

# The Gift of Thorns

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Date: 12 June 2022

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[ 0 : 00 ] So again, let me say welcome to all of you who are joining us, especially those who are joining for the first time. My name is Tommy. We've been in a series for the last couple of months in 2 Corinthians, which was written by the Apostle Paul.

And the title of the series has been Power Through Weakness, Power Through Weakness. And the reason for that title is that oftentimes, in the eyes of the world and the surrounding culture, spiritual power looks like weakness.

Spiritual power looks like failure. And that's especially true this week as we look at 2 Corinthians chapter 12, verses 1 through 10.

We just heard that read by Elizabeth. In this very well-known passage, we actually get a glimpse into Paul's personal life and his personal struggle.

And we see how Paul thought about his own suffering and weakness, what he refers to as his thorn, the thorn in his flesh.

[ 1 : 00 ] This is one of the things that Paul's opponents most criticized about his ministry. It's one of the things they pointed to and said, see, this man cannot possibly be legitimate.

Look at how much he suffers. Look at how weak he is. And yet, according to Paul, this thorn is one of his greatest sources of power.

In fact, he says in this passage, when I am weak, then I am strong. And I don't know if that just never really struck me before because, you know, this is one of those verses that we hear a lot. But I've been marinating on this the last few weeks and just asking how. How can somebody actually say that and mean it? When I'm weak, then I'm strong.

I mean, for me, when I'm weak, I'm weak, you know? When I'm weak, I'm not having a good day. When I'm weak, I've run out of hope. I'm struggling. I've got nothing to give.

[ 1 : 58 ] And yet, Paul says, when I'm weak, I've got more to give. I've got more to offer. I've got more foundation under me. I've got more energy and motivation to do what I'm called to do.

And I just ask, how is that possible? So, this is what we're going to be thinking about and exploring together this morning. Where does Paul get this kind of resilience, and then where can we find it? We're going to look at this in two parts. First, the scandal of thorns. Most people see thorns as a scandal, a source of outrage and embarrassment. And then we're going to look at Paul's perspective, the gift of thorns.

The scandal of thorns, the gift of thorns. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You that every week we can come around it with our various distractions and struggles and uncertainties and doubts and hopes, and that because of the prayer that we just prayed a moment ago, because of this gospel reading that we've just heard, we know that Your Holy Spirit is with us. We know that Your Holy Spirit can take this ink and paper and can lift this truth off the page, so to speak. We're here not just to hear Your written Word, but to encounter Your living Word, Jesus Christ.

[ 3 : 12 ] And we pray that in the power of Your Spirit, You would bring us face to face with our Lord and Savior, Lord, through this text. We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen. So, first of all, the scandal of thorns.

If you've been tracking with this series, you know a little of the context. For those of you who may be here for the first time or need a refresher, here's a little bit of the context. Paul had started this church years back.

He had been preaching the gospel. A lot of people had come to faith. He started the church, spent some time with them, discipling them, and then raised up some local leaders to take the helm.

And then he went on because he was ultimately called to be a missionary and church planter in other places as well. And since Paul left, over the course of a few years, the church had started to drift theologically away from the gospel that Paul had preached, and they drifted more and more in the direction of what we might call triumphalism, Christian triumphalism.

They began thinking of the Christian gospel as a vehicle for personal success and victory in life. They were all about living their best lives now, and Christianity started to become a promise of the best things in life coming to them.

[ 4 : 29 ] They were also fascinated with mystical experiences. They were fascinated with people who would say things like, last night, God lifted me up into the heavens and I saw the glory of the Lord face to face.

I was praying and I heard the audible voice of God tell me that I should take this job or marry this person. And they would look at such people with awe, and they would say, well, you must have a special relationship with God.

God must love you a little more than the rest. And so they flocked to religious leaders who boasted about their mystical experiences. They flocked to people who boasted about the private revelations that they received from God.

