

# **THANKFUL FOR THE THORNS**

## **2 Corinthians 12**

**By John P. Miller**

**. . . yet of myself will I not glory, but in mine infirmities. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities . . .**

**Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities . . .**

**II Corinthians 12:5,9,10**

Having gloried in the weakness of his flesh three times in five verses, Paul the Apostle was either crazy, or he had discovered a secret which allowed him to thank God even for the thorns in his life. I believe Paul had come to the glorious discovery that, in spite of a weakness in his flesh, he could learn to thank God for even the difficulties, the hardships, and the trials he faced.

As you look at your life and you see thorns, maybe you're impatient, maybe you're irritable, maybe you're short-tempered, maybe there are areas of sin you haven't been able to resist; maybe it's a marriage problem, a financial problem, or, like Paul's, a physical problem. Have you been able to come to the place where you can say, 'God I'm thankful for that thorn in my flesh'? Paul wasn't simply glorying in the fact that he was suffering. The secret of Paul is that he found out that God had a purpose in it, and was using it for His glory.

**It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth:) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth:) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities. For thought I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me.**

**II Corinthians 12:1-6**

Because of the false teachers in Corinth, undermining his apostleship by saying he wasn't an apostle, and that he wasn't really sent from God, Paul had been forced into boasting. Now, if Paul was going to boast, he was going to boast humbly. So he speaks in the third person in verses 1-6 about the paradise experience he had. 'It's not profitable for me to go around glorying, but I'm going to come to the revelations and the visions I've had from God,' he said. You see, false teachers probably saw his thorn in the flesh and said, 'If you're really an apostle, you wouldn't have this sin in your life. If you were really spiritual, you

wouldn't have any problems. You're not an apostle.' So Paul talked about his buffetings, beatings, and his weaknesses. 'I glory in my weaknesses,' he said, 'but I'm going to go on to visions and revelations.'

A lot of times, ministers like to be kind of braggadocious. When I go to pastors' conferences, most of the time I'm bored to tears and just want to get home. 'How big is your church? How big is your offering on Sunday? How many missionaries do you support? How many people got saved last week?' Brag, brag, brag. Paul says, 'I'll brag. I was caught up into the presence of God'. Can you imagine Paul going to a pastor's conference . . . 'Paul what's been happening in your ministry?' 'Oh, not much, just hanging out in heaven. The other day, I was talking to God, just visiting with Him . . .'

The third heaven doesn't mean that heaven has degrees. It doesn't mean that Peter's going to be in an elevator saying, 'Which floor do you want to go to?' No, the first heaven is the place where the birds fly, the atmosphere above the earth. The starry heaven, where the sun dwells. It's not as if you could shoot a rocket far out into space and finally discover God's dwelling place. That's not the issue. God dwells in a realm outside of our physical existence.

Paul the Apostle had a paradise experience. And because of it, he had a painful experience. You see, the more God blesses us, the more God will burden us. The more God exalts us, the more He has to humble us. I've had people say to me, 'You're the pastor. You preach. You must never have any problems.' 'I just thought everything was smooth for you, John. No bumpy roads.' No, the more the privilege, the more the pain. The more there is exaltation, the more the humbling processes has to take place in our lives. Paul had an experience like no one else. He was caught up into the Presence of the Lord. And because of this powerful paradise experience, he had a painful experience when God gave him a thorn in his flesh.

Now, what the thorn was, we do not know. I've always kind of laughed at the difference speculations theologians have made concerning Paul's thorn. I do believe it was something physical. I can't be dogmatic, but I'm pretty sure. He said it was in his flesh. There are those who say it was a reoccurring headache. Others say it was false teachers. Others say it was epilepsy. One liberal scholar tried to explain away the Damascus Road experience, saying Paul wasn't struck by Christ on the Road to Damascus, he had an epileptic seizure. I say, Well, if epilepsy can transform a persecutor into a preacher of the Gospel, oh blessed epilepsy! His life was changed. The list goes on in speculation. William Ramsay said it was malaria. Others suggest it was persecution. Still others say Paul was subject to great fits of depression. Some say it was a speech impediment. Others say it was ugliness. Some of the description of Paul is that he was short, bow-legged, bald with a hook nose. I think the funniest of all is that one guy thought Paul's thorn in the flesh was his wife.

