

STRENGTH THROUGH WEAKNESS

2 CORINTHIANS 12:1-10

THE PURPOSE OF PAIN



FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

DAVID MURRAY
MAY 29, 2022 (PM)

INTRODUCTION

I recently received an email from a friend who's come through a lot of suffering. "I feel that much has been taken from me in terms of confidence and self reliance and my struggle is how much do I strive to regain confidence or position and how much do I just let it all go. This is a struggle I was not prepared for and has taken me by surprise."

It's a question all Christian sufferers ask: How much do I ask for full restoration and how much do I accept the loss? Should I pray for the grace of full healing or pray for the grace of ongoing weakness? Or to put it in the language of 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, **How should we respond to our thorns?**

BACKGROUND

In 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul was losing his ministry influence over the Corinthians because false teachers were boasting about how much better they were than Paul. "We are the greatest!" they boasted. Paul's response is "I am the weakest" (2 Corinthians 11:16-31). Although he had plenty of accomplishments and experiences to boast about (12:1-6), he much preferred to boast about his weaknesses. He did this partly to stop people thinking more highly of him than they ought (12:6), but also because of how much more spiritual benefit there was for him and others if he boasted about his weakness rather than his strength.



What's a bad boast?



1. THORNS PAIN US

"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, **a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me**, to keep me from becoming conceited" (7).

Thorns are varied

In Paul's case, the thorn was "in the flesh." It appears to have been some physical or bodily problem. From other asides in his writings, some have speculated that it was an eye problem (Gal. 4:13-15; 6:11), or a speech impediment (2 Cor. 10:10). However, we don't know for sure the exact part of the body that was affected. We only know that it was some kind of physical suffering. But there are many other kinds of thorn that bring pain into our lives:

- Family breakdown through conflict or divorce
- Child abuse and the lifelong complex PTSD that results from it
- Mental illness such as depression, anxiety, bi-polar, OCD, schizophrenia
- Moral failure that is public or private
- Temptation to vile thoughts, words, and actions
- Injustice through fraud or force
- Poverty and unemployment
- Special needs in self or a family member
- Memories of and shame about painful past events

Thorns are the same

Although there were many varieties of thorns in the Middle East, they were all the same in that they all pierced the skin, causing great pain, bleeding, scabs, scars, etc. They were often extremely difficult to remove completely causing long-term infection and irritation.

They are also the same in that Satan loves them and uses them to harass us. Wherever he sees a thorn, he comes to hit us on that very spot, again and again, to maximize our distress. God uses the thorns but Satan abuses them. God uses these thorns for good, but the devil uses them for evil.

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

Sin brought thorns. God sent thorns into the world as a punishment for sin (Gen. 3:18), but also to keep us from sin. Without the thorns that curse work, we would make work even more of an idol than we do. Similarly the thorns God sends into our personal world also keep us from sin and close to God.

Satan aggravates thorns. However much good God has designed thorns for, the devil sees them as a great opportunity for evil. God hates to give us thorns, but the devil loves to shove them in deeper.

GOD HATES TO PAIN US
THE DEVIL LOVES TO PAIN US



How does God use thorns for our good?



2. THORNS PROTECT US

We're humbled before God

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations (7).

Great blessings often come with great pain to keep us from great pride. The humblest person in the world is always in danger of pride. Pride is more dangerous than pain. Pain can keep us from pride.

We're drawn to God

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me (8).

There's no bitterness, self pity, anger or rebellion here. He sees God as the organizer and manager of all things and knows that he alone could extract this thorn. He therefore runs to God rather than from God or at God.

We depend on God

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (9).

God didn't say "Yes." But he also didn't just say "No." He said, "No, but, I've got something better for you than thorn removal. I've got a grace infusion for you. This is the high-point of the letter. Paul was brought to the throne of grace to the God of all grace and received a boatload of grace, a word which means the steadfast sovereign love of a superior. God could have said "Yes" in love. But he chose to say "No" with equal love.

We glorify God

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me (9).

The weaker we are the more obvious is God's strength in sustaining and delivering us. In this way, the thorn becomes a servant not a tyrant. Without thorns we wouldn't become a rose. Thorns not only protect from danger but result in beauty. Paul speaks a lot about his weakness because it makes people see Christ's strength more. Christ pitches his tent where he sees weakness.

We submit to God

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities (10).

Paul prayed three times. Not just once, but also not obsessively, demandingly, and impatiently. he came to a point where he had to say, "That's my last prayer for this." After that, he experienced a contentment, an acceptance, a surrender, because it was better for him and for Christ's kingdom.

We get strength from God

For when I am weak, then I am strong (10).

Strong Paul never knew God's strength; weak Paul did. We must experience weakness, to experience God's power.



CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

Christ pioneered this path. Jesus travelled this road constantly as the thorns multiplied and pressed deeper into his body, mind, and soul. No one suffered more thorns in more places for more time than Christ did. No one experienced more divine strength in more human weakness (2 Cor. 13:4).

Christ invites us to this path. The path to glory for God lies along a path of admitted weakness. People are won to the faith not when we project strength and confidence, but when we admit weakness and failure.

I will not boast of anything—
no gifts, no power, no wisdom,
But I will boast in Jesus Christ,
his death and resurrection.

Stuart Townend, "How deep the Father's Love for us"

THE WORST SUFFERING
IS THE BEST EVANGELISM



Hear God's Story > Change our story > Tell the Story > Change others' stories



SUMMARY



A NEW CHAPTER

- **Gospel:** Use your thorns to understand the Gospel better.
- **Jesus:** Use your thorns to know Jesus better. His thorn-filled path was crowned with thorns.
- **Discipleship:** Use your thorns to get to know others better (Christians and non-Christians)
- **Monday:** Tell someone about your weakness and watch for God to rest his glory on you.
- **Culture:** Resist our culture's narrative about the pursuit of power, the avoidance of all pain, and the pointlessness of pain.
- **Heaven:** Use your thorns to help you to heaven, but remember they have no place in heaven (Isa 55:13; Ezek. 38:24). Hell, though, is a place of eternal piercing.
- **Prayer:** Almighty God show me my weakness so that I can find and boast in your strength.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your thorn? What other thorns do you see in people's lives?
2. In what ways has Satan aggravated your thorns?
3. How often should we pray for the removal of thorns?
4. How have you benefitted from your thorns? How have they protected you?
5. What would you say to a boasting Christian? A thorn-pierced Christian?
6. How could you use your thorn to witness to the lost?

First Byron Christian Reformed Church
8541 Byron Center Ave SW, Byron Center, MI 49315
Phone: (616) 878-9768
www.firstbyroncrc.org

Pastor David Murray
www.HeadHeartHand.org
www.thestorychanger.life