

THE THORN ULTIMATUM

Second Corinthians 12:1-10

**The top three New Year's resolutions:
Exercise more... Eat healthier... Lose weight.**

The apostle Paul had what we can call a 'New Man' resolution. He resolved he would "take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (v10).

Among them would be "a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet [him]" (v7).

We have likewise been promised by Jesus that in the world we should expect tribulation.

Paul didn't resign himself to his suffering as if burdened by it. He took "pleasure" in them. "Pleasure" is better translated *to think well of, to approve, and to be willing*.

- "Infirmities... reproaches... necessities... persecutions... [and] distresses." You have them. Are you boasting about them?
- Do you have a thorn in your flesh? If so, do you believe that "the power of Christ... rest[s] upon [you]"? (v9).

Do you want, in 2023, to grow spiritually, to be a stronger Christian? God will design a custom lesson plan to teach you that it is when you are weak that you are strong.

Charles Spurgeon wrote, *"I am certain that I never did grow in grace one-half so much anywhere as I have upon the bed of pain."*

In our time remaining, we are going to go through the text to reveal Jesus and thereby understand more about the pleasure and boasting made possible by grace.

The title of today's message: *"The Thorn Ultimatum."*

Asthma, scarlet fever, rheumatic fever, sinusitis, heart palpitations, nervous trouble, bone & joint deformity, color blindness, scoliosis, high blood pressure, diabetes, anemia, partial deafness, astigmatism, fatigue.

Those were the boxes that were checked on Steve Rogers' WWII draft card. He made five attempts to enlist. During the fifth, he was noticed by Dr. Abraham Erksine, who had the authority to approve him. The 5'4" chronically ill 95lb weakling was *exactly the man the doctor was looking for*.

The rest is comic book gold. The scientist supplied Steve with super-soldier serum. He transformed into Captain America. He was bigger, stronger, and faster. He was physically enhanced.

When someone becomes a Christian, and receives the "super-Spirit," are they *physically* enhanced? No, of course not.

If, however, you stop to think about it, *we often act as if a Christian is physically enhanced*.

We identify as 'spiritual' by those who are presentable, healthy, talented, educated, and successful in the world. It is natural for us to look upon the *outward* man, not the *inward*.

Once upon a time, the nation of Israel demanded a king. "There was a man of Benjamin whose name *was* Kish... a mighty man of power. And he had a choice and handsome son whose name *was* Saul. *There was* not a more handsome person than he among the children of Israel. From his shoulders upward *he was* taller than any of the people" (First Samuel 9:1-2).

Israel's Man of the Year, and Sexiest Man Alive, Tall Saul, was a miserable failure.

The LORD sent the prophet Samuel to the house of Jesse to anoint His choice for king. He was ready to repeat the mistake and choose Jesse's eldest son. "But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For *the* LORD does not *see* as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart' " (First Samuel 16:7).

That "man after God's own heart" was David, *only a boy*, the least in his family. Good choice.

William Carey's biographer said he *"was born in a forgotten village in the dullest period of the dullest of all centuries."* His family was poverty-poor. He did not go to school beyond the age of 12. A skin affliction made him sensitive to outdoor work, so he became a cobbler's apprentice.

Attracted to the ministry, Carey was rejected when he gave his first sermon as a candidate. It took two more years for him to be ordained.

In 1787, Carey suggested that all Christians had a duty to share the Gospel around the world. His enthusiasm was met with this answer: "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid and mine."

Undeterred, he founded the Baptist Missionary Society five years later. One year after that, he was sent to India. There were repeated attacks of malaria and cholera.

Carey and his wife Dorothy lost three small children on the mission field. Dorothy progressively lost her sanity, unable to cope with the strain of living at a subsistence level in India.

A fire in 1812 at the mission printing plant destroyed years of Carey's translation work. On top of all that, there were no conversions for seven years.

What modern mission board would not feel it their obligation to recall Carey as a failure?

- Carey eventually formed a team who translated the Bible into 34 Asian languages.
- He established 19 mission stations.
- He formed 100 rural schools encouraging the education of girls.
- His fight against the custom of *sati* led to its being banned in 1829. It was the Hindu practice by which a widow sacrificed herself by sitting atop her deceased husband's funeral pyre.

