



The Ministry of Thorns

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***2 Corinthians 12:7-10** -- "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure." or this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me." "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."*

I. INTRODUCTION -- THE STRANGENESS OF GOD'S WAYS

- Whenever one reads this portion of Scripture, it stands out to us that often there is a sense of strangeness about the processes of God. Here, at the height of spiritual power, at the point of revival, a calamity sets in on the life of the great apostle Paul.
- It probably is best illustrated in the life of Peter, as to the paradox of the working of God in our own lives. Peter was impetuous and outspoken and some of the things that he said was not always couched in wisdom nor in tact. Consider the pattern:
 - Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord. (Luke 5:8)
 - Lo, we have left all and followed thee. (Luke 18:28)
 - What shall we have therefore? Be it far from Thee, Lord. (Matthew 16:22)
 - Lord, if it be Thou, bid me come unto Thee on the water. (Matthew 14:28)
 - Lord, save me. (Matthew 14:30)
 - The crowd press Thee, and how sayest Thou, Who touched me? (Mark 5:31; Luke 8:45)
 - Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God. (Matthew 16:16; Mark 8:29; John 11:27)
 - To whom can we go but unto Thee? Thou hast the words of eternal life. (John 6:68)
 - Lord, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three tabernacles: one for Thee and one for Moses, and one for Elias. (Matthew 17:4; Mark 9:5; Luke 9:33)
 - How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? (Matthew 18:21)
 - Though all men deny Thee, yet will not I. (Matthew 26:35; Mark 14:31)
 - Thou shalt never wash my feet. (John 13:8)
 - Lord, not my feet only, but my hands and my head. (John 13:9)
 - I know not the man. (Matthew 26:74)
 - Lord, Thou knowest all things: thou knowest that I love Thee. (John 21:15-17)
 - Not so, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common and unclean. (Acts 10:14; 10:28; 11:8)
 - Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us; what was I that I could withstand God? (Acts 11:17)
- This is just a sampling of some of Peter's comments. His words mark him. Often hastily rushing into sacred territory like a blind bull, full of arrogance. On the other hand, despite these heady remarks that Peter made, his heart was always close to repentance. As with the Lake scene, attempting to tread waters much too deep for him but willing to cry out to the Master as he began to sink.
- Often, as it is our nature, the inability to comprehend the way that God will work through us and with us and in us. Yet, it thrills God to bring power out of weakness.
- Great spiritual power, yet the presence of the nagging thorn. Great faith, yet weak faith. The distraction that constantly allowed him to understand that despite the power and privileges of the Crucified life there was that sense of weakness.
- So it is with thorns that come our way. They have the prospect of shaping us.

II. 2 CORINTHIANS 12

- Paul was quick to affirm that fourteen years ago, there was that place of excessive revelation. A place that he had been close to God. Were one to look back fourteen years in the life of Paul from II Corinthians 12, it would have been traced to the stoning at Derbe and Lystra.
- At the place of the pain of the stoning, Paul was lifted to the third heaven. It was there that God revealed to him the great mystery of the third heaven. Such was the experience that Paul does not even relate what he saw.
- But because of this great experience in his life, he came to great revelation, but he also came to bear the mark of the thorn.

A. Word Study of “Thorn”

- When one looks to the word, thorn, there is that basic understanding of what a thorn is. However, Paul was not having reference to a small, simple hurt that served to distract him at different times of his walk toward God.
- The Greek word here is SKOLLOPS. The definition of the word is something pointed, sharp, the presence of a stake. Something that causes severe pain or constant irritation.
- It was something that Paul could never rid himself of. It was a malady, a weakness, a distraction that he would carry with him to the grave.

B. The Beauty of Thorns

- Thorns are invitations to courage.

