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“A Thorn in the Flesh”

2 Corinthians 12

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“A thorn in the flesh” can be anything or anyone that causes pain or suffering. Paul did not define exactly what his thorn was, but it may have been physical affliction or external opposition. Either way, his “thorn” was painful and difficult, and he learned much from his trial as he persevered through it. How well do you handle the pain in your life? What is your “thorn in the flesh,” and how should you persevere through it? As we study 2 Corinthians 12, we will see how we can find encouragement through trials.

1. Context

a. A revelation of heaven

i. Paul did not know if his heavenly revelation was a visit or a vision.

1. In **Acts 14**, Paul was stoned by the people of Lystra.
2. Paul either died or nearly died, but God revived or healed him.
3. Because of Paul’s death (or near-death) experience, he was not sure if his revelations came from a visit to, or a vision of, heaven.

ii. Paul was humble about his heavenly revelation.

1. Paul said “*I know a man*” twice (**2 Corinthians 12:2-3**), humbly sharing his vision in the third person.
2. Paul only revealed the vision he had 14 years prior in response to the Corinthians questioning his apostolic authority.

b. A thorn in the flesh

i. Paul said that he was given a “*thorn in the flesh*” to keep him humble.

1. **DISCUSS**: How has God used “thorns” for your spiritual benefit?

ii. Paul said his perseverance through trials should speak more of his Christian character and apostolic authority than any divine revelation.

2. **2 Corinthians 12:7-10** – “*And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*”

a. Speculation about Paul’s thorn

i. Some think that Paul’s thorn was an eye condition or disease.

1. Paul intended to move on to Macedonia, but he had to halt at Galatia because of his ailment (**Galatians 4:13-14**).
 - a. **DISCUSS**: How has God used your troubles to empower you to help others?
2. After speaking of his ailment, Paul spoke of the Galatians' generosity and of his eyes.
 - a. **Galatians 4:15** – *"If you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me."* (NIV)
3. Paul finished the letter to the Galatians by saying his large handwriting should be proof that he wrote the letter himself.
 - a. **Galatians 6:11** – *"See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!"* (NIV)
4. A medical article on PubMed, the publishing website of the National Institute of Health (NIH), studied Paul's symptoms and concluded that he likely had migraines with aura.
 - ii. Others think that Paul's thorn was likely external opposition.
 1. This theory suggests that the *"thorn"* refers to people because Paul described this thorn as *"a messenger of Satan"* (**2 Corinthians 12:7**).
 - iii. Perhaps the description of Paul's *"thorn"* was vague so that Believers can more easily apply the lesson of perseverance.
- b. Defining Paul's thorn
 - i. *"Thorn"* was translated from the Greek **skolops**, meaning "stake" like a tent peg or a stake used to impale a person.
 - ii. **2 Corinthians 12:7** says that the thorn was *"a messenger of Satan to buffet me."*
 1. The ESV says *"harass."*
 2. The NIV says *"torment."*
 3. Whatever translation you use, Paul's *"thorn"* was a major trial, not a minor annoyance.
- c. The source of Paul's thorn
 - i. **2 Corinthians 12:7** says that the thorn was *"a messenger of Satan,"* which indicates that the source of Paul's trial was Satan.
 - ii. However, God's answer to Paul's request that He remove his *"thorn"* was no.
 1. **2 Corinthians 12:9** – *"And He [God] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."*
 2. If God allowed Satan to buffet Paul, then was the trial from Satan or from God?

- iii. Paul's thorn was caused by both God's good purpose and the Enemy's evil plans.
 - 1. Just like Job's suffering was allowed by God and caused by Satan.
 - 2. God knew Job's story would be a blessing to Believers even thousands of years later, encouraging us to persevere.
 - 3. **DISCUSS:** How have others' trials encouraged you to persevere? How do you keep these lessons in your heart when you face trials of your own?