**And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.**

**II Corinthians 12:7**

The word 'thorn' is actually 'stake'. It's not a little tiny thorn off a rosebush. It is a tentstake. And he's speaking of the crippling of the tent stake. The word 'buffet' means 'to strike with the fist'. God was allowing Satan's messenger to buffet Paul. Every one of us has some form of a thorn in our flesh. And although they come in many different shapes and sizes and forms, if you'll be honest with yourself, you'll admit that there's an area of weakness in your own life, that there's a thorn in your flesh; a besetting sin perhaps, a struggle, a difficulty, a weakness. God has allowed it for a purpose, and it's important we come to the place where Paul did, where we can say, 'Lord, I'm thankful for the thorns.'

**For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.**

**II Corinthians 12:8**

In order to come to the place where we can be thankful for the thorns in our lives, there are some things we need to do and things we need to know. The first thing we need to do is what Paul did: We need to take our problem to the Lord in prayer. You know, a lot of times instead of praying about our problems, we harden our heart against God. 'Oh, God let this happen,' we say. 'So now I'm mad at God. And since I'm mad at God, I won't go to church,' or, 'I won't give money', as if God says, 'Oh, no!'; as if the God of the universe will go broke. Thorns can either be a blessing or a bummer. They can either help or hinder your walk with God. It all depends upon your attitude. The same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay. Paul had a thorn, but he became better not bitter because he took it to the Lord in prayer.

Notice Paul asked God to remove the thorn three times. Does this mean Paul lacked faith? Does it mean he should have prayed only once, and God would have delivered him? No. There's nothing wrong with persistence in prayer. But I do believe that, although it doesn't say it in the text, when Paul prayed, he was ready for God's answer. He was specific. He said, 'Lord, take it away' But knowing Paul, I'm convinced he also said, 'Lord, not my will, but Thine be done.'

Is there something in your life about which you say, 'God take it away?' That's the natural response. When I look at a thorny area of my life, I say, 'Get rid of it, God! Deliver me. Remove this thorn, Lord.' But there's another way to pray: that I might enlist that thorn to help me in my spiritual walk with God. You can either pray for the removal of the thorn, or to enlist that thorn to work for you and not against you. How about praying, 'Lord, help me to grow through this thorn. Help me to glorify You through this trial. Help me to trust You in this situation even though I don't understand why You've let it happen'? God doesn't call us to understand or to know, but to trust. The purpose of prayer is not to get our will done, but to get God's will done.

Notice Paul's thorn wasn't taken away. God said in a sense, 'I won't remove the thorn, but I will give you something even better.' When God doesn't answer prayer the way I want Him to, I often find myself getting upset with Him because I want Him to do things my way. But guess what. God doesn't do things my way. That's why Jesus prayed 3 times in Gethsemane, 'Not My will, but Thine be done.' 'Lord, here's my thorn,' Paul prayed. 'I'd like You to take it away but only according to Your will.' 'I won't take the thorn away,' God answered, 'but I'll give you grace to bear it.'

Phillips Brooks, a great preacher of the 1800's, said, 'I do not pray for a lighter load. I pray for a stronger back.' We often pray for a lighter load, but God wants to strengthen us in our circumstance or our situation. The purpose of prayer is to do God's will. And although the thorn wasn't changed, guess what was: Paul's attitude. He now had an attitude of gratitude.

