

Introduction:

Have you ever grabbed a flower stem only to discover it was covered with thorns? Or perhaps you've had to reach into some kind of bush for something only to learn that it was full of thorns. The thorns pierced and ripped at your flesh. Can you imagine having one of those thorns stuck in your flesh and you are unable to remove it. It would be a constant irritant, especially as it became infected. And the real pain comes every time you bump in to something right where the thorn is. You try to dig it out, but it just won't budge. That is where Paul found himself in **II Corinthians 12:7-10**. Of course, his wasn't an actual thorn from a bush. He was using that word picture as a metaphor for some struggle he was having. And even though we don't know what his actual thorn was, we've probably all been there. Some of us may be there right now. Some struggle is overwhelming us. We simply can't understand why God is allowing it to go on. We wish it would go away. We try to get rid of it. But we can't. How should we respond? Let's examine Paul's journey with the thorn so we can learn how to be victorious despite the thorns.

Discussion:

I. Thorns happen.

- A. Before we examine how to respond, I think there are a couple of things we need to grasp. This is the apostle Paul. He is a faithful Christian. He is serving the Lord with his entire being. Most of us, myself included, feel shame and guilt that we don't measure up to his work and faithfulness in the Lord despite all he endured. Surely, if anyone should be exempt from experiencing thorns, it would be this guy.
- B. Yet, Paul faced a thorn in the flesh. Even more, God refused to remove it. We tend to think being a faithful Christian should protect us from the jab of thorns, but it doesn't. In fact, sometimes it is because we are faithful to the Lord that we feel them.
- C. We don't know what Paul's particular thorn in the flesh was. However, notice the list of things he connected to it: weaknesses (which biblically could refer to physical ailment [cf. **Galatians 4:13**] or shortcoming [cf. **II Corinthians 10:10; 11:6**] or to a spiritual weakness [cf. **Hebrews 4:15**]), insults (which refers to a wrong suffered because of insolence and impudence [cf. **II Corinthians 10:10**]), hardships, persecutions, and calamities (these final three seem to go together to refer to the difficulties and dire straits Paul experienced repeatedly and continually [cf. **II Corinthians 6:4-5; 11:23-27**]). Each and every one of these things could hinder Paul and his work for the Lord. We can understand why he would want any and all of these removed.
- D. Being a faithful disciple doesn't mean we are immune to weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. Nor does it mean God will remove them quickly. We must understand thorns happen.

II. God and Satan and Thorns

- A. Another aspect of these thorns needs to be explored before we delve into how Paul responded victoriously. And that is the involvement of Satan and God.
- B. We want to carefully steer clear of broad sweeping generalities out of this particular instance. The text demonstrates this particular "thorn" was directly caused by Satan in order to harass Paul. However, Paul expresses God allowed it to happen to help Paul keep from being conceited. I think it is possible, due to disciplinary measures (cf. **Hebrew 12:7-8**) that God may directly cause some thorns.
- C. However, whether the direct cause is Satan or God for any particular thorn or if it is even merely time and chance (cf. **Ecclesiastes 9:11**), I believe this situation with Paul demonstrates the respective goals these two have for the thorns you experience.
 1. No matter who or what is the direct cause of a particular thorn, Satan wants to use it to harass you. He wants to use it to embitter you against God and get you to turn away from Him.
 2. No matter who or what is the direct cause of a particular thorn, God wants to use it to help you. He wants to use it to draw you closer to Him.
 3. The choice is yours who you will allow to win this battle.

III. Responding to the Thorns

- A. *Remember Jesus*: In **II Corinthians 13:4**, Paul returns to this weak vs. strong theme. This time he looks at Jesus. Why was Paul able to turn to God in the face of this thorn? Because he recognized God wasn't putting

Paul through anything God wasn't willing to face. Jesus also faced thorns (very literally). The crucifixion is the biggest scandal in the world. It presented the supposed Savior in the absolutely weakest position imaginable. Jesus faced weakness, insult, hardship, persecution, and calamity. When it comes to thorns, there is nothing Jesus asks of us that He didn't face Himself. Remember that.

