

INTRODUCTION

Every time we take a trip to Israel, we travel up to the very northern finger of the Galilee and pass by the ruins of Nimrod’s Palace. Nimrod is mentioned a couple of times in the Bible as a mighty warrior, but there’s not much else about him. According to Jewish tradition, God blessed Nimrod by making him a giant warrior who defeated all his foes. But Nimrod became so conceited, He refused to acknowledge or worship God. Instead he shot arrows into the sky to try to kill God. God laughed at his arrogance and sent the arrows back to earth covered with blood which made Nimrod believe he had wounded God. Finally, God said, “If you think you’re the mightiest warrior, here—do battle against my tiniest creature.” God sent a tiny mosquito, and before Nimrod could kill it the mosquito flew directly into one of Nimrod’s gigantic nostrils and into his brain where the mosquito buzzed around. This buzzing finally drove Nimrod crazy and until the mighty Nimrod fell over and broke his neck. And to this very day, it is said swarms of mosquitoes can be found at the ruins of Nimrod’s palace.

Nimrod’s legend about the mosquito is somewhat like what Paul called his thorn in the flesh. Like a mosquito, a thorn is an irritating thing, but it seldom kills anyone. Let’s read about Paul’s painful, irritating thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10:

“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Many messages on this text focus entirely on Paul’s thorn, but this isn’t a seminary class where we’re trying to untie all the Gordian knots of theological disagreement. This is a life laboratory where we’re applying biblical principles to real, human problems. So I’m going to talk more about our thorns than I am about Paul’s thorn. Let’s notice first:

1. THE MISERY OF THE THORN: WHAT IS IT?

Obviously this was something that made life miserable for Paul. It might have been a physical problem, since he says it was in his flesh. But it also might have been emotional or mental, since the phrase “thorn in the flesh” was used in that culture like we say, “thorn in my side” or a “pain in the...neck.” Let me make three general observations about a thorn in the flesh.

(1) A thorn in the flesh is any affliction in our lives that could produce self-pity and bitterness

There are all kinds of theories about what Paul’s thorn actually was. Many books have been written speculating it might have an eye disease or poor vision. Others claim it was epilepsy or malaria. Some even suggest since Paul was a Pharisee, he had to have been married, and his thorn in the flesh was a nagging wife—no wonder he traveled so much!

But I’m not going to even address any of those, because they’re all guesses. I believe he didn’t identify it intentionally. If we knew it was malaria, we might say, “Oh, well that works for malaria, but I have cancer.” Or if we knew it was vision problems, we’d say, “Oh, that works for eye problems, but I have MS.” Instead, Paul’s thorn in the flesh is like men’s socks: One size fits all. In other words, whatever your thorn is, these principles about the thorn can apply to you.

The first thing I notice about the thorn experience of Paul is that he writes about it immediately after he writes about being caught up into paradise. One of the most godly men I’ve ever known, was Ron Dunn. God used him mightily as a speaker and author, yet he was no stranger to thorn experiences. He suffered from depression and physical problems, and his teenage son committed suicide. He understood the highs and lows of the faith and wrote: “A third heaven and a thorn in the same chapter. My, how real that is to the Christian experience. Do we ever get to the place we think that heavenly experiences exempt us from all difficulties? Is it true in the life of many of you that in the very same chapter of your life you have experienced a high spiritual exaltation and a low Satanic depression? You see, it’s not inconsistent as far as God is concerned for you to be lifted up to the third heaven one moment and to have a thorn a ‘messenger of Satan’ in the next moment. And the greatest revelation that Paul ever had in his life was not the revelation that he received when he was caught up to the third heaven...it was the revelation he received when he had the thorn in his flesh.” And as great as your joy was over your discoveries of some of the reasons that heaven will be a blast in the last message, your discovery about the meaning of the thorns in your life today will be far more valuable to you.

(2) Satan twists the thorn experience to defeat us

Was the thorn in flesh from Satan or God? Yes. Paul identified his thorn as a “messenger of Satan to torment me.” The word messenger is our word “angel.” Paul was recognizing the fact that God allows us to suffer, but He is never the author of suffering, Satan is. When suffering people shake their fists at God they’re shadowboxing the wrong opponent. God is a good God, but Jesus said the enemy only comes to “kill, steal, and destroy.”

In the story of Job, God never caused Job any pain. He allowed Satan to attack him. We learn from Job’s story that Satan’s desire in attacking us is to make us suffer so much that we will curse God and die. But God has a better purpose for our pain.

