

The Thorn of Weakness
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 25, 2007
Dr. Brent Beasley

We have been talking in this “Crown of Thorns, Crown of Glory” series about the thorns that Jesus faced and that you and I face and the way that, in Christ, even those thorns are transformed. There has been the thorn of betrayal, and the thorn of loss, the thorn of rejection, and today, the thorn of weakness.

Have you noticed that none of us is immune from weakness?

Have you noticed that even we church-going Christians are not immune from weakness?

Have you noticed that Christians also live out of suffering as well as out of joy and hope?

We think today about the Apostle Paul. Think about Paul’s life. Think about the suffering that he endured. 2 Corinthians 11:16-33 gives us a list of some of Paul’s suffering experiences.

Given one hundred ninety-five lashes with scourges, beaten with rods three times, shipwrecked three times, stoned once, cast adrift at sea once. In toil and hardship, hunger and thirst, in cold and exposure. Paul knew what it was like to suffer.

And this is the world in which we live.

I wish that I could promise you that if you just had enough faith, your problems would be solved.

I wish that I could promise you that if you just lived your life right—by the book—that you wouldn’t have to suffer like everybody else.

I wish that I could promise you that if you just gave enough money to the ministry of this church, you would receive God’s special favor and would be exempt from the problems of life.

I wish I could promise you all that, because then I could put it in a book and get rich. But I can’t, because I’m not ignorant enough to believe all that, and I’m not going to lie to you.

We are not immune from the suffering and pain and sickness and senseless violence and addiction and broken marriages and undeserved disappointment that are a part of the world in which we live. I wish I could honestly tell you otherwise; but I cannot.

Paul knew what it was like to suffer. And I haven’t even mentioned this thorn in the flesh that he was always talking about.

No one knows what Paul’s thorn was. He gives no description of it. He doesn’t name it. He just alludes to it. His readers apparently knew what it was, so he doesn’t have to describe it.

Paul didn’t know when he was writing his friends in Corinth that 2,000 years later people would be digging, analyzing, cutting and pasting clues from his other letters

trying to figure out was this mysterious thorn was. But it's hard to diagnose a patient who's been dead for 2,000 years.

I have seen it speculated that Paul's thorn was anything from gout to depression to bad eyesight to a speech impediment to sexual temptation to low self-esteem to epilepsy to migraines to Malta Fever.

I agree with Paul Duke who said it's better that Paul never said what his thorn is. That way we can all fill in the blank for ourselves. We all nod and say, *I know exactly what he's talking about*. That splinter that rubs us the wrong way every time we start a new day.

Whatever it was, Paul named it a thorn. So it must have pained him like a thorn. It was something sharp and stinging in him, lodged deep in his life. A constant, painful presence, annoying, aggravating, maddening.

If you go back and read the entire letter of Second Corinthians, you learn that Paul has been up against a group of religious imposters—people who pretend to be spiritual shepherds but who in truth are sheep-stealers, and the way they try to get ahead in the world is by slinging mud at others, primarily Paul.

They have pointed to his ongoing hardships and persistent troubles as signs of a deficient faith, and by contrast, they brag about their own piety and worldly success as evidence of their “proper” faith.

To boost their image in the eyes of others they have resorted to boasting about their ecstatic religious experiences. They

bragged about their spiritual superiority. They were the “superlative apostles” as Paul once called them.

Perhaps they were the Gnostic followers who boasted of special knowledge. They claimed a spiritual superiority because of their secret knowledge and mystical experiences.

And so in response to all of this, Paul makes clear how inappropriate and damaging such boasting is. Any true encounter with God is invariably an act of God initiated by God. It does not indicate one's superior level of faith or spirituality. Which is why you can't brag about it.

This spiritual one-upmanship that goes on and is so hurtful to the cause of Christ—it's very dangerous.

If you travel to Edinburgh, Scotland you will find Edinburgh castle, a tower of seemingly insurmountable strength. But the truth is that the castle was once actually captured. The fortress had an obvious weak spot which defenders guarded—but because another spot was apparently protected by its steepness and impregnability, no sentries were posted there. At an opportune time, an attacking army sent a small band up that unguarded slope and surprised the garrison into surrender.

Where the castle was most vulnerable was where it did not acknowledge its weakness. Where it was strong, it was weak. Where we think we are invulnerable, there we are weak with vulnerability.

[Today in the Word, Feb 89, p. 36]

But even Paul, the guy who seems to have this all squared away, even he was tempted to resort to a little boasting now

and again. Paul's life had, of course, been marked by extraordinary spiritual experience.

The ancient Jews had this understanding of heaven as consisting of these three levels (or floors), and the third level was understood to be the place where God Almighty dwelt.

So when Paul describes some guy he knows as having been taken to the third floor to meet directly with God, just about everyone acknowledges he was talking about himself—it was just his way of trying not to brag about it.

He puts it in the third person—not as a forerunner of today's American athletes—but as an act of humility because it was tempting to brag—tempting to trot out his incomparable experience with God as a trump card to get those annoying critics out there who were criticizing him to be quiet.

And so it is in the light of that very real temptation that Paul discloses the news that God gave him a *thorn in the flesh* to keep him from being *too elated* (v.7), too puffed up.

Paul did with his thorn what most of us would do: he begged God to take it away. On three painful occasions he begs God to take that horrible thing out of his life. But all three times, when he gets up from his prayers, it's still there—sharply painful, unbudging.

