

Do You Have A Thorn in the FLESH?

Even the apostle Paul struggled with the pull of his sin nature. You can allow weaknesses to cripple you, or you can discover the secret of overcoming.

Most of us are familiar with the apostle Paul's reference to his "thorn in the flesh"—the affliction he prayed three times for God to remove. God denied his request, and Paul came to believe that He had allowed it as a way to keep him humble. This was a theological explanation of Paul's reality.

But the phrase "thorn in the flesh" is a metaphorical expression as well, and in this sense, we all can identify with it. Every sovereign human vessel has a thorn in the flesh. What is mine may not be yours, and yours may not be mine. God knows our frame. He knows what each of us needs, and He knows how to get our attention.

Anyone's thorn is a "handicap," or disability, in a sense. Generally we use the term "disabled" to mean someone who has a physical, emotional or mental limitation. But I am using the term "handicapped" as well, since it is an umbrella term that covers more than one kind of disability. We all have a "handicap" of some sort—though some of them are more severe than others.

A "handicap" is any nuisance that hinders progress, success or happiness. It is an inconvenience that is likely to be permanent—a situation or condition that will undoubtedly be around for a while.

The important thing to remember is that thorns in the flesh are given sovereignly by God—that is, by His sovereign permission. They are carried out by the devil, but—paradoxical as it may seem—God gives them. Paul said of his thorn, “A messenger of Satan came to torment me” (1 Cor. 12:7, NIV).

Whatever your handicap or disability is, if you accept it as being from God, it will be only a matter of time until you see a purpose for good in it. Take your handicap from God with both hands. Why? Because He loves you, and it is His inscrutable, sovereign way of getting you to develop intimacy with Him.

A clear example of God’s bringing good out of a handicap is what occurred when my wife, Louise, experienced a temporary hearing loss. She had punctured her eardrum while we were on vacation and developed tinnitus, which affected her hearing temporarily.

Soon after we got back to Westminster Chapel, she happened to meet Judith Brittain, a deaf woman who is a sign-language teacher. At that moment, Louise felt a strong impulse to learn sign language, having some idea of what it is like not to hear well. The end result was a flourishing ministry to deaf people at Westminster Chapel.

In the play *As You Like It*, Shakespeare wrote, “Sweet are the uses of adversity.” How true! Because of Louise’s condition we learned many things about deafness and deaf people that we had not known.

How to Handle Your Handicap

There is no question that some handicaps create severe difficulties in our lives. They may cause us to feel misunderstood or isolated. They may make it hard for us to perform simple, daily routines. They may rob us of our dignity and sense of self-worth. But it is possible to rise above them. Here's how.

Accept the disability. If you are a disabled person, you must begin with accepting yourself as you are. Accept your handicap or disability, whatever it is. Begin to see it as a manifestation of God's glory.

Clearly, the handicap would not be your choice of how God manifests His glory through you, but accept it as His will nevertheless. I promise you this: If you accept your handicap as being from God, the day will come when you truly thank Him for it.

Whatever you are going through, whatever robs you of the happiness you desire, know that God has allowed it for a purpose. Accept it. Accept it as being from a loving God. Then come to terms with it. Don't pretend it's not there.

Admit that it probably won't go away—at least, not for a while. God could remove it, yes, just like that! But apart from divine intervention, come to terms with the fact that it is there to stay.

Acceptance means you don't deny the handicap. Let there be no repressing, no living in denial, no pretending it is not there. God has allowed it, and it may be there to stay.

Avoid self-pity. All of us, including people with

disabilities, need an opportunity to unload our frustrations. But we should do it without complaining. There must be no self-pity. God takes the responsibility for sending the “thorn,” but self-pity becomes sin against God.

Perhaps you have complained. Who hasn't? Simply confess your sin to God by praying the following prayer:

“Father, I am sorry for complaining about this handicap in my life. I can see that You have done it. And if You have done it, that makes it right. Even though I don't understand the reason, I am going to trust You to bring good out of it and to glorify Your name.”

