

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

The Blessing of Thorns

Luther observed, “*God’s power—his Word in us—rises in proportion to the pressure it receives.*” St. Augustine explained, “*The tempting of Christians is the proving of Christians. Either they are shown what they have or else they are shown what they lack.*”

What’s the point? Christians see suffering as an opportunity for growth in and reliance upon the grace of Christ. In our lesson, St. Paul was not speaking from idle contemplation, but from experience. He had seen in his own life how God used what seemed like an impediment to his and the Church’s benefit, how his ignorance of God’s will at turbulent times in his life later turned into amazement at the grace and strength of our Lord. What was St. Paul’s thorn? It doesn’t matter. What is important is that it was an unwanted problem at the time. Whether it was physical, interpersonal, or mental, it was at one point seen as a great adversity, only later to be recognized as opportunity for God to display His strength.

St. Paul did not want to suffer any more than the rest of us, yet suffer he did. He mentions *weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties*. The word for difficulty is a powerful one. It means something like sticking your head in a vice and turning, as the world presses in around you so that you feel like you’ll be crushed. He says he had a thorn in his flesh. That too is an interesting word. It is like falling into a pricker bush, so that you get stabbed and your skin itches all day, with little relief in sight. St. Paul pleaded with God to remove it, but God wanted just the opposite. This thorn was for St. Paul’s own good. It reminded St. Paul that he and his ministry were not independent of God. St. Paul was a frail human being who needed God’s grace just as much as his hearers. St. Paul’s afflictions continually reminded him that grace and salvation weren’t speculative or otherworldly words, concrete and personal words imbedded in the guts of each day. In times of trouble, the worst place St. Paul could direct his eyes was to himself. When he realized this, St. Paul rejoiced in his thorn and fixed His eyes on Christ. *God’s grace was sufficient.*

St. Paul’s thorn also taught him that true strength is perfected in weakness. God had richly blessed St. Paul with revelations, miracles, journeys, and conversions. In essence, God had blessed St. Paul with what many would call a thriving ministry. St. Paul’s sinful nature would have loved nothing more than to take pride in his conversions, his journeys, his miracles, and his revelations. But none of these things were his; they were God’s. The least important thing in the whole equation was St. Paul’s own strength. What mattered was God’s.

So far I have talked a lot about St. Paul thorn and weakness, but I think many of us know the feeling as well. We’ve had our thorns, our occasions to pray once, twice, three times that the Lord would deliver us from something that we were sure was doing us no good. We’ve wondered why, staying awake at night and distracted during the day trying to get at what possibly the Lord was thinking and purposing, tired of being tired. And so we whine, we Monday morning quarterback, we dabble in God’s work and try to yank out the thorn, to move things along. But none of that does any good. Rather, we ought to rejoice with St. Paul, because, in our weakness, the Lord is strong and His grace is sufficient, as His Son, dwelling in us through faith, walks together with us on the well-trodden narrow road of tribulation in our well-worn shoes.

God's grace is sufficient. That is why we have certainty, because Christ, not us, is responsible for our salvation and the strength of the Church, because God is strongest when we are weakest, because His healing is worked through our pain. His grace will increase in proportion to your need. Your muscle will grow as it burns and is torn as you carry your burden. Your suffering will cleanse you from pride and apathy and clothe you with trust and zeal. The beating of this messenger of Satan will sober you and give you perspective and clarity, even while it blackens your eye. You may be hard-pressed, but you will not be crushed. You may be irritated with the itch-inducing sting of a thorn, but you will be soothed. While all men must suffer, believing and unbelieving, for you this suffering will prove training for your faith and a jewel on your unfading crown of glory in Christ. Rather than driving you into despair, God means by this cross to pull you to the cross of His Son, where strength and weakness meet, where a frail, bloodied Jew hangs in testimony to His power to redeem humanity.

Augustine once wrote, *"'But God,' they say, 'is able to heal all things.' Of course His purpose in acting is to heal all things; but He acts on His own judgment, and does not take His procedure in healing from the sick man. For undoubtedly it was His wish to endow His apostle with very great power and strength, and yet He said to him: 'My strength is made perfect in weakness.'"* God's ways are not always our ways. When we face adversity, we can rejoice because God is preparing something marvelous, whether or not we know what it is. Be content when you find yourself in weaknesses, in insulting injuries, in inner feelings of necessity, in persecutions, and in tight places, for Christ's sake, because God is using you to display His grace and strength. Cling to Christ in these times, for it is no easy task, humanly speaking, to trust that God's grace is sufficient and to find strength in weakness. It takes patience, prayer, and faithful use of the Means of Grace.

The great men and women of the Bible and Church history were the men and women who recognized their weakness and rejoiced in them. They took no credit for themselves. They marveled, instead, at what the Lord had often accomplished in spite of them. Luther once commented on the Reformation, *"I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything."*

Do we still believe in the power of that Word? I pray we do. Let's rest in it, and God will do the rest. Let's lay all our sins, our doubts, and our questions at His feet and go forth united in His forgiveness and grace. And when troubles arise, and they will, let's thank Him for thorns, that they teach us His grace is sufficient and true strength is perfected in weakness. It is only through adversity that a child learns to walk. It is only through adversity that a Christian learns to trust. His grace is sufficient, and no cross that you bear is too heavy for Him to lift or too narrow for Him to join you under it. Who knows what God is working in you and through you even as you face shame and bear the torment of a thorn? God does, and that is enough. St. Augustine is on a roll today, and I think his words can sum it all up best, "If sorrow makes us shed tears, faith in God's promises makes us dry them." Amen.