

Thorn in the Flesh



'...when I am weak, then I am strong.' (2 Cor 12:1-10)

1. What is the thorn in the flesh?

This passage must be among the most transparent, vulnerable, and honest admissions from any servant of God in the entire Scripture. The great apostle Paul admits he has a problem of being easily conceited. 'Thorn in the flesh' in Greek means 'fishhook or splinter.' 'Flesh' refers to the unregenerate part of the soul.

This thorn will not kill you, but it will cause constant pain in your soul. This thorn in Paul's personal life troubled him much. Even though he prayed for it to go away 3 times, it would not go away! In fact, the answer from the Lord was, 'You need this thorn. It will do you more good than harm.' This was the only way for the power of God to remain in Paul's life.

2. How did Paul respond to the thorn in the flesh?

'Therefore, most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities (weakness), that the power of Christ may rest upon me.' (2 Cor 12:9)

5 weaknesses [pains] that Paul takes pleasure in [embraces with both hands]

- a) *infirmities (weaknesses);*
- b) *reproaches (insults);*
- c) *needs (hardships);*
- d) *persecutions;*
- e) *distresses (difficulties) - for Christ's sake.*

Paul had extraordinary spiritual experiences - a tremendous conversion experience (Acts 9) and signs, wonders, and mighty deeds (2 Cor 12:12). Had Paul been in total control of himself and possessed perfect humility, this thorn would not be needed. But because Paul was so weak and so prone to take himself so seriously God gave him this thorn to keep him in God's grace. If you knew Paul personally, would you have thought he was prone to pride? *'The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.'* (Jer 19:9)

3. When did this thorn come to Paul?

This particular thorn came to Paul shortly after his heavenly encounter 14 years before Paul wrote this epistle. God took Paul to the third heaven and showed him things that are too great for a man to utter. It means this thorn in the flesh

- a) was a manifestation of God's presence in Paul's life. Maybe you have such a thorn in your life! It is the manifestation of God's presence in your life;
- b) This thorn in the flesh was a form of God's chastening or discipline - 'enforced & accelerated learning' (Heb 12:75-6).

4. THREE forms of God's Chastening

- a) Internal (Plan A)
- b) External (Plan B)
- c) Terminal (God's last offer of mercy)

You may have more than one form of thorn in your flesh. The thorn may feel like a prison sentence, locked into an unpleasant situation that may not go away any time soon. It will eventually go away when you no longer need it. But don't expect it to go away this afternoon.

One prosperity preacher said, *'If Paul had my faith, he would not have this throne in the flesh.'*

This type of statement shows we desperately need a biblical understanding of suffering.

5. What is the Prerequisite for the thorn in the flesh?

What qualifies us for the throne in the flesh? You do not need a special altar call. The Lord's prayer teaches us to pray, 'Lead us not into temptation.' We ought to pray to avoid temptations and trials, but it is not always possible.

There are 4 qualifications for the thorn in the flesh.

- a) When God has been exceedingly good to you. Paul was taken to the third heaven! God was so good to Paul. *1 Peter 2:3, 'You have tasted that the Lord is good.'* If you have not tasted the goodness of God, you probably are not a candidate for the thorn yet.
- b) You have a weakness - you tend to take yourself too seriously. If you do not have any problem with pride, you don't need this thorn. But if you feel you don't need any help to keep you humble, then you have no objectivity about yourself.
- c) You are God's chosen vessel for some form of special ministry. If you are a sovereign vessel of the Lord and if you don't have a thorn in the flesh now, you will later. *'Whom the Lord loves, He chastens and scourges every son whom He receives.'* (Heb 12:6) It means special preparation is required.

When Samuel anointed David at 17 years of age, it was the beginning of trouble for David. Just because we have the anointing it does not mean that we do not need preparation. David needed another 20 years of preparation to function as the king of Israel. *C.f. 'If I have 25 years to live, I would spend 20 of them in preparation.'* (Charles Spurgeon) Preparation is always painful. If you are given a thorn in the flesh, then you have been enrolled into the University of the Holy Spirit.'

- d) When God is not finished with you yet. You have not yet graduated from the need for preparation. You are still in God's university.

6. What is the Purpose of the thorn in the flesh?

- a) To guarantee our sanctification. *'...that we may be partakers of His holiness.'* (Heb 12:10) This is God's ordained means of sanctification. The thorn is God's way of getting our attention and making us more like Jesus. One of the most amazing verses in the NT is Heb 5:9, *'and having been perfected [by the things which He suffered...]'* Why would Jesus need to suffer to be perfected when he was already the perfect Son of God? (I will ask Him when I get to heaven.) But if Jesus needed to suffer, how much more do we – if we want to be holy and sanctified?

