

1
B – Pentecost 7
2 Corinthians 12:7-10
“Praying for Thorns”

After a bit of modest bragging about his exclusive, backstage tour of heaven, Paul writes, **“To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this [thorn in the flesh], that it should leave me. But he said to me ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”**

Here is the scene. You’re on a plane flying across the country and suddenly the engines of the plane burst into flames and the co-pilot rushes out of the cockpit and announces that the plane is going to crash. It’s necessary to abandon the plane. But not to worry, there are plenty of parachutes for every passenger. The stewardesses begins to distribute parachutes to everyone with instructions on how to wear it and operate it, saying, “I know this is scary for you, but be assured, the parachute will deliver you safely.”

As that the door of the plane is opened, the first passenger steps up and shouts over the wind, “Could I make a request? Could I have a green parachute? It’s my lucky color.” The pilot shakes his head in disbelief and says, “No, it’s enough that you have a parachute.”

A second asks, “I’m afraid of heights. Can you remove my fears before I jump?” “No,” comes the reply, “but despite your fears, you’ll land safely.”

A third argues that he would like to wait until the plane gets lower before jumping to which the pilot says, “No. Don’t be ridiculous. You’ve got a parachute. Trust it.”

A fourth with knocking knees shouts, “I have a better idea. Let’s crash with the plane. Maybe we’ll survive. And the pilot shouts, “You people don’t understand. I’ve given you a parachute. That’s enough.”

To Paul’s prayer for THORN REMOVAL SURGERY, Jesus answers, **“my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made known in weakness.”**

We always want Jesus to fix one more thing for us so that we can finally get on with the business of trusting in Him. “Just this one thing, Lord.” Fix this, change that, give me this, take that away ...” “Then I’ll be ready to trust you. Then I’ll be ready to jump into this life of faith.”

Paul has a problem. He calls it his **“thorn in the flesh.”** We don’t know what it was, the scriptures don’t say. Which means, whatever it was is not the point. So don’t waste your time on that.

But Paul did what we all do. Whatever it was, he prayed that the Lord would remove it. So, what’s your **‘thorn in the flesh’** that you pray that the Lord would remove from you?

- Is it the physical pain or the disease that you pray the Lord would take away from you?
- Is it the emotional pain of loneliness or depression or anger that you have prayed that the Lord would remove how many times?
- Is it the consequences of mistakes you made in your youth that remain on your record – whether that record be public or private?

And really, who doesn’t pray for all this – for ourselves and for others?

So let’s be clear. It’s not that these prayers for **“thorn extraction surgery”** are wrong. Even our Lord Himself prayed THREE TIMES in the Garden of Gethsemane for God to remove His **“thorn in the flesh”** – that cup that was given Him to drink – filled with the most horrible physical and spiritual suffering the world has ever known.

It’s not wrong to pray like this. But even as we pray, with our Lord, with Paul, that God would remove our **‘thorns in the flesh’**, we must always also be willing to pray, **“not my will, but yours be done.”** Which is what Paul does – EVENTUALLY. It took Paul some time to learn this – because this is a hard lesson to learn.

It’s important to notice that Paul knows where these ‘thorns’ come from. **“A thorn was given me in the flesh – a messenger of Satan.”** And the truth is, Satan’s got an endless supply of these thorns. And he loves to keep sticking them to us.

And being the fallen, turned in on ourselves creatures that we are, there’s a way in which WE’RE ACTUALLY THANKFUL FOR THEM. We like to use these ‘HARASSING THORNS’ as ways for keeping the Lord at a safe distance from us. There’s always one more **‘thorn’** to remove before we’re willing to jump. And we’ve got enough of these **“thorns”** to use as excuses for NOT JUMPING to make a rose bush jealous.

In answer to Paul’s prayer, Jesus replies with a hard answer, **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made known in weakness.”**

So much for the ‘if you just pray hard enough, God will give you what you ask for’ lie that the ‘super-Christians’ keep pumping into the air that we breathe. Not even all Jesus’ prayers were answered. God didn’t **“take the cup away”** from Him as He asked. Rather, His Father gave His Son angels to help Him drink it.

