

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

A Thorn in My Side

There are certain phrases in English that people who are just learning the language have a difficult time understanding. Hit the sack, spill the beans, let the cat out of the bag, back to the old drawing board, barking up the wrong tree, hit the nail on the head, under the weather, and raining cats and dogs, are all examples of phrases that could need some explaining if a person new to the language is going to understand what you are expressing. Even at that, though I know what it means when someone says it is raining cats and dogs, I have no idea why we use that turn of phrase to say that it's raining heavily. Another phrase that must freak people out is when someone says they jumped out of their skin.

When I was a teenager visiting family in the Netherlands, I was traveling with one of my cousins who spoke very good English, as I observed the endless and well laid out bike roads everywhere we went, I said, "I get a kick out of these bike paths." He looked at me in wonder as he had translated that literally and was trying to figure out how I would get a kick from a bike path.

There is another turn of phrase that we use that comes directly out of the Bible, it is "a thorn in my side". You need look no farther than Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians to figure out where that saying comes from. You can also find a reference to it in the Old Testament book of Numbers 33:55. To have a thorn in one's side is to have a constant annoyance or experience someone or something that is of continual trouble. Some of you may already have that someone or something in mind!

Though for us a thorn in one's side can leave us frustrated or even looking to hand out some retribution, for example when someone allows their dog to daily poop on your lawn without cleaning up after them, or the neighbourhood cat uses your garden as their personal kitty litter box, there are often bigger and more challenging things that can become a thorn in one's side. It may be the family member that always seems to be in need of your money, the person who gossips and can't be trusted, or the person down the hall in your building that always leaves a mess or turns the volume up to loud.

We don't actually know what the thorn in Paul's side was, whether it was physical, emotional, or mental, but we do know that he believed it to be a messenger of Satan to torment him. In other words, he did not blame God or think that God was messing with him as a test of faith. What he did come to believe was that the thorn kept him humble.

The humble part is where we need to focus for a moment. You may recall that the context of the letter is Paul writing to defend himself because some so-called super apostles (Chapter 11) were in Corinth undermining the work that Paul had

accomplished with the believers in that city. This group were boasting of all that they could do, were eloquent speakers – read smooth talkers – and charged or asked for support for their ministry to the Corinthians. Paul had paid his own way, taught them, and loved them. Paul starts his defence in chapter 10 and it continues to the end of the letter. In chapter 11 he begins with, “I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness” and then spends all of chapter 11 and 12 boasting just as those who were trying to win over the Corinthian church had done, though it loathes him to do it, as it seems to Paul the Corinthians were impressed by boasting.

Yet when Paul boasts about his accomplishments, he diminishes anything that would make him look like he was super, actually saying that to boast of that would mean that this ministry was about him rather than God. Instead, Paul chooses to boast in his weakness. He boasts about the hardships and sufferings he and those with him have experienced because they knew that their coming through all of that came from the power and grace of God. He knew that in any “self-confident boasting” he was not talking as the Lord would but as a fool. (11:17)

So we come to the opening of chapter 12 and our reading today to hear about visions and revelations of a man that Paul knows. Well, the reason he knows the man is because it is Paul himself that had these revelations, yet Paul feels no need to share exactly how it happened or much else about the experience because it would not be helpful to the church. It was a personal experience and boasting as others did would sound impressive but would do little to build up the body of Christ. Instead, he spends more time on this thorn in his side, in his flesh, and that may be for a few reasons.

As mentioned earlier, the thorn keeps Paul humble. It is not from God, but God has also not taken it from Paul. He has to keep dealing with it. One would be well advised to note that Paul pleaded with God three times to take this trouble away yet the answer was no. Often we hear the words from the gospel of Matthew, “Where two or three are gathered in my name and agree about anything asked for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.” (Matt 18:19) and we determine that God will answer our prayers as we hoped, but that is just not the case. Once again, there is more to the context around that Matthew verse than we care to remember and second, we forget that God has said “no” more than once in the Bible, most notably when Jesus asked that the cup be taken from him when he was in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39).

Once again, the answer is “no” to the Paul’s prayer. God did not put the thorn in Paul’s side, but neither does God work to remove it, whatever that “it” is. Paul says. “a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.” Somewhere, somehow, whether through a deep understanding, another person that God brought into Paul’s life, or through divine revelation, Paul understood God to be saying “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” (v9)

Now please don't take this to mean that you should suffer if there is some relief to be found. If God has provided relief through medication, surgery, counseling, or provides the opportunity to get you out of an abusive relationship or bad situation then take it and respond with gratitude. Embrace any healing, wholeness, or corrective that comes your way. For many though there seems to be no relief. The struggle may be temporary, or it may be ongoing, like no end to the chronic pain, no hope that mental illness will be lifted, no cure, or no change in relationships or hardships. It is in these experiences that Paul's understanding may be helpful to you as you look to God and hear the words, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'

Remember God did not inflict the suffering on Paul anymore than God has inflicted suffering on you or another, but we live in a world where brokenness is an ongoing reality. So, what does it mean for God's grace to be sufficient for power is made perfect in weakness? Well, this power is of Christ and if we have Christ in us, with us, and working through us, then we have the power of Christ dwelling in us. This is why Paul ends with the words that, regardless of what the trouble, if he lives in it for the sake of Christ and with Christ, then whenever he is weak, then he's strong.

This strength comes from the place inside us where Christ resides. Where Christ is, there is power, power to make choices about how to respond to our circumstances. Any weakness becomes a strength, but it is strength because of Christ in us. It is not strength that comes of our own will power or muscle power, though God will use that too.

Our getting through the challenges as we rely on Christ and the sufficiency of God grace becomes our witness, not because we boast about how God is making us great, but we witness by how in our weakness, in our struggle, or circumstances, God is present, giving strength and power to live out our lives regardless and maybe in spite of our personal thorn in the flesh.

Thinking about weakness as power and strength goes against everything we are taught is truth and of value. We clamour for power, we admire those with health and strength, we long for comfort and ease in our living. Weakness has no place in our lives and we berate ourselves as we age and our bodies no longer have the strength and agility we covet. Our minds and memories grow dim and we become frustrated. We are tender hearted and cry easily and apologize for being emotional. Some struggle from the moment they are born and we wonder "why?" and yet, if we are to believe Paul then we have the power of Christ dwelling in us. We have the grace of God. Our weakness become our witness when we trust God's grace and Christ indwelling presence.

We are humbled not because we are weak but because we are in awe of God's presence with us. When times are tough, when the thorn in your side just doesn't go away, take a look and ask, "Where is God in this?" May your answer witness to others of God's grace and Christ's power in us, with us, and working through us. Amen.