Your problem may not go away, and maybe you know that. You've been praying and it hasn't been removed, it hasn't gone away. 'Why hasn't God answered my prayer?' you wonder. He has. He doesn't want to change your thorn. He wants to change your attitude. If there's bitterness in your heart, chances are good that there was first selfishness in your heart. Maybe you didn't get what you wanted, or things didn't go your way, and now you're bitter. Why? Because you're selfish. Jesus said, 'Deny yourself. Take up your cross, and follow Me.'

How did Paul's attitude changed from an attitude of, 'Take it away', to, 'Lord, thank You for this thorn'? We see in verse 7 that Paul realized that the thorn was a gift from God. 'You mean God would give His servant a thorn?' Yes. 'But I thought God loved me. I thought God cared about me. I thought God was a good God, a merciful God. What is God doing allowing this thorn in my life?' Admittedly, it's a messenger of Satan. But we read in the Book of Job, that God has put a hedge around every one of us. Therefore, Satan can't touch us or afflict us but what God allows Him to. So even though the thorn's source is from Satan, God is behind the whole picture. Paul came to the point where he realized that God is in control and that's the attitude we need to have. God loves me. God knows what He's doing. And God has allowed this thorn as a gift from Him for a very specific purpose.

Samuel Rutherford said, 'Why should I tremble at the plough of my Lord that makes deep furrows in my soul? He's no idle husbandman. He purposeth a crop.' God is not laboring to work in your heart in vain, but God is purposing a crop. You see, if I value comfort over character, my trials will upset me. If I want everything smooth, I'll be uptight and upset. But if I want God's will, if I want to be like Christ, and if I want to grow in grace in the knowledge of my Lord, it won't matter what's going on around me. I will turn my pain into prayers, and my prayers into praise as I begin to thank God for the thorns He's allowed in my life. Not only did Paul choose character over comfort, but he also came to the realization that the spiritual is more important than the physical. That's what's running through this text. 'John, I'm out of work,' you say. 'I haven't worked in

months.’ ‘That’s rough,’ I say. ‘That’s hard. But how are you doing with the Lord?’ ‘Oh, I’m just growing in the Lord. God’s love means more to me than ever before. I’m seeing God provide and I thank Him for what He’s doing. I’ve spent more time in the Word, and it’s causing me to trust Him more than ever.’ ‘That’s great!’ I say. ‘I’m not glad you lost your job. But I’m glad the spiritual is more important to you than the physical.’

‘John, I’m laying on a hospital bed. My body’s full of pain,’ you say. ‘That’s tragic,’ I reply. God is concerned with your physical body to be sure. But He is more concerned with your spiritual life. How are you doing with the Lord?’ ‘Oh, I’m doing great,’ you say. ‘This hospital bed has become a heaven on earth. This hospital room has become a holy of holies, a place of prayer. I sense God’s presence. I see his strength.’

‘John, my marriage is really messed up. It’s falling apart. My home is breaking up.’ ‘That’s tragic. I don’t underestimate the importance of that. And my heart goes out to you. But how are you doing spiritually? Are you turning to God in prayer? Do you realize God is in control? Are you trusting Him. Are you spending more time in His Word? Are you seeking Him and trusting Him more? Oh, blessed thorn that brings us to the place of trusting in Him.’

Paul realized that the spiritual realm was more important than the physical realm. Because of that, he discovered some blessings which came from his thorn, and that I believe can often be the very blessings we find as a result of thorns in our own lives:

**1. Paul’s thorn kept him humble** - Twice in verse 7, Paul said the purpose of the thorn was to keep him humble. ‘I don’t want to be humble,’ you say. Then be puffed up with pride. The Bible says God hates the proud and knows them afar off. So what do you want? Do you value the physical more than the spiritual? Do you value comfort more than character? What are your values in life? ‘Well, I like everything to go my way,’ you say. ‘I’m bummed out constantly because it never does.’ It never will! But when you come to the place where you realize that the spiritual is more important than the physical, that nothing that goes on physically around you can affect you for ill if your attitude’s right and you’re looking to the Lord then that thorn can keep you humble. And that’s the most important place you can be, for God says, ‘the proud I know far off.’ Who is God near to? He is near to those who are of a broken heart. A humble and contrite spirit God will not despise.

