to have to continue to deal with this thorn in the flesh.

II.

There is a thorn deeply embedded in our flesh, too. No amount of digging is going to pry it out. No hydrogen peroxide can bubble away at the infection. No self-discipline can remove the thorn. We’re stuck with it, just as Paul was.

Once Paul called himself the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). His life as a Pharisee before the Lord Jesus blinded him and brought him to faith on the road to Damascus was one filled with pride. Today he says that this thorn was given him so that he wouldn’t become arrogant. Perhaps one of Paul’s chief shortcomings was the potential for pride.

That’s a thorn that infects most people. Whatever the particular sin for you, the thorn that is common to every human being is the thorn of sin. Sin is deeply embedded in our flesh. Perhaps, like Paul, you can think of plenty of things you could be proud of in your life. Maybe you even take a perverse, misguided pride in your life of faith and your own spiritual condition.

“Three 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’” (2 Corinthians 12:8-9, EHV).

Three times. Such a persistent thorn probably got more than three prayers, but three very special times Paul chose to bring this specific issue to the Lord in earnest, concentrated prayer.

Have you ever pleaded with the Lord about some nagging thorn you’ve had to deal with? I’ll bet you have. Perhaps it was a physical ailment. Maybe a particular sin that seems to haunt you again and again. Any one of a thousand things could just seem to be nagging

thorns under your skin.

Maybe he granted your prayer and used his omnipotent tweezers to take the thorn away. But perhaps, like Paul, his answer indicated that you would just have to deal with the problem for the time being.

III.

“My grace is sufficient for you.” Last week Paul sprinkled that word “grace” in to flavor his description of the offerings of believers. He could do this because two weeks ago in the our readings he said: “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 willingly became sin personified to go to the cross to pay for the sins of all—sins of arrogance and pride and every other sin—so that we might be forgiven and be made heirs of eternal life with him.

“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” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10, EHV).

Jesus *appeared* to be weak when he hung on the cross. He *appeared* to be powerless and unable to accomplish anything. But just when he *appeared* to be powerless he was displaying the limitlessness of his power—he was paying for the sins of every man, woman, and child who ever lived. He was showing his strength.

IV.

The strength of the Lord Jesus now rests on us. “When I am weak, then am I strong.” Our personal weaknesses show the strength of Christ. When you acknowledge your own faults, we have to admit there is nothing *you* personally can do to achieve salvation. 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, purchased and won on the cross, given to you in baptism and given and poured out for you each time you receive his Supper.

“I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses.” All the heroes of the faith were deeply flawed human beings. Peter, seemingly the strongest of the disciples, denied Jesus. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob each took matters into their own hands, thinking that God somehow 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 that *we* need the Lord Jesus for salvation. Our thorns are evidence that we need the grace of God poured out on us like a healing salve to cover over our sin. Thorny situations serve as opportunities to display God’s goodness in our lives. May God bless us, even while we deal with thorns. Amen.