Doors of Daring -- Henry van Dyke

*The mountains that inclose the vale,
With walls of granite, steep and high,
Invite the fearless foot to scale
Their stairway to the sky.*

*The restless, deep, dividing sea
That flows and foams from shore to shore,
Calls to its sunburned chivalry,
“Push out, set sail, explore!”*

*The bars of life at which we fret,
That seem to prison and control,
Are but the doors of daring, set
Ajar before the soul.*

*Say not, “Too poor,” but freely give;
Sigh not, “Too weak,” but boldly try;
You never can begin to live
Until you dare to die.*

- Until the presence of a thorn marks my life, I am just a shell of what God desires to do. At turn of Paul’s life, there was Satan to harass, annoy, depress, and hurt him. Yet, the thorn carries with it the evil of pain but also the good of pain.
- Satan can afford to leave some people alone, for he does not fear them. There are others that Satan constantly badgers and opposes for in doing so, he is endeavoring to thwart their impact on their world. He fears the result of their life getting entirely on track for God.
- In the process of thorn-bearing, as with all tribulations, God’s hand is in it just as well as Satan’s hand is in it.
 - *Job 2:3 -- “And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? and still he holdeth fast his integrity, although thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause.”*
- In one aspect, the thorns are the messengers of Satan, in others, the messengers of God. It is all in who you listen to. Paul did not find fault with God, nor did he sit down in despair. He kept going, moving, driving, reaching, giving, in his pursuit of God.

1. Thorns Cause Men To Pray.

- The power of the thorn causes men to pray. It was here that the great apostle identifies his own desire to pray because of the pain of the thorn. Three times, he sought for the deliverance.
- He prayed persistently until God told him, “No, my grace is sufficient for your thorn.” Paul prayed specifically, “This thing that troubles me.” Some men pray in general and never get anything specific (these are generally those who do not pray or have not developed an ability to have a dialogue with God).
- Trouble and distress should drive us to God, instead of away from God. It should cause men to pray, not to complain. Yet, how often it is that we misappropriate the purpose of prayer. We approach the throne of grace and turn it into the judgement bar by accusing God and attempting to arraign Him.
- This principle is developed uniquely in the book of Nehemiah when he prays specifically because of the thorns in his own life.
 - [Nehemiah 1:4-11](#) – Prayer was born out of distress of a broken wall, a broken nation, and a broken people.
 - [Nehemiah 2:4](#) – Prayer came as a result in response to a favor. Nehemiah received the attention of the king but did not really know what to ask of him. He prayed for God to direct his request.
 - [Nehemiah 4:1-6](#) – Prayer came as a response to an attack by two wicked enemies, Tobiah and Sanballat.
 - [Nehemiah 4:7-9](#) – Prayer became a weapon. The Bible declares that “prayer was set as a watch against the enemies.”
 - [Nehemiah 5](#) – Prayer became instrumental in restitution. Prayer does not just deliver us from the enemy, it causes us to long to restore some broken thing in our lives.
 - [Nehemiah 6:9-14](#) – Prayer arose out of a response to Sanballat’s rumors and his slandering distractions. The best thing we can do in the face of false accusation generally is to pray. Time is the great revealer and it proves all both to God and to men.
 - [Nehemiah 8:1-13](#) – Prayer was mixed with the Word. This is how that faith is restored back into our lives.
 - [Nehemiah 9](#) – Prayer that becomes focused on the goodness of God works to lift our own spirit and to build our faith. Today is not your darkest day. . . . It is far from it. . . . There is a God who still answers prayer and still pours out blessings that we are not even able to contain.
 - [Nehemiah 13:14, 22, 29, 31](#) – Prayer centered on remembrance. Four times in Nehemiah 13 the word “remember” is used. God is going to remember us for something and we all ought to determine that God is going to remember us for something good.

2. Thorns Nourish a Dependence on God.

- The presence of a thorn in my life causes me to depend on the grace and mercy of God.
- When I am weak, then am I strong. One of the great paradoxes of Scripture. Out of weakness comes strength. Out of inability comes ability. Out of burden comes growth. Out of hunger comes revival. Out of doubt comes faith.
- The following rendering of the Beatitudes comes from a paraphrase called “The Message.”
 - [Matthew 5:3-12](#) -- *“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.” “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.” “You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.” “You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being care-full,” “you find yourselves cared for.” “You’re blessed when you get your inside world--your heart and mind--put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.” “You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.” “You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.” “Not only that--count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens--give a cheer, even!--for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.”*
- Out of the perplexities of life, comes the constraining love of Christ. It is the love of Christ that gives purpose, that brings the anointing, that causes us to diligently seek Him. Out of our own weakness, He supplies strength.
 - Peter’s memory of his denial of Jesus, kept him dependent on God.
 - David’s memory of Uriah’s murder, kept him dependent on God.
 - Elijah’s memory of the juniper tree, kept him dependent on God.

