

THORNS IN THE FLESH
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2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-10
170s

Paul in Macedonia; preparing to go to Corinth. Titus just arrived with news of problems there. Some men putting down Paul as of little importance in the Christian faith and are bolstering themselves. Paul writes II Corinthians to prepare the way for his visit in a few weeks.

Midst of writing, composes one of the landmark passages and verses of the Bible - yet never meant to do it. Kept this secret for fourteen years and then lets it slip out unplanned. From this incident we draw our passage for this evening. II Corinthians 12:1-10.

Used to read II Corinthians 10-12 and be confused. Paul says, "I wouldn't be a fool and boast," and then he boasts. Never understood until I read passage out loud (Julie's tapes) Seems some other men were boasting of their work for Christianity and putting down Paul. So Paul answers with candid satire. Read 11:16, "Now they boast and say.. I won't boast, I'm not a fool, but if I would boast, here's what I'd say..." They Hebrews, Israelites, sufferings, stripes, besides, care of all the churches.

Read 12:1 word "glory" = "boast"

"Opponents boast alot, their visions, I'll boast of mine." Probably never intended to relate this, but in heat of argument it came out. Under Holy Spirit, writes it not to brag about revelations he's had or to tall about his thorn; he wrote it for our profit.

Examine passage tonight to see what we can learn.

Read 12:2 "I knew"= "I know"

Describes vision he had fourteen years ago (Not conversion - this was over twenty years after conversion.) Paul probably had many visions not recorded.

Probably a spiritual highlight of Paul's life - can't remember if entire body was taken or just his soul was transported to the third heaven.

Third Heaven hades
Only occurrence in Bible.

Read II Corinthians 12:3-4.

Paradise - occurs three times in Bible.

Luke 29:43 - "This day thou shalt be with me in Paradise."

Revelation 2:7 - "To the one who overcomes I will give to eat of the tree of life in the midst of Paradise of God."

Before Resurrection - paradise located in Hades - aldl faithful dead went there. Wicked dead took up rest of Hades.

Ephesians 4 - Christ descended to paradise and took all of Paradise to Heaven where God is.

Paul went to Paradise.

Wonder what he saw? Moses, Jesus Christ, Abraham, Abel, Lot?

Can he tell us what he heard? "No, unspeakable, not lawful to say.

Unmatched experience probably given to help through future suffering.

But notice, Paul reveals that in the time of his greatest exaltation came also his greatest humiliation. See that in a moment.

Read II Corinthians 12:5-7.

Better perspective - "Thorn" same word as "stake" (Not steak as in eat) From Babylonians - sharpen trees and impale people on stake. Paul had stake twisting in his body to keep him humble.

Everyone has a thorn - Some problem or trouble or sin that buffets them - something wish didn't have!

What's yours? Many guess as to the nature of Paul's thorn. -

headaches, temptation, Jewish rivals - Hank: "I know, backed into a cactus - West Texas version."

Four Main Guesses.

1. Ugly - II Corinthians 10:10 - "Letters weighty but bodily appearance is weak. "Beaten with rods."
2. Malaria - very prevalent and incapacitating in Asia Minor.
3. Epilepsy: Read Galatians 4:13-14. Ancient world believed epilepsy caused by demons. Spit to ward off demons. In Galatians 4:14, "reject" = "to spit at" (read with "spit at")
4. Eye trouble - Most probable - blind at conversion, scales - Galatians 6:11 - "Large letters with my own hand" Galatians 4:15 - "Pluck out eyes" Acts 23 - trials, chided high priest, slapped "Didn't you know you were speaking to high priest? "No didn't perceive that."

Reason for not telling nature of thorn!

So all identify with it.

Paul had a thorn in life! Is he alone? No! Even God had His cross. Jesus Christ had thorns on his brow. Every garden has its weeds; stickers belong to every rose; every life has its strife.

What's your thorn? Alcoholic father, sick problem child, work? Say, I don't have one. Then beware - you soon will.

Read 12:8--10.

"Lord, take it away." God didn't give him his answer, what he asked for. Notice, even though he didn't give him his answer; God did answer his need.

Observe three practical lessons about thorns in life. See others. You too but like to relate these three tonight.

I. Afflictions for the saints always have an divine purpose.

If lost, doesn't apply. You're dealing directly with Satan. For Christians, two kinds of afflictions in Bible.

