

The King's Thorn

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[0 : 00] Well now if you would turn back to 2 Corinthians chapter 12 on page 970 that Martin read for us a moment ago.

We come today to a headline text, a text that has helped millions of Christians throughout the ages and all around the world. It's verse 9, it brings together the cross of Jesus Christ with our daily experience as Christians and you won't like it.

But I think you'll come to love it. I think we all will. Paul says verse 9, He, the Lord, said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Now the great power of this statement by the Lord is the context that it comes in. As Martin read it, did you notice that Paul has just described in chapter 12 two very different experiences?

In the first six verses he describes an extraordinarily, extraordinary, once in a lifetime highest spiritual experience. And then from verse 7, His beloved Corinthian church are troubled by false teachers, tall poppy false teachers.

[1 : 33] And I'm grateful to Aaron Roberts for introducing the concept of tall poppies last week. And it's true, it does come from Australia, although everywhere I go in Canada, I keep coming across it again and again amongst us as Canadians.

The false teachers boasted about their credentials and more particularly their amazing spiritual experiences. What Paul describes as visions and revelations in verse 1.

And what a pain it is to be in a church to have people boasting of their superior spiritual experiences.

It is such a nuisance when people pretend as though they've got the hotline to God that the rest of us don't have. It's even worse if leaders and teachers are doing this.

And they want us to listen to them, not on the basis of scriptures, which we all have and can read, but on the basis of their direct words from God.

[2 : 36] And on the basis of their spiritual experience. Beware of it when teachers say, God said to me, God said to me. And brothers and sisters, we are so very easily taken in by this.

And to combat this, the Apostle Paul describes just one spiritual experience that happened 14 years before. And it is an absolute humdinger.

I mean, if he can hardly bring himself to even talk about it, even to mention it, which is why I think he puts it in the third person. He wants to create a distance between himself and this amazing experience.

He says literally, I was caught up by Christ into the highest heaven, the third heaven, just the highest heaven where Christ is into paradise itself.

And I heard things there that I'm not permitted to say to any other human being. Now, in terms of boasting and one-upmanship, that is an absolute party stopper, don't you think?

[3 : 40] I mean, can you top that one? I don't know anyone who ever tops that one. And although he's very clear that it was God himself who gave him this experience 14 years ago, he never mentions it anywhere except here.

And he does so because there are two dangers. The first is, it was not given to Paul to build up anyone else's faith. I mean, you think about it. When I read this verse, I want to ask all the wrong questions.

I want to ask, what was it like? What did it feel like? What did it smell like? Did you see people? Did you see my friends? And I think that's a danger.

But the bigger danger is it's very dangerous for Paul because of his own temptation for pride. See, verse 6, that's what he's saying.

The false teachers wanted others to think more of them because of their boasted spiritual experiences. They wanted other people to put them on a higher level, to treat them as Christian celebrities. And the apostle Paul says, that's complete foolishness.

[4 : 53] I don't want you to think any more highly of me any differently than you think of yourself. I want you to assess me by what you see, which is obvious weakness, and by what you hear, which is the preaching of the gospel.

And so in verse 7, the apostle immediately introduces the almost opposite experience because they are linked. In fact, God gave this second experience because God had given him this first amazing experience.

The thorn in the flesh was given by God because of the astonishing heavenly experience. Just read verse 7 for a moment. So, therefore, 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, to keep me from becoming conceited. Now, don't you find that almost unbelievable?

That the Lord should give his apostle, this great man of God, this humble man of God, who had been so effectively taking the gospel to the Mediterranean, that he gives him a thorn in the flesh after this experience to keep him from being conceited.

[6 : 12] I mean, this is really something because of what it says about us. That the highest, most beautiful, most captivating, awe-inspiring spiritual experiences God can give us, we can take them and turn them into a basis for pride or conceit.

We are so self-focused and we are so arrogant that even the best gifts God gives us, we turn for the worst. Now, don't get me wrong, please, do not misunderstand this.

My hope is that every single one of us would have wonderful, repeated spiritual experiences. And my hope is more for some of you than for others in this regard.

But God in his kindness gives them to us. We can't arrange them. But I have worked in churches, not St. John's. I've worked in churches where this kind of thing becomes the central thing.

And it always leads to pride. Almost invariably, we become puffed up. And what happens over time is this. That when things go wrong, particularly in relationships, when things get difficult and there are disagreements and misunderstandings, if you're looking for the spiritual experience, instead of loving and working things through, you go somewhere else to find new spiritual experiences and new spiritual experiences until in the end, you're no longer seeking God, you're seeking the spiritual experience of God.