- It is the understanding that my own life has an Achilles' heel that keeps me dependent on God. Without the knowledge that swift failure can occur in my life, Satan has caused me to buy into a lie. There always will be that potential for the sin factor to overthrow us if we are not inclined toward spiritual discipline.
- Paul's thorn was nothing more than God trying to factor into his life, humility.

3. Thorns Cultivate Character.

- The presence of that troubling thorn causes men to become shaped in the image of Christ. "As the outward man perishes, the inward man is renewed day by day."
- The thorn is the shaping of character. The thorn gives men the understanding of the sufficiency of the grace of God.
- **The grace of God is:**
 - Sufficient when friends forsake and foes pursue.
 - Sufficient to make you strong against a raging synagogue or a shower of stones.
 - Sufficient for excessive labors of body and conflicts of the soul.
 - Sufficient to enable you to do as much work, and even more, than if the body were perfectly whole.
 - In estimating the greatness of a man's life, it is fair to take into consideration the difficulties under which the man had to labor to accomplish the tasks. There is always that understanding of the enabling power of God.
- **Understand the sufficiency of God:**
 - The small boy's lunch was only five loaves and two fishes. . . but it was sufficient.
 - David only had a small slingshot. . . but it was sufficient.
 - Moses only had a rod in his hand. . . but it was sufficient.
 - The widow only had just a bit of oil and meal . . . but it was sufficient.
 - There was only one cloud the size of a man's hand . . . but it was sufficient.
 - At the wedding in Cana there was only water. . . but it was sufficient.
 - In the face of your own difficulty, in the light of your own trial, in the hopelessness of your own life, there is the grace of God. . . but it is sufficient.
 - Pablo Picasso. Picasso was the Spanish cubist artist who sketched, sculpted, and painted his way into prominence in the early twentieth century. On the rare occasion, he painted live portraits. One such instance was his painting of Gertrude Stein, one of America's foremost authors of a bygone era.
 - Stein was born in Oakland, California. She was educated at Radcliffe College and also studied at John Hopkins University. For most of her life she lived in Paris and there she would write.
 - To many, Gertrude's prose was unintelligible. To the elite, her words were sublime. "A rose is a rose is a rose." Or, "When they are alone, they want to be with others, and when they are with others, they want to be alone. After all human beings are like that."
 - My attention however is not so much focused on Gertrude Stein or upon her words or her life's story, but on that encounter she had with the great artist, Pablo Picasso. During the winter of 1905-1906, Gertrude Stein sat for the exceptional portrait to be painted by the master.
 - Ninety times she sat before the canvas. Ninety times, Picasso grew frustrated. Finally, in frustration Picasso said, "I can't see you any longer when I look at you."
 - So he packed up his brushes, paints, and canvasses and returned home to Spain. There, he would continue working on the portrait of Gertrude Stein. By spring, it was largely finished. In the fall, the painting was unveiled.
 - Onlookers were surprised. Gertrude Stein was a young woman when the master painted her. Yet, the face staring from the canvas was that of a wizened woman wearing a thoughtful, earnest face.
 - Eventually a lone voice courageously remarked to Picasso that Gertrude didn't look like her portrait. Picasso replied simply, "She will one day." Indeed, as time passed Gertrude became the image of Picasso's portrait.
 - Any artist can paint what is. Good artists can paint what once was. But, only masters can paint what shall be.
 - Today, I look into faces of partially completed canvasses. And I pray that the Master will allow me to catch a glimpse of what He sees for your life. I pray that you do not become frustrated or disheartened with the thorns in your life, because they are being used for not as you are, not as you were, but as you someday shall be. . . . that is the purpose of the thorns.

III. CONCLUSION

- In the process of thorn bearing, it marked the life of Paul but that is not all that marks his life.
 - *Galatians 6:17 -- "From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."*
- Could it be that the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ, the marks of the Cross, were those marks that Paul obtained from the marks of his thorn.
- Could it be that the thorn was what shaped his life into the image of Christ? Could it be that what caused him to flame with holy fire was the presence of the stakes in hands and in feet?
- No man will arrive in heaven without some scars that life places upon him. But the scars that life brings to us should mark us in the manner of a Cross. The thorn is not to destroy me, it is to equip me and to empower me.