1. Correcting - out of God's will, resist spirit, feel hand of God. God spans for same reason you spank your child.
2. Perfecting - I Peter - suffering produces perfection.
 - a. Examine self: "Lord, life wrong? If yes, take spanking like an obedient child.
 - b. If nothing wrong, then recognize God's hand perfecting.

Paul's thorn had a definite purpose - "lest I be exalted..."

Job: "O, you put me in the furnace of affliction; when you're through, oh Lord, I'll come out like gold!"

Spurgeon - great preacher - read (sermon a day for ten years. Preached five times a week and three or four times on Sunday. Gout - "why me?" - two or three months of every year had to go to Mentome, France - left church, etc. Thorn? Yes, but read and studied to produce finest sermons world has known.

Thorns always have a divine purpose.

(Hospital and colitus)

II. Thorns Are No Hindrance to Christian Service.

Age of excuses - My headache, my arthritis, my lumbago, my leprosy... all have something wrong - aspirin age.

What is some great saints had attitude some of us had?

Paul - thorn - wrote Romans - "Sorry I couldn't come sooner. Too busy here. Cover all territory and now coming.

Livingstone: Covered all of Africa with a burning fever. Found him dead on his knees in prayer.

Lady with one movable finger in Tramp for Lord.

We don't make many like them any more.

Paul probably glad that God didn't answer his prayer. If Paul hadn't had that thorn, he'd never never have been Paul.

Every useful servant of God has had something painful that's made him what he is.

Suffering is no excuse from service - Read I Peter - Tells us that instead, it's suffering which produces true saints.

Don't run from thorn - be a source of power in your life. Affliction is not a barrier to Christian service; oftentimes it's the secret of being fruitful for God.

III. Greatest lesson Paul learned. (Read 12:99a and 10b)

"My strength is sufficient for thee, for when I am weak, then I am strong."

In hospital, I appreciated the good food and the physical healing, but greatest blessings was grace to endure it.

"God, heal me," cried Paul. "No son, you need that thorn." (Some say, God's will to heal all time - No, sometimes leaves it with us for a purpose) "No, son, you need it to keep you humble."

But when God doesn't heal, does better, gives grace to bear the burden.

Your thorn, when God won't remove it, gives you grace to bear it.

Notice, my grace is sufficient for thee. Compare beginning and ending one infinitely great; Other comparatively infinitesimal.

Like fish in Mississippi River," mustn't drink too much or I'll drain the river.

Like ocean to boy on beach, "My depths are sufficient to fill your bucket."

Christ says, "My grace is sufficient for thee."

While Christ's grace is sufficient and inexhaustable, he never dispenses it superfluously or needlessly.

Christ at Lazarus tomb.

1. Take away the stone.
2. Loose him and let him go

God seldom does what we can do for ourselves. He just gives us the grace we need for any particular situation.

Doesn't give martyr's grace to office worker.

Spurgeon was asked: "Grace enough to burn at stake at town square tomorrow?" "Don't need it today, but by 12:00 tomorrow I'd have the grace and be ready."

Many of you have thorn tonight - God's word is

When you have thorn or trouble or problem remember:

1. Christian afflictions always have a divine purpose.
2. Your thorn is no hindrance to Christian service.
3. Finally, no matter how small your thorn or how great your stake, his grace is sufficient for thee.

Hiding Place

Jews - cold prison, gruel, ants, transferred to Vught. Night -- barracks for processing - Bunkers - "Some don't appreciate the accommodations at bunkers."

"Betsie, how long will it take?" Betsie: "Perhaps years; but what a better way to spend our lives!" Corrie - "What are you talking about?" Betsie: "These young women, Corrie. If they can be taught to hate by the Nazis. Why they can be taught to love through Jesus Christ! We can show them Jesus Christ as long as we're here!"

Corrie writes, "I looked at the matron seated at the desk in front of us. Saw a gray uniform and a visored cap. Betsie saw a wounded human being who needed Christ. I wondered what kind of road she followed, while I trudged along on the all too solid earth!"

In midst of all the thorns, Betsie knew that His grace was sufficient. Corrie learned it later. Have you learned it yet?

Invite - Not a Christian - then thorns no blessing to you. Can't bring thorns to Jesus Christ.

Remember that He who sent Paul a thorn for his own good once wore a crown of thorns for the good and salvation of all sinners.

Story of Moorhouse and lame daughter with package.

Dady I'll carry it up. Or - Now Dad, you carry me and the package.