

Asking Jesus, Pt. 8
Remove This Thorn!
2 Corinthians 12: 7-10

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1) The Request. We're taking one final look at a request made of Jesus and how he replied. I've so enjoyed our series called *Asking Jesus* and your lovely response to approaching Christ this way. In today's passage, we overhear the apostle Paul asking Christ to take away an affliction that was plaguing him. "Lord, remove this thorn!" is the short way to put it. Take away what's pricking me and pounding me so I can get on with my life lived for you.

2) Who's Asking? This is Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. As you know, Paul brought the gospel all over the ancient world. He would stay in one city for several months before moving on. In that time, Paul would train up local leaders for the new church. But everyone was still a new Christian. And in Paul's absence some crazy ideas would get going. Some old habits of paganism would creep back in. And in his absence, Paul himself would be questioned. Rivals challenged his motives, sincerity, and qualifications. So at the end of this letter to Corinth, Paul defended himself. He reminded them of how much he suffered to bring the gospel all over the known world. He reminded them of how he worked as a tentmaker so he could teach them for free. And finally, he reminded them of a dramatic spiritual experience he had that simply no one else could match. Paul saw the heavenly realms. He saw the glorified Jesus so vividly that human words could never convey this heavenly vision. In fact, he saw things about which he was forbidden even to try to speak. No, he had not been with Jesus during his days on earth. But unlike anyone before or since, Paul had encountered the ascended Christ. There really was no one else like Paul.

3) What's the Request inside the Request? Knowing Jesus intimately does not guarantee a life of health and prosperity. For Paul, the opposite was true. Before he met Jesus, Paul had a problem with pride. His heavenly revelation might well have made him even prouder. He knew that what he taught was true and that no one had ever said the things he taught and wrote. The God who called Paul mercifully gave him an antidote to his pride: a thorn in the flesh. Something that would prick him with pain. He viewed this thorn as a messenger from Satan sent to pummel him regularly. Now Paul doesn't say exactly what this thorn was. He leaves it vague. And that means we can relate to it. Paul's affliction caused him to be weak.

Literally to have non-strength. To be without prowess precisely where he needed to be vigorous. It hampered him. He begged the Lord to pull out this thorn so he could be free and strong and whole again.

Let's think for a moment about how thorns strike us. You've driven all the way to the shore. You park and pile out of the car. The ocean is so near you can hear it and smell it. You start to run for the white sand. Zing! You step on a patch of sandspurs and hit the ground howling. Everyone else beats you to the water as you pull out those nasty stickers.

We have lots of phrases for how sudden loss of usual strength hits us. We tie it to every part of our bodies:

- My hearts sinks.
- My breath catches.
- My knee buckles.
- My tongue gets tied
- My eyes swim.
- My brain freezes.
- My grip slips.
- My nerve fails.

In a moment, weakness strikes and we are kept from doing what we want to do. I don't want life to be this way. Remove this thorn! Get me back to normal. Open a way for me.

At the heart of this is the deep human cry. "I don't want to be frail. I don't want to age. I don't want loss. I want to move forward in strength and love and hope and growth. I just want things to work. I want to feel like everything's all right and is going to be all right." We're really asking God to take away the thorn of being human. To remove the sting of being mortals. To fix the world where the collateral damage from sin and evil keeps thwarting all best aspirations.

4) Jesus' Reply. Over three intense prayer sessions, Paul pleaded with Christ to draw out this thorn and set him free. But the answer was always the same. "My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness." In other words, "No can do Paul. You need this thorn so that you know you always need me. And when you know how desperately you need me, you will call on me. And when you call on me you will find my grace suffices for your true needs. "My strength comes into its own in your weakness."¹

Lord take away this thorn! *No. Please! No. Not gonna do it.* This can make us really frustrated. Really angry. This can make us think God is not loving. This is not what an easy, sweet prosperity gospel promises us. But it is the fact of it. God does not promise a life free from suffering if only we have enough faith. In fact, just the opposite. We are promised love, but not being loved by all. Daily bread, but not all earthly security. Eternal life, but not freedom from the pain of one day dying, nor from the pain of daily dying to self. We are promised hope, but not ease. Joy, but not an absence of tears. We will feel in a way a person without Christ does not feel: often deeper sorrow for brokenness as well as inexplicable peace in the worst of times.

This is just the way of it. Jesus tells us, “My grace is sufficient for you.” It’s enough. It satisfies. Your lack of strength opens you to receive my strength. If you could live on your own without me, you would. And you would miss out on what truly makes for life. You would end up with nothing but yourself and you would be lost. My way leads to life. Trust me, this narrow path is hard but it is true. I am leading the very creation through the groans and pains of making all things new. Trust me. *The thorns of Satan are meant to lead you to my cross of life.* What Satan means to ruin you, I use to take you deeper into myself.