Receive God's love. There is more for you to do than accepting your disability and avoiding self-pity. You must know that God loves you. How do you know it? He saved you, didn't He? The greatest thing in the world is knowing you will go to heaven when you die.

There are people with no handicap, no disability, who have everything in this life, but when they die, they will not go to heaven. There are also handicapped and disabled people who are not saved. There is only one reason you are saved: God was good to you. He gave you the gospel.

Never forget that this life is not all there is. We are on our way to face God at the judgment. Life at its longest is still short. It will soon be over.

What happens when you die? It is either heaven or hell. To know that you are going to go to heaven, that you are saved, and that God loves you is the greatest thing of all. Receive

the love that He so generously lavishes on you.

See yourself as special. Also know that no matter what your emotions may tell you to the contrary, you are special. God doesn't give your particular thorn in the flesh to everybody! I believe that in heaven you will see how blessed you were on Earth to have had the privilege of the particular disability you bear.

It may not seem that way now, but I can tell you this with assurance: We will be eternally grateful in heaven for our particular thorn, for there is a definite, thought-out reason why God has given it to us.

It is to drive us closer to Him, not further from Him. It is to keep us from being smug or conceited or from taking ourselves too seriously.

God could step in and take it away. But if He doesn't, it will stay only because God's purpose in it is still unfulfilled.

Although I wish with all my heart that God would remove my own "thorn in the flesh," I have to say that I have become reconciled to its permanence. I never thought I would say to God, "Lord, I believe that it would be wrong if You took my thorn away."

I can see that it has been essential to all I have done. I have stopped praying it will go because I think it is one of the best things that ever happened to me.

I urge you if you are waking up each morning and saying with

despair, "It's still here," to try to admit that, although you want it removed, there is a greater purpose in it that God alone understands. Take comfort from these verses in His Word:

"The Lord will give grace and glory; no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly" (Ps. 84:11, NKJV).
"My ways [are] higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts'" (Is. 55:8-9).

Whatever your thorn in the flesh is, and regardless of whether you have asked for it to be removed (as you surely have), I urge you once again to realize that it is there because God says it is still right for it to be there. One day you will see; God did it just for you.

Live in anticipation. You also need anticipation. Yes! Anticipation that God will heal. Never give up hope. But if God chooses not to fulfill this desire right away, be confident that He will use you powerfully even with the disability.

I once asked Joni Eareckson Tada, a quadriplegic with a worldwide ministry, "Would you like to be healed?" After a slight hesitation, she said, "Yes, yes, yes."

Then she continued: "But the most precious time of my day is when they put me to bed and I am just alone with the Lord. I am so afraid that if I didn't have this paralysis, I wouldn't have that intimacy."

Joni's fear is that if she were physically whole then she might not have as close a relationship with God. But it is not wrong to live in anticipation that God will step in and heal

you. Never give up hope that He will move on your behalf.

The reward for being patient and not complaining is worth the wait. Your patient endurance helps ensure a great reward when you get to heaven.

I say to anybody in a wheelchair, to anybody deaf or blind, to anybody with any impairment, you have an opportunity to receive a most dazzling reward when you get to heaven—and it will be greater than it would have been had you not had it. The greater the affliction, the greater the reward. All this is guaranteed if you don't give in to self-pity or complaining.

Fanny J. Crosby, the great hymn-writer, was blind from birth, but she wrote many hymns, including "Blessed Assurance," "All the Way My Savior Leads Me" and "Saved by Grace." Someone once said to her: "Miss Crosby, I feel so sorry for you. You've never seen a flower; you've never seen the faces of people around you."

"Oh," she said, "you feel sorry for me? Don't you know that the first face I will get to see will be the face of Jesus?"

The thorn in the flesh gives us the possibility of a greater reward than we would have had. Here below you may have felt your handicap was a deprivation. In heaven you will say, "How lucky I was to have it." I guarantee it!

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lives with his wife, Louise, in Florida.