Their assumption in all of this was spiritually mature people, you know, the kind of people that we want to put into leadership positions, the kind of people that we want to follow as pastors and elders, spiritually mature people are the kind of people who have incredible spiritual power and mystical experiences, where God gives them visions and speaks to them.

And, you know, there are leaders like that today who very much lead out of this sense of God told me we needed to do this, all right? God showed me where we need to go, we need to go here.

[ 5 : 41 ] And so they very much respected that kind of leadership. Now, suffering for them, suffering was a whole different matter. Suffering meant that you were a failure.

If you suffered, it meant that you didn't have enough faith, right? You didn't believe enough. Well, if you just believed more than God would answer your prayer, obviously you don't have enough faith. It meant God must not be with you. It might even mean that God is punishing you. Well, what did you do to deserve this calamity in your life? That was their mentality towards suffering.

So in their minds, the Christian life was all about victory. It was all about success. It was all about power. It was all about overcoming. The point is, a suffering Christian was a scandal in their eyes. It's something to be embarrassed about, something that you definitely wouldn't tell other people if you were suffering. You'd at least want to put on a happy face and convince the people around you that things are going well.

[ 6 : 43 ] You should not be honest about what's going on because it means that somehow you have failed. It was a scandal. And I would say that the same is generally true for many Christians in the modern West today.

You know, the sociologist Philip Reif refers to our culture as a therapeutic culture. He wrote that book a while ago, but it's just become more and more and more true, the triumph of the therapeutic. And essentially, he describes our culture as a therapeutic culture, which means it's a culture that is largely centered on the emotional well-being and happiness of the individual over everything else. Right? So, for most people in our culture, individual happiness is the sort of central highest value. Everything else kind of stacks up under that.

So, most of us, and I think most of us probably aren't even really aware of this, but most people carry around a certain set of baseline expectations for the quality of life that they assume they're going to have.

[ 7 : 45 ] So, most of us assume that we will generally be safe and healthy and that we will generally live long lives. Most of us assume that sickness and pain, if they do happen, they should be brief and they should be infrequent and they should be treatable.

And so, the moment we begin to experience something like that, as fast as we can, we want to go to the local corner pharmacy, some of which are open 24 hours and give us access to all kinds of medicines and treatments to alleviate suffering as quickly as possible.

We assume that we will be generally free from things like anxiety or depression or more serious forms of mental illness. Those will immediately drive us into treatment.

We generally assume that we're going to have careers that not only meet our needs financially, but also provide some sense of meaning and purpose and fulfillment. We assume that everybody

should be able to have that.

We generally assume that we should be able to be sexually self-expressive and satisfied. We generally assume that we should be able to marry someone who meets our needs, emotionally and socially and sexually.

[ 8 : 48 ] We generally assume that if we are in a marriage where our needs are not met, that we should be able to get out of that marriage fairly easily. We generally assume that if we want to be able to have children, that we should be able to have children.