A.B. Simpson writes, *"God is not looking for extraordinary characters as His instruments, but He is looking for humble instruments through whom He can be honored throughout the ages."*

2Co 12:1 It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord

- Paul saw Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus on the day he was saved.
- He had a vision when he was called to minister to the Gentiles.
- It was by a vision that he was sent to Macedonia.
- When things got tough in Corinth, he was encouraged via vision.
- After his arrest in Jerusalem, vision.
- In the midst of the storm at sea that would leave him shipwrecked on Malta, vision.
- Add to all these that Paul had spent three years in the desert receiving teaching directly from the risen Lord.

But wasn't Paul boasting by mentioning his "visions and revelations of the Lord?" William MacDonald writes, "When boasting of weakness, the apostle didn't mind mentioning himself. But when boasting of visions and revelations of the Lord, he would not apply them directly to himself, but would rather speak of the experience impersonally as having occurred to some man he knew. He was not denying that he was the one who had the experience, but was simply refusing to involve himself directly and personally."

2Co 12:2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago - whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows - such a one was caught up to the third Heaven.

Paul was "a man **in** Christ." One thing this conveys is that you didn't see Paul, you saw Jesus. Spiritually speaking, he was hidden in Christ.

Fourteen years earlier he had been "caught-up to the third heaven."

The Bible speaks of the atmospheric heavens, the stellar heavens, and the third Heaven - the dwelling place of God.

2Co 12:3 And I know such a man - whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows -

2Co 12:4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

"Paradise" is used here as a synonym for the third Heaven. Paul didn't know if he had died and gone to Heaven, or if he was simply transported there while still alive.

"Not lawful... to utter" could mean that these visions and revelations were personal - not meant to boast to others about. He drew from them now in order to show the boasters their arrogance:

- Paul was "in Christ," humbled by visions.
- They were in their flesh, quick to draw attention away from Jesus to themselves.

2Co 12:5 Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities.

2Co 12:6 For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me *to be* or hears from me.

By not outright owning that he was the man, it allowed him to use his experiences as an illustration without boasting.

The loudest speaker in tongues, the most elaborate 'prophesier,' the most exuberant, Pentecostal worshipper - these were the fleshly standards the Corinthian's established. Paul was content to be seen as weak, *or not to be seen at all*.

Now is a good time to talk about Paul's appearance. There is a literary portrait of Paul in a second century writing called *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Paul is described as "a man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were projecting, and he had large eyes and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long." He sounds a little like Dobby, the house-elf in Harry Potter.

Now we come to it - the infamous "thorn in the flesh."

2Co 12:7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

"Thorn" is the translation of a word used of a *tent-peg* or a rather large *stake* upon which you were tortured or impaled. Interesting that Paul worked with canvas, making tents.

"In the flesh" identifies it as a physical infirmity. The thorn, or its effects, were visible.

"A messenger of Satan" must be understood in the context of it being "in his flesh," i.e., something visible. It does not mean a malevolent creature oppressed Paul. It is similar to the situation with Job in the Old Testament.

Satan thought it would *stumble* Paul, but God knew it would *humble* him.

Speculation about the thorn is mostly on one of the many ancient eye ailments on account of a weird thing he wrote concerning the Christians in the regions of Galatia.

He said, "For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me" (4:15). He followed that up by saying to them, "See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand!" (6:11). "Large" in the sense of his not being able to read small print. Paul's King James Version Bible was giant print.

There were many chronic eye conditions in ancient times. *Trachoma*, for example, is a good guess. From its initial description in antiquity until the late 1930s, no specific treatment or effective cure existed.

Because these eye conditions are described as conjunctivitis, we think pink eye - not really a big deal. **It was a huge deal.** Some of the images that come up on a search will make you wince.

Having to listen to a guy who had *trachoma*, you'd understand why you'd want to give him your eyes.

2Co 12:8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

Why only "three times?" Jews prayed three times daily:

- Daniel, "in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem... knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days" (6:10).
- The apostles continued to observe three daily times of prayer in the Temple (Acts 2:15, 3:1, 10:9).

