

BOOK OF 2 CORINTHIANS
THE MINISTRY OF SUFFERING
2 CORINTHIANS 12:7-10

Introduction

The foundational statement for this message this evening:
Every believer in Christ needs to learn that human weakness and divine grace go hand in hand together.

Understand that the Lord is always at work in our lives developing our trust in Him as well as our dependence upon His strength rather than on ours!

Sometimes, to bring us to the place where we draw closer in our dependence of Him, He sends along a *"thorn" or "suffering"* in some form to actually minister to us. Now, we might think *"suffering"* to be a strange minister. Nevertheless, the *"ministry of suffering"* has helped along countless numbers of God's people through the years. Our *suffering* can take different shapes and sizes. Its design, though probably not apparent to any of us immediately, is effectively designed by God for us to bring us into a more intimate knowledge of Christ and His sufficiency.

To help us understand this, I want us to take a closer look at Paul's *"thorn in the flesh,"* as he called it, considering **why it came to him, who delivered it, and what it accomplished.**

Last week we saw:

PAUL SPEAKS OF VISIONS AND REVELATIONS. (Vs 1-6)

We Looked At What These Visions And Revelations Were.

We Looked At Why They Were Given To Paul?

We Saw How We Are Not To Depend Upon Receiving Similar Visions And Revelations.

Paul did not have the complete canon of Scripture.

Paul's work was foundational.

Paul had been set apart by the Lord as an apostle.

We Were Looking At The Effect Did These Visions And Revelations Might Have Had On Paul.

They overwhelmed him!

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There is no doubt that he was **sustained and strengthened by them** but they also had another effect. Because Paul **saw and understood what others did not know or understand**, he found himself **slipping into a prideful spirit.**

TONIGHT, LET'S LOOK AT HOW OUR THORNS, OR RATHER SUFFERING, MINISTERS TO US. (Vs 7-9)

Think of it this way. Our privileges that we have from the LORD may lead to pride in our lives. As a result, God may render us weak in some other respect to keep our head from swelling and to keep us dependant on Him.

I. THE NATURE OF THE THORN.

The term *"thorn"* is variously translated as *"stake"* that might be used for **impaling or torturing someone**, or as a **splinter.**

So, obviously, the *"thorn in the flesh"* is a **metaphor of suffering some point of great pain, weakness, shame, or humiliation** that held back the apostle's tendency to boast about himself or to be swelled with pride.

The fact is, we don't know what Paul's *thorn* truly was! There has been a lot of speculation about it...but no one can say without doubt what his *thorn* was.

Maybe the reason that we don't know precisely what constituted Paul's *thorn* is to keep anyone with a similar thorn from boasting that they are just like the apostle Paul and thereby **fall prey to pride in their experience of weakness.**

We know that *thorns or sufferings* can come in any number of types, styles, and sizes for Christians in every age. So not knowing Paul's *thorn* helps every Christian to identify with Paul's weakness, and more importantly, with the strength that comes through grace alone!

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II. THE PURPOSE OF THE THORN (OR SUFFERING)!

Whatever the thorn, it was enough to bring Paul low, to humble him, **and to remind him of the inherent weaknesses in the flesh, and to keep his look toward the Lord of glory and grace.**

Paul prayed **three times**, evidently in great agony, for the Lord to **remove the thorn**. That tells us that **it was not something that he would have chosen for himself. It was something that he desired to be rid of, and the sooner the better!**

Thorns are painful! I can remember numerous times in my life especially as a boy finding myself stuck with a **literal thorn or thorns** and running to mama when I couldn't get it out!

In the same way "*a thorn in the flesh*" is an uncomfortable something that we will instinctively ask the Lord to remove.

We make our case before the Lord of why we would be much better off **without the thorn**.

We think of a bunch of reasons that **such a thorn is impractical and a hindrance** to our service for Christ.

Is it wrong for us to think and pray in such fashion?

Not as long as our attitude is one of resting and depending on doing the will of God when all is said and done.

Our Lord prayed in the Garden for the cup of suffering that He was about to face to pass from Him. But He prayed, "*Not My will but Thine be done.*"

When the Lord is not pleased to remove the **thorn**, then we must submit to His purposes and glory in His good pleasure on our behalf.

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In Paul's case, the thorn came as a "*messenger of Satan to buffet (or torment)*" him. What we learn from the apostle is this: **Even when the devil's design is to hurt the Christian, it is overridden by God's providential purposes in our lives.**

Like Job of old, the devil may have his intent to destroy, but God has His greater purpose to reveal His glory in us and through us!

III. THE TEACHING OF SUFFERING. (Vs 9)

A. There Is The Lesson In The Sufficiency Of His Grace!

Paul was in danger of pride and self-exaltation and God took steps to keep him humble. That fit God's purpose, not Paul's!

To God, our humility is more important than our comfort. Our humility is more important than freedom from pain.

That is contrary to the society in which we live where everything around us focuses on comfort, security, and ease. Yet God's purposes extend beyond this age! His purposes extend to our eternity that is to come.

Of all our needs that we sense, absolutely nothing surpasses our need of Him and His grace!

With the grace God gives, there is power—power to live for Christ, power to serve, power to worship, power to witness, power to resist temptation, power to remain faithful, power to exercise contentment whatever our circumstance.

There Is The Lesson In The Sufficiency Of His Grace!

B. There Is The Lesson Of His Abiding Power!

God's design is to make us a showcase for Jesus' power!

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In the midst of our weaknesses, when we have nothing to personally boast of, that's when Christ's power invigorates us and enables us.

John the Baptist declared in *John 3:30*—"*He must increase, but I must decrease.*"

That is Paul's same message. The thorn brings us low so that we no longer look to OUR abilities and strength but rather we look wholly to Christ!

C. There Is The Lesson Of Contentment With Weakness!

Verse 10 is not Paul showing a martyr's complex.

Instead, when, "*for Christ's sake,*" weaknesses come our way, and God is not pleased to remove them, we need to recognize them as instruments for opening the way to know Christ's strength!

Our weakness is exchanged for His strength—that's God's Divine plan for us!