“My grace is sufficient for you” means, you have everything you need in the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. You don’t need sometime else or something more.

So, here’s the test. Let’s see how you do. It’s a one question test - and the question is this, “What if God’s only ‘yes’ to all your prayers was His saving grace in Jesus Christ. Would that be enough? Would His grace in Christ be sufficient for you?

Let me put it another way. What if God were to say “no” to all your prayers, but ‘yes’ to His Son who prays for you – **“Holy Father, they are in the world, keep them in your name…”** Would that be enough?

For all his pleading, the answer Paul gets from his Lord is, **“My grace is sufficient for you.”** This is a hard for us to swallow. We’ve been taught all our life to be self-sufficient, independent. But Jesus says, **“my grace is sufficient for you.”** That means that our sufficiency is not in ourselves but in our Lord. And we are not independent but entirely dependent on Him.

This is hard for us. No one likes the idea of having to be cared for because we can’t care for ourselves. I’ve never met anyone who was ready to go to a nursing home. What we really want and pray for is for God to give us the sufficiency to fix all of our problems and take care of ourselves. We pray that God would demonstrate His power by making us strong and powerful enough to take care of ourselves.

But it’s contrary to and against all of our wisdom that He says, **“My power is made perfect in weakness,”** that is, in **“your”** weakness. How strange and scary this sounds to our ‘might makes right,’ and ‘only the strong survive,’ way of thinking.

We say, “Power is made perfect in strength.” But Jesus turns everything around. **“My power is made perfect in your weakness.”** It is only as we come to grips with our weakness and inability to save ourselves that we are ready to surrender all of our reasons and excuses and ‘thorns’ and confess, **“your grace is sufficient for me.”** ‘It’s all I need.’

And that’s why the answer to our prayer that those thorns might be removed is so often “no.” These ‘thorns’ show us just how weak and helpless we really are. They shatter our pride. They humble us. They **“keep us from becoming conceited.”**

So, the best thing that can happen to us is that those thorns in the flesh might actually do their job. Not the job that Satan put them there for – but the job that the Lord uses them for.

Maybe this is why Jesus calls all of those, so called “weaknesses” that He rattles off in His “beatitudes,” such blessings. **“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” “Blessed are those who mourn.” “Blessed are the meek.” “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.”**

“My power is made perfect in weakness,” says our Lord.

- Just look to the cross. In the weakness and foolishness of Christ crucified, we see the power of God to save the whole world.
- Just look to your baptism. In the weakness of plain water is the power of God to wash away all your sins and raise you to new life.
- Just look to the preaching of His Word. In the weakness of an absurd proclamation – “Christ Jesus died for you. All your sins are forgiven” is the power of God to convert our boasting in ourselves to boasting in our weaknesses.
- Just look to His Supper. In the weakness of ordinary bread and wine, is the power of God to forgive your sins and strengthen you in this one true faith to life everlasting.

If God’s power is so great in THESE weak things, HOW MUCH MORE ought we to boast in His power to work in my weakness?

Paul’s response to God’s ‘no’ to his prayer is to jump with both feet into this life of faith. **“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly IN MY WEAKNESSES, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. For when I am weak then I am strong.”**

The paradoxical nature of the Christian faith is this – every thorn in the flesh is one more reason for us to boast in all-sufficiency of God’s grace for me. Every thorn in the flesh becomes my instructor in the one of the most important lessons I can learn in this life – the lesson of being **“content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities”** – contentment that is built on the sure foundation that **“God’s power is made perfect in weakness.”**

You don’t have to have all your problems solved before you can get on with trusting that the Lord will take care of you. You don’t have to have your life all together before you can start living by faith. You don’t have to have GREAT FAITH before the Lord can give you GREAT LIFE.

Our Lord has born all of our **“thorns”** in His flesh, and on the 3rd day, rose again. And we have already died with Him and been raised with Him and we await the day when we are ‘thorn free.’

But until then, we will **“boast in our weaknesses.”** ‘Let Satan pierce me with as many thorns as were in that crown that pierced my Lord’s head, and that pierced His hands and feet and side on the cross. **“His grace is sufficient for me.”**