5) Our Response. Can we really find in the thorns of Satan and suffering the connecting path to Christ’s cross of life? The witness of a multitude of believers is that it is true. Christ Jesus does not always give us what we ask for. But he does always give us himself. Let’s take just one example. Some years ago at a conference I got to know a wonderful, loving theologian named Michael Reeves. In just one dinner, we shared our life experiences deeply and a friendship was born. Mike was about to take over leadership at a seminary in Wales. The task was overwhelming. For a long time he had no time to communicate beyond a quick word. We met up at a conference in March and he shared with me a bit of just how hard those first years got. Mike did not know going in just how financially precarious the seminary was. Before he could execute his vision, he had to spend several years digging out of deep holes. He had to replant the whole school. Many times, he needed some staggering amount of money just to keep the school from closing. He learned radical humility and radical dependence on God. These hardest days of his life became a trustworthy path to the deeper joy of intimacy with Christ.

I included a quote from Mike Reeves in our Lent book. In March I learned that his words came from deep, lived experience. Let’s listen to them again,

Here's the encouragement for those who feel inadequate. God actually uses us most powerfully at the point of our brokenness. You might think, "I've got certain gifts, and I offer those to God. But I've also got this very bruised area of my life. Or this very messed-up area of my life. And I know the Lord will use my good traits, but he's not going to use that scuffed-up part of me, or that secret garbage of mine." My friend, it might well be the other way around. Most often the Lord uses us at the very greatest point of our brokenness and our weakness. He's not after self-starters who go out in their own energy, strong and confident in themselves. That's not the gospel. Rather, brokenness is the main qualification for effective service.²

When we ask Jesus, he always hears us. He delights to receive our prayers and requests. Of course he does not always reply as we have hoped he would. Often, we realize later what a mercy it was that Christ did not give us exactly what we asked for! He never lets us co-opt him for our own agendas. He never lets us maneuver him away from his mission, the same mission he gives to us. But he does reply. For he prays for us before his Father. And he gives himself to us over and over through his Spirit in our hearts, through meeting us in his Word and at his table. He sends us brothers and sisters to care for us at just the right time. And as we ask, he supplies the strength we need to get through his will for us in the day. He proves that his grace is sufficient. We do not have to hide our weaknesses, for Jesus already knows them. Our seeming deficiencies are channels for his love and mercy. They provide occasion for us to rely on Jesus and find that he never fails us. Michael Reeves has lived this truth. I know many of you have as well.

So, how do you access this grace and power of God that meets us even in our weakness? There are some very practical ways. Receiving this invisible, secret strengthening of Christ involves the past, the future and the present. *The past:* One of our elders this week reminded us how important it is to remember what Jesus has done in history and what he has done in the history of our lives. To know his strength right now, we recall the times he has showed up for us in the past. That's why it's so good to keep a record of answered prayers. I bring to mind when he resolved an impossible problem. There was no other explanation than God. He saw me through a dark time. He led me through a conflict. He sustained me in weariness. I remember that I called on him and he answered.

The future: Jesus has promised that he will return. He will set all things right. The future does not belong to the bullies and the tyrants, to the demagogues and the haters. The future belongs to Jesus who promises to make all things new. I

find strength in weakness when I draw in faith upon those promises. I trust, in defiance of how things look, in the future of Christ Jesus.

The present: I ask him to be my strength. It sounds too simple to be so. But it's real. I tell him what's going on. Raw. Unfiltered. I don't try to solve it for him. I just present to him the truth he already knows. Lord, I'm so tired. I don't want to engage this situation. Lord, I feel guilty and weighted and sick of trying to be good. Lord, I'm full of resentment and I don't know how to love through it. Lord, I can't see the way to go forward. It's just not clear to me. Lord, I don't know how to get through to this person. I'm just baffled. Here it is, Lord, what's coming before me today that I know about. I don't even want to think about what's going to surprise me. I got nothing. Just this mess. Here. Here it is.

Then, finally, I'll share with you a prayer I often say when the alarm goes off in the dark and I'm not really sure I want to meet what lies ahead. It's from an ancient prayer called The Breastplate of St. Patrick. The prayer begins, "I arise today through a mighty strength." I arise today through a mighty strength. It goes on to draw on God in particular ways. I don't have it memorized, but I riff off of it. The key is looking away from myself to the triune God. I arise today through the strength of Christ. I claim his death for my sins. His rising for my life. His Spirit to be my daily bread. I arise today through the power of God to guide me, his hand to hold me, his grace to shield me. I arise today through a mighty strength.³

The wonder is that such a simple act leads us to show a sustaining grace. In fact, when we open our eyes to look for how God responds, we end the day realizing how his unseen hand has moved all over our lives, things that can only be understood as God. This really is the path to life. His grace is sufficient. His power is perfected in weakness.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The NT in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993).

² Michael Reeves, *Overflow: How the Joy of the Trinity Inspires our Mission* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2021), 52.

³ St. Patrick's Breastplate, 4th c.

https://www.worldprayers.org/archive/prayers/invocations/i_arise_today_through_a_mighty.html