3. What God allows is for our ultimate good.

a. A thorn in the flesh will keep me:

- i. Teachable
- ii. Humble
- iii. Oriented toward heaven in prayer
- iv. Reliant on God's grace and strength
- v. Near to Jesus

b. Teachable

- i. God is not obligated to take us out of the trial if we are not learning the lesson.
 - 1. **DISCUSS:** When have you found yourself facing a similar trial over and over again? What was God trying to teach you?
- ii. Not all trials are corrective; some are instructive, revealing God's love to us.
 - 1. **Romans 5:3-5** – *“Not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”*
 - 2. **DISCUSS:** How have you felt God's love amid your trials?

c. Humble

- i. In **2 Corinthians 12:7**, Paul twice says that *“lest I be exalted above measure.”*
 - 1. The Christian life has ups and downs.
 - 2. The highs encourage us.
 - 3. The lows humble us.
- ii. Paul knew that pride could bring ruin to a Christian's life.
 - 1. Pride led to Satan's fall, and Satan tempts men to fall by that same sin.
 - 2. John Calvin said pride is the pregnant mother of all sins.

3. **Matthew 23:12** – *“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”* (ESV)
 4. **Philippians 2:5–8** – *“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”*
 5. **DISCUSS:** Do you humble yourself? What happens when you wait for God to humble you?
 6. **DISCUSS:** How can we be humble like Jesus?
- d. Oriented toward heaven in prayer
- i. **2 Corinthians 12:8** – *“Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.”*
 - ii. We often become praying people amid our trials.
 1. Before crisis strikes, we are often oriented to the cares of this world.
 2. After crisis strikes, we are often oriented to the world to come.
 - iii. “Orient” means “the east, of the east, or of the rising.”
 1. The sun rises in the east; that is why it is called the Orient.
 2. To orient yourself is to have direction—to know where you’re going.
 3. Trials have a way of removing confusion and orienting us toward heavenly things.
 4. **DISCUSS:** How have trials reoriented you back to God?
 - iv. **Philippians 4:6–7** – *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”*
 1. Paul did not tell us that if we keep praying, God will give us what we want.
 2. Paul said that if we keep praying, God will give us peace even if we do not get the answer we want.
 3. Paul prayed only three times for God to remove the thorn from him, because God answered him with peace.
- e. Reliant on God’s grace and strength
- i. **2 Corinthians 12:8–9** – *“Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in*

weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

1. We need to be less self-reliant and more God-reliant.
 2. **DISCUSS:** Have you felt God's strength perfected in your weaknesses?
- ii. **Psalm 40:1-2** – *"I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps."*
1. We can rest in our God.
- f. Near to Jesus
- i. **2 Corinthians 12:9-10** – *"And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*
 1. Paul was not taking pleasure from his suffering, but from how his trials kept him close to Jesus.
 2. Paul was not a masochist; he was mature enough to realize that suffering had brought him nearer to Christ than he would have been if he had escaped his trials. - ii. Joni Eareckson Tada
 1. Joni has been in a wheelchair for over 50 years.
 2. At age 17, Joni dove into the Chesapeake Bay and broke her neck, becoming a quadriplegic.
 3. Joni travels the country, encouraging those with disabilities and pain by reminding them of God's goodness.
 4. Joni has battled with stage 3 breast cancer, but she continues to lean on the Lord.
 5. In Joni's *The God I Love*, she said, "Sometimes God allows what he hates to accomplish what he loves."
 6. **DISCUSS:** Is there a trial that you consider God's gift to you? - iii. Fanny Crosby
 1. Fanny wrote over 8,000 hymns and Gospel songs.
 2. Fanny had been blind since she was 6 weeks old.
 3. Fanny wrote, "Oh, what a happy soul I am! Although I cannot see, I am resolved that in this world contented I will be. How many blessings I enjoy that other people don't! To weep and sigh because I'm blind I cannot, nor I won't!"
 4. Fanny said, "It seemed intended by the blessed providence of God that I should be blind all my life, and I thank him for the

dispensation. If perfect earthly sight were offered me tomorrow I would not accept it. . . . If I had a choice, I would still choose to remain blind . . . for when I die, the first face I will ever see will be the face of my blessed Saviour.”

- iv. When we pray, God may give us peace either out of the trial or amid the trial, but in both cases, He always hears.

* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New King James (NKJV)