(3) God turns the thorn experience for His glory and our good

Suffering can be a messenger of Satan and a gift of grace at the same moment. God never causes suffering. As the Great Physician, first He does no harm. The Great Physician’s specialty is His remarkable ability to take something that we think is awful and turn it into something awesome if we allow Him. Of course, the greatest promise of His ability to do this is found what I call God’s greatest guarantee: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28) Paul, who also wrote those words, knew that somehow, in God’s perfect timing, his thorn in flesh would turn out for God’s glory and for his good.

I used to know a pastor who always signed Rom828 under his name. He was eating in a hotel restaurant and as he was walking out a server ran him down and said, “Sir! Excuse me you signed your ticket wrong. We don’t have a room 828 in this hotel.” This pastor explained he had written his room number lower on the ticket, and he quoted Romans 8:28. He told the server that he had lived for many years and he had discovered that because our God is such a loving Father that he was able to write Romans 8:28 over every experience of his life. I agree.

In fact, I’m looking forward with great anticipation to see how God eventually writes Romans 8:28 over what some are calling the greatest economic crisis of our nation’s history. I’ll bet some of my dad’s generation, the Greatest Generation, are chuckling when they think about this “crisis” and they remember rationing gas, tires, and sugar. The speed limit was lowered to 35 to save gas, and supplies of luxuries were almost non-existent. And they survived.

Experts are saying this crisis affects the global economy—every nation. Do you think God is worried? Instead of listening to all the pundits and so-called experts, maybe we should listen to God’s Word written 3,000 years ago found in Psalm 2:1, “Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?” There’s plenty of raging going on, and there are more bail-out plots and rescue plans than we can handle. But I love verse 4. It simply says, “The One enthroned in heaven laughs.” When we try to scramble around to fix a problem that is the symptom of the greedy, sinful human heart, God must surely chuckle. Maybe God is using this to remind us that happiness and security will never come in stocks, bonds, and possessions. I don’t know what’s going to happen and when it’s going to happen, but for those who love God and are called according to His purpose, we should not be afraid or worry. Jehovah-Jireh WILL provide and He WILL write Romans 8:28 and use it for His glory and our good. Meanwhile, God can use our thorns for His glory now. So let’s talk about:

2. THE MINISTRY OF THE THORN: HOW CAN GOD USE IT?

So, God can take a thorn experience and make something good of it. In order for Him to use it as a ministry in your life there are four things you must know about your thorn experience.

(1) It keeps me from being proud

Paul wrote, “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn in my flesh.” (vs 7) The first thing Paul observed was that it kept him from becoming conceited. To me, the main reason God allows us to suffer the misery of thorns is to keep us humble. Being humbled is not the same thing as being humiliated. But God can only use humble people who depend on Him.

Have you ever had a painful experience that humbled you? I’ve had more than I care to share, but one particular one stands out in my mind. I had just turned 16 and gotten my driver’s license, but of course, I didn’t have a car, because back in those days, where I grew up, your parents never bought you a car, you bought one when you earned enough money to buy a used car and put gas in it. About two months after I got my license, my dad bought a brand new car. It was a beautiful 1969 Chevrolet Impala sedan. It was blue, but it wasn’t just blue, it was “glacier blue” with a white vinyl roof. But the best thing about this car was that it was one of the first in our

little town that had a factory-installed eight track tape player! I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I finally convinced my dad to let me take it out one Saturday night. He handed me the keys with the solemn warning, “Now son, drive safe, and be careful.” I said, “Sure, dad!” At the age of 16 I was a high-school athlete and full of so much confidence that to have called me “cocky” would have been an understatement. I was going to show off my new car!

I picked up my buddy, Andy, the Baptist preacher’s kid, and we slapped in my 8-track tape of “Magical Mystery Tour” by the Beatles. We were cruising around town lookin’ fine, windows down, factory-installed stereo cranked up singing, “I am the eggman (woo), they are the eggmen (woo), I am the walrus, (coo coo kachoo ka coo coo kachoo)” (And we say the lyrics today are strange!)

Less than thirty minutes into our evening, I drove by Ray’s Grill, the local hang out. The parking lot was full of my friends from school. There must have been thirty cars there. I thought that this was the perfect opportunity to show off my new wheels, so I whipped a u-turn and pulled into the parking lot faster than I should have. I was going to pull right up beside the back of Robbie Harrison’s hunting pickup, where some of my football buddies were sitting. What I never saw was that Robbie had recently welded a long piece of angle iron in front on his bumper to protect it in the woods. I never saw the angle iron, but I heard it and felt it as I drove up beside his truck. I had pulled too close that angle iron and ripped a slash down the side of my dad’s new car all the way from the front wheel well to the back. By the time I got the car stopped, I had cut a deep crease down the entire left side of the car ... and in front of my friends. We were all shocked into silence for a moment and the only sound was the Fab Four singing out, “In Penny Lane there is a barber showing photographs of every head he’s had the pleasure to have known.” I punched the stereo off and then proceeded to die. Andy said I literally turned white. I tried to get out the driver door, but it wouldn’t open because the crease had sealed the gap between the doors. I asked Robbie if his truck was okay, and he looked down and said, “Sure, my new bumper just has a bunch of blue paint on it, but hey, it’s okay.”

I drove Andy home, and my first thought was to just keep driving down to Florida, which was only a quarter of a mile away. I seriously considered running away and getting a job and sending money back to my dad to pay for a new car. But finally I decided to drag myself home. I parked the car, slid across the seat and got out the passenger door and stumbled into the house and said, “Dad, I need to show you something.” He looked at it and my mother cried, “Oh, my brand new car!” I could tell my dad bit his tongue and didn’t say what he wanted to. Instead he said, “Son, are you okay? Tell me what happened.” It was a very humble teenager who told him the whole story—much different from the cocky kid who had left less than an hour earlier. He explained that our insurance deductible (which I had never heard of before) was \$100 and that I was going to use my part time job to earn the money to pay the deductible. I said, “Yes sir,” and was relieved I didn’t have to buy a new car. But for sure, don’t you know when the car got repaired and when my dad finally let me use it again, about ten years later, that I was much more careful when I drove?

Years later when my dad and I were discussing that and laughing about it, he said, “Son, that fender bender probably saved your life. You were an accident waiting to happen, and I’m just glad it was a minor accident on the first night you drove that car.” Sometimes God allows us to

go through a thorn experience to keep us humble.

Why would God humble us? So he can give us more grace. James 4:6 says, “He gives us more grace...God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” I don’t want God resisting me, but I sure want more of His grace, don’t you? Thorns keep us humble.

(2) It drives me to pray

Paul shared, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.” (vs 8) Anything that causes us to pray is good. Paul didn’t just ask the Lord, he “pleaded” with Him. Not once, twice, but three times. “God, take it away! Take it away! Take it away, please!” Let’s get really honest. How many of you have been praying for something for a long time? You’ve begged God MANY more than three times for something and He hasn’t responded yet? Thanks for your honesty. If you didn’t hold up your hand, then either you’re lying or you’re not praying as much as you should!

That great theologian Garth Brooks once wrote: “Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers.” But the truth is that God ALWAYS answers prayer. He just doesn’t always answer it the way we want. Sometimes He says, “No.” That’s an answer. Sometimes He doesn’t answer according to our timing, and until then His answer is “Wait.” But it’s okay to keep asking. The two most power parables about prayer that Jesus taught were both about the value of persistence in prayer. At other times God says, “I’m not going to give you what you’re asking, I’m going to give you something better.” That’s how God answered Paul’s prayer to take away the thorn.

He said, “I’m not going to take away your thorn, I’m going to do something better. I’m going to give you all the grace and power you need to handle it.” So, the next ministry of the thorn is:

(3) It makes me depend on grace

In verse 9 he wrote, But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” God allows us to experience thorns so He can make us depend on two things: His grace, and His power, and you’ll never appropriate His power until you appreciate His grace. God didn’t say, “My grace CAN BE sufficient,” or “my grace WILL BE sufficient.” He made it present tense and personal. “My grace IS sufficient for YOU.” God’s grace is sufficient to carry you through EVERY challenge of life, and if you don’t fully understand that, He’ll permit you the opportunity to learn it the hard way.

I once heard a story about a Texas millionaire who ordered one of the first Rolls Royce automobiles in Texas. He was happy with the car; but the owner’s manual didn’t list the horsepower of the engine. This was back in the days of telegraphs so he sent a wire to London asking about the horsepower of the engine. The company wired back that the horsepower information was a closely guarded company secret and could not be revealed. The Texan was angry and had his lawyers contact the company and demand since he had paid the full price for the car he had the right to know the horsepower. The Rolls Royce Company responded by agreeing to provide him the horsepower information. The Texan got a telegram with only one word: “ADEQUATE.” It was their way of saying, “You don’t need to know the number, but

you’ll always have all the horsepower you need for any occasion.”

That’s what God is saying to you right now. “Whatever problem you’re facing, whatever thorn is causing you misery right now; My grace is adequate, it’s sufficient.” Either God’s grace is enough or it isn’t. And it is.

How many times during the day are you consciously aware of and dependent upon the grace of God? If a day passes without you saying, “God I can’t make it by your grace,” then it might explain why your thorn is chronic. Try falling on His grace.

(4) It allows me to offer a sacrifice of praise

Paul concludes, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. (vs 9) He had come to the place that, rather than begging God to take it away, he had started to praise God for his thorn, so the power of Christ could be his. It’s always appropriate to praise God for the good things in our lives, but that kind of praise isn’t really a sacrifice. It’s just like writing a thank you note to someone who gives you a gift. But when you can praise God for the thorns in your life—the difficulties and pain, then it becomes a sacrifice of praise. God is always honored by a sacrifice. The Bible says, “Through Jesus,” you can’t do it except through the filter of the sufferings of Jesus “therefore, let us continually” not just once or twice “offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips” it is expressed with your lips, not just a thought “that confess his name.” (Hebrews 13:15)

Some people say, “We no longer relate to God through the sacrificial system.” Oh yes we do, we just don’t sacrifice animals any more—if we did PETA would picket us every week! We relate to God through the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus, “the Lamb of God, slain from the foundation of the world.” In addition, we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable to God. And we continually offer to God the sacrifice of praise.

How do you know when you’ve arrived at a place where you can celebrate your thorn experiences rather than complain about them? It’s when you can offer God the sacrifice of praise to God despite the pain you’re going through. As strange as it may feel, try praising God when your thorn is sticking you in a tender spot!

CONCLUSION

Did you know there were no thorns in the Garden of Eden? The first thorns came because of the curse of sin. God said in Genesis 3:17, “Cursed is the ground because of you...it will produce thorns and thistles.” Only after sin entered the world did humanity have to deal with thistles and thorns. Along this same line of thought, have you ever noticed what the last word of the Old Testament is? A curse. God said, “...or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.” (Malachi 4:6)

In the last message I mentioned the wonderful “no-mores” of heaven. There will be no more tears, no more death, no more sorrow, no more sickness, and no more night. There’s another no-more I held back for this message. Revelation 22:3 says, “No longer will there be any curse.”

That also means that there will be no more thorns in heaven either, just like Eden. I love a Bible where the last word of the Old Testament is curse, and the last chapter of the New Testament says, there will be “no more curse!” It starts out with no thorns in Eden and ends with no thorns in paradise! Meanwhile, welcome to the interlude of thorny experiences.

Perhaps now you understand why Jesus wore a crown of thorns. It wasn't an accident; it was a fulfillment of scripture. He was taking away our curse. Just as Isaac's substitute was a ram caught in a thorn thicket, our Substitute sacrifice wore a crown of thorns. He already felt the sting of all the thorns of life, and in His resurrection, He took the sting of death away!

There is an ancient legend from France that tells the story of how on a certain Good Friday an angel appeared to a simple parish priest and handed him the crown of thorns Jesus wore. The priest was honored and humbled and took it inside the little church and placed it on the altar. The small congregation wept on Good Friday as the crown of thorns reminded them of the suffering of Christ. The priest decided on Easter Sunday morning to remove the crown of thorns because he felt it would hinder the joy of the resurrection celebration. But when they arrived at the little church on Easter Sunday morning, they were surprised to discover that the thorns had blossomed into a beautiful bouquet of roses and a sweet fragrance filled the church.

Of course, that's a legend, but what a message to us! Will you lay your thorns, your limitations, your difficulties, your sufferings and your sorrows on the altar before Jesus? Will you start give Him the sacrifice of your praise even in the midst of your pain? Anybody can take lemons and turn them into lemonade, but only Jesus can take your thorns and turn them into fragrant roses!

OUTLINE

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- (1) A thorn in the flesh is any affliction in our lives that could produce self-pity and bitterness
- (2) Satan twists the thorn experience to defeat us
- (3) God turns the thorn experience for His glory and our good

2. THE MINISTRY OF THE THORN: HOW CAN GOD USE IT?

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- (4) It allows me to offer a sacrifice of praise
"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. (vs 9)



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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes