

2 Cor 12:1-10 Exaltation and Infirmary, part 2

In this passage, Paul tells us about a splinter or a thorn in his flesh that was bothering him and that he wanted to have removed, but it was not removed. He did not experience that feeling of relief that comes when a thorn/splinter is removed. He learned to live with the thorn. In fact, he gladly accepted the thorn as a means of experiencing God's grace and power in his life.

In this passage, Paul mentions two particular experiences: the first one, heavenly, the second, satanic. The first experience was a glimpse Paradise. The second experience was very earthly. The first experience was unique to Paul; very few people have a vision of heaven like he did. The second experience is rather common; many people have a "thorn in the flesh" of one kind or another.

We learn here that God gives us grace to endure our infirmities/afflictions. The power of God is available to us through our weaknesses. Physical infirmities may allow us to more fully experience the power of Christ. So we need to see our thorns in the flesh as a means of drawing nearer to God.

Last week we looked at the first experience, ...

- I. .1-5 Exaltation: Paul's "visions and revelations" – he talks about an experience in "third heaven" and the unutterable utterances he heard there.

After that exalting experience, Paul is brought back down to earth by...

- II. .7-10 Infirmary: Paul's "thorn in the flesh"

As we consider Paul's response to his thorn in the flesh, we can learn much about how we should respond to suffering.

Paul enjoyed great privileges as an apostle, but he also knew great hardship. The two often go together in Christian experience—great exaltation and great affliction. Those who are the most effective servants of Christ often also suffer greatly. Satan doesn't pay much attention to those who are no threat to him. He focuses his attention on those who oppose him the most. The most effective and influential Christians often endure great suffering.

That was true in Paul's case, and he knew the reason for his suffering.

- A. .7 The purpose for the infirmity: "lest I be exalted above measure."

The word "exalted" (ὑπεραίρω) means "lifted up beyond," exalted overmuch. Another translation has "to keep me from becoming conceited."

This potential for exultation or pride came from an “abundance of revelations” – possibly the greatness, grandeur, the extraordinary nature of Paul’s supernatural experiences.

A person who has these remarkable spiritual experiences might easily be exalted. He might become proud of or conceited because of such inexpressible heavenly experiences.

In order to prevent potential boasting or conceit, the Lord allowed Paul to have another experience.

B. .7 The experience:

1. A “thorn in the flesh”

- a) Obviously, a “thorn” would be a painful or irritating thing, like a splinter. We are familiar with thorns/splinters, and they are not pleasant. Thorns produce wounds and discomfort, but normally thorns do not produce serious injuries. You can still function even if you have an annoying thorn in the flesh.

Likewise, Paul’s thorn was unpleasant and inconvenient, but it did not stop him from fulfilling his ministry. It just made everything harder, painful, and inconvenient. This thorn was a real nuisance, but he kept on going.

- b) The thorn was in Paul’s “flesh.” I think the most natural meaning here is that the “flesh” refers to his physical body. The word “flesh” does at times refer to one’s human sinful impulses and appetites, the old sinful nature, but I don’t see it referring to that here.

2. There are many speculative theories as to what this “thorn” was; some have suggested malaria, eye-trouble, epilepsy, insomnia, migraines, a speech disability;¹ gall stones; gout; rheumatism; sciatica; gastritis; leprosy; lice; deafness; dental infection; stuttering.² Perhaps he’s talking about persecution, temptation, or depression. Or worst of all, loss of hair!

He’s likely referring to an irritating, annoying, painful physical ailment or affliction. The thorn produced pain in his flesh.

¹ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), 2 Co 12:7.

² John MacArthur, sermon on the passage.

3. .7 Paul calls the thorn a “messenger of Satan.” In some sense, Satan was responsible for this tormenting physical infirmity. Whatever it was, Paul sees it as a Satanic attack.

That doesn’t mean that every infirmity and affliction we have comes from Satan. But Satan is an adversary who stalks about like a roaring lion seeking to devour us (1 Pet 5:8). Most of our afflictions are probably not directly satanic; our thorns are usually quite natural and ordinary.

4. .7 Notice that this messenger “was given to me.”
- a) This is a passive verb; someone else is doing the giving. This kind of construction is called a “divine passive,” with God understood as the implied agent.³
 - b) I think he’s saying in a roundabout way that God allowed this thorn in the flesh. The thorn was *both* allowed by God and sent by Satan—a messenger of Satan given by God. That may seem odd, but it’s biblical. Cf. Job’s experience, King Saul—an “evil spirit from the Lord.”
5. .7 Satan’s purpose is to “buffet” Paul by means of this thorn.
- a) The word “buffet” (κολαφίζω) means “to strike with a blow of a fist.” It means, “to batter, to knock about, to harass violently.” It’s the same word used in the Gospels to describe the Jews striking Jesus with their fists (Mt 26:67; Mk 14:65).

