

The Struggle is Real: The Purpose, Perspective, and Promise of the Thorn

The apostle Paul was no stranger to suffering. We read in the book of Acts as well as in Paul's epistles that he suffered various illnesses, accidents and was persecuted relentlessly during his life after he became a follower of Christ and an apostle. Often, we ask why God allows His children to suffer; why such bad things happen to God's people. In 2 Corinthians chapter 12, the apostle Paul teaches us that there is a greater purpose, perspective and promise in the suffering.

Paul's authority had been questioned

When we read Paul's second epistle to the church in Corinth, we notice that he is addressing accusations that he lacks authority and has acted deceitfully. Evidently there were other teachers who had stirred up opposition against Paul, questioning his authority as well as his intentions. It seems that people were even questioning Paul's authority and legitimacy as an apostle on the basis that so many horrible things had happened to him. During the course of this letter, Paul defends himself and his ministry. Although he does not want to boast about his close, intimate relationship with Jesus and the special revelations he has received, he describes in the first verses of chapter 12 a specific revelation he was given, demonstrating his legitimacy as an apostle.

Why did so many horrible things happen to Paul?

Indeed, it is easy to see that Paul's life and ministry are characterized by suffering. It is certainly no secret to the people in the Corinthian church that the apostle had been arrested many times, suffering beatings for preaching the

Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul recounts many of these trials in chapter 11 of this epistle: He was whipped with 39 lashes on five occasions; on three occasions he was beaten with rods; as well as stoned, shipwrecked 3 separate times, plus other dangers, illnesses and suffering. In the city of Lystra he was pelted with rocks, dragged outside the city gate and left for dead (Acts 14:19-23). His crime: preaching salvation through the risen Jesus Christ!

In chapter 12 of his epistle, Paul explains all of this. After recounting the particular revelation that had been given to him, he shares how, “a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger (or angel) of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited” (v. 7b, ESV). Paul uses the metaphor of a thorn in the flesh, which we use today as a nagging problem that will not go away. For example, someone might say, “That person is a thorn in my side!”

He goes on to explain just what this thorn was, literally a messenger or angel of Satan. This agent of Satan was sent for a reason. The English Standard Version quoted above uses the word “harass,” the King James Version translates it “buffet” and the New International Version translates it “torment.” The Greek word Paul uses is the word “kolaphizo,” which means, “to strike with clenched hands, to buffet with fists” (Vine, Unger & White). The same word is used in the Gospel of Matthew when the author writes of Jesus, “Then they spit in his face and struck him” (Matt 26:67). Notice they did not spit in His face and harass Him but struck Him or beat Him. Paul is conveying to the reader of his epistle (the people of the Corinthian church) that the reason for his hardships and suffering is an ongoing spiritual assault by Satan and his mafia.

The Purpose of the thorn

It may be difficult for us to relate to someone who suffered so much during his ministry. We often judge success in ministry by the positive outcomes that we see: for example,

the number of people giving their lives to Christ, the number of baptisms in a year, the attendance at church on Sunday morning and the like.

Imagine if your pastor or someone you know in ministry went through so many terrible circumstances. It would be quite natural to see someone suffering one horrible thing after another and wonder if maybe there is sin in his life or maybe he is just a victim of bad luck. As for Paul, one could imagine the rumors going around about him and even people engaging in gossip in the community. "Did you hear the latest of what happened to Paul?" "Can you believe that he was thrown in jail again?" "Who in the world is shipwrecked three separate times? Maybe he should stay away from the sea and stick to traveling on dry land!" "Wouldn't God want to protect his anointed apostle?"

Paul gives us the reason behind his suffering, namely that God used this satanic assault to prevent Paul from becoming conceited. The language he uses implies that it was to prevent him from being lifted up by others, to be considered a type of religious celebrity or rock star. We do not have to look far for examples in our time of how pastors and preachers who experience enormous success have been treated as celebrities in the church, only to experience a fall due to sin. It is our natural inclination to lift up great men and women who are especially gifted, particularly speakers or singers. The Christians in Paul's day were no different from us.