During the Welsh revival, Evan Roberts prayed, 'Lord, bend me.' (1904) It would be great if we all obediently follow God's plan A – listening to the word of God through preaching, reading, studying the Scriptures, and responding to God. But we all need God's Plan B because we don't always listen to Him or obey Him voluntarily. The Corinthian Christians abused the Lord's supper so badly that the Lord had to severely chasten them and as a result some died prematurely.

- b) One of the fringe benefits of external chastening [enforced learning leading to sanctification] is that it ensures that we receive reward at the judgment seat of Christ. God wants you to have an eternal reward more than you do. Therefore, when God's plan B of 'chastening' falls on us, one day we will look back and say it was the best thing that happened to us. God said to Jonah, *'Go to Nineveh.'* Jonah said, 'No.' So God sent wind, waves, and a fish to get him! God's Plan B was activated.
- c) Another benefit of the thorn in the flesh is to keep us out of trouble. *'Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep Your Word.'* (Ps 119:67). One day, you will treasure the chastening. One day, you will appreciate it.

7. How does the thorn in the flesh achieve all these things?

It is the **'compensatory puncture of our pride.'** It is God's way of bringing a balance to make up for our character deficiencies. Some people receive very little attention and honour that they need only a little puncture to their pride. Some receive so much attention and honour that they desperately need this puncture to keep them under God's mercy!

In other words, the good the thorn does more than compensate for the pain it causes. This is how God helps us to build a defence against 'conceit.' The great apostle Paul admits he needed this compensatory puncture regularly because he is prone to take himself so seriously. Note that the great saints of God throughout history saw themselves as the greatest sinners (1 John 1:8). E.g. Isaiah (Is 6:5)

8. **Intentional Ambiguity**

'...lest I should be exalted above measure...[x 2]' (2 Cor 12:7)

- a) 'Lest I be exalted above measure...[by others].' People put Paul on a pedestal and admired him too much. (Sometimes we don't want people to know how human we are – it is phony spirituality.)
- b) 'Lest I be conceited.' I.e. to keep myself from exalting myself to the point of inviting God's judgment. Therefore, Paul says, 'This is what I need.' The thorn was designed to keep Paul humble because he received exceedingly great revelations, and possibly Paul could be overly excited by the people bragging about his spirituality!

We will not outgrow this problem of pride on this side of life. So, God delivers a knockout blow on our pride by sending these 5 types of pains – weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and distress (2 Cor 12:10). Why? God is a jealous God. God has determined that no flesh will glory in His presence and it keeps us from competing with God's glory. 'My glory I will not give to another.' (Is 42:8) We must never forget this about God.

9. **Paradox of the thorn in the flesh**

Paul says that God gave it to him. Paul also says the messenger of Satan came to buffet him. How can this be? Was it God? Or was it the Devil?

***King David** - 2 Sam 24:1, '...the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel, and He moved David against them to say, 'Go, number Israel and Judah.'* Compare this with 1 Chr 21:1, 'Now Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel.' So who did it?

The Crucifixion - Acts 2:23, '[Christ] being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified and put to death.' God pre-ordained the cross for His Son, but it was the wicked men who crucified Him. God is always at the bottom of it all fully in control. 1 Cor 2:8 – The devil would not have crucified the Lord had he known it was God's plan to use it for good.

The Difference between what God causes and what God permits is holy ground. God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, 'Stop. Do not come near. You are standing on the holy ground.' (Ex 3:5). God does not want us to figure everything out. Rather, God wants us to take off our shoes and worship Him. Those who try to figure out everything may be coming too close to what is holy.

10. **The permanence of the thorn in the flesh**

Paul prayed 3 times for the thorn to be removed. There is nothing wrong with praying for God to remove the thorn again and again. But do not try to remove it yourself. It may only bring more pain. How can I know what I have is the thorn in the flesh? You have prayed over and over, and it doesn't go away, and like Paul, God has been exceedingly good to you. It means you are highly honoured. You are locked into a painful situation. It may be the thorn in the flesh. God is up to something. Don't complain. Learn to say, 'Yes, Lord.' How long will it last? As long as you need it.

11. **What exactly was Paul's thorn in the flesh?**

Was the thorn Paul's physical frailty? Or the Judaizers opposing him? Maybe his foes? Even his friends? His failures? Or a sense of discouragement? There are 50 scholarly opinions about what Paul's thorn in the flesh is. Some say it was his bad eye. Tertullian the early church father said it was pain in Paul's ear or head. Some believe it was the Judaizers. Some think it was Paul's inner guilt for persecuting the church.

God does not want us to know exactly what Paul's thorn was. Otherwise, 99% of us might conclude it does not apply to us. God uses the umbrella term 'thorn in the flesh' so that it can apply to all of us.

Don't despise it. Don't resent it. It is only a matter of time before we thank God for it. 'Lord, help us to apply this message rightly in Jesus' name. Amen.'