[7 : 45] Again, the problem is not with the spiritual experience per se. The problem is with us. And even the higher spiritual experience opens us to becoming conceited.

So that's why Paul is writing this. It's not so much the spiritual experience that helped him a great deal, but it's how God met him with the thorn in the flesh, as we'll see. Now, this thorn in the flesh, nobody knows exactly what it was.

And there's lots of different theories from someone who is his opponent or persecution to depression to migraines to epilepsy to eye trouble.

And the word literally means a spike, a javelin, a stake, a thorn. And because it's in the flesh, it's likely some sort of fizzling, physical, not fizzling, fizzling something completely different.

It's a physical disability of some sort that's acutely painful, and it somehow limits, almost cripples and hinders Paul's ministry. And it makes him weak.

[8 : 57] And I think it's pastorally wonderful that we don't know what the thorn was, so that every Christian since knows something of the shape of this experience. And we can all draw on the grace and power of Christ.

Interesting, isn't it, that when Paul suffers most, he's not interested so much in the medical diagnosis as he is reflecting on the spiritual significance. The way it's described is that it's brought into connection with the vision.

It's given at the same time as the extraordinary vision, verse 7, to keep me from becoming conceited. But whereas the experience was a one-off, the thorn remains for the apostle for 14 years until he writes this, ongoing, regular, hindering his ministry until now, given to Paul as a direct consequence of the high experience.

And verse 7, it's very clearly given by God. God is the source of it. Just as God had given him the vision, God gives him the thorn in the flesh. More than that, in verse 7, it's a gift from God and a tool in the hands of Satan at the same time, right?

It's the gift of God and the instrument of Satan both. And as Dan was telling the children earlier, that's exactly the shape of Jesus' life. When you look at the cross of Christ, can you see the hand of Satan at work?

[10 : 23] Yes, we can. At the same time, it was God's greatest work. And I think this is the paradox of the Christian life, that Satan can use whatever the thorn is in your flesh right now, Satan can use it at the same time as God giving it to you and God working in it as well.

It's not that God comes along and works through Satan, but at exactly the same time, Satan is working his evil purpose and God is working his purpose of grace and power.

You see, in the wonderful experiences, Satan works to bring us pride and arrogance. God works to bring us humility. And in suffering, Satan works to bring us despair and to distrust the goodness of God.

And God brings us to depend on him and to truly know him. Which means right in the middle of the fiercest, sharpest attack, God is there offering his goodness and power.

That's the context of verse 9. And in verse 9, with this background, the Lord says to Paul, my grace is sufficient for you.

[11 : 42] My power is made perfect in weakness. And this is such a rich text that I want to ask a couple of questions of it. You may know Dr. Jim Packer in our congregation, and he likes, he's very fond of quoting a poem by Rudyard Kipling, which goes like this, I keep six honest serving men, they taught me all I knew.

Their names are what and why and when and how and where and who. Now, completely irrelevant to the sermon, that comes from a wonderful book called The Just So Stories, and it's from one of the stories, the end of the, how the elephant got its nose, how the elephant got its trunk.

And Rudyard Kipling is being asked questions incessantly by a curious little girl who has insatiable curiosities. And he says that the elephant got its long nose because he kept poking his nose in everyone else's business and one day a crocodile grabbed the nose.

And that's why he has a trunk now. That's not in the Bible. That's Rudyard Kipling. So let me ask five of these questions. What and why and when and where and who?

What exactly does the Lord say in verse nine? There are two parts. He says, my grace is sufficient for you and my power is made perfect in weakness.