- B. *Let the thorns lead you to God:* Having remembered what Jesus went through for you, remember the warring factions. God wants to use the thorn to help you and draw you closer to Him. But the choice is yours. What did Paul do in the face of the thorn? He prayed to God. He turned to God. He didn't go around complaining to others about how awful things were. He didn't back off on His praying because things weren't going his way. He didn't abandon God, he drew closer to Him. Consider what Paul said in **II Corinthians 4:7-12**. Paul understood his "jar of clay," his weaknesses and struggles, were pointing him to God's strength. These were pointing him to his need for God. Phillip Yancey tells the story of a friend of his who was a recovering alcoholic. The friend explained how upset he had been because every day he begged God to take away his desire to drink. But every day, the very first thought in his mind was the desire to drink. He explained that upset him until he realized his first thought led him to his second thought: prayer. "I need a drink" led him to "I need to pray." Whatever your thorns, you can overcome if you use them as a springboard to God. Remember, it is Satan who wants you to use the thorn as a reason to separate from God.
- C. *Trust God knows more about thorns than you do:* Paul developed some perspective on this thorn. He finally realized that the thorn was actually saving him. Without the thorn, he would have turned to arrogance and pride. Pride would cause him to abandon God. The thorn was keeping him humble. I don't know at what point in this process Paul recognized why the thorn was good for him. What I do know is in the face of the thorns, it is often hard for us to imagine what good can come from them. Those "rays of sunshine" that are always telling us to look for the silver lining are annoying. Perhaps the better advice is not to look for the silver lining, because sometimes we may not find it until well after we've experienced the thorn. The better advice is to trust that God knows more about this thorn and its benefits than you do. As **Romans 8:28** explains, everything God allows us to experience will work together for our good. Trust God that He knows the silver lining, and He knows why this thorn is good for you.
- D. *Accept the thorns:* God told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you" (**II Corinthians 12:9**, ESV). God is not telling Paul His grace is sufficient to help Paul overcome the thorn. He is telling Paul the thorn as it is at that moment is exactly what Paul needs, and the thorn itself is the sufficient grace. In our finite, myopic, navel-gazing wisdom, we are often certain we know exactly what we need to do God's work. If God would just align our life in accord with our thinking, everything would be better. We can even spiritualize it as we try to explain to God how much more work for Him we could do if He ran our lives our way. If we want to be victorious over the thorns, we must learn that whatever thorns the Lord allows in our lives are exactly what we need when He lets us endure them. He will use them for our good. Acceptance is the key.
- E. *Be glad for the thorns:* Paul went beyond merely trusting God and accepting the thorn as if there was nothing he could do so he might as well resign himself. Rather, he positively boasted in the thorns. In **II Corinthians 12:9** he says he will boast gladly of his weaknesses. It was only because of his weakness that he was empty enough to allow God's strength to work in him. I know this seems counterintuitive, yet the thorns are a positive part of our growth. They actually mean good things. Take stock of your thorns, weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. These are the things that are helping you grow and enter the kingdom. Don't just resign yourself to them, thank God for them, boast in them, be glad of them.
- F. *Strengthen others:* After being disparaged by some at Corinth for being weak and having explained his own weaknesses, Paul returns to this theme of weakness in **II Corinthians 13:5-10**. Paul was glad to be weak as long as he might strengthen others. His work among the Corinthians was not so they would praise him as strong, but so they might be strengthened. He prayed for their restoration. He would use his authority to build them up, not tear them down. If you want to overcome your thorns, let them be the springboard that allows you to strengthen others when they face thorns. If they think you are weak, so what. As long as you can help strengthen them, you are overcoming the thorns. After all, Satan wants that thorn to harass you and disqualify you. What a great victory if you allow God to rub that thorn in Satan's face as the very thorn is the thing that prompts you to grow and lead others to growth.

Conclusion:

Thorns happen. They may be happening to you. But thorns don't have to kill. They can be the grace that leads to life. How are you responding to your thorns?