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“And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me,” II Corinthians 12:9.

That Thorn in Your Flesh

Lesson Aim: To strengthen those who are suffering adversity.

L143. Date: May 1975. **Text:** II Corinthians 12:1-10.

Topic: Suffering: Of believers.

Why do Christians suffer? That problem has perplexed mankind through innumerable generations. The fact that the innocent do suffer is beyond question. Why? There are several reasons suggested as to why God permits suffering.

Some endure suffering with patience. They believe God has some good purpose which He is working out through their suffering, even though they do not know what it is. In confidence that God is love, they endure without trying to require reasons from Him.

Some endure suffering with rebellion. They fret and stew in their pain. They question and doubt. They wonder if God is fair. They are sometimes filled with remorse and self-pity. They increase their suffering by their attitude. Some endure suffering with doubt. They consider that God either is not all good or He is not all powerful. If He were both all good and all powerful, He would overrule suffering as an act of grace and pity. The fact that He does not indicate either that He is not all good, and so does not care, or He is not all powerful, and so can do nothing.

What is your attitude toward suffering? Thank God, He has given some information in Holy Scripture to help you have the right attitude.

If ever there was a man of God, it was the Apostle Paul. Yet, he suffered a continuing malady. That “thorn in the flesh” was viewed as “the messenger of Satan.” He dealt with God concerning deliverance and did not receive it, but God did something more wonderful than to remove the

“thorn.” In Paul's experience, you can learn how to deal with suffering.

I. A THORN MAY FOLLOW A TRIUMPH, 12:1-7.

Satan is grieved when a believer makes spiritual progress. It is common, therefore, for him to bring tragedy immediately following triumph. Do not be surprised if some of your greatest testings follow upon some of your greatest victories.

Paul spoke of an experience beyond description when “a man in Christ” was “caught up to the third heaven . . . into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter,” verses 2, 4. It is quite evident that Paul was the “man in Christ” who had such an experience.

What was the experience which the apostle enjoyed? We do not know. It was, at the time of the writing, “fourteen years ago” when the experience came. It could not have been his conversion experience because that had come about twenty years before the writing of that epistle. Fourteen years before would have been about a year before Paul began his missionary work among the Gentiles. God gave him a vision to prepare him for that long ministry. He did not tell what the content of the vision was, but it must have been wonderful.

Observe that Paul was “caught up.” The passive form of the verb indicates that the experience was in no way self-induced. It was the same action of God by which “the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip” when he had won and baptized the Secretary of the Treasury of Ethiopia (Acts 8:39). The verb is also used in Paul's description of the second coming: “. . . **We which are alive and remain shall be caught up . . . to meet the Lord in the air,**” II Thessalonians 4:17.

Paul's experience caused him to ascend to the “third heaven” which is the “paradise” of God. Further description is not given. Those terms are enough to indicate the supreme blessedness of the state into which he entered. So entrancing was the experience that he could not be sure whether his spirit departed from his body or whether he was caught away bodily into the very presence of God. Blessed privilege!

Paul's experience of glory was followed quickly by the attack of Satan. It not only followed after, but it was directly related to the great vision he had seen (verse 7). The abundant revelations were followed by abundant sufferings.

It happened to others, too. The disciples witnessed the miracle of Jesus in feeding the multitude from a little lunch (Mark 6:31-54; Matthew 14:13-33). They were excited over the miracle. Upon the instruction of Jesus, they

entered a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. Immediately they were caught in a storm. Their great faith, aroused by the miracle of multiplication of food, was challenged by the presence of a storm. It happened to others; do not be surprised when it happens to you.

Trials do not mean God has deserted you. They do not indicate you are out of the will of God. They do not reveal that God is punishing you for wrongdoing. The victories are the blessings of God, whereas the trials are the messengers of Satan. If you permit suffering to turn you from God, even to the extent of questioning His goodness or His justice, Satan has won a victory over you. An old adage is, "Sorrow is but the shadow of God's wings as He draws near to bless."

II. A THORN CAN ACCOMPLISH A GOOD PURPOSE, 12:7.

How men would praise Paul, if they knew of the visions God granted him. In fact, how tempted Paul might have been to feel proud of himself "that God had vouchsafed such privileges to him and not to another. There was no such problem! God took effective steps to prevent that sin by giving Paul a "thorn in the flesh."

What was Paul's thorn? We do not know. Some consider that it was spiritual in character, sent by God to keep Paul humble. It may have been failures in some areas of ministry. It may have been opposition to the Word he preached. It may have been persecutions by the Jews which would shame him before the Gentile world. Paul's thorn may have been spiritual in nature.

It seems preferable to consider Paul's thorn to have been some physical malady which handicapped his personal progress and perhaps made his appearance less attractive. It is most likely that the problem was visual. That opinion is based upon the following considerations: (1) He spoke of how the Galatian Christians had witnessed his "infirmity of the flesh" when he preached the gospel to them (Galatians 4:13). (2) He spoke of their love to him so that, ". . . ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me," Galatians 4:15. (3) He mentioned how he had written the Galatian epistle with his own hands, having to write with large letters (so he could see?), Galatians 6:11. (4) He quoted the Corinthians who said he could write powerful letters from a distance but he made a very poor appearance in person, (II Corinthians 10:10). All those conditions would be met if Paul was afflicted with an eye disease common at that time which disfigured the appearance and limited sight.

The exact nature of Paul's thorn in the flesh is not given in order that you might identify your thorn with his. Whatever your thorn may be, God

will deal with you as He did with Paul in giving grace sufficient for it.

III. A THORN MAY NOT BE REMOVED BY PRAYER, 12:8.

“For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me,” but it did not depart. God did not grant Paul's petition. His prayer was answered, but not in the way he had wished. The answer Paul received became the most powerful inspiration in his life.

God may or may not remove your thorn because you pray. If He does, praise Him. If He does not, praise Him anyway, knowing that He will give you a greater blessing than mere deliverance.

Remember how Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Three times He prayed, **“O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt,”** Matthew 26:39. It was enough for Paul that he pray as his Master prayed.

Three times was enough. If one is open to the will of God, there is no need to pray longer about the problem. If God does not respond, by removing the thorn, He will do something even better. Do not despair.

IV. A THORN WILL REVEAL THE SUFFICIENCY OF CHRIST, 12:8, 9.

“ . . . He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness . . . ” verse 9. What a privilege it is to be upheld by the all-sufficient grace of Jesus Christ. When humiliating weakness gives opportunity for God's grace openly to shine forth, it is a thing in which to glory. No wonder Paul responded to God's promise, **“Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me,”** verse 9.

“Only a morbid fanatic can take pleasure in the sufferings he inflicts upon himself; only an insensitive fool can take pleasure in the sufferings that are the consequence of his folly; and only a convinced Christian can take pleasure in sufferings endured for Christ's sake, for he alone has been initiated into the divine secret, that it is only when he is weak, having thrown himself unreservedly in penitence and humility upon the never-failing mercies of God, that he is strong, with a strength not his own, but belonging to the ‘Lord of all power and might.’”—Tasker.

God's grace has produced many roses among the thorns. Annie Johnson Flint has blessed untold thousands of people with her beautiful poetry, expressing deep spiritual insight. Did you know that she was afflicted with a

physical ailment which bound her in infirmity and oppressed her with almost unceasing pain? In her weakness the grace of Christ proved sufficient and used her to bless so many others. He can bring beauty out of the ashes of your suffering, too.

Do not question the purpose of God. Do not rebel against the way of God. **“Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him: and he shall bring it to pass,”** Psalm 37:5.

The ways of the Lord are perfect. Settle that truth once for all in your heart. He never acts in haste or apart from proper purpose. Yield to His molding process, and you will be transformed into the spiritual image of His Son, your Savior. God's great design is to work in you that He might bless others through you. Be available for Him to do whatever He pleases, and you will rejoice in the outcome. .

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths,” Proverbs 2:5, 6.

Questions

1. What are the typical reactions to suffering?
2. Why do trials follow triumphs?
3. What triumph had Paul experienced before his thorn?
4. What purpose did Paul's thorn perform in him?
5. What insight did Paul's thorn give him?
6. What is God's grace?
7. How can you know that grace is sufficient for you?
8. Why does God not always remove thorns in answer to prayer?
9. How can you take pleasure in problems?