

## **A Thorn In The Flesh**

Paul writes to the Corinthians (II Cor. 12:2-10), to warn them to be careful of those who strut and boast too much. He says that he too could boast, but he won't. Paul freely admits to having a "thorn in the flesh," a major weakness. No one knows to what Paul is referring. In fact there is great debate about this subject. All we know is that it was a source of great anguish to Paul. He calls this "thorn" a "messenger of Satan" because it interfered with his preaching of the Gospel. But he eventually realized that the "thorn" was given to him to keep him from being excessively proud. Paul was kept humble and aware of his weakness. He realized that his affliction served to ADVANCE the gospel!

However, when he first became aware of the thorn, Paul did not see it that way. He prayed fervently to God many times for the removal of what was not only painful and humiliating to him and but also interfered, he thought, with his Christian service. Like most of us, Paul was not only ready to pray to God, but also to TELL Him what the proper answer to the prayer should be. And God answers prayer, but not always in the way we expect. Here God answered Paul's prayer, but not in the way Paul had asked. God said "I have something better in mind." When God did not take away the thorn, Paul finally realized its true purpose. His affliction made him more open to and reliant on God. Instead of removing the "thorn," God gave the reassurance of His grace and reminded Paul that God's strength is "made perfect in weakness." The Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Paul never came to feel that the thorn in itself was a good thing. But he DID come to see how God's grace could transform, could redeem, what was bad into something good in his life. Paul had to look not to himself but to God and God's power. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul was not to fear, as we are not to fear, weakness, but to accept that to be human is to be weak. Accepting this truth permits God's grace to operate. It is when Paul is weak, really weak, - poor, sick, humiliated, despised, unloved by his own spiritual children as well as scorned by the world - that God's power comes into view. God's grace functions best where there is weakness and where that weakness is acknowledged. Sometimes when we adults attempt to teach children, we find they obstinately resist our instruction, thinking they know it all. It is then impossible to help. But once they recognize their "weakness," we can come in with our "strength." So God cannot impart

strength to US until WE acknowledge OUR weakness. It was Paul's weakness in respect to the thorn in the flesh, about which he could do nothing, that led him to allow God in with His strength. Thus, Paul says "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul wasn't saying that everything that happened to him, or to us, was good. Let's face it - far too many bad things happen to good people. And he certainly was not saying that everything that happened was what God had purposefully willed to happen. But, by praying and listening, Paul learned that God can take our weaknesses and use them to demonstrate His power. Paul affirmed that there is nothing that can happen to any of us that, if we turn to God with it, He cannot work SOME good. God doesn't build a wall around us to isolate us from harm. But He DOES surround us with a grace that can transform anything that happens to us.

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