We generally assume that if we don't want children, we should be able to prevent or terminate the pregnancy. We generally assume that as long as we don't hurt anyone, we should be able to live however we want in the pursuit of our own happiness, and that we should reasonably expect that nobody's going to interfere with that. We tend to treat these not as just baseline assumptions, but I would go so far as to say I think we treat these as almost rights that we feel entitled to. And we get very angry, we get very upset as a culture when anybody tries to stand in the way of that for anyone else, so any institutions or values or religions that would encourage people to forego these things for any reason, right? So, for instance, encouraging someone to stay in a hard marriage because of the vow they made, or encouraging someone to live a life of singleness and celibacy because of their faith, or encouraging someone to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term, those are things that would be considered to many people as oppressive and evil. So, not surprisingly, in the therapeutic West, we've drifted toward a therapeutic Christianity. It doesn't take long in a culture like that for the religions to start to follow suit. So, two sociologists, Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, published a study back in 2005. This has since become a book, and all kinds of stuff has been written about it, but they surveyed a whole bunch of mainline Protestants and Evangelicals and Catholics, and they determined that the dominant religion among all of these groups is actually something they called moralistic therapeutic deism. So, people who thought they were faithful Catholics or faithful evangelicals actually turns out they believe in something called moralistic therapeutic deism, which is a term coined by these two researchers. And this revolves around the idea that the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about ourselves, right? Just like the broader culture would say. And so, the view of God has shifted, right? God's job in this approach to the Christian faith, God's job is to help us get there, is to help us live that kind of life that we want to live by solving our problems and meeting our needs, right? If we get sick or we know somebody who's sick or we're financially struggling or we want to get married or we want to have kids, then we're praying to God. Our expectation is God needs to show up and do this thing for me, and then otherwise we kind of want God to stay out of our business, right? Once the need has been met, once the prayer has been answered, we kind of say, okay, God, thanks. We'll let you know if we need you. Get back in the lamp, and then we sort of want to live our lives. And so, there are some major implications as we think about suffering, right? What's the problem with that kind of view? What's the problem with that kind of faith? Well, here's one issue I see. If you live your life with a worldview or, worse, a religion that assumes that all suffering is bad, that all suffering is scandal, and that life is about personal happiness, if that's kind of your perspective on life, you're going to be completely unprepared for the real world. You're going to be completely unprepared for real life, because real life for most people is extraordinarily hard. Some people know this more because they work, you're therapists or you're doctors or you're in ministry, and so you know because you're around a lot of human suffering. But for a lot of other people, it's easy to assume that whatever suffering you experience is sort of unique to your life, and everybody else has it pretty well, because most of us do a good job of projecting an image to the world that things are great. Right? But real life for most people is actually extraordinarily hard. Suffering is an unavoidable, massive part of being alive. It just is. You know, and if we think that life is all about being happy, and we have no category for suffering other than outrage and embarrassment, then life is really not going to make much sense. It's really not going to make much sense. You know, there have been many articles and statistics published about the numbers of people leaving Christianity behind, and this is kind of true across the board regardless of denomination. I think this is partly explained by the fact that most Christians leaving the faith grew up with therapeutic Christianity. They were sold a bill of goods. They bought into promises that have not been fulfilled. Right? They bought into an idea of Christianity that God is going to come in and answer my prayers and take away all my suffering and give me my best life now, and then they go out and they live a few years, and they realize that life is kicking the absolute crap out of me. And they pray, and it doesn't seem

to line up with anything that they have been sold. And so, you know, in these days with the internet, we're so much more aware of how much suffering there is all around the world all the time.

[ 13 : 56 ] And so, I think people with a faith like that, their faith just falls apart. It feels completely disconnected from real life. Right? So, Paul, when we look at Paul, gives us a completely different perspective on suffering. He wouldn't say, it's just a scandal, it's an outrage, be embarrassed by it, means you failed. He has a far more nuanced view of his own suffering. So, let's look at Paul's view where he would see thorns as a gift. Not a scandal, but a gift. As we said, the Corinthians assumed that mystical experiences meant that you were spiritually mature. They mean that you're uniquely blessed by God.

They believe that suffering means that you're a failure, your faith is weak, or that God is punishing you. Paul turns this completely upside down. So, he addresses first in this passage mystical experiences. And he basically says, you know, mystical experiences do happen. And he reluctantly shares about an experience that he had had 14 years earlier. He talks about himself in the third person, and it's a kind of first century way of him indicating, I'm really embarrassed to talk about this, because it's not the kind of thing that one should talk about. Right? Have you ever been around somebody, have you ever been around somebody, I hope not, who talked openly about the intimacy that they share with their spouse? I hope you've never had that experience. But how would you feel if you were sitting there and somebody said, oh, let me tell you about what happened the other night?

You would sort of say, no, I don't, this is, or that's what you should say. I don't want to hear about that. That's not appropriate. You know, make you angry. This is not appropriate to share.

That's kind of how Paul feels about this. Right? I don't kiss and tell, basically, is what he's saying. Like, listen, you have this kind of intimacy with God. This is not something that you just talk about. It's not something that you brag about. Clearly, it means that it wasn't real intimacy, right? So Paul says, let me reluctantly, he says, I know about a guy. He had an experience 14 years.

