

## GOD USES THORNS

Years ago in the northeastern United States codfish was a big commercial business. There is a market for eastern cod all over, especially on the West Coast. The demand posed a problem to the shippers. At first they froze the cod, then shipped them elsewhere, but the freezing took away much of the flavor. So they experimented with shipping them alive, in tanks of seawater, but that proved even worse. Not only was it more expensive, the cod still lost its flavor and, in addition, became soft and mushy. The texture was seriously affected. Finally, some creative person solved the problem in a most innovative manner. The codfish were placed in the tank of water along with their natural enemy--the catfish. From the time the cod left the East Coast until it arrived at its westernmost destination, those ornery catfish chased the cod all over the tank. And, you guessed it, when the cod arrived at the market, they were as fresh as when they were first caught. There was no loss of flavor nor was the texture affected. If anything, it was better than before. Each one of us is in a tank of particular and inescapable circumstances. It is painful enough to stay in the tank. But in addition to our situation, there are God-appointed "catfish" to bring sufficient tension that keeps us alive, alert, fresh and growing. It's part of God's project to shape our character to be more like his Son. In the New Testament the Apostle Paul had a catfish in his life:

2 Cor 12:7 To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 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.

The greatest gift the church can offer the world today is GRACE. For some that means saving grace. For others it is the grace God gives to live out the Christian life as He wants us to. Our greatest asset is not programs or even our preaching but the grace of God lived out before the world in everyday life.

In this passage it says that Paul was given a thorn. I know you have all seen thorns before. A thorn is something that causes you pain. The actual Greek word used here is the word SKOLOPS which meant a stake or sharp piece of wood. Paul's thorn was probably not an actual piece of wood stuck in his body but represented a problem he was struggling with. Many authors have had different ideas about what the thorn that Paul was talking about actually was:

Some think it meant temptation – that Paul lived with a secret temptation in his life that, if left unchecked, would have consumed him. This is alluded to:

2 Cor 11:29 Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

Some think it was his suffering and persecution. Certainly he faced incredible trials in his ministry.

2 Cor 11:23 I ... been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.

27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

Some think the thorn was bad eye sight brought about by frequent cases of malaria which was common to many people who lived in the Tarsus area.

Gal 4:15 "...you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me"

Gal 6:11 See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!

Some think that Paul had a different physical problem other than his eyesight which affected his appearance. We read in 2 Corinthians that people said that Paul was ASTHENES or weak in his body.

2 Cor 10:10 For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing."

Ever wonder what Paul actually looked like? You don't have to wonder because history gives us a description. The oldest description of Paul comes from an early church father who wrote that "Paul was small in stature, bald headed, bow legged, vigorous physique, with leading eyebrows and a slightly hooked nose and ..." one other thing I'll tell you latter

Paul was no Cary Grant – more like Danny Devito! Whatever the thorn actually was we know that is was something that Paul desperately wanted to get rid of. Perhaps the thorn was not specifically named and described so that each one of us could relate to his experience. You see all of us have thorns in our lives. Your thorn is the area in your life you are the most vulnerable or most defeated. Maybe it is a relationship or physical matter. Maybe it is depression or a bad habit.

Whatever it is, this passage says several things about how to deal with thorns in your life:

1. ACCEPT YOUR THORNS – there was given me

A gem is not polished without rubbing, nor a man made perfect without trials. -- Chinese Proverb

When author and speaker John Orberg was just out of seminary and first attempted preaching he fainted in the middle of his message. Can you imagine that! It is bad if others fall asleep but when you are talking but in this case HE fell asleep. The next time he tried the same thing happened. He was speaking in a Baptist church – not charismatic when that is a good thing! You just can't preach effectively when you keep fainting. There was no physical explanation. Every time he preached he didn't know if he'd make it. People started coming just to see if he would fall – like people going to the Indy 500 just to watch the crashes. He says that every time he now speaks there is always the dependency on God for every word.

Paul begged God to take the thorn away three times. This was not just a casual request. To pray 3 times means desperation as it also was with Jesus in the garden. Paul pleaded with the Lord. He poured out his heart. He had faced so much for Jesus yet when he prays "God why do you leave me in pain" heaven is silent. Imagine Paul's disappointment.

Finally God does speak, but it was probably not what Paul was expecting. He said "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" God was not offering thorn removal but grace to live with the thorn.

What is grace? It is the offer of God's pleasure. It means salvation but not just that. Not just the promise of forgiveness but the promise of God's favor no matter what. It means God's presence and power. Before Paul met Jesus he certainly was not known for his grace:

Acts 8:3 Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison

All this changed when he met Jesus. He was transformed by God's grace. When Paul would write a letter he would always begin with "Grace and peace to you". His last recorded words are "Grace be with you". From beginning to end, from top to bottom he was changed by God's grace. Paul stopped praying to take the thorn away because he recognized that the fruit of that thorn was grace in his life.

Remember the description of Paul that I read to you:

"Paul was small in stature, bald headed, bow legged, vigorous physique, with leading eyebrows and a slightly hooked nose and FULLOF GRACE"

Those 3 words at the end of the sentence change everything don't they? They changes his entire appearance. Talk about an extreme makeover! Paul carried that grace around the Roman world and changed it for good. Let me ask you a simple question this morning. Does "full of grace" describe you? If God did that through a guy like Paul, imagine what can he do through you.

Someone once wrote: "The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you." That's another way of saying with Paul that we never have temptations greater than we can bear. We pray for lighter burdens when we ought to pray for stronger backs. We pray for an easier path when we ought to pray for tougher feet. We pray for fewer problems when we ought to pray for better solutions. So how do you live a life full of grace?

2. OWN YOUR THORNS – I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses

The church is place for people with problems. All people have them but many are in denial. The church is for sick people. We have to have the courage to get real about our thorns. Church is a place for thorny people.

Our natural tendency is to wear a mask and pretend that nothing is wrong in our lives. Often people come to church plagued by all kinds of guilt and problems. They look around and see the masks and think that they are the only one on earth going through what they are struggling with. They are fearful that if people really got to know them and saw the sin in their lives then they would not like them.

My experience is that when you take the risk and you are open and honest about your struggles then people are not shocked and disgusted with you. They understand. They say "I know you have thorns, I have some too, and I love you anyways". Trying to hide behind a mask always makes you miserable. There is freedom in honesty.

A boy called Jonny and his sister Sally were visiting their grandparents. The boy was given his first slingshot. He practiced in the woods, but he could never hit his target. As he came back to his grandparents back yard, he spied her pet duck. On an impulse he took aim and let fly. The stone hit the duck and it was killed instantly.

The boy panicked. Desperately he tried to hide the dead duck in the woodpile, only to look up and see his sister watching. Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing. After lunch that day, Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But Sally said, "Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn't you, Johnny?" And then she whispered to him, "Remember the duck!" So Johnny did the dishes.

Later Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing. Grandma said, "I'm sorry, but I need Sally to help me make supper." Sally smiled and said, "That's all taken care of. Johnny wants to do it." Again she whispered, "Remember the duck." Johnny stayed while Sally went fishing. After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's, finally he couldn't stand it. He confessed to Grandma that he'd killed the duck. "I know, Johnny," she said, giving him a hug. "I was standing at the window and saw the whole thing. Because I love you, I forgave you. I just wondered how long you would let Sally make a slave of you. Don't let the devil keep you in guilt and bondage. Be honest and confess your sins and find the freedom that truth brings.

Say to the person beside you "I have some thorns". Often truth is the doorway to finding grace in our lives. Grace and truth always go together.

John 1:17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

### 3. USE YOUR THORNS – when I am weak, then I am strong

The first beacon of the Eddy Stone Lighthouse for the English Channel off the coast of Plymouth was placed there over 250 years ago to warn ships of the dangerous reefs. Winstanley, the architect who built it, was so confident of its strength that he had written on the cornerstone "Blow, O ye winds! Rise, O ocean waves! Break forth ye elements and try my work!" They were foolish words. Less than 3 years later a violent storm destroyed the lighthouse along with Winstanley and others who were doing repairs on it at the time. In 1756 John Smeaton, an early leader in civil engineering, rebuilt it. He found a new sight and dug down deep into the solid rock. He was a Christian, and on the cornerstone he wrote the words, "Except the Lord build the house it's builders labor in vain". Since then it has stood every test and it stands there today. It was built on the rock.

When Jesus gave his beatitudes in Matt 5:3 he started by saying "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In other words, blessed are those who have realized their own helplessness and who have placed their complete trust in the Lord.

The world teaches us to despise all forms of weakness – but the Bible tells us to embrace our weaknesses for only then do we let go of our self-reliance and look to the source of true strength in our lives.

When we accept our weaknesses we become gracious people and we become dispensers of grace. Remember the parable of Jesus about the 2 people who owed money and their debts were cancelled. Thorns remind us of our need and the debt of love we owe Jesus.

Luke 7:47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven -- for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.

Philip Yancey told the story of the woman who was getting married and planned a huge wedding banquet. It was going to be held at the Hyatt Hotel and cost \$13,000. After everything had been planned and paid for the groom dumped her. When she tried to cancel she could not get her money back because the food had already been bought. She decided to go ahead with the party. Years before she had gone through a difficult time and had lived in a homeless shelter. Now she would invite the down and outs. For the dinner they served boneless chicken – in honor of the groom. Homeless people were served a fancy meal on fine china with the band playing. That is good picture of the church and the kingdom of God. A person who used their brokenness to bless.

When we accept and own our thorns we look at the world differently.

Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger people! Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then doing good in your world shall be no miracle, but you shall be a miracle. Everyday you shall wonder at yourself, at the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God. -- Phillips Brooks

When it comes to thorns Jesus was our example. On the cross Jesus wore a crown of thorns. He bore our thorns on himself for us. He made himself weak enough to suffer and die so that His power could be made perfect in us.

The year 1527 was the most trying year of Martin Luther's life. On April 22 he was preaching in Wittenberg when he became dizzy and fainted (like John Orberg). Over the next several months he dealt with debilitating depression and sickness. It had been 10 years since he had published his 95 theses. He had battled long and hard against the church and government, even against other reformers. Now he was broken and beaten. He wrote his friend Melancthon about his illness, "I spent more than a week in death and hell. My entire body was in pain, and I still tremble. Completely abandoned by Christ, I labored under the vacillations and storms of desperation and blasphemy against God. But through the prayers of the saints, God began to have mercy on me and pulled my soul from the inferno below." Eventually with the help of doctors he regained his strength and health. Just as he was recovering a plague struck Wittenberg. Even though his wife was pregnant, Luther's house was transformed into a hospital, and he watched many friends die. Then his son became ill and it looked as if he would die. In the midst of all this he wrote his most famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

Sandra felt as low as the heels of her shoes as she pushed against a November gust and the florist shop door. Her life had been easy, like a spring breeze. Then in the fourth month of her second pregnancy, a minor automobile accident stole her ease. During this Thanksgiving week she would have delivered a son. She grieved over her loss. As if that weren't enough, her husband's company threatened a transfer. Then her sister, whose annual holiday visit she coveted, called saying she could not come. What's worse, Sandra's friend infuriated her by suggesting her grief was a God-given path to maturity that would allow her to empathize with others who suffer. "She has no idea what I'm feeling," thought Sandra with a shudder. "Thanksgiving? Thankful for what?" she wondered aloud. For a careless driver whose truck was hardly scratched when he rear-ended her? For an airbag that saved her life but took that of her child?

"Good afternoon, can I help you?" The shop clerk's approach startled her. "I... I need an arrangement," stammered Sandra. "For Thanksgiving? Do you want beautiful but ordinary, or would you like to challenge the day with a customer favorite I call the Thanksgiving Special?" asked the shop clerk.

"I'm convinced that flowers tell stories," she continued. "Are you looking for something that conveys 'gratitude' this Thanksgiving?" "Not exactly!" Sandra blurted out. "In the last five months, everything that could go wrong has gone wrong." Sandra regretted her outburst, and was surprised when the shop clerk said, "I have the perfect arrangement for you."

Then the door's small bell rang, and the shop clerk said, "Hi Barbara...let me get your order." She politely excused herself and walked toward a small workroom, then quickly reappeared, carrying an arrangement of greenery, bows, and long-stemmed thorny roses. Except the ends of the rose stems were neatly snipped...there were no flowers. "Want this in a box?" asked the clerk. Sandra watched for the customer's response. Was this a joke? Who would want rose stems with no flowers!?! She waited for laughter, but neither woman laughed. "Yes, please," Barbara replied with an appreciative smile. "You'd think after three years of getting the special, I wouldn't be so moved by its significance, but I can feel it right here, all over again," she said as she gently tapped her chest.

"Uhh," stammered Sandra, "that lady just left with, uhh... she just left with no flowers!" "Right... I cut off the flowers. That's the Special... I call it the Thanksgiving Thorns Bouquet. "Oh, come on, you can't tell me someone is willing to pay for that?" exclaimed Sandra. "Barbara came into the shop three years ago feeling very much like you feel today," explained the clerk. "She thought she had very little to be thankful for. She had lost her father to cancer, the family business was failing, her son was into drugs, and she was facing major surgery." "That same year I had lost my husband," continued the clerk, "and for the first time in my life, I had to spend the holidays alone. I had no children, no husband, no family nearby, and too great a debt to allow any travel. "So what did you do?" asked Sandra. "I learned to be thankful for thorns," answered the clerk quietly. "I've always thanked God for good things in life and never thought to ask Him why those good things happened to me, but when bad stuff hit, did I ever ask! It took time for me to learn that dark times are important. I always enjoyed the 'flowers' of life, but it took thorns to show me the beauty of God's comfort. You know, the Bible says that God comforts us when we're afflicted, and from His consolation we learn to comfort others.

"Sandra sucked in her breath as she thought about the very thing her friend had tried to tell her. "I guess the truth is I don't want comfort. I've lost a baby and I'm angry with God." Just then someone else walked in the shop.

"Hey, Phil!" shouted the clerk to the balding, rotund man. "My wife sent me in to get our usual Thanksgiving arrangement... twelve thorny, long-stemmed stems!" laughed Phil as the clerk handed him a tissue-wrapped arrangement from the refrigerator. "Those are for your wife?" asked Sandra incredulously. "Do you mind me asking why she wants something that looks like that?" "No...I'm glad you asked," Phil replied. "Four years ago my wife and I nearly divorced. After forty years, we were in a real mess, but with the Lord's grace and guidance, we slogged through problem after problem. He rescued our marriage. Jenny here (the clerk) told me she kept a vase of rose stems to remind her of what she learned from "thorny" times, and that was good enough for me. I took home some of those stems. My wife and I decided to label each one for a specific "problem" and give thanks to Him for what that problem taught us." As Phil paid the clerk, he said to Sandra, "I highly recommend the Special!"

"I don't know if I can be thankful for the thorns in my life." Sandra said to the clerk. "It's all too... fresh." "Well," the clerk replied carefully, "my experience has shown me that thorns make roses more

precious. We treasure God's providential care more during trouble than at any other time. Remember, it was a crown of thorns that Jesus wore so we might know His love. Don't resent the thorns." Tears rolled down Sandra's cheeks. For the first time since the accident, she loosened her grip on resentment. "I'll take those twelve long-stemmed thorns, please," she managed to choke out. "I hoped you would," said the clerk gently. "I'll have them ready in a minute." "Thank you. What do I owe you?" asked Sandra. "Nothing," said the clerk. "Nothing but a promise to allow God to heal your heart. The first year's arrangement is always on me." The clerk smiled and handed a card to Sandra. "I'll attach this card to your arrangement, but maybe you'd like to read it first." It read:

"Dear God, I have never thanked you for my thorns. I have thanked you a thousand times for my roses, but never once for my thorns. Teach me the glory of the cross I bear; teach me the value of my thorns. Show me that I have climbed closer to you along the path of pain. Show me that, through my tears, the colors of your rainbow look much more brilliant." -- Syrenthia Anderson