

### **Boast in Your Weaknesses!**

***7Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.<sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.<sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.<sup>10</sup> That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*** NIV 2011

The ancient Romans prided themselves on their virtue, their discipline, their roads and their military might. When a Roman legion returned to Rome, they would march through the city in a big victory parade. Ahead of the column was a magnificent chariot with two men in it: the victorious general and a slave. Now the Romans had a unique custom. During the parade, as the general heard all the cheers and praises and pride began to swell up in his heart, the slave repeatedly whispered in his ear, "Remember, thou art mortal."

We have that voice whispering in our ears as well, but it is not coming from the lips of a slave. It comes from our own weaknesses, or as Paul calls it in our text, our "thorn in the flesh." These thorns hurt. They probably are keeping us from doing things we wish we could do. They remind us we are mortal. But don't look upon such thorns as some unfortunate affliction. Rather, like Paul, let's boast about in them. First, let's see what are these thorns.

#### *I. Why we have thorns in the flesh.*

By his own admission, Paul confessed he had his weaknesses. He considered himself the chief of sinners. He told the Corinthians he was not eloquent. He was accused of being timid. But there was one weakness that really bothered him. He called it his "thorn in the flesh." ***7Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*** There are all sorts of theories on what this thorn might be. Some speculated it as some physical disability such as recurring symptoms from malaria. Others suggested it was a speech impediment. Maybe it was emotional or psychological. Luther thought it was some sort of spiritual struggle. But it is good that Paul does not tell us exactly what it is. This way we can all relate to Paul in our text because each of us has his or her thorns in the flesh. What is yours? Do you struggle with a recurring physical disability? Do you have emotional problems or mental?

From where do these thorns come from? They usually come from a broken world where things are not perfect. Once Jesus and his disciples came upon a paralyzed man and they asked him who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born with a disability. Jesus said neither. Bad things happen in a broken world. Children are born with disabilities, not because God is punishing their parents, but because go wrong in an imperfect world. As it says in Ecclesiastes, ***Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.***

But not all of our problems or weaknesses come naturally from a sinful world. Sometimes there are special thorns. Paul's was a special one. ... ***I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*** Paul's particular thorn was given him by Satan. Remember what Jesus said to Peter on Maundy Thursday? He said that Satan wanted to sift him like wheat. Remember Job? The reason all those bad things happened to him was Satan thought Job would prove to be a hypocrite if he faced some trouble. Undoubtedly Satan wanted to stop Paul from serving as a missionary. What would Satan want to keep you from doing?

But there is one big condition on these special thorns. Satan can't do anything to us without God's permission. Satan couldn't do anything to Job without God's permission. Undoubtedly Paul's thorn came because God gave Satan permission. And God puts limits on Satan. Satan couldn't harm Job at first, and later, given permission, he couldn't kill him. Who knows what injuries or disabilities God kept out of your life. But why would God allow bad things to happen to good people, especially those he calls his children? Why would he give Satan permission to hurt us? Leave it up to God to find a way to use even Satan for our good.

#### *II. How we can boast about our thorns and weaknesses.*

There was a reason God allowed Satan to torment Paul. Right before our text Paul admitted something. ... ***because of these surpassingly great revelations.*** Fifteen years earlier, after Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, he went to Arabia. It was there God gave him these special revelations which he described earlier in chapter 12. He literally was caught up into Paradise. Have you received such revelations? Did God give you a glimpse of Paradise? If you did, we would all know. You would have told us and we would think you are something special. It would have been easy for Paul to think he was something special. ***7Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.*** Satan wanted to hurt Paul. In fact he wanted to use this thorn to slow Paul down and hinder his ministry. And God gave him permission to? Yes, because God used Satan for Paul's good. He used him to keep Paul humble and not conceited.

You are blessed by the Lord, and you have some blessings others do not have. There are people here who look up to you because of these blessings. But it may be easy, too easy, to let such things go to our heads. You may think that you are better than others. So God keeps us humble. Remember, pride goes before the fall. His simple command to never boast but be humble is enough. But don't be surprised if he uses some thorn to keep you humble.

Paul's thorn tormented him so much he prayed for its removal three times. Think about it. This is the Apostle Paul. God gave him the power to raise one person from the dead after he fell out of a window during one of his sermons, and to perform many other miracles. But there was nothing Paul could do to remove this thorn. And it was making his ministry harder. But Paul also saw God's purpose in his thorn, to keep him humble. As a result he boasted about his thorn and weaknesses. Do not look upon your thorns as unfortunate accidents. Rather, look at it this way. When God allows things to happen, he twists and turns them into some good for us. So, don't sit there lamenting your thorns. Trust God has a good purpose for it. You may even boast about them.

And what can we boast about with our thorns? ***Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.*** Jesus promises us that when we knock, the door will be opened. When we ask, he will give it to us. When we seek, we find. He emboldens us to pray because he promises to answer every prayer. We love it when he says yes. How many prayers of thanksgiving have we offered here because God said yes? We can even tolerate an occasional "not yet" answer to our prayer. But it is hard when God says no. Three times Paul prayed earnestly to have this thorn removed. Three times God said no.

Do you think Paul was disappointed with God's answer? His thorn must have tested his patience. It hurt much. It also was making it harder to be a missionary for Christ. If you have a speck in your eye, you cannot drive well or read, watch TV. If you have a coughing spell, you cannot hold a conversation. If the speck or cough goes away, you can do those things again. Paul saw the thorn as a hindrance to his ministry. And God said no. Keep it.

But did you catch what else God said? He added, ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*** Sufficient. That means we have more than enough. Was there enough rain this summer? Some, yes, but enough? We could use more. How much paint is enough to paint your living room? How much gas is enough to drive to Shakopee? God is saying that his grace is sufficient. In other words, we have enough, more than enough.

His grace was sufficient when it came to our problem with sin. A full tank of gas means you can drive to Shakopee and back, and God's grace is more than enough to fix our sin problem. Our thorns and other ailments are proof positive that our sin has broken this world. Our pains are also the precursors or beginning pains of something coming down the road, a place of eternal, unbearable suffering, an eternal fire where the worm never dies. But God's grace moved him to plan our salvation down to the smallest detail. He sent his Christ to be the atoning sacrifice for our sin. His grace is sufficient. All sins are paid for. Guilt is removed. Heaven is promised. There is nothing missing. It is done.

And that very same grace which provides pardon and peace is sufficient to give us the strength and endurance to make it through this life. In fact, our thorns prove something. They prove God's power is made perfect in weakness. Satan intended the thorn to hurt Paul and make it harder to do his work. But Paul found out that it actually helped his ministry. It kept the spotlight on Christ and not on Paul. As people listened to this weak, frail, thorn ridden Paul, they could only conclude that there must be some special power behind this weak man. People believed, not because Paul was eloquent because he wasn't. They believed by the power of God. They didn't believe because Paul was so special. He wasn't. In fact, he had his problems and issues like everyone else. They believed because of the power of God.

Our weaknesses become opportunities, and our thorns show this power comes from God. I ask you, who preaches a better sermon, a pastor walking into the nursing home with his Bible, or a little old lady, broken down over the years in a wheelchair and has more than her share of aches and pains, but praises God and thanks her Christ for saving her? What is a better sermon, a member with money in the bank and everything is going his way and sings hymns with gusto, or a child suffering from a degenerative disease in the hospital with tubes sticking in here and out there, singing, "Jesus loves me, this I know?"

So join Paul in saying, ***That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*** We are strong, as strong as Christ. Amen.