Because Paul had had a paradise experience, God knew he needed a little pain in his life. God knows how to balance our lives, doesn’t He? Blessings alone would bring spiritual barrenness and dryness. I will admit to you that if my life went perfectly smooth, I would be a spiritual pygmy. I would die on the vine because it’s the troubles, difficulties, roughness, bumps and the irritations that God uses in my life to make me enjoy the Bible more, to make prayer all the sweeter. The things of God mean more to me when I lose the things of the world because only the things of God are of eternal importance. I know that God has to

constantly allow little thorns in my life to keep me humble. The pain has to equal the privileges and the blessings. All sunshine makes a desert. God has to send the rain to produce the fruit in our lives.

**2. Paul's thorn kept him active** - In order to be a blessing to other people, Paul had to be kept humble. Someone said quite fittingly that Paul's great experience in heaven could have ruined his ministry on earth. I like that. Your blessings can ruin your ministry. You can be put on the shelf because God is prospering and blessing you. God loves you too much for that, so He humbles you to keep you dependent on Him. I Corinthians 1 tells us that the comfort which we receive from God when we are in trouble is the same comfort we turn around and minister to others when they are in difficulties. The world has been most greatly advanced by those who suffer, for those who have been most used by God to bless others have been those who have suffered the most. Think of David. Have you ever been comforted by one of his Psalms? Have you ever found encouragement, hope, or strength through one of his Psalms? Well guess what. David had to suffer in order to bring you comfort. And that's how God wants to use you. He wants to keep you humble through suffering so that you can be a blessing to those around you.

**3. Paul's thorn allowed him to experience the all-sufficient grace of God**

**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**

If I were to ask you to go to the grocery store and buy enough food to feed 10 people for a month, but gave you only \$5 to do it, you'd say, 'This isn't sufficient. It's not enough.' God has called us to a holy life, to a different life, to a supernatural life. And if I look only at my own strengths, wisdom, power, and might, I would have to say, 'Lord, You haven't given me sufficient funds. Lord, I can't do this on my own.' 'That's right,' He says. 'But My grace will be sufficient for you. My strength will be perfect in your weakness.' I like to change the word 'sufficient' to 'enough'. 'My grace is enough,' God says. 'Yeah, but Lord, if I were just better looking, I'd be more effective for You,' we say. Isn't it funny how sometimes we'll see a charismatic, good-looking, intelligent, rich, famous non-Christian and say, 'He would make a great Christian. I just want the Lord to save him because if he got saved, thousands would hear about Jesus.' That's not the way God works. Guess who are God's chosen: foolish things, weak things, base things, despised things. We're all candidates! God doesn't need your strength. You haven't got any, anyway. Nor does he need your wisdom, your power, or your money. God just wants you with all your sin, weakness, shortcomings and problems. Just give them to God.

I love the story when Jesus multiplied the bread and the fish. And he turned to Philip and said, 'Whence can we buy bread that these may eat?' Knowing they only had 200 denarii, Philip, the practical apostle, reached in his pocket, whipped

out his calculator, and started figuring. 'Jesus,' he said, '200 pennyworth is not sufficient. It's not enough.' He forgot Jesus was the Son of God. He forgot that Jesus had all power to do anything He wanted to do. Just then, Andrew came cruising up with a little boy who had a couple fish and couple loaves of bread. 'Lord,' he said, 'I found this little boy here. He's got a few loaves of bread and a few fish. But what are those among so many? It's not enough.' 'Give them to Me,' Jesus said He took them in His hands, lifted them up, blessed God, and broke the bread. He handed the bread to the apostles and they began to pass it around until everyone was filled.