- [13 : 09] It's very important. You see, the Lord is not interested in weakness for the sake of weakness. He does not give us any thorns because he enjoys watching us suffer.
- But he knows that in weakness, weakness is the space in which we come to the end of ourselves and we begin to really understand and experience his goodness and his grace.
- It's in weakness that grace becomes existentially important to us where we learn to live in a sort of a practical way. And of course, God uses our strength.
- He's given you many strengths. He gave many strengths to the apostle Paul. But he's not so much interested in your strengths and your performance. He's much more interested in you. And this is a promise, this first line, my grace is sufficient for you.
- And the word sufficient doesn't mean it's just adequate. It's just going to cover up the difficulty. It's measureless. It's vast. It's boundless. It means that no suffering can outstrip the grace of God.
- [14 : 17] It means that the greater the difficulty, the greater our experience of grace. And this is, brothers and sisters, not something we deserve. It's grace. And it's deeply personal to Jesus.
- It's my grace is sufficient. So as Paul lives with this thorn in the flesh, he begins to learn the inexhaustible supply of the Lord's goodness.
- And he comes to experience it in a way that never runs out. And the reason is because of the second half, my power is made perfect in weakness. This is the reason that grace is sufficient.
- It's because the power of Christ is made perfect. It's realized. It comes to its fullness in our weakness. It's what it says.
- The same power that rose Jesus from the dead finds its scope in the midst of our weakness. We cannot escape weakness by willpower or spiritual experiences.
- [15 : 21] It is only the grace of Christ which is adequate to strengthen us in our weaknesses. And it's only in that way will he receive the glory. I think that it's the only thing that can possibly explain the change of attitude from verse 8 to 10.
- Because when Paul gets the thorn, he is tormented by Satan. And in verse 10, he is rejoicing in God. And he says, when I'm weak, I'm strong. Which is an amazing thing to say.
- It's the paradox of the Christian life. So that's what he says. Secondly, why does Jesus say it? Well, put yourself in Paul's sandals.
- In verse 8, he tells us that three times he begged the Lord to take away the thorn. In other words, 14 years ago, after the great spiritual experience, when the Lord first afflicted him, the apostle was completely unaware that there was any benefit for him.
- Just the opposite. And I don't think it takes much imagination to think about what he might have prayed. You know, Lord, you've given me these opportunities to preach the gospel.
- [16 : 32] I can't take them because of this debilitating thorn. Lord, I've been imprisoned and I've been beaten and I stood for the gospel. There are so many people coming to faith as I preach the gospel.
- It feels like you're pinning me to the ground with this stake in my flesh. Please take it away. And what's helpful about this is that Christianity isn't a sort of a stoicism.
- Christianity is not gritting our teeth and bearing it and pretending to everyone else, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay. Christianity is not, this is not an opportunity for you to demonstrate your vast inner resources.
- Nor is Christianity spiritual masochism. We do not say that suffering is good in itself. It's not good in itself. We do pray for deliverance.

But the Lord speaks the words in verse 9 because Paul prays for one thing and the Lord has something better. Paul prays for deliverance.

- [17 : 39] But the Lord wants dependence. And dependence comes about as we rely on his power in our weakness. The heavenly Lord believes that his grace is more than enough so that we might be satisfied in the midst of weakness.

The Lord believes that it's better for us to have a thought in the flesh and to depend on his grace than it is to be strong and delivered. He does want the apostle to be strong, but not strong in the way Paul wants.

He wants to be strong in weakness to have the power of the Spirit resting on him. This is the paradox of all forms of Christian leadership. I don't know any Christian leaders well who don't feel their own weakness acutely, who feel their own inadequacy and they feel pressed by their own temptations and they're not able to do what they want and they often feel like giving up.

I do. This is where God's power is at work and that's why Jesus says these things. What, why, when.

Thirdly, when do we know the grace and power of God? When does it come to us? Now in verse 9, both of those phrases of the promise are in the present tense.

- [19 : 08] For those of you who read these long books, the official name is timeless durative presence. Now, from time to time, the Lord gave the apostle more spiritual experiences.

We know this from the book of Acts. But for 14 years now, he has been ongoingly afflicted with a thorn in the flesh, constantly, I don't know, daily, weekly.

And each time, the grace of God has been sufficient. And each time, the power of the Lord has been made complete in his weakness. And that is what the cross of Jesus Christ looks like in the ongoing living of the Christian life.

The grace and power of Jesus don't come to us all at once at the beginning of the Christian life, even though you wish it would. It doesn't happen at the beginning of the Christian life.

It comes to us constantly, ongoingly, daily, hourly. His work is at power, sorry, his grace is at work, his power is at work in our weakness at the same time as our weakness.

- [20 : 17] And it's not that the weakness comes and then we call out for power and it comes. It's the same thing, only we often don't know it. We're completely unaware that God is giving us his power. And it's only when we turn to him and understand and experience that power.

See, that's why he finishes verse 9. And he says, therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me ongoingly like a tent.

So you see, my grace is sufficient, my power is made perfect. It's not just a bumper sticker, it's not just a poster verse to stick up somewhere and encourage you. It's in the context of the thorn.

And the promise and power of the Lord comes to us when we experience the thorn and daily rests on us. And the tent word is the dwelling word where Jesus himself, where we experience the presence of Jesus as the thorn goes in.

When I am weak, he says, then I am strong. So what and why and when? Fourthly, where?

- [21 : 31] Where is the power of Christ most seen? Well, the false teacher said it's in visions and revelations in our spiritual ecstatic experiences.

And they have a point. Can't dismiss that. They are gifts from God. We don't arrange them and organize them. They come to us from God. And we pray for deliverance.

And have we not had those prayers answered many times as a congregation? And it's great to see the power of Christ work in deliverance. We see that many times in the scriptures. God acts to free from affliction and difficulty and despair.

But if verse 9 is true, the power of Christ is most seen in a life lived in ongoing dependence on him.

That's the paradox of the Christian life. It's the upside downness of the Christian life. We have come to know God through the foolishness of the gospel.

[22 : 35] What a foolish message it is to the world. That the world will be saved by a man nailed to a tree dying on the cross. It's always been a stumbling block.

Our world loves power in power. God works power through weakness. You see, the atrocities of terrorism are power in power.

And I think the temptation for us as Christians is to think that we will present a much better image to the world if we used power. It's always been the case, hasn't it?

Back in 1 Corinthians the apostle wrote, Jews demand signs, Greeks seek wisdom. We preach Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to the Gentiles.

Where do we look for the power of God? Where do we see it at work? It is in our weaknesses. It's when we are weak the power of God is made perfect.

[23 : 37] It's when we are weak, then we are strong. in 1949 the Republic of China evicted all Western missionaries, 5,000 missionaries were forced out of China.

There were less than a million Christians in China and the mission agencies wrung their hands thinking what will the Lord do? And Christianity in China was then officially under persecution for many decades.

Christians and when the door opened some decades later there had been an explosion in growth of Christians in China and it's estimated that today there are between 80 and 100 million Christians living there.

God works through weakness. And my final question is who? Who gives this grace and who is it for? Well it's obvious isn't it?

In verse 9 it's Jesus Christ who gives this grace. the passage is full of Jesus Christ. It's a vision of Christ he has in verse 1.

[24 : 40] In verse 8 it's to the Lord Jesus Christ he prays and in verse line he said to me. For all my Christian life I always thought it was God the Father who said this. The fact that it's Jesus Christ who says these words is just tremendous because it's Jesus who understands pain and weakness.

He understood what it meant to depend on the power and grace of the Father. And he descended from a far greater height than any of us have ever experienced and he experienced far greater weakness than we could imagine.

You talk about a thought in the flesh his flesh was literally pierced by the nails on the cross taking our sins being abandoned for us. And his death is the one event in history par excellence where power is made perfect in weakness.

It's through the weakness of the cross of Jesus Christ that the power of God made him to be sin and makes us to be the righteousness of God. It's through his weakness that we are saved.

And because we are united with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection the same power and the same grace is ours now through Jesus Christ. He is the one who says to us this morning, my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in weakness.

[26 : 05] I have faced a much deeper darkness, more piercing pain, a more deadly death than you could imagine. His rejection was richer, his abandonment was more complete, he was pierced for our transgressions.

He is the one who offers us grace and power and I think when the thorn pushes in, we usually try and find out why that's happening.

Most people I know, when they feel the thorn pushing in, try and find a reason why God is doing this. And often they come to the point of saying, well God's doing this to stop something worse happening later on.

We don't actually know that. But we do know that Christ's promise here is for us. It's not just for the apostle. Otherwise it wouldn't be here in scripture.

And in chapter 4 you remember Paul described the great paradox of the Christian life. We have the light of the glory of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ in our hearts.

[27 : 13] That's transforming us so we become more like the image of Jesus. But although we have it in our hearts, we have the treasure in jars of clay in these weak, fragile, broken lives.

And we are immersed in a culture that wants the absolute opposite of the Christian life. I would love to look strong to you. So long as I can hide the mess in my life, I will tell you what's going on.

I think I want, know I have a right to a life that's easy, comfortable, and relatively pain-free, where I can fulfil my potential. just don't look too hard beyond the surface.

The Lord Jesus Christ, who is crucified in weakness and now lives by the power of God, he lives in us, he lives through us, satisfying us with his grace.

And that glory of Jesus Christ is contained in cracked, weak jars, but it's exactly through those cracks that his glory shines.

[28 : 23] And I think many of us are busy trying to hold those cracks together so that they won't open up. And sometimes the only way that God can get the glory out is to take a stake and a thorn and to open us up so that others can see the glory of Christ shining through.

Three experiences, the high spiritual experience, thorn in the flesh, most important and above both of them, more powerful and transformative is this promise.

My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness. So brothers and sisters, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

Amen.