

My Thorn

The hardships of life can drag us down or make us stronger. The difference is a function of how we chose to react to them.

“And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:7-10).



We have no idea what Paul’s thorn in the flesh was. Several ideas have been floated—poor eyesight, persecution, some unknown physical ailment—but we have no way of knowing for sure. However, the significance of this little biographical detail lies not in *what* it was, but *why* Paul had it, and *how* he responded to it.

Paul saw this affliction as a divine tool for teaching him humility. It was a counterbalance to the extraordinary vision he had experienced some fourteen years earlier (v. 1-4), a constant

reminder that he should not be “exalted above measure.” Whatever splendor he saw in that Paradise experience, he was still a mere mortal, a sinner saved by grace, and his power was in the Lord, not in himself.

But Paul was slow to come to that realization. Three times he prayed that the Lord would remove this affliction; three times he was denied. The Lord finally revealed to him that this hardship was necessary to shaping his character. It forced Paul to rely on God’s strength, not his own.

Paul’s insight into this one specific affliction transformed his perspective on every other misfortune in his life. Henceforth, he saw potential benefit in all the “infirmities, reproaches, needs, persecutions, distresses” that he encountered (v. 10). Life is tough, but the pain only made Paul stronger.

Does God bring suffering into our lives? If Paul’s experience is any indication (or Job’s, too, for that matter), the answer is a qualified “Yes.” He allows Satan some degree of latitude in bringing hardship into our lives, not because He doesn’t care, or because He has some morbid fascination in watching us squirm. It’s precisely because He *does* care. *We need* to be pushed in order that we might be improved.

Do I have a physical disability or illness that hampers my ability to function as I wish? Maybe I’m stuck in a bad marriage, or struggle in a miserable job. Perhaps I carry the emotional pain of a rotten childhood or some other traumatic life experience. Whatever burden I carry, I have a choice as to how I deal with it. I can let that pain drive me into a life of anger, self-pity, and envy; or I can accept it as my thorn in the flesh, a “messenger of Satan” that God is using to purify me like gold. It’s not easy—no serious training ever is—but it can bring enormous rewards into my life, driving me deeper into the arms of the Lord.

Paul’s thorn in the flesh is a valuable contribution to the larger question of why we suffer. It doesn’t explain everything, but it covers a lot—if we have the wisdom to see it.

— David King