He got brought up to the third heaven. He was in the presence of God. He heard and saw things that can't be uttered. And he says, you know, I could boast about that, but it's pointless. There's no value in it. It's not leading anywhere. It's not going to edify you. It's not going to edify me. It actually cheapens the whole thing. And he goes on to indicate in verse 7, there's actually a danger when we talk about that. Oh, God said this to me. God gave me this vision. There's a real danger when we talk like that. And that is that we start to become haughty. We start to become arrogant. We start to become self-aggrandizing because it's very hard to say something like that without elevating yourself in status above other Christians around you. Because the immediate thought is, oh, well, God speaks to you audibly? Well, you must have a special relationship with God that I don't have. So Paul says it's really dangerous. And when you have an experience like this, which they do happen, lots of experiences like this have been recorded by Christians throughout the centuries, they do happen. But when you have an experience like this and you boast about it, there's a real danger that you become conceited. You start to think of yourself as, well, God must really have a special place in His heart for me. And so Paul says, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, God has given me this thorn in my flesh. Right? Over-focusing on mystical experiences is actually a sign of spiritual immaturity. And the kind of theme of this whole section is God's aim isn't to make us happy. If you think God's job is just to make you happy, your life's not going to make sense. Your faith's going to be irrelevant. God's aim is to make us holy. It's to make us holy.

[ 17 : 47 ] Now, that means that ultimately we're on the road to total satisfaction and fulfillment.

That's the end of that road. But the road is hard, and the road is long. And it's filled with obstacles, and it's filled with suffering and hardship. It is a long, hard journey to holiness. He says in verse 7, so to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me. Now, people have debated for centuries what the thorn might be. Some people have suggested that it's an emotional struggle or a spiritual struggle. Others have suggested that it was some kind of physical ailment. The problem is the word thorn isn't really used enough for us to know, and the word flesh can mean any number of things. And so, I actually think it's helpful that it doesn't specify because what that means is it kind of gives us the freedom to project whatever suffering we might be experiencing into this, right? It's sort of a more of a blank canvas. So, here's what we do know. The word thorn can just as accurately be translated as spear. Okay, so when you read thorn, you think of a minor kind of annoyance.

There's kind of a thorn kind of stuck, and it's just kind of bothering me. But imagine a spear, right? The idea here is something that is lodged in your body that is causing ongoing, unrelenting pain. You're aware of it every day, every minute of the day. And because it's lodged in there, the wound can't heal. So, every time you move, every time you start to forget it's there, the wound reopens, and it hurts even more. That's the image that he wants to convey here.

So, it's an ongoing, unrelenting, unwanted source of suffering that doesn't seem to ever go away. Now, that could be any number of things. For some people, this might be chronic pain.

It might be some sort of a chronic illness that doesn't get better. We've had people in our church who struggled with chronic pain to the point that they were bedridden at times, and that's awful, right? It could be some other form of disability. It could be some form of mild or severe mental illness. For others, it might be unwanted singleness. It might be infertility. It might be addiction. Wesley Hill numerous times writes about his same-sex attraction as his thorn in the flesh. Whatever thorns we might call to mind as we consider this passage, however we might think about this as we think about our own lives, Paul actually offers us some principles that help us deal with the thorns in our lives. He sort of models this as someone who's going through it himself.

[ 20 : 33 ] So, he's not somebody handing down from high and mighty, here's what the Lord told me that you should do. He's saying, this is what I've done. This is how I get through my day. The first thing that we see is this. God allows thorns. God allows thorns, but he takes no pleasure in it. And this is a very nuanced idea that we need to really spend some time with. Paul says this, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan. Satan wants us to suffer. Satan wants us to give up and abandon all hope. But God, on the other hand, sometimes allows suffering, but it brings him no joy. It brings him no pleasure. You get the sense that he almost does it reluctantly. There's a...it says in Lamentations chapter 3 verse 32 and 33, it says, but though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love, for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men. He allows it to happen, but he doesn't do it from his heart.