The grammatical construction (present tense) suggests continuous or recurring buffeting/battering. So this was a permanent condition, a chronic pain, a thorn not pulled out. Some of us know what that’s like.
 - b) This affliction, whatever it was, was like a constant slap in the face or punch in the nose. Whatever the thorn was, it was painful and inconvenient, perhaps even embarrassing.

³ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 855.

App: A constant, tormenting, recurring, chronic illness can “buffet” a person. Illness can hinder the work of the Gospel and make life difficult. And we know that Satan has the power to cause such illnesses. And God allows it, for his own purposes.

Like Paul, we may feel buffeted by our thorns in the flesh—we are battered and knocked about by them. Our trials and infirmities are like a punch in the nose. And so we would do what Paul did --

- C. .8 The request: Paul asked the Lord to remove the thorn.
1. “pleaded” (παρακαλέω) – “to ask earnestly.” So the pain or inconvenience of this thorn is enough that Paul fervently prayed that the Lord would remove it. He asked three times that God would remove it because it was a significant problem.
 2. God refused to remove it, even after Paul prayed earnestly and repeatedly about it. God had healed other people in response to Paul’s prayer for them, but this is one prayer that God answered differently than what Paul requested.
 3. .9 God’s response was, “My grace is sufficient (ἀρκέω) for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” In a certain way, Paul received a *better* answer: God promised to provide grace and power to cope with physical weakness/pain/irritation caused by this satanic thorn.
 4. The original language has “sufficient for you (is) my grace.” The emphasis is on “sufficient.” In spite of the weakness and frustration caused by this thorn, God’s grace was more than enough.

Quote: Christ assures Paul that the supply of his grace for the carrying out of [his] ministry, and in particular for the bearing of the pain and buffeting of the [thorn], would never run dry. He needed nothing more than Christ’s grace.⁴

A few practical principles we learn from this passage:

⁴ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 862.

- a) Healing may not be God's will for us. Paul asked three times and God did not heal him. He had to endure this chronic, constant affliction. He had to keep on going in spite of the discomfort/pain. As far as we know, he suffered with this thorn for the rest of his life.

Some of us have chronic physical ailments that God will never heal. God didn't heal Paul; he may not heal us. We trust that God will give us grace to endure the discomfort and keep on going.

We certainly should pray that God would remove our thorns in the flesh. We have that right and privilege.

The claim that God always desires to heal all his people is false. God didn't want to heal Paul; he may not want to heal you. It suited God's purposes to allow Paul to endure this thorn because it kept him humble. Maybe that's what you need as well. Or God may have some other purpose in mind your suffering. God always has morally justifiable reason/purpose when he allows suffering.

- b) Also false is the idea that if I pray hard enough over something, God will answer my prayer as I desire.

God did not answer Paul's prayer here as Paul wanted. Paul desired healing, and he wanted it badly enough to ask repeatedly. Yet God did not heal him.

It's false to claim that lack of healing is the result of a lack of prayer or a lack of faith. Paul had both, and many people have both, yet do not experience healing.

Healing or not healing is God's prerogative. When we ask for healing, we must always submit ourselves to God's will.

- c) We trust that God has a good purpose in our suffering. He may allow us to experience pain, sorrow, and failure for an ultimately good purpose—to prevent us from becoming proud (as in Paul's case), to draw us nearer in dependence upon him, to develop our Christian character, to rid us from worldliness, to teach us various lessons, etc.

Even if he allows Satan to attack us, we can be confident that God has a good purpose in it. E.g., Job. God has a reason for thorns.

And we experience God's power and love *in the midst of* our suffering.

Cf. Romans 8:35–39 (NKJV)

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." 37 Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- d) If God does not remove the source of pain, we trust that he will provide the grace necessary to bear up under it.

God did not provide healing for Paul, but he did provide sufficient grace and strength to endure.

God's grace is available even if healing is not. Even if God does not take away our pain, he still gives grace.

What is grace? In this case, he's talking about the kind of enablement that allows us to continue serving in spite of pain. God supplies what we need to keep on going.

Instead of focusing on our desire for healing, we should focus on God's sufficient grace. Paul was able to endure this thorn in the flesh because of God's grace. It was troublesome and painful—like a splinter that is not pulled out—but it didn't stop him from doing his work.

God didn't remove the thorn; he gave him grace to endure his infirmities.

Sometimes God removes the thorn, but other times he requires that we endure it. God grants us the strength to endure hardships. God allows us to be weak so we find our strength in Christ and not in ourselves.

2Ti 2:3 You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

Ac 14:22 ... we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.

- e) .9b Sometimes we must accept the infirmity as an element of God's will for us. Once Paul realized that God was not going to remove the thorn, he embraced his weakness as something positive for him. He saw it as a means of experiencing the power of Christ resting on him.

