

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Dear Christian Friends,

From our study of God's Word together you have come to know that our faith clings to Jesus. Because of what he has done for us, we are now a new creation that desires to be faithful to him. But as we live for him and his will, we need to be careful to always remember who is accomplishing what. In the end, just as our faith clings to Christ and his work, so also our faithfulness clings to Christ and what he accomplishes.

About 14 years before our final lesson, the apostle Paul was given amazing revelations of heaven... he saw and heard things that we would not even be able to comprehend right now. Part of the reason Paul was writing this second letter to the believers in Corinth is because there were other men who were trying to prove their faithfulness to Jesus by knocking their socks off with all sorts of revelations that they supposedly had. The thinking was that they were more faithful because of the things they had heard and seen. But Paul doesn't mention this revelation anywhere in his letters and here he only touches on it briefly to make the point that he never boasted about such things to prove his faithfulness. Instead, God translates faith into faithfulness in a much different way: It all has to do with a little things called thorns in the flesh. They threaten us, but while he may not take away those thorns, Jesus does take away their threat.

Paul writes: ⁷**To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.** ⁸**Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.**

Paul speaks of a thorn in the flesh. You've had a splinter or thorn before. It's sharp. It hurts. If you don't remove it, it hinders what you are doing. If it's in your foot you're not going to enjoy walking on it. You're going to stop and address the problem. If it is in your hand you are not going to enjoy using them until that thorn is completely removed.

Paul was serious about spreading the gospel and helping Christ's kingdom grow. But he felt as though something was hindering him. He never lets us know what this was. People have all sorts of guesses, but the main thing that Paul wants you to know is that he felt it threatened his ability to effectively spread the gospel, just like a thorn in the flesh... He goes as far to say it was like a messenger of Satan himself, tormenting him... punching him in the face, tripping him up, you could say, every time he did anything to share Christ with others.

What exactly does a thorn in the flesh look like for us today? When sharing your faith with someone doesn't go so well, have you ever asked yourself, "what's wrong with me? Why can't I do this?" When we honestly examine ourselves we find plenty of weaknesses: maybe you aren't great at telling stories or striking up a conversation about anything, let alone your faith... you've always struggled. Then there's that person next to you in line or living next to you and you know that if you could just get past your bumbling and unimpressive speech, you could share the gospel with them... and they would be interested... hanging on to your every word. But that thorn in your flesh makes sharing your Savior frustrating... and the opportunities are lost.

Maybe your physical condition has deteriorated over the years so that you are physically restricted... you can't get around so easily, you can't speak like you used to... a thorn in the flesh. You find these things to be quite an obstacle for the "go" part of Jesus' great commission.

Maybe you feel inadequate yourself... as though you just don't know enough. I'm not talking about being ignorant of God's Word because you are too lazy to read it or study it yourself, but genuinely not knowing everything. Who of us can say we have all the answers. You've tried to share your faith, but you couldn't answer a tough question and it seemed to make all the words you said fall to the ground.

Other thorns in the flesh come from without. There is the time it takes to build a relationship and share your faith. Now, I'm not talking about making foolish decisions about time because we are lazy or don't want to make God's will a priority, but genuinely being so busy with work and family that it often stands in the way of taking time to share your faith with someone.

Maybe you have been insulted for sharing your faith or a relative or friend has just refused to listen. Other Christians scoff at you and make you out to be like a cult because of what you believe about homosexuality, marriage, and the inerrancy of Scripture. Persecutions that we face as Christians can come from individuals or the attitudes of the society we live in as a whole. We live in a country where at times, freedom of speech seems to be for everyone but Christians.

Finances in our synod have already forced us as a synod to call back missionaries... becoming a pastor or teacher costs more now than it ever has.

We feel that if only God would take away these thorns, then we could *do a better job* as his disciples... then we could help him out more... then we could be faithful and effective disciples. Paul constantly prayed to the Lord about his thorn in the flesh and at least three times in earnest. We do well to follow his example. Who else has greater ability to remove any and every obstacle to growing his kingdom!

Sometimes the Lord does remove those thorns in the flesh... through prayer and the proper application of his Word. But what if he doesn't remove the thorn in our flesh... that hindrance to effectively sharing the gospel? It would make sense to us that if Jesus' command for us is to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth for all to hear so that they might believe and be saved, then he would simply remove every obstacle, to sharing the gospel?

This then is where faithfulness becomes something we do not expect. Paul writes: ⁹**But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."** God's answer is surprising to us isn't it? He's saying that he may keep some of these thorns in the flesh in our lives, but he assures us that he removes their threat. He is not weakened by our weaknesses as his disciples. Instead, his power shines through.

Many times we feel that if it were up to us we would want to blaze a trail into people's hearts with a great show of might and power... an absence of any thorn entanglements. Finances would be such that we would constantly be starting missions rather than closing them. We would make it so that every Christian could speak with eloquence and persuasiveness. We would make all who would even think of persecuting or insulting the Christian faith stop dead in their tracks.

But faithfulness to God is not always going to look like that. So many times you will hear someone say, "Well we are growing by leaps and bounds, we must be doing something right." Is that really so? Shocking and awing people into church does not necessarily mean that Christians are being faithful. It's easy to deceive ourselves into thinking that we need some clever defense, ingenious program, or perfect speech, in order to bring the gospel to others... it becomes this huge undertaking and relies so much on our own wit that we completely lose sight of the facts: Until we as sinners conclude that we have no inherent power to help Jesus out, we are useless tools in his hands.

Imagine that your hammer started telling you how best to put up a wall. Does it really know where you want it to be and what you want the entire house to look like? Can it really help you if it insists on driving the nail by its own power and wisdom? We don't always want Christ's power to be made perfect in our weaknesses. We want him to show his strength by giving us what looks like strength and power to this world.

But his grace is sufficient for you. The next time you are faced with that thorn in the flesh... that weakness in yourself, or that threat from without that hinders the spread of the gospel in your life. You have prayed time and again that the Lord would remove it. And he hasn't. Is he not listening? Look to the cross again. There you will see a real crown of thorns in Jesus' flesh, nails in his hands... the blood of the holy, sinless son of God, shed for you. That's grace... that self-sacrificing love that we never deserved... it paid for our sins and it is sufficient for us as we live as his disciples in this world.

We pray, "remove it Lord and then I can do faithful work for you." But Jesus says, "No, you have everything that you need. Your sins are forgiven, eternal life is yours... you have my love and forgiveness... that is everything you need... I will accomplish my will even with your weaknesses."

What an amazing testimony our weaknesses make to this world and to us! Paul responded this way: **Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.** ¹⁰**That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.** Paul no longer viewed the thorns in the flesh he struggled with as a messenger of Satan. Instead, he remembered who was in charge even of Satan himself... Christ. His weaknesses were now reason for him to boast because where he was the weakest, there Christ accomplished the most.

In our weakness we cannot look to ourselves, but only straight up to God, there we are strong. What are your thorns in the flesh? God is going to use you in spite of them. You may not always have the showy argument for Jesus. But did you know that when 14,000 people were asked what brought them to church only about .5 percent came because of an evangelistic crusade. Only 2 percent came because of a special program, but an

overwhelming 85 percent came because of a friend or relative. That's the way the body of Christ is built. One disciple with all his weaknesses telling another person what Jesus did for them... and not always in the most eloquent of terms... One crippled person not merely being positive, but talking about and longing for the new life that only Christ can give them...

All of us with our idiosyncrasies and quirks, our struggles and hardships as Christians in this world... You'd think Jesus couldn't accomplish a thing with such a bunch. But Jesus does. His power is made complete in our weaknesses. He accomplishes what we many times can only see as impossible. Doesn't that make you want to try the impossible? All the reasons we could give not to share the gospel with someone... *I speak with faltering lips... I'm not that exciting to listen to, they have a history of never listening, they will mock me and Jesus, I want to, but time is not a luxury I have, I'm old, broken down, and worn out....* Why not go for it anyway!

Do you have any good reason to think that Christ won't be able to work through even you, as weak as you are? "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Our weaknesses and thorns in the flesh are no longer threats to the gospel, but golden opportunities for us to see Christ doing what he does best. Brothers and sisters, rejoice in those things... because of Christ, they are your strengths. Amen.