

The Value of the Long-Term Struggle

I read a Facebook update recently in which a reasonably healthy friend experienced **health issues** out of nowhere that are likely going to be something he has to deal with for the rest of his life. My first reaction was concern and hope for healing. My second reaction (not spoken publicly) was a realistic, “Welcome to the world of the **chronically ill**.” And I didn’t mean it with sarcasm.

I meant it seriously: “Welcome, dear friend, to the world of the **thorn in the flesh** that **God** does not remove. As you adjust to its pain and inconveniences, know that it will also bring unusual **blessing** to you as it distracts you against much that does not matter in this life and makes those things that do matter seem much more precious.”

As Paul describes it, “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, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (1 Cor. 12:7-10, ESV).

Paul doesn’t say exactly what his thorn in the flesh was. Speculation is that it had to do with poor eyesight that caused him to have to dictate his letters to an assistant. He does call it a messenger of **Satan** to harass him.

There’s an interesting tension here between his trust in **God’s sovereign control** over this thorn and his belief that it comes from Satan. But even if Satan has sent the thorn to harass him, an uninvited guest that impedes his progress and annoys

him persistently, Paul is still confident in God's **supernatural** ability to thwart Satan's purposes for this thorn and replace them with His own good purposes.

What was God's good purpose in Paul's thorn? It was a simple purpose with profound results: **humility**. God's purpose was to keep Paul, who was entrusted with the incredible privilege of sharing the gospel, from becoming conceited.

The purpose was to make him weak. That is so opposite our view of what makes an influential leader. We want our leaders fit and handsome. But God instead allowed affliction that brought Paul low, for it takes us being in that state to hear some of the most beautiful words from God to His children in all of Scripture:

"My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness."

Wow! God says, basically, "I will be enough for you to accomplish what I want you to accomplish. Your weakness opens the door for My supernatural strength to become fully realized in you."

So welcome, friend, to the world of the chronic **thorn in the flesh**. It may be cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis, heart disease or glaucoma. It may be a long-term financial burden, caring for a disabled loved one or any number of lingering struggles.

The main characteristic of it is that it isn't going away, and it seems like something that is going to keep you from doing the things for the **Lord** you thought you would do. But really, it does the exact opposite. As Satan harasses you with it, God opens your eyes to your utter dependence on Him in a way you didn't fully grasp before. And then, in His strength when you have absolutely none of your own, He accomplishes things you never thought possible.

Thorns hurt. They are not pleasant. They don't get easier. They remain an agent in our lives that makes us weak. But I love God's supernatural ability to transform the worst that

Satan throws our way into the very things that accomplish His gospel purposes through us.

Again, as Paul says, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (1 Cor. 7:9-10).

*Adapted from **Wendy Alsup's** blog, . Wendy has authored three books including By His Wounds You are Healed: How the Message of Ephesians Transforms a Woman's Identity. She is also a wife, mom and college math teacher who loves ministering to women.*