It would seem that Paul prayed for one day's cycle, then received God's answer.

The Lord does not heal as much as He did in His first coming. He healed as a sign that He was the promised Messiah. We are in an age in which He is made visible in our suffering more than through our healing.

2Co 12:9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

God's answer was to remind Paul that His "grace is sufficient." The Lord doesn't say He will give Paul *more* grace. He reminded him that grace was already sufficient to meet every circumstance.

Let's touch upon the problem of pain. People ask, "Why, God?" Why is there evil, and why doesn't God do something about it.

It was necessary for God to give our original parents, Adam and Eve, free will to choose to follow Him, or to reject Him. C.S. Lewis observed, "Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the existence of free-wills involve, and you find that you have excluded life itself."

Our parents chose poorly, and the result is the fallen world we live in, whose ruler is the devil.

Why doesn't God do something? He has; He is. In the Garden of Eden He promised to send His Son to be our Savior.

Jesus Christ would be born, God in human flesh, to die in order that we might have eternal life believing in Him.

Justifying sinners, declaring believing sinners righteous, is no simple task.

Jesus came a long time ago; what's going on with that? God is waiting in a special way, called long-suffering, because He is not willing that any should perish eternally, but all come to eternal life.

God loves the world so much that He sent his only begotten Son to die that men might not perish but have eternal life. No man comes to the Lord unless he is drawn by God. Wonderfully, on the Cross Jesus draws all men to Himself. Whosoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life. He is the Savior of all men, especially those who believe.

Let us be clear: Jesus *can* save every man, but those who refuse His offer of salvation, who refuse to believe in Him, remain in their sins and must in the end to be consigned to eternal, conscious punishment in the Lake of Fire.

The word "rest" is *tent upon*. You're body is the "tent." Jesus dwells **in** you by means of God the Holy Spirit. Listen to these two descriptions:

1. The apostle John said of Jesus He was "full of **grace** and truth" (John 1:14).
 2. The "Spirit of **grace**" is a name of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 10).
- Because He is **full of grace**, wherever Jesus is present, grace is full; it is sufficient.
 - He ascended into Heaven, then sent God the Holy Spirit to live in us. He is the Spirit of **grace**, by whom we have sufficient grace.

When Jesus told Paul His grace was sufficient, He wasn't talking about giving Paul an injection of super-grace.

He was talking about Himself, living in Paul's 'tent' by the Spirit of God, with sufficient grace in every circumstance & suffering.

You may not immediately receive that sufficiency. It can be hard to wrap your mind around the fact that all resources in heavenly places are yours. But it doesn't make it untrue, or suggest there is another source other than Jesus.

Alan Redpath writes, *"Return to the battle, no longer trusting in the false and insufficient human resources which so foolishly we had taken into the battle, but now trusting in the limitless resources of our risen Lord."*

2Co 12:10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

There are hard truths to learn, and severe mercies to be experienced, in following the Lord. Elizabeth Elliot, no stranger to loss, said, "Our vision is so limited we can hardly imagine a love that does not show itself in protection from suffering. The love of God did not protect His own Son. He will not necessarily protect us - not from anything it takes to make us like His Son. A lot of hammering and chiseling and purifying by fire will have to go into the process."

You might remember the classic SyFy series, *Quantum Leap*.

Doctor Sam Beckett stepped into the quantum accelerator and vanished. He found himself jumping into someone else's body, "facing mirror images that were not his own."

In Episode 22, Sam leaps into a woman. Two men are attempting to abduct her. Sam is helpless until Al, his trusty holographic sidekick, reminds him that he is trained in Judo, Karate, Muay Thai, and Taekwondo. Once Sam is reminded, he easily dispatches the bad guys.

God the Holy Spirit doesn't need to leap into you. *He is already in you.* It is up to you and I to believe it.

I came across this quote summarizing what we've expounded upon:
"God knows what each one of us is dealing with. He knows our pressures. He knows our conflicts. And He has made a provision for each and every one of them. That provision is Himself in the person of the Holy Spirit, indwelling us and empowering us to respond rightly."