You know, the Lord just wants us to put whatever we have in His hands. Yes, He will break it. And He will multiply it to feed hungry people. Your life must be broken if it's going to bless. In order to bless, you must bleed. You must touch other peoples' lives because God has touched you and allowed you to suffer and go through difficulties. It's all a matter of attitude. Do you value the spiritual more than the physical? Paul said to the Philippians in Chapter 1, 'I want you to know the things that have happened to me have happened for the good.' For the good, Paul? You're in jail! You're in chains. You're in prison. 'It's the greatest thing that ever happened to me,' Paul insists. 'Everyone in Caesar's household has been hearing about Jesus. I'd never been able to do this had I not been put in the prison. Not only that, some of the guys in the church are really getting bold and preaching the Gospel. Yes, some of them are preaching with wrong motives, but that doesn't matter. Christ is preached. God is glorified. That's what's important. It doesn't matter if I'm in prison. God's working. God's being glorified. That's where it's at.' Oh, God, help me to have that same attitude. Oh, Lord, help me to come to that place where You're all I need, where You're all my sufficiency, where You're all my strength.

#### **4. Paul's thorn taught him the paradox of God's power**

**Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.  
II Corinthians 12:10**

'When I am weak, than am I strong.' I love that. Turn it around. 'When I am strong, I am weak. But when I am weak, then I am strong.' Do you think you got it together? Do you think you have all your faculties about you and you're a great person? I feel sorry for you because the truth is, you're weak, and you'll never know true strength until you admit it, until you come to the Lord in brokenness and humility and say, 'God, here's my few fish, stinking as they might be. Here are my few loaves. It isn't much, it isn't enough but in Your hands, You can do great things.'

The secret of strength is weakness because God wants to exchange your weakness for His strength. If you hang on to your strength, you'll be weak. Paul came to discover an important spiritual truth that every single believer who wants to grow in the Lord must learn: We need His help. Whoever said God helps those who help themselves was wrong. God doesn't just sit back and say, 'OK, get

your act together. Shape up. Then I'll think about helping you.' If He did, we'd never have His help. No, God says, 'Come to me just the way you are in your weaknesses and your failings and your faults. Give them to Me. Trust in Me. And I'll work through you.'

If you're dealing with a thorn in your flesh, God wants to change your attitude to an attitude of gratitude. In and of itself, the trial you face may not be a good thing. But what we call good and what God calls good are two different things. We often look through earthly eyes at our problems. We don't see them from heaven's perspective. We're looking at the wrong side of the tapestry. We just see all of the dangled threads that make no sense, that look chaotic and confusing. But God's working from the other side, from eternity's side. When we see that God has a purpose and a plan, we can come to the point where we can say, 'Lord, this thorn is painful, but I'm thankful that something better has come out of it. You're keeping me humble. And because You've kept me humble, You've kept me useful. And I've been able to bless other people. And Lord all the while I've been able to experience Your all-sufficient grace which I never would have experienced had it not been for the thorn. Thank You, Lord. And Lord, I've come to learn that in my weakness, You make me strong.'

Do you feel weak today? Do you feel like there's no hope? Do you feel like giving up? Do you feel like you don't have sufficient strength to meet the day? God says As your day is, so shall your strength be. Whatever circumstance you're looking at in your life right now, God is sufficient. But will you trust Him?

A missionary by the name of Hubert Mitchell was on the island of Sumatra with just one family member. Far away from the rest of his family, he was far away from friends and loved ones, trying to reach the people of the island for Christ. But he had seen no response. Finally, the one family member he had with him died. The Sumatrans looked at Hubert Mitchell, and thought, 'We'll just watch him and see how he deals with this horrible tragedy in his life.' And as Hubert Mitchell stood at the grave and lowered his loved one in the ground, he sang these words:

*When we have exhausted our store of endurance,  
When our strength has failed e'er the day's half done,  
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,  
Our Father's full giving has only begun.  
His love has no limit, His faith has no measure,  
His power no boundaries known unto men,  
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,  
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.*

