

## 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Dear Friends in Christ,

Some of you might recall the story of the psychology professor who was giving his students a test. One question concerned manic depression. The question was this: "What would you call someone who walks back and forth screaming at the top of his lungs one minute and then sits in a chair and weeps uncontrollably the next?" One student answered, "A basketball coach."

Some of us might exclaim, "It sounds more like me!" The hard times of life are not new to most here. And with the hard times come the standard questions which we considered to some extent last Sunday: "Why me?" or "Why is God letting this happen to me?"

I hope you don't mind if I ask the professor's question again. "What would you call someone who walks back and forth screaming at the top of his lungs one minute and then sits in a chair and weeps uncontrollably the next?" Well...maybe, sometimes it's a child of God struggling with life. I want to examine what I'm calling . . .

### THE THORNY ISSUE

#### I. What Was the Thorn?

Here are parts of verses 2-9 of our text:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven...(this man) was caught up into paradise - and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter... though if I should wish to boast...I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. So 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.

So Paul was given a glimpse of heaven and, as he says, "to keep me from becoming conceited", or, how about "in order to bring down to reality"...a thorn was given me in the flesh." And, of course, the question that becomes the issue is, "What was the thorn?" And the answer is: We don't know!

In the 9<sup>th</sup> verse of our text, Paul refers to this thorn as "weakness." He states, "But he (God) said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" And then he notes, "I will boast...of my weaknesses." A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament notes that the Greek words used for "weak" and "weaknesses" refer to "bodily weakness" and "often sickness, diseases, times of weakness." (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, University of Chicago Press, 1956, p. 115.) The point is this: Paul was afflicted in some way.

But there's another facet to this thorn. It's tied to the words, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you...'" You see, it wasn't an issue of whether or not Paul had sufficient faith to be healed. The issue at that moment was a reality: God said "No!" to his request.

And all this brings us to *The Thorny Issue* . . .

#### II. What's the Purpose?

"What's the purpose?", or, as some might put it, "Why is God letting this happen to me?" And, again, we have to re-focus on Paul's words:

“So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations (That is, the fact that he was allowed a glimpse of Heaven, the fact that such a glimpse would carry him away from what this world really is, and the fact that he had a job to do here as God designed it!), a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.” (v. 7)

As you know, one of the definitions of *conceited* is “having an excessively high opinion of oneself.” (Webster) Well, if you got to see Heaven you might start thinking that God favored you above most. And since God had a job for Paul and has one for you and one for me, the proverbial “kick in the pants” can quickly bring us back to realities. That “kick” was the thorn. And we can do one of two things with the “thorn”; either whine or put it to use.

Who could better relate to someone going through heart issues than someone who has been through them? Who is usually the most qualified to help others? Isn't it usually the person who has - as we say - ***been there, done that***?

And not only that, remember what the Lord had Peter write: “if necessary, you have been grieved by trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith...may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (I Pet. 1:6-7) Our sermon hymn was “What is the world to me With all its vaunted pleasure?” What we have in Christ should enable us to sing these words from our hearts: “The world seeks after wealth And all that mammon offers Yet never is content Though gold should fill its coffers. I have a higher good, Content with it I'll be: My Jesus is my wealth. What is the world to me!”

We have a higher good. It's eternal life through faith in Christ. And we have a higher good on this earth: Serving the Lord by serving others. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” has not been placed on the back burner of who we are and what we have in Christ! Thorns in the flesh remind us of what this world is - that we still live in it - our need for Jesus - and this world's need for Jesus - that He has assigned us to represent Him.

And another purpose of thorns . . .

### III. The Sufficiency of God's Grace.

Thorns keep us focused on the sufficiency of God's grace. That's what Paul teaches. Here are verses 8-10 of our text:

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so 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.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” We live with the weakness of sin and the troubles and death it brings. God's grace reaches into our lives through the suffering and death of Christ for the punishment of our sin, and His victory over the grave. It's simple - for us: “Whoever believes has eternal life.” We live in a world that screams “I want! I want! Give me! Give me!” Our faith should scream, “I have! I have! Everything in Christ!!” Sufficiency.

“My power is made perfect in weakness.” Try it this way: If all we think about and pursue are satisfaction of self wants and desires we're not much use to the Lord. A thorn can abruptly change that; make us dependant on Him. Usable!

George Plagenz was a Religion Columnist who died in 2006. Years before his death he wrote about a young doctor who delivered a baby into a poverty-stricken family in Montana. The child had a horribly deformed leg and difficulty breathing. The doctor revealed his thoughts. I quote: "The other children will call him 'Limp'. His life will be miserable. If I don't do anything for his breathing, he will die. Wouldn't that be better?" Plagenz wrote that the doctor remembered his Hippocratic oath and began blowing into the baby's mouth. The baby lived.

Several years later the doctor's daughter and son-in-law were killed in an car accident. The doctor's ten-year-old granddaughter was left an orphan. He raised her. Here's the rest of the account:

"One day the child was stricken with a crippling and (possibly) incurable condition. The doctor learned there was a young doctor in the Midwest who had been getting excellent results in the treatment of this particular disease. He took his granddaughter to see the doctor.

"The young physician was lame. (And, now, you've guessed it!) He was the deformed baby into whose mouth the older doctor had breathed 35 years before. Because of his own infirmity, the young doctor had specialized in this crippling disease. The treatment on the older doctor's grandchild was successful and the little girl was returned to normal health."

The issue really isn't the thorn. The issue is, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths." That's the issue.

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott

*July 1, 2018*

*2 Corinthians 12:2-10:*

## ***“The Thorny Issue”***

*I. What Was the Thorn?*

*II. What's the Purpose?*

*III. The Sufficiency of God's Grace.*

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