

Delight in Your Thorns

A sermon based on 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

There's a man who is very skilled at basketball. At least he was. He was so good in high school that he was the ringer. He took his team to state several years in a row. And his senior year a scout watched him play and he was offered a full ride if he'd play college ball. His dreams were coming true! How blessed he was and he thanked God for the blessings he'd given him.

But it all came crashing down one night. On the way back from a basketball game he chose to ride home with his dad and brother rather than stay a little later and ride home with friends. That choice changed his life forever. A drunk driver sideswiped their car which rolled several times before it landed upside down on top of them. The young man and his father climbed out the windows and with amazing strength that came from adrenaline they lifted the smashed car off his brother--and that in spite of the injuries he had received himself--injuries that would forever end his basketball career. The young man was devastated. But still he thanked God for the blessings he'd given him.

The apostle Paul had problems and pain too. He asked God to take it away, but when God said "no" he too thanked God for the blessings God had given him. He even thanked God for his pain. He even delighted in it.

Pain and suffering have come into your lives. And it will still come. It will dash your hopes. It will kill your dreams. And it will hurt. But you can still thank God for the blessings that he's given you. You can even delight in the pain that you endure... that he won't take away. How? How can you possibly be glad for your pain? See how the apostle Paul delights in his thorns and learn how you too can delight in your thorns.

Three times Paul pleaded with God begging him "Please! Please! Take this thorn away!" Now I think "thorn" isn't the best translation here. Literally it's a spike, like a spike used to torture someone. Don't think a little prick of the finger when you go to pick a rose. No. Paul was tormented by it, literally beaten with fists with repeated blows. And Paul didn't want to get rid of it for selfish reasons, to make life easier or more comfortable for him, but because he saw this thorn as an obstacle to his ministry. It made his task of sharing the gospel so much more difficult that he considered it sent from Satan. No wonder he cried out to God, "Please! Remove it! Take it away! End the pain that I might better serve you!" But God said, "No."

Now there's a lot of speculation on what the apostle Paul's thorn in the flesh actually was. Some suggest it was bad eyesight since Paul speaks of the love the Galatians had for him that if it were possible they'd give him their eyes and "Look what large letters I write in my own hand." Others suggest he'd contracted malaria on the many voyages he'd taken. Still others suggest he'd been beaten and broken so many times that his body didn't heal correctly and that he was now crippled. Still others say he had a stutter or a speech impediment since he did not come with eloquent speech.

We don't know what Paul's thorn was. But I think God intentionally kept it vague that we might fill in the blanks with whatever thorns stick into us, tormenting us with repeated blows. What are your thorns?

Are they financial as you wonder if you'll ever get a job or if the repo man will soon come knocking? Are they physical challenges like Paul seems to have? Do you have some sickness or ailment? Arthritis or a trick knee or just the pains that come as you grow older? Is your thorn emotional as you wrestle with depression, grieve over the loss of a loved one, or weep over wayward and rebellious children?

Every week, every day, we pray to God, "deliver us from evil." We pray to God to keep thorny problems away from us. But sometimes he says, "No. I won't keep that thorn from you." Why?! Why would a loving God let us endure such pain?! Why, when Paul--apostle of apostles--pleaded with God so earnestly those three times, "Please! Please God, take it away! Think how much better I'd be able to serve you!" would God say "No. I won't take the hurt away"? It's because he loves us so much.

"What?!" you say, "God loves us? That's why he lets us hurt?!" Yes. Paul says, "To keep me from becoming conceited... there was given me a thorn in my flesh." If not for this tormenting thorn, Paul may have been tempted to think that the success of his ministry was due to his excellence as a pastor, and not to God's powerful Word.

You see, when we think of evil, we usually think of that evil out there--the terrorists that want to blow us up, the diseases that want to spread, the accidents waiting to happen, the dollars ready to slip away. But too often we forget about the evil in here [pointing to my heart]--the evil inside of us.

Do you think life is all about you? Do you think God ought to take away every form of hurt and pain that you ever face? Should God let you live a problem-free, worry-free life? Then you're in danger of becoming conceited. Thank God for giving you thorns. Martin Luther once said, "God cannot fill you up with his grace if you're already full of yourself. First he must empty your cup of pride before he can fill it up."

If we never faced pain in our life, if we were always in control, we'd be tempted to think, "What do I need God for?" We may become self-reliant, instead of God-reliant. So God lovingly sends us troubles to remind us how much we need him. And do we ever need him! You see, the hurt and the pain that you and I face in this life is nothing--nothing!--compared to what we deserve! We deserve hell. And God would much rather send us a thorn--a tormenting spike of torture even--than to let us or someone else there.

How do you know he loves you that much? After all, that "No" can be pretty hard to take when you plead earnestly with God to take your thorn away. It can be hard to understand how God could love you when he says, "Keep the tormenting messenger of Satan. I won't take it away." But you can know he loves you by looking to Jesus.

After all, Jesus, like Paul, desperately pleaded with God in prayer three times, "Father, if you are willing take this cup from me." But God said, "No. I won't take the cup away. I can't." Jesus was then tormented, literally beaten with the fists with repeated blows. He endured not a thorn in the flesh, but a crown of thorns, not a figurative spike of suffering, but literal spikes nailing his hands and feet. Jesus didn't deserve it, because he never complained against God, never demanded God change his situation, but patiently endured, yet he suffered the misery and shame of the cross and the torment of hell. And

he did it all that you might be forgiven -- for your complaints to God in the midst of suffering, for your conceited self-centered, the-world-revolves-around-me-attitude.

And that suffering that he underwent for us, that torment he endured, completely changes the way we view our suffering and the torment he asks us to endure for the kingdom. We're no longer self-centered and conceited, but Christ-centered and eager to make sacrifices of our own. We no longer live to secure our comfort, but to serve him, even when that service is painful.

That's how Paul could say, "I will boast... about my weaknesses... I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties."

Paul wasn't a sadist or a lunatic. But he understood that it's often through our suffering that God can really work. "For [his] power is made perfect in weakness!" For Paul, his thorn in the flesh meant that the gospel message--and clearly not the messenger--deserved the credit and the glory for having the power to change lives. For the early Christians, their persecution meant they would take the gospel to the ends of the earth as they fled for their lives. (cf. Acts 8:1,4)

That man in the introduction, his name is Jeff, and he's now serving God as a teacher in a WELS school.. Had God kept Jeff from getting injured, he may have gone pro. But he wouldn't be a principal sharing the gospel with dozens of children every day. So God had other plans for Jeff. And in Jeff's weakness, he's strong.

What does your thorn in the flesh mean for you? Maybe you suffer pain in the hospital because the person you share a room with needs to hear your confidence that "If I live, I live to the Lord. If I die, I die to the Lord. So whether I live or die, I belong to the Lord." (Romans 14:8) Maybe you've lost your job because a former co-worker needs to hear you say, "Though Christ was rich, he became poor so that I though his poverty might have the riches of heaven." (2 Cor. 8:9) Or maybe your thorn is simply a reminder that this life with its problems and pains is fleeting--here today and gone tomorrow. But the things of the Spirit are lasting. They're eternal. And those are the things that are really worth working for, fighting for, suffering for, even dying for.

Dear friends, pray "Deliver us from evil." Pray it boldly. Even plead with God to remove your thorns. But when he doesn't, delight in your thorns, in your weaknesses, in your hardships, your persecutions and your difficulties. Even boast about them. Do it for Christ's sake. For when you're weakened by these thorns, then you're strong in your faith and strong to serve God and others. And his power will rest on you and give you the strength to endure. In Jesus' name, amen.