

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, September 11, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7

“There was given to me a thorn in the flesh.”

THE GOSPEL OF THE THORN

One of the almost incredible facts of life is that some of the people who have left an indelible mark upon the world and whose names are immortal, have been people who themselves were severely handicapped people like Julius Caesar, the epileptic; Beethoven, the composer, who was stone deaf; John Milton, the blind poet; Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the victim of polio; Helen Keller, both blind and deaf; and Stevie Wonder, for whom I have a tremendous admiration, whose joyful, indomitable spirit shines through his blindness.

And here in the New Testament we read that St. Paul, the great apostle of the faith, was himself a handicapped man.

What was Paul's particular handicap? This question has always intrigued the commentators, and as I have studied our text, I find that the expositors put forward many suggestions in their attempt to fathom the mystery of Paul's "thorn in the flesh."

a. One commentator says that it was probably ophthalmia - extremely bad eyesight which half blinded Paul and hampered his work at every turn. The fierce Syrian sun often made eyes weak and inflamed, and the East is notorious for blind. Here are Paul's own words to the Galatians: "I will write these closing words in my own handwriting. See how large I have to make the letters!" (6:11) Because he was so shortsighted, he had to write big! Earlier on Paul had said to those Galatian believers, "I know you would gladly have plucked out your own to help me" (4:15). Paul was on trial before the Jewish Supreme Court, we read that he said, "I did not realize that he was the high priest" (Acts 23:5). Through the haze of his half-blindness he could not recognize the High Priest in front of him, even though that dignitary wore gorgeous and distinctive robes. Eye trouble seemed to be Paul's torment.

b. "But no," says another, "Paul's thorn in the flesh was epilepsy." We need not go into details to find the evidence which would lead us to believe that he suffered from this distressing malady; but it is quite possible that Paul was an epileptic. If that is true, all those who are likewise afflicted may find inspiration and hope in the knowledge that the condition in no way diminished his immense intellectual and spiritual powers.

c. Luther and Calvin each maintained that it was a high spiritual temptation. They believed that Paul had hours when he shrank from duty, when doubts began to play havoc with his faith, when the hideous memories of his past persecutions of the Christians almost overwhelmed him.

d. St. Augustine, St. Gregory, and the mediaeval monks, perhaps all too self-conscious

of their own problems, intimated that Paul was tempted by lust -- a “carnal appetite” they called it; some old vicious temptation which constantly harassed him. The very word a “thorn” in Greek is the word for a “stake,” and the phrase “a stake in the flesh” describes the ghastly method used by ancient hermits and holy men to lacerate whatever organ of their body seemed to them to be the seat of temptation.

- e. Tertullian said it was “headache.”
- f. St. Jerome asserted it was “earache.”
- g. Others have held that it was a stammer that made his speech “contemptible” (2 Corinthians 10:10).
- h. St. Chrysostom maintained that it was the Jews, who followed Paul around from place to place to twist his words, and contradict his Gospel, and seek to impose the works of the Law upon the young Christian converts, maintaining that the works of the Law must be performed if they were to achieve salvation.
- i. Finally, there is one writer who, I trust with more facetiousness than sincerity, suggests that perhaps this is an oblique reference to Paul’s wife, if he had one!

Well, there you have nine theories or suppositions regarding Paul’s “thorn.” But we don’t know for sure what it was; and isn’t it a good thing we can’t be sure? Because this means that every sufferer, no matter what his problem may be, can identify with Paul, and derive comfort and inspiration from Paul’s experience of the thorn in the flesh.

We do know that whatever the trouble was for Paul, it tore into the very quick; it agonized him; and more than that, it never left him, although he prayed earnestly for its removal. The loathsome thing became a lodger for life!

However, enough about the penalties it made Paul pay. Let us think rather about the blessings which resulted from it.

In the first place, you will notice that

1. Pride was deposited by the thorn. Listen to the Apostle as he gives us a snatch of autobiography: “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” Paul was a most gifted man, an intellectual giant. In dispensing natural talent, God had been more than kind to him. He had been a brilliant university student. And his very gifts and talents had brought him into the deadly danger of pride: pride, the most subtle and deadly of all sins, the sin that caused Satan’s original downfall. Jesus always looked upon it as the most hideous sin of all because it makes a person encase himself in a hard shell of self-righteousness which completely cuts him off from the saving grace of God in Christ: pride, the one sin above all others that blocks the way to Calvary.

Paul was in danger from pride -- and then, the thorn came!

Doesn't that often happen to us? When everything moves along well, when our cup is filled to overflowing, when success embraces us and material things smile upon us - then - we so often begin to push God into the background; and He has to allow a thorn to tear us and bring us back to Himself. So often when we are intoxicated with the success of our own achievements, we feel like howling with the pagan poet Henley:

“I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul!”

The old proverb reminds us that “it takes a steady hand to carry a full cup.”

With savage fingers the thorn tore down the idol of Pride as it crept on to the throne of Paul's heart. And later Paul was able to say, “But all those things that I might count as profit I now reckon as loss, for Christ's sake” (Philippians 3:7). The thorn had done its work well!