It grieves him to do it. He does what's necessary in us. It brings him no joy to do it. You know, there are so many times as parents when we have to allow a certain amount of suffering into the lives of our children. We have to say no to things that they really, really want, and they cannot understand why we would say no to this thing. There are times when we have to allow them to try and to fail, and it's so hard to watch them do it, but we know that in the long run they will benefit from that experience more than if we hover around them and ensure only their success, right? There are times when we have to give them consequences that to them seem completely unfair and unjust. They're in outrage. They're beside themselves that they've been given this consequence.

And the old adage really is true. There are times when it does hurt us worse than it hurts them, although they hate to hear that. But we do these things. Why? Ask any parent. Ask any good parent. Because you love them. Because you would do anything for them. Because you would lay down in traffic for them. And because you love them more than they can fathom, and because you know more than they could possibly imagine about what they ultimately need, you know that sometimes allowing some suffering to enter their lives, it's part of the journey toward maturity. It's part of the journey toward the kind of man or woman that you're trying to form them into. And, you know, it's hard enough explaining to a four-year-old why this present suffering will ultimately be good for them.

There's no way most four-year-olds could fathom that. But imagine God trying to explain our thorns to us. Right? That's like trying to explain it to an ant.

So, God sometimes allows thorns, but He takes no pleasure in it. The second thing we see in Paul's response is this. It's okay to ask God, even to beg God, to remove our thorns. Right? Paul says that he prayed three times that God would take away this unwanted suffering. Christianity is not masochism. Okay? We're not enthroning suffering in some sort of idealistic sense, nor is this pure stoicism, where we say, well, it's good. It builds your character. That's not what we're saying here. We actually believe that God created a world free from suffering, that God hates suffering actually more than we do. We'll come back to that. And that suffering exists because of sin and brokenness. If God doesn't enjoy suffering, we shouldn't enjoy suffering. We're right to be angry at the reality of suffering in the world.

[ 24 : 27 ] We are right to ask God to beg God. You know, three times, you do something three times in the Bible, that could mean many, many, many times. It could be that Paul was praying for months and months and months, every night, on his knees. And sometimes God does answer

those prayers. Sometimes God does heal people miraculously. Sometimes God can, in a moment, change your life circumstances. God can do the impossible. So, we don't just pray as an exercise of futility. We pray because God might. But what if God doesn't? What if God's answer is no to that prayer? The third thing we see in Paul's response is this.

If God doesn't remove a thorn, if God doesn't take away unwanted suffering from your life, it is because He intends to use it. It is not because He's forgotten about you. It's not because you don't have enough faith. It's not because God has got other things on His mind. It's not because He doesn't love you. He intends to use it in your life. There's the only two options. Either He takes it away, or it is serving a purpose. There's no other explanation. He either takes it away, or it is serving a purpose. And, you know, Paul says there's one way that we can interpret suffering that comes from Satan. You know, it's interesting that he refers to the suffering as a messenger from Satan. The suffering comes into your life, and there's a message inside it, handwritten by Satan, just for you. And these messages can be anything. This suffering means that God has abandoned you. This suffering means that God doesn't care about you. When's the last time you prayed to Him? And now that you have this thing in your life, now you pray to God? You haven't been to church in five years. You think God's going to do this for you? God is punishing you. God knows what you think about that person. God knows what you did the other night. God knows the truth about you.

This is your just desserts. This is what God is doing because you deserve it. Or God is capricious. I can't ultimately trust God because God has no idea what God's going to do. God might bless me. God might smite me into the ground. Who knows? There's no rhyme or reason to what God does. There's no point in praying because God, He's just going to do what He's going to do, and it might as well be a roll of the dice. Or, don't you see, there is no God.

