

The Ministry of Our Disabilities
II Corinthians 12:1-10

INTRODUCTION

Everyone knows about Paul's thorn in the flesh. Almost everyone can identify it confidently. Yet everyone seems to have a different idea about the thorn. We tend to see our own source of pain in this experience of Paul. Since the Lord did not see fit to tell us exactly the nature of the thorn, this is probably what He intended. It has come to mean to most of us that painful disability which we have to live with.

While we may not be able to identify the thorn in the life of Paul, we can learn some very helpful things about it. The thorn is there by divine permission. "There was given me a thorn in my flesh." The implication is that it was given by the Lord Him self. This disabling thing was there in the plan of God. Some people have difficulty with the idea that God might "give" someone a thorn, a painful experience. However, we need to keep in mind the depth of the divine love. God loves us so much that he would rather that we be holy than, that he would rather that we be holy than that we experience momentary happiness. True happiness always follows holiness.

The thorn is persistent. "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me." The first two times Paul received only silence, but the third time, God did speak to him. He did not speak to remove the thorn, but rather explained to him the purpose of the thorn. This painful thing was present in his life to perform a ministry. It would be there as long as Paul needed the ministry. Have you been trying to escape a thorn through prayer? Could it be that God is seeking to minister to you through this thorn?

The thorn is profitable. One of the most helpful things to ever happen in the life of Paul was the coming of this thorn in the flesh. Whatever it may have been, it did for him what nothing else could have done. This is the reason that he came to the place that he gratefully gloried in this suffering. This brings us to the consideration of the two-fold ministry of the disabilities that God permits to come into our lives.

I. THE MINISTRY OF THE DISABILITIES INCLUDES THE PREVENTION OF PRIDE

All of us are cut out of the same piece of cloth. We are more alike than you might ever imagine. Everyone of us have a tendency toward pride. This is the reason that the Bible warns so often of the danger of pride. Someone has identified three types of pride that beset the human family. They are pride of face, pride of race and pride of grace. Some of us have had very little problem with the pride of face --- the Lord just didn't give us much to be proud of. But most-of us have probably had more problem --with-the pride of race that we have been wary of this type of pride is very subtly. In little ways we give evidence that we think our color or our different nationality are superior. We look down on those who are different from us and judge them on the basis of those things over

which they had no control. Our race and nationality were given to us by the providence of God. Why should we be sinfully proud of them?

The most repulsive form of pride is the pride of grace. This is pride rooted in one's own sense of importance to God. This is where the ministry of the disabilities comes into the picture. If ever a man had that of which he might become spiritually proud, it was the Apostle Paul. He recounts some of those things in the opening of the chapter. It had happened about fourteen years earlier. It came without him seeking it or expecting it. He wasn't sure whether he was lifted up bodily or whether it was just his spirit that was lifted out of the body, but he found himself raptured right into the very presence of the exalted Lord. He found himself in the third heaven, the very dwelling place of God, the heavenly paradise. What he saw and heard there was so wonderful that it was impossible to put it into human language. Furthermore, some of what he heard there was not to be told, the Lord may have forbidden him to tell it. It was the kind of experience one would never forget. Since it came just before he was to launch forth into his missionary ministry, it was a problem given to encourage him in the difficult days of suffering that were just ahead. Indeed, it was the kind of experience that might cause one to become conceited, to feel himself superior to other people who had not had such an experience.

The Lord knows our human nature. He knows that we are flesh. He knows that even a great spiritual experience can become a source of sinful pride. Some folks have even slipped into pride over their conversion experience. This is one of the real pitfalls of the charismatic movement of our day. There is always the danger of a religious experience. It is not our experiences that make us useful to God, but our dedication and dependence upon Him.

Paul's experience can help us understand one of God's basic methods of preventing this pride. "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassing great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me" Whatever the thorn may have been in the life of Paul, it was there to prevent pride. Day by day it was a reminder of his humanity and of his utter dependence upon the Lord. It crippled his humanity so that he might experience more of God's availability and ability.

The experience of Paul is somewhat like that experience of Jacob in the Old Testament. In the struggle at Peniel, God touched the sinew of Jacob and left him crippled. For the rest of his life this proud non was made to walk with a limp. But he had to receive this disability to remove the pride that was keeping him from being what God had called him to be.

Christian biography will reveal this to be a regular method of God. He often uses the ministry of disability in the lives of His people. Spurgeon had his lifelong tendency toward depression and his severe headaches. Wesley had a family situation that was a constant source of pain. Truett had that terrible experience of accidentally killing a man. He never got over that! A friend of mine lost a son that was to forever affect the life. Another lives with an incurable physical

malady. God gives the thorn to create the disability so that pride may be prevented in the life of his own. In His wisdom He knows when and what type of thorn is needed to accomplish this blessed ministry in our lives. Are you familiar with this ministry of the thorn?

II. THE MINISTRY OF THE DISABILITIES INCLUDES THE PREPARATION FOR POWER

We are not told when this thorn came upon Paul, but we are told what it came to mean in his life. When it first appeared in the life of Paul, it was his immediate response to ask the Lord to remove it. Surely anything that was limiting his ability could not be the will of the Lord for his life? Earnestly he prayed for the removal a second time, when God seemed to ignore the first petition. It may be some encouragement to you to discover that even Paul did not always get an immediate answer to his prayer. But, when he sought the Lord the third time, the Lord spoke to him. "But he said to me." The English text cannot convey the full significance of this. The tense of the verb suggests that the Lord spoke with a finality about the matter. He would not need to ask the Lord anymore about this matter. The word that the Lord was giving would complete the conversation for all time. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." "Grace" is the word for all of the Lord's wonderful provisions. Here it was given to Paul in the form of strength to bear with the pain of the thorn and power with which to do the work the Lord had given him to do. God gives grace to the humble, This means that the ministry of the thorn, the disability, is to get us into a position in which we can receive the grace which the Lord provides. He is full of grace and rich in grace. Did you notice that the Lord assures Paul that His grace is sufficient? There will never be a deficiency or shortage in strength. He will be able to bear whatever the disability may involve. Furthermore, the Lord assures him that his power is made perfect in weakness. The