God says “No!” God does say "No!" from time to time in our lives. If God can say "No!" to Paul, I guess God can say "No!" to you and me as well. Come to think of it, God said "No!" to his son, too. Jesus prays, *Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.*

Eventually Paul stopped asking. He didn't get the answer he was looking for, but, gradually, over time, he began to see and perceive God's answer: *My grace is sufficient for you.*

Now, at first impression, we might think this answer means something like this:

So what if you've got a thorn in your flesh? You've got my abundance of grace on your life, don't you? My grace has saved you, set you free, given you a place in the life to come. Don't sweat your thorn. It's a drop in an ocean of blessing. My grace is enough.

That might be what we think this means at first, but as the message of God continues to emerge and deepen in our hearts, we begin to see that this grace that God is talking about means something a little more pointed, pointed like a thorn.

For power is made perfect in weakness. Oh, Paul says. And now he begins to understand: his wound was more than a trial that grace would get him through; it was an opening through which grace would flow.

[thanks for this wonderful insight to Paul Duke, "Reflections: July" in The Abingdon Preaching Annual 2001 Edition, pp. 240-2]

There are times when God says "No!" There are times God chooses not to heal us. That's obvious: each one of us is going to eventually succumb to something. But more than that, there are times when healing would thwart the greater purposes of God for our own lives, not to mention how our lives interact with God's greater plans for the world.

God's "No!" is not arbitrary, nor insensitive. Sometimes it leads to a greater healing that takes place within us. Sometimes the

wound is not just something that God will remove or get us through. It is an opening through which the grace of God can flow.

That's why it is such a terrible mistake to try to be a kind of air-tight Christian—you know, everything's perfect, nothing can penetrate my shield of piety and spirituality and morality. Terrible mistake. Don't fall into that trap. Because the profound truth is that our weakness, our thorn, our wounds are the precise places where the grace of God enters our lives. It's the wound that provides the opening...

This week I came across a couple of lines of poetry or a song:
*Ring the bell that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. That's how the light gets in.*

The crack is our vulnerability, our wound, and here's the thing that is as hard for us to fathom as I'm sure it was for Paul to learn. Nine times out of ten the light gets in through the cracks and not through the perfection.

There was an article this summer in *Leadership Journal*, entitled "Leader's Insight: Overcoming My Strengths." In it the author, a pastor from Iowa, admitted to having *spent a good deal of energy and time in [his] professional life overcoming [his] weaknesses.*

He went on to say that he *learned to recognize [his] weaknesses and studied how to overcome them and to rely on other people around [him] whose strengths could compensate for [his] weakness.*

Not a bad strategy at all. Many of us have followed that approach in our professional lives. After all, it was Paul who reminded us in this same letter to the Corinthians that we each have different gifts, and it takes each of our gifts to build up the body of Christ.

What the pastor in the *Leadership Journal* article went on to share, however, was the realization that it was really his strengths, not his weaknesses, that were keeping him from being all that God had for him. He was forced to finally ask this question: *Which of my strengths have I relied on that have prevented me from relying on God . . . ?*

The pastor's final conclusion was this advice:
While overcoming our weaknesses may be the difference between failure and success, overcoming our strengths may be the difference between respectable results and living and ministering on the front edge of God's will.

Yes, God has given us our strengths and wants us to use them, but . . . does not want us to depend on them. Dependence is something we should reserve for God.

So, the thorn in the flesh stays. It stays. But now it becomes a tool God uses to keep us bound firmly to his power—to keep us living out of his power. The thorn in Paul's flesh—his weakness—kept him living out of his relationship with Christ.

He could have been like those other religious leaders and simply tried to live out of his own spiritual accomplishments, to live within the protective shield of self-righteousness and apparent perfection and skills and gifts. But he didn't.

Because as wonderful as the triumphant moments of our lives can be: a healing, a rescue, a dramatic reversal in circumstances, a big accomplishment, nothing is more profound than to be met at the center of our weakness with a power that sustains us, defends us, and will not let us go.

In those moments we discover the truth of what Paul is talking about, we discover strength in weakness, strength that comes, not because we have become strong, but because we are living in and with God who is strong.

When God says "No!" to removing the thorn, it is an invitation to enter a relationship so profound and so life-giving, that God's "No!" almost seems a "Yes."

[thanks to Dr. Fred Anderson, Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York in a sermon preached July 9, 2000]

Crown of thorns, crown of glory.

George Matheson was born to privilege. At the University of Glasgow he graduated first in classics, logic, and philosophy. His prospects for academic success were brilliant.

Then, in his 20th year of life, he became totally blind. He followed God's call to ministry anyway. Across many years of faithfulness, he pastored some of Scotland's finest and largest churches, wrote books of philosophical theology which are still read and cited today, was theologian to Queen Victoria, received numerous honorary doctorates, filled the most prestigious lectureships in the land, and was a fellow of the Royal Society.

Listen to this prayer written by George Matheson. Let's make it our own today:

My God, I have never thanked thee for my thorn.

I have thanked thee a thousand times for my roses,

But never once for my thorn.

Teach me the glory of my cross,

Teach me the value of my thorn.

Show me that I have climbed to thee by the path of my pain.

Show me that my tears have made my rainbows.

Amen.