

## GRACE FOR THORNS

2 Cor. 12:1-10

In the Corinthian church the false apostles were claiming they had received special visions and revelations from God, and the Corinthians were being swept away by those lying charlatans and boasters.

Therefore, it was necessary for Paul (though reluctantly) to relate his own genuine visions and revelations. Before describing his supernatural journey to heaven and vision, Paul confesses how extremely distasteful it would be for him to boast about it, and was only doing it because he was being compelled to do so.

He realized that such boasting was *necessary* for the Corinthians, but stressed that it was *unprofitable*. Why? Because personal visions and revelations do not benefit the church. They are unverifiable, nor can they be repeated, and they can lead to pride (*John MacArthur*).

What is profitable and builds up the Christ's church is the "word of God", not experiences. That's what Paul wants the church to understand.

Outline:

- **Paul's Exaltation (Vv 1-6)**
- **Paul's Humiliation (v7)**
- **Paul is Fortification (Vv 8-10)**

### Paul's Exaltation (Vv 1-6)

Beginning at vs 1, the apostle Paul speaks of a rare, wonderful, mind-boggling experience that he had more than 14 years prior to writing this letter. Taking us back to about 44AD. Out of humility he starts telling of the experience in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, he said, in verse 2, "**I knew a man in Christ**" --but it becomes clear that he was speaking of himself.

He says that he isn't sure whether what he experienced was "**out of the body**" or "**in the body,**" but one way or the other he was "**suddenly raptured to the third heaven**", which he also refers to as "**paradise.**"

Paul stood outside of himself in heaven. What he heard and saw was so astonishing that he could not express it with human words, nor would he be permitted to do so, if he could.

The things he saw and heard were not meant for the world of the flesh. They belong to the world of the spirit, the next life.

Some many today talk about an after-life experience they had, and tell of the amazing things they saw and the message that God told them to take back to earth.

So, they write books about it, they go on the internet and TV shows to boast about their experience and the special work God has for them. This is all rubbish! It is all imaginary, made up stuff to cheat people out of money. You see, none of them have come back with thorns!

For Paul it was the real thing, and he was not permitted to share it. The things were too scared to be spoken. The personal, heavenly experience was meant and designed for him alone, to fortify him for future service and sufferings. To strengthen his faith and promote holiness.

And unlike those false charlatans, who were quick to boast about their exploits, imagery visions and revelations, Paul kept his ecstatic rapture to paradise to himself for 14 years.

And now he was compelled to talk about. He did it for the Corinthians sake, letting them understand, that he was not unmatched by the false teachers in this one important area of which they great boasted.

Then, after relating that remarkable experience, Paul tells what came next.

### **Paul's Humiliation (v7)**

He says, in verse 7, ***"Because of the extraordinary greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!"***

Twice in v7, Paul emphasized that God allowed **"a thorn in the flesh"** to keep him from exalting himself and becoming conceited. Even though he was the most principled Christian of all, Paul was vulnerable to the normal struggles of life.

What was this thorn in the flesh that God permitted in Paul's life to keep him humble? A thorn that is called **"a messenger of Satan"**, with the purpose of tormenting the apostle. How do we understand this?

First, we must understand the nature of the thorn. It was an affliction **"in the flesh, in the body"**, of painful and irritating nature. It was not a spiritual or mental affliction; even though the mind and spirit would of course be affected by the physical pain and great distress.

Much speculation has been put forth as to the precise nature of the affliction, but no one knows for certain. My opinion is the view of many of the older commentators on the subject and it is based on some NT verses that Paul may have suffered a rare "eye disease", which caused his appearance to be somewhat even grotesque.

To the Galatians, in Chapter 4:13-15: ***<sup>13</sup> As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, <sup>14</sup> and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. <sup>15</sup> Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.***

Chapter 6: 11, ***"See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!"***

All we know is that some humiliating illness in his body, which perhaps made him contemptible to others, tormented him, and he longed to be freed from it. He calls it a **"messenger from Satan,"** so while it was given by God, a devil's agent brought **"it"** to him.

As in the case of Job, the devil, who is ever so ready to torment believers, was under the control of Almighty God, who allowed the afflictions to fulfill His purpose.

There is great comfort in this, in spite of the mystery involved, since whatever hurt may come our way from the devil, it can only come, by the Lord's permission.

Jesus in Luke 13:16, tells the story of how Satan had kept a woman crippled for 18 years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all, until Jesus arrived and set her free from her infirmity. As He touched her, she immediately straightened up and the first thing she did, was praise God.

God's purpose in permitting Satan to affliction Paul with the thorn, was to humble Paul. God must keep Paul from becoming spiritual puffed-up and prideful about his supernatural trip to heaven and his visit of paradise.

No one on earth had ever before given such an honour. Moses met God on the mountaintop. But Paul met God in paradise. God did not want his one-of-a-kind privilege to get to his head, not then or ever. So immediately on his return to earth, the painful thorn was inflicted and it would remain for the rest of his life.

Pride is a constant temptation to all of us. The bible says, **"God resists the proud, but shows grace to the humble."**

Every child of God is prone to be proud. God therefore often uses opposition and suffering to teach humility. It is an act of grace.

Possibly today, some of you are hurting terribly--perhaps physically, or maybe emotionally, or possibly you're hurting both ways. If so, my heart goes out to you, and I want to encourage you to "hang in there," because--on the authority of God's Word--help is available. Grace is available.

But when it comes to most suffering--especially the types of suffering over which we have little or no control--in most of those cases people don't know why they are being allowed to suffer.

Indeed, throughout history people have struggled and agonized over the question of why God allows suffering. He is all-powerful and could, in one split second, totally eliminate suffering from the world if he so chose. So why does he permit people to suffer?

The broad, overall explanation is that we live in a fallen world; ever since sin entered the world, there has been chaos and suffering. Also, the Bible gives us some further general observations about suffering, and--as we noted--in a few cases such as Paul's, God has revealed the exact reason for a person's suffering; but to a large degree the issue of suffering is shrouded in mystery, and we should never jump to conclusions--about others, or even about ourselves.

Sometimes a person will say, **“What did I do to cause God to let me hurt like this?”** --when in reality it might have nothing whatsoever to do with your conduct.

It could be related to your conduct because God does sometimes send chastisement—Will punish those he loves—but the point is that we should not just assume that it’s because of something we’ve done or left undone.

Job’s so-called friends **felt sure** that they knew why Job was suffering, and told him so; they were convinced that it was because he was guilty of some gross immoral act, but they were dead wrong.

If God chooses to reveal the purpose for a person’s affliction, that’s fine, because he is God; but you and I must never judge as to why people have handicaps or diseases—we have no right to do so.

### **Paul’s Fortification (Vv8-10)**

In verse 8 Paul says, **“Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.**

Why Paul stopped prayer after 3 times is not stated: weather he was convinced that he ought to stop asking, or weather he was following the Lord’s example in the Garden of Gethsemane, who prayed 3 times and was resigned to God’s will, we don’t know why.

Paul’s prayer was answered, but not in a way he hoped for. Paul wanted the thorn out. God wanted the thorn in. Paul was one of the most faithful, on-fire, effective Christians who ever lived, yet God said *“No, I will not remove the thorn, but I will give you something; I will give you grace to bear it.”*

God answered, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”**

So, when God says “No” to some of your requests, realize that there is a valid purpose for his refusal.

**“My grace is sufficient for you....”** The Scriptures make it wonderfully clear that his grace is sufficient and available to meet the whole range of human needs.

*First* of all, His grace is sufficient for salvation, regardless of how steeped in sin a person might be or regardless of how long he’s been in that bondage. We considered Paul’s dramatic salvation in the last sermon.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says, **“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”**

John Newton was a seaman who lived in the 18th century. He was a profane man, a drunkard, an infidel, a slave trader, and a constant trouble-maker. Once when in a drunken stupor, he went overboard, but was rescued by fellow seamen, and God began to work in his heart. He was finally converted on May 10, 1748, and God set him free from his wicked lifestyle and made a new man out of him.

He wrote what has become perhaps the best known and best loved of all hymns, and those who knew him said that it was, in reality, his personal testimony. The first verse goes like this:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*

Secondly, grace is not only sufficient for salvation, it is also sufficient for whatever trials and tribulations life might bring our way, as God made so clear to Paul.

Some troubles we may be delivered from, but others we must bear--as was true in Paul's case--but God makes available grace to bear them.

To all Christians, God gives this great promise in Hebrews 4:16: ***Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.***

I love that third verse of John Newton's great hymn:

*Thro' many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come;  
'Tis grace hath broth me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*

Our God is a God of grace (1 Peter 5:10). God allows his suffering so that he might display His amazing grace. We can not overstate that!

In verse 9 God said, ***"My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."*** God's power is seen, completed, experienced and perfected in our weakness. Think about the paradox of that statement.

The best way to understand this saying is to look at the cross. The cross is the paramount example of power =in-weakness. Christ was crucified in weakness—the thorns of our sin pierced His body, reaching deep into His soul, but on the third day was raised by the power of God. On the cross Christ was not only at His weakest point, but at His strongest point. It defies all human logic!

Paul not only comes to terms with the thorn but embraces it as a means to manifest the power of Christ, so he says, in v 9, ***"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."***

Because of that "thorn" Paul realized that, in himself, he was badly inadequate, and was utterly dependent on the Lord--and when a person finally understands that, and looks to the Lord to supply his need, he is in a position for God's power to be poured into his life.

So, Paul not only accepted the infirmities, he **"boasted"** in them, not because he preferred pain rather than health, but because he preferred the power of God in his life rather than be ineffective in his service to Christ.

Think about this. He boasted in his infirmities, in effect, he is saying, *"Praise God for my thorn!"* Something he once prayed to have removed, he now boasts because of it. Wow, what turn of events! The perspective has totally changed.

Paul was made to understand the value of the thorn, so he went on to say in verse 10:  
***"Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."***

Suffering is a tool God uses to build godly character. You *can* live with your "thorn".  
You *can* live with whatever you're going through right now that God won't stop or take away.  
The "thorn" will not destroy you.

In fact, as you allow it to serve its intended purpose in your life, you may experience God's power in a way you have never experienced it before! You can handle that thing, that challenge, that heartache, that hurt ***"according to the power that works within us"*** (Eph. 3:20).

You can bear whatever comes your way. Paul's word is, ***"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me"*** (Phil.4:13).

In Romans 5:3-4, Paul also says, ***"but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> and perseverance, <sup>[b]</sup> character; and character, hope."***

2 Corinthians 9:8, Paul also says ***"And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work."***

To God be the Glory!