The Perspective of the thorn

The ongoing onslaught by Satan and his mafia is something that was not particular to Paul and his ministry. The Bible gives us a larger perspective of the spiritual battle that is taking place around us. For example, Psalm 82 gives the reader a glimpse into the throne room of heaven where God heads the divine council. In this divine courtroom scene, God renders judgement against the "gods" (Hebrew elohim) or sons of the

Most High. These are angelic beings, created by God, also referred to as princes, stars and sons of God elsewhere in Scripture. Because of their sin, they are condemned and sentenced to death. *(For more on this see Michael Heiser, The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015).*

In chapter 12 of the book of Revelation, we read of a vision the apostle John has of a dragon, Satan, warring against God. He and a third of the “stars” or angelic beings try to overthrow God but are defeated and thrown down from heaven. The dragon then sets his sights on God’s people. This spiritual assault continues today as Satan and his mafia pursue and target God’s people. This is the spiritual worldview of Paul who for years went into cities in which the people worship these other “gods” and shined the light of the gospel.

This is why Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12b, NIV). Every time Paul went into a city, into a public place, to preach the gospel, he made himself a target of the enemy. He made himself public enemy number one for Satan and his mafia.

He was not alone in this of course; the other apostles experienced similar satanic assault. For instance, Peter was told by Jesus that Satan had asked to sift him as wheat (Luke 22:31). He experienced much suffering of his own on account of preaching the gospel, ending with his execution at the hands of Emperor Nero of Rome. Satan targeted Paul, Peter and the other apostles, as well as the church in general, and continues to do so today.

The Promise of the thorn

Paul's suffering had a purpose, a perspective and it also came with a promise. Paul writes in verse 8 of chapter 12 that he pleaded with the Lord on three separate occasions that this spiritual assault would end. God answered his prayers in the following manner: "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Cor. 12:9, NIV). Imagine that! No matter what Satan and his mafia threw at Paul to try and stop him from preaching the gospel, it was no match for the power of God! Because of this, Paul writes, "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" (2 Cor 12:10).

While none of us want to experience suffering (and why would we?), suffering is a tool in the hands of the Great Craftsman who is shaping us into who He created us to be (see Rom. 8:28 and Eph. 2:10). For example, Paul writes in Romans, "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (5:3-6, ESV). Godly character does not come quickly or easily.

If we want to develop the virtue of humility, we must be willing to experience some humiliation. In faith we live for Christ and along with this, we risk failing or looking foolish in the eyes of nonbelievers but that is only because they lack understanding about the things of God. How others perceive us is infinitely less important than how our Creator sees us. Here are five things we can implement in our lives:

First, surrender totally to Jesus Christ. Jesus gave Himself for you, leaving heaven and coming to earth in human flesh to live a life that we could never live: without sin. He devoted His life to accomplishing the will of His Father (John 5:36, 19:30). He offered Himself as a sacrifice for us, dying on a

cross in our place, to pay for our sin. He rose from the dead, giving us eternal life in Him. Living for Him is encapsulated in the commandments to love God with our entire being and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31).

Second, submit to Jesus as Lord, as King. Submit to the leadership of the Holy Spirit and His Word. Make prayer and Bible study an important part of your life, for by doing this you are feeding your soul. We should be cultivating the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5). As God, the Holy Spirit works in you to transform you: characteristics such as love, joy, peace, patience (slow to anger), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control will become increasingly evident. Also, we are to submit to one another, making the needs of others as important as our own.

Third, this leads us to serve the Lord and serve others through acts of ministry and giving. This requires sacrifice, which costs us something. We sacrifice our time, talent and treasure as we serve others in a million different ways. We are to “pursue love and earnestly desire the gifts of the Spirit” (1 Cor. 14:1). The fruit of the Spirit is a manifestation of what God is doing in us and the gifts of the Spirit are what God is doing through us.

Fourth, share with others. Share what God is doing in your life, how He has delivered you from your sins, whatever they may be. Share the simple gospel message with others, without shame or apology. Share the gospel and share the love of Christ with others. Sharing the love of Christ with others is a natural (supernatural really) result of loving Him, drawing closer and closer to Him in relationship. In other words, when we love Him, more and more we just love others as a result.

Lastly, celebrate your life in Him. Live your life with joy, celebrating each moment, giving Him praise and glory. We have so much for which to be thankful and to celebrate. Remember that, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above,

coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17). Give Him glory for what He has done and celebrate Him for who He is.

Suffering will come. But in that suffering, there is purpose, perspective and promise. Jesus warned all those who follow Him: "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33b). He will be there with us in our suffering. He has suffered more on our behalf than we will suffer and the great hope that we possess in Christ is infinitely and eternally more wonderful than the pain and suffering we will endure in the course of our lives. Praise Him during good times and during bad times. Praise Him. Trust Him.

W. E. Vine, M. F. Unger, & W. White, Jr., Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words. Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1996, Logos Bible Software. {eoa}

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