Paul does not merely resign himself to this outcome; he welcomes it enthusiastically. If this is God's will, then he willingly accepts it "most gladly." That's hard to do, especially when we want God to remove the thorn.

- f) .9 "strength is made perfect (τελέω) in weakness."

Quote: This is the summit of the epistle, the lofty peak from which the whole is viewed. ... All is of grace; the glory belongs to the Lord alone; the divine power is supreme.

Paul gladly submitted himself to the divine purpose. Because of this thorn—this weakness in the flesh—Paul experienced Christ's strength. He was both strong in the Lord and weak in the flesh.

.9 The word "perfect" means "completed, matured, brought to its goal." We gain spiritual strength through physical weakness/affliction/pain. When we admit our own weaknesses, then we rely on the power of God.

Quote: Divine power finds its full scope and strength only in human weakness—the greater the Christian’s acknowledged weakness, the more evident Christ’s enabling strength.⁵ Cf. Phil 4:13.

The power of God is best displayed in the context of human weakness. When we admit our weakness, then we depend upon the strength of Christ.

In fact, we can embrace and be thankful for our weaknesses if they cause us to depend more fully on God’s grace.

D. Responses

1. .9b I boast (καυχάομαι) in my infirmities (ἀσθένεια)

If the power of Christ is available through his infirmities, then he is willing to have the thorn in the flesh. If that thorn grants him the power of Christ, then he’ll accept the thorn.

.9 The word “rest” (ἐπισκηνώω) means “to take up residence.” It has the sense of setting up a tent; to dwell in a tent. So it’s through weakness that the power of Christ dwells/resides on us. The power of Christ pitches its tent within us through weakness and infirmity. When you have infirmities/afflictions, you depend more fully on God and not on yourself. You recognize your need for grace.

2. .10 “I take pleasure” (εὐδοκέω) in infirmities, etc. This word usually means something like “think well of.”

Obviously, chronic pain itself does not cause pleasure. No one enjoys the frustrations caused by afflictions or infirmities. But we can think well of afflictions/infirmities if they have beneficial purposes or results. If the thorn allows the power of Christ to dwell within us, then we can think differently about the thorn.

Illus.: You’ve heard the expression “No pain; no gain.” We must endure the discomfort of exercise to gain the beneficial results of it. The Bible assures us that trials, when we face them properly, have beneficial results. The gain comes through the pain.

⁵ Murray J. Harris, “2 Corinthians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Romans through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 397.

Pain does not bring us pleasure, but it can be an occasion to draw nearer to God and to experience more of the power of Christ.

3. .10 I affirm that strength comes through weakness. Physical weakness can result in spiritual, inner strength.

Paul gives several examples of the kinds of weaknesses he experienced—infirmities, reproaches, needs, persecutions, distresses. He experienced all of these afflictions “for Christ’s sake.” The difficulties that he’s experienced were the result of serving Christ.

Matthew 5:11 *Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely **for My sake.***

If Paul is afflicted for the sake of Christ, then he is happy to endure afflictions. He’s willing to endure infirmities for the cause of Christ.

Ac 5:41 *And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame **for his name.***

So the grace and the strength he’s talking about are directly related to serving the Lord. He experiences God’s grace to endure and keep on serving God in spite of the pain and inconvenience.

Most specifically then, this promise of grace and strength through weakness pertains to those who continue serving God in spite of the obstacles. We persevere in our service for God in service in spite of weakness, pain, and inconvenience.

Too often, it’s just the opposite. We quit serving God because of our infirmities and weaknesses. Perhaps that describes you—you’ve quit because of the very things Paul mentions here—thorns, weakness, infirmities, reproaches, needs, distresses—these things have caused you to quit. Instead of quitting, rely upon God’s grace. Trust that the power of Christ can rest upon you to help you overcome your infirmities and keep serving God in spite of your weaknesses.

Human weakness and divine grace go hand in hand together. We must see our thorns in the flesh as the means God uses to extend grace to us, to prevent pride, and to recognize our own weakness. Thorns in the flesh lead us to greater dependence on God and decreased dependence on self.

Paul's experience was thorns, infirmities, reproaches, needs, persecutions, and distresses. And yet his testimony is that in his weakness, he is strong. Because of his thorn, he experiences God's gracious enablement to keep on going. He's willing to endure all of this for the sake of Christ. His vision of heaven helped him endure the afflictions of earth.

Maybe God will remove our thorns in the flesh; I hope he does. But if not, God's grace is available for us as we experience afflictions and infirmities. Many of us have thorns in the flesh that we deal with. I trust that our testimony is the same as Paul's—we've found that God's grace is sufficient; we remain spiritually strong even when physically weak and afflicted. We keep on serving God in spite of our thorns and weaknesses because of God's grace and strength.

Probably none of us will have the same kind of heavenly experience Paul had. But we all can have the experience of God's grace. His strength is made perfect in weakness. Even when I am weak, because of the power of Christ, then I am strong.