

Your Thorn in the Flesh

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Word of Faith Rod Parsley is pastor of World Harvest Church in Cleveland, Ohio. He said, “Forget Paul’s Thorn! We know God has the power to heal...It is His absolute and perfect will to heal you. We do not have to sift through Paul’s thorn, Job’s boils, or Timothy’s sick stomach to try to understand the perfect will of God. You must realize Paul’s infirmity was not in his flesh; it was his soulish man-his mind, his will, and emotions. We know this because he told us the thorn was a messenger of Satan sent to buffet him...It is time preachers stop trying to make excuses for their lack of faith and understanding of the Word of God” (*Repairers of the Breach*, page 267, 268).

Paul’s thorn in the flesh was in the flesh or his body. Was Job’s boils in his mind? Was Timothy’s stomach problem all in his mind?

If you have a physical affliction it is not necessarily because you have rebelled against God or you lack faith in God.

Literal thorns are the result of Adam’s fall into sin. In Genesis 3:18 God told Adam and Eve that one of the painful results of their fall into sin was “thorns and thistles shall the earth bring forth.”

Physical problems like thorns are the consequence of Adam’s sin not your sin. At least that was the case with Paul’s thorn in the flesh. God gave him the thorn to prevent him was sinning not to stop him from sinning. Paul’s thorn in the flesh was not the result of a “lack of faith and understanding of the Word of God.”

Listen to Paul’s explanation in verse seven: “Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.”

1. What are Thorns in the Flesh?

(What ever the thorn was it was not a finger prick from a rose bush. It was more like a stake on which criminals were impaled. Origen, the early church father used it in reference to Christ’s crucifixion, according to the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament).

- a. Early church fathers thought it was spiritual temptation or a besetting sin because of verse seven. The thorn could not be a besetting sin from given to Paul from God when God does not tempt.
- b. Preacher Chrysostom believed the thorn was a person like Hymenaius or Alexander because Paul referred to the thorn as “a messenger of Satan.”
- c. Greek scholar Lightfoot identified the thorn with a physical disease like epilepsy.

- d. Others believe the thorn was migraine headaches.
- e. Still others have speculated that the thorn was Paul's less than desired appearance which the Corinthians criticized in 2 Corinthians 10:10. It is doubtful that Paul was requesting that God perform plastic surgery in removing his thorn in the flesh.
- f. Paul's speech or even ability to speak or preach was also attacked and thought to be his thorn according to 2 Corinthians 11:6.
- g. C. I. Scofield wrote in his study Bible notes on 2 Corinthians 12:7 that some have conjectured that Paul's thorn was an eye disease but the Scriptures are silent on this matter.

It is not nearly as important to know what Paul's physical affliction was as to know he had some physical problem and that we identify with Paul and benefit from his suffering.

2. Why are Thorns in the Flesh Given?

a. Thorns Are Given To Prevent Pride

- 1) Paul had a heavenly experience of glory in 12:1-7 could have easily led to pride.

Paul is defending his gospel ministry because the carnal Corinthians were falsely accusing him. He is giving his resume of suffering in contrast to the false teachers with whom the Corinthians were enamored. His defense begins in 11:21. He was given special revelation because he was an apostle. But he was not bragging as his opponents were charging. His experience was 14 years ago and Paul had never boasted.

Can you imagine someone today having an experience like Paul's. They would appear on religious TV and then write a book. We don't have to imagine because that is what Jesse Duplanits did in his book *Heaven: Close Encounters of the God Kind*. In this book he tells about his 1988 five hour trip to heaven. You can also hear tell his story on YouTube or on his DVD. Contrast that response to Paul's.

- 2) Paul's thorn was preventive. The suffering of some of the Corinthians, however, was corrective as is made clear in 1 Corinthians 11:30. Some of the Corinthians were sick and some were dead because of their sin. But not Paul.

I remember one preacher, James Zaspel, who said when he was a boy, his parents hung a paddle (for spanking) on the wall and had written under it the words of the great hymn, "I need thee every hour." Our problems can be divine deterrents to prevent us from becoming proud.

b. Thorns Are Given So We Will Pray

- 1) Paul prayed because he was pierced. So many times the only time we effectively and

fervently pray is when the burden is so heavy on our shoulders that our knees buckle under the weight and finally on our knees we cry out to God.

- 2) Paul asked God to take what he needed and God said “No!” God told Paul that his thorn was a gift from God: “given to me” (verse seven).

Harold Russell lost both hands in WW II but went on to become an actor and author and encourager of the handicapped. Harold Russell wrote: “It is not what you have lost, but what you have left that counts.”

What can take away some of the sting or even torture from the thorn is gratitude for the gift that causes us to be humble and pray more effectively.

If we don't cultivate an attitude of gratitude the thorn will fester and poison our system with bitterness. The thorn in the flesh may become a root of bitterness.

How can we pray and give thanks for pain? Because thorns not only help prevent pride but also enable us to experience God's grace.

c. Thorns are given so we can experience God's Grace

- 1) God said, “I'll not subtract the pain but I will add grace” (verse eight). God said, “I'll not lighten your load but I will strengthen your shoulders.”
- 2) Christ knows what thorns in the flesh are. He wore a crown of thorns that was driven into His brow by a mocking Roman soldier. Because He has experienced thorns in the flesh and all the weaknesses of suffering, He is now our sympathizing High Priest to whom we can go. Listen to our invitation in Hebrews 4:14-16. In these verses describing our Great High Priest, Jesus the son of God, the author used Paul's word of “weakness” and “grace.” Because Christ became man, He knows your weakness. He can sympathize with you. But because Christ is God, He can also supply you with grace.
- 3) Paul responded with acceptance. He accepted both the pain and the power that comes with accepting the pain. Listen to Paul in verse nine, “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” You cannot have the one without the other. Two things weighted down on Paul at the same time: Burdens and power in equal proportion.

Paul resolved in verse ten: “Therefore I take pleasure in weaknesses, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.”

On Huckabee last evening, Mike Huckabee interview Tim Tebow who is QB for the Denver Broncos. He was the 73rd Heisman Trophy Winner in 2007. He is also an unashamed believer. In

college he started wearing a Bible verse on his eye black. He wrote with a silver Sharpie Philippians 3:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." During the championship game he wrote John 3:16 and 94 million people Googled John 3:16. His mother was advised to abort him for her health's sake. But she had the courage and strength not to. Her physical thorn in the flesh produced in her the strength to do right.

Someone said, "Man is both the marble and the sculptor." With God's help, you can turn your life into something beautiful if you respond to his painful chiseling. If we allow God to humble us, if we pray with dependence on Him, and if we accept the grace and strength that comes with humility and prayer we can also experience the power of Christ.