My friend, never rebel against the thorn. Remember, it is meant by our heavenly Father to act like the surgeon's scalpel — to cut out the cancer from your soul. St. Peter, in his first letter, makes a very thought-provoking statement when he says, “Remember, when your body suffers, sin loses its power, and you won't be spending the rest of your life chasing after evil desires, but will be anxious to do the will of God” (1 Peter 4:1-2).

Pride was deposed; but more than that

2. Power was released by the thorn. We know full well that trouble often seems to release a hidden spring and bring the very best out of a person. War many a time reveals and releases qualities in a man which might never otherwise have come to the surface. A clerk leaves his office desk, joins the Army, receives his commission on the field, and comes home a colonel. The farm boy goes off to battle, and brings home a Congressional Medal of Honor, and people exclaim: “Who would have thought that he had it in him!”

A paralyzed man was being pushed in a wheelchair over a level crossing in the city of Hull, England. The chair stuck in the rails, and the attendant who was pushing it ran off in a panic as an express train thundered round the bend. The helpless man in the chair looked in horror as the monster bore down upon him. The spectacle of its huge bulk seemed to release a hidden spring, and the cripple swung clear while the chair was crumpled into matchwood before the roaring train.

So, man's extremity is often God's opportunity. The coming of the thorn often means the coming of a new power, a new depth of character, into a person's life.

Paul would never, I think, have become the blazing ambassador for Christ that he was, had it not been for the sanctifying influence of the thorn.

John Bright, the celebrated English statesman of the last century, lost his young wife less

than two years after their marriage. On the day of her death, his friend, Richard Cobden, called to offer his sympathy, and found Bright in the depths of grief and despair. "All that was left on earth," said Bright afterwards, describing that bitter hour, "all that was left of my young wife except the memory of a sainted life and our all too brief happiness, was lying still and cold in the room above us." But, "After a time, Mr. Cobden looked up said, 'There are thousands of homes at this moment where wives, mothers and children are hungry. Now, when the first paroxysm of your grief is past, I would advise you to come with me, and we will never rest till the Corn Law is repealed!'" And God used John Bright's desolating sorrow, his terrible experience of the thorn, to release in him hidden springs of power which made him one of the greatest social reformers England produced in the nineteenth century.

Does God not allow the thorn to pierce our heart in order that hidden springs of power might be released in us too? Don't rebel against the thorn. Let it do its work and ask God to give you courage and strength to respond to it aright.

Pride was deposed by the thorn; and Power was released by it; but best of all

3. Personality was enriched by the thorn. A demobilized soldier returned to his old civilian job at the end of World War II. His hands had lost some of their cunning, and he botched badly his first piece of work. He knew the boss of old and waited for the string of profanity and the abusive language which the boss was so expert at using. But, to his amazement, the only comment that came was, "Too bad, John, but better luck next time," And then John remembered that the boss had lost his only son in a bomber raid over Berlin. Around that bitter loss the boss had built an enriched personality.

I wonder would Paul have had the Christ-like character which brought people in multitudes to the Cross, had it not been for the thorn. I doubt it. Going through the mill separates the wheat from the chaff. How can I really sympathize with a bereaved friend if the angel of death has not at some time visited my own home?

I'm sure it was the thorn that twisted and rankled in Paul's life that made him so generous and understanding toward John Mark, the disciple who had taken cold feet; and toward Onesimus, the runaway slave.

A gentleman years ago had a gramophone, which, some of you older people will remember, had a steel needle which had to be replaced quite often. This man nourished his love for music by playing over and over again his favorite pieces on his 78 rpm records. One evening he invited another music lover to spend an hour or two with him, and during the evening he made an experiment with his friend. "I am going to play the same record twice," he said. "Listen carefully and tell me which rendering you prefer." As the music died away, his friend said quite positively, "I preferred the second rendering. It was purer, sweeter. What was the difference?" "Just this," said his host, "the first time I played it with a needle, and the second time with a thorn!"

It often takes the thorn to bring the finest music out of a human personality.

Every fourth grader knows that a pearl comes from the body of an oyster. The poor oyster is irritated by grit that intrudes, by a splinter that torments it. It cannot remove the agonizing grit, so what does it do? It weaves its mucus round and round the tormenting thing until the grit is enthroned within a pearl! So, we might say that a pearl is a glorified agony.

And then I turn to the last book of the Bible, the Book of the Revelation, and I read that the gates of the Heavenly City are made of pearl -- the Pearly Gates! (Revelation 21:21). What does that suggest to us? Does it not say to us - look carefully at the Gates of Paradise - look until you find your pearl -- that piece of grit that tormented your life — that thorn that tore its way into your heart. It's there!

The Pearly Gates represent the glorified agonies of time.

Now listen to what the New Testament says as its last word on this torturing problem of suffering: "Now obviously no affliction seems pleasant at the time: it is in fact most unpleasant. Yet, when it is all over, we can see that it has quietly produced the fruit of real goodness in the characters of those who have accepted it in the right spirit!" (Hebrews 12:11, Phillips)

My friend, will you not thank God even for the thorn?

AMEN.