

What was Paul’s thorn in the flesh? This question has puzzled students of the Bible for centuries. Some think Paul’s thorn was an actual physical ailment, perhaps caused by the punishment he endured during his missionary career. Others think his eyesight may have been failing. The fact that he describes his affliction as a thorn in the *flesh* seems to support the idea that it was physical in nature—although that hasn’t stopped scholars from speculating about psychological and spiritual problems as well. In the end, I’m not sure it’s all that important to determine what Paul’s thorn was. Figuring out what he suffered from is not the point. The point is, Paul, God’s chosen spokesman, suffered. And that is no small thing. It’s kind of a big deal, actually, because that’s not how religion is supposed to work. The people on God’s side are supposed to get the blessings, aren’t they?

You’ve probably heard people say things like: “If you’re suffering right now, you just need to pray harder. If you want to be healed; if you want to be delivered, you just need to have more faith.” But I wonder, is that the advice they would’ve given to Paul? Is that what they would’ve said to a man who had a personal encounter with the risen Lord Jesus—a man who had experienced visions of heaven—a man who endured beatings, death threats, and shipwrecks for the sake of the gospel? I don’t know what they would say to Paul? I can’t imagine saying that to him. And that is most certainly not what the Lord said to Paul, either. When Paul prayed and asked that his thorn in the flesh be taken away, Jesus did not reply, “Just have more faith and I’ll take it away.” Instead, he said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Wow. Do you understand the answer? God is saying it in a kind and loving way, but the answer is “no.” God is saying, “My grace is sufficient for you—the love that I have shown you in laying my life down on the cross for you—the love I have shown you in rising from the dead—is enough. It’s all you need. I’m perfecting my power in your life through the things you wish I’d take away.”

Paul suffered. He called it a thorn in the flesh. We each have thorns of our own that we pray God would remove. And sometimes He does. But at other times, he tells us to hold onto His grace—to hold onto his gifts in faith—the gifts of undeserved love and membership in the family of God—to hold onto these things in the same way you would hold onto a life raft in a stormy sea, because He’s going to let the storm continue. And in the storm, our hearts cry out, “Why?”

Maybe its because we are at our best when we are holding onto Him and nothing else. When I let go of my pride; let go of my self-reliance; let go of the illusion that I have things under control; I’m finally humble enough to let God really carry me and direct me. His power is made perfect in weakness. It’s the difference between being the captain of my own soul or being navigated by the God who created the waves and the wind. It’s one of the most counterintuitive values of the Kingdom: I am not closest to God when I am at my strongest; I am closest to God and more open to receiving Him when I am at my most vulnerable. This is what real humility is made of: its realizing that God doesn’t want me to be partially dependent on Him, you know, just when I need a boost. God wants me to be completely dependent on Him, in every room of my life. It’s realizing that He really does know better than me how my life should go. When you finally give control of your life up to God it is the biggest relief you will ever experience--but be prepared for a struggle.

One summer, a woman took a vacation to Switzerland, and during her time there, she enjoyed many long walks on the mountain trails. As she was taking one of those walks, she came upon a shepherd’s fold, and her curiosity got the better of her, so she peeked through the front door. There sat the shepherd, and around him lay his flock. Very close by, on a bed of straw, lay a single sheep, which seemed to be suffering. A closer look revealed that its leg was broken. She felt sorry for the poor animal, so she introduced herself and asked how this had happened.

To her amazement, the shepherd said, “Oh. I broke the sheep’s leg.”

Seeing a look of disgust cross the woman’s face, the shepherd said, “Look, of all the sheep in my flock, this one was the most wayward. It would

never obey my voice. It wandered to the edge of cliffs; it led other sheep astray. I've had experience with this kind of sheep. So I broke its leg."

"The first day I went to it with food, it tried to bite me, but after a while, it showed every sign of submission and even affection. And when this sheep is well, as it soon will be, it will be the model sheep in my flock. None will listen and obey as quickly or follow so closely at my side."

Let me be very clear: God does not want to break your leg, or harm you in any way. But his power is made perfect in weakness—meaning that he does not always alleviate our suffering as we request—and he can do something remarkable through our suffering. He can grow us, or touch others who suffer through us. This is not how religion works. This only makes sense if you have a relationship of trust with God; if you trust that he knows more than you do; if you trust that He knows better than you how things ought to go; if you trust that the grace that he gives in the gospel is enough to live on.

If it seems strange to you that God can transform suffering into something meaningful, then I invite you to think about Jesus himself for a moment. Think about how he achieved his mission. He could've used his power to marshal a mighty army to overthrow Rome and usher in an age of political power in Jerusalem, and that's what a lot of people wanted him to do, including many of his own disciples. He could've, but he didn't.

He could have promised health, wealth, prestige, all the finer things, to those who followed him, attracting people to his way by being the proven winner, you know, if you just have enough faith, you'll get all the blessings. He could've, but he didn't.

Instead the God whose power is made perfect in weakness demonstrated the principle himself. He became weak. The God who could've summoned an army of angel warriors allowed himself to be abused by Roman soldiers. The God who created the mighty trees staggered up Golgotha with a wooden cross. The God who formed Adam from the dust allowed his own flesh to be pierced by thorns, and nails and spear. The God who had commanded sacrifice became the sacrificial lamb. All for one reason: to take away the sin of the world. God's power was

made perfect in weakness at the cross. Jesus suffered. Jesus gave up power so that our sin debt could be paid in full. And after his suffering came new, risen, victorious, never-ending life. And right then and there, Jesus set the pattern for all who follow him. Suffering first, then glory. It's the pattern that Paul's life followed. It's the pattern into which you have been baptized. You feel it in different ways throughout your life, and it's seldom easy, but it makes every moment of life rich with possibilities. And it actually gives you a framework for dealing with suffering. Every time you see a cross; every time you hear the gospel, you can be reminded that you have all of God's greatest gifts in hand through faith. You cannot earn those gifts by being good; you don't lose those gifts when times are bad. You can even learn to lean into the suffering just a little because you know it is helping you depend fully on God.

A medical missionary in Africa had to learn to cross streams and rivers without the help of bridges, in order to do his work. The danger of wading through fast moving current is somewhat obvious. This missionary ended up learning from the native Africans the best way to make such a hazardous crossing. The person about to cross finds a large stone, the heavier the better, lifts it to their shoulder, and carries it across the stream, and the extra weight keeps them from being swept away.

The burdens we carry and the thorns we endure can have the effect of keeping us grounded. Their weight can drive us to depend fully on the solid rock of Jesus. This requires honesty, humility, and faith, and with those gifts firmly in hand, he can hear these words not as a threat, but as great news: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."