All of this is meaningless. You just got dealt a bad hand. There's no one up there guiding any of this. Right? So, you pull that little message out of your suffering, and you unroll it, and there it is. [ 27 : 14 ] This is what this means. But God also speaks to us in our suffering. Right? He says, as He says to Paul, in response to Paul's prayers, He says, no, I'm not going to remove this. Why? Because my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness. Thorns can become places where God's grace starts to become real in our lives. Places where we begin to learn what it means to actually depend on God, not just in a theoretical on Sunday sense, but in a day-to-day sense, maybe in an hour-to-hour sense. Places where grace becomes real and tangible. You know, I've known people who were struggling and fighting their way out of addiction. A number of them in our church over the years. And you see how, especially in those early days, that journey out of addiction is praying sometimes every minute, God, give me the grace, give me the ability to get through the next 10 minutes without taking a drink.

Give me grace for 10 more minutes. Give me grace for 10 more minutes. And that's how the road often starts for people. Right? Those people know something about grace that most of us don't. They know what grace feels like when it's the only thing keeping you above water. And you ask, well, how can grace become real ultimately in these moments? I mean, what does that actually change? And here's the thing. Here's how I've experienced it.

In our moments of greatest suffering, when we cannot understand why God is allowing this thing to happen to us, we are actually faced with the most fundamental question of all. When I don't know why God is doing something, I'm left with only one question. Do I trust Him? Do I trust His character?

Can we trust that God is good? Can we trust that God loves us even when our lives do not seem like it, even when there is no evidence to support that idea? And you say, well, how do we know we can?

[ 29 : 22 ] And the answer comes from the Garden of Gethsemane. You know, in those final hours, Jesus knew that He was going to face unimaginable suffering. Just like Paul, Matthew tells us that Jesus prayed three times that the suffering would be taken away. Lord, please let this cup pass from my lips. And just like Paul, the Father said no. But while Paul only had to endure a thorn, Jesus wore a crown of thorns. Jesus suffered more than we can possibly imagine, more than we will ever fully understand this side of the new creation. And the reason that He was willing to do it, the reason that He was willing to put on that crown, to go to the cross, was to deal with sin and death once and for all, so that He would be able to guarantee to us whenever we pray for our own suffering, that He would be able to guarantee one day this suffering will end. One day there will be

no more suffering. One day I will personally wipe away every tear that you have ever shed.

You know, most religions do have an explanation for suffering. Buddhism says that your suffering is ultimately an illusion. Hinduism says your suffering is punishment for sins in a past life. Islam says your suffering is punishment for sins in this life. Secular humanism says your suffering is ultimately random and meaningless. But only the gospel says that God cares about suffering so much, He hates suffering so much, that He was willing to suffer. That He was actually willing to suffer more than us, so that He could bring an end to all suffering. And so what the cross means is this. The cross means that even when we cannot understand God's motives, we can always trust His character.

Even when you cannot understand God's motives for why He allows you to experience what you're experiencing right now in this moment, even if you can't understand why, you can trust His character.

That's what this means. So no matter what thorns we might be facing now, and I know enough to know that there's a lot of thorns in this room, a lot of thorns in our flesh, instead of listening to those messages from Satan, listen to the voice of God speaking quietly and clearly in your heart.

Seek the sufficiency of His grace in prayer. And over time, what that does is it begins to make you incredibly resilient in the face of whatever suffering might come. Because no matter how many times Satan might knock you off your feet, you will always land on your knees. And that is where Christians are at our strongest. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You for Your Spirit.

[ 32 : 53 ] And Lord, we know that there is much struggle and grief in this room. Far be it from us to try and fathom or understand the why, Lord. But I pray that whatever doubts, whatever resentment, anger, bitterness we might carry as a result of our suffering, I pray that in the face of Your love, that would melt away. Lord, what we need now more than anything else is to feel Your embrace, that Your grace would become real for us, that we would sense and feel and experience its sufficiency, that as You provided manna for Your children in the wilderness, so You would provide Your grace in Your Son, Jesus Christ, to us now. Lord, that if we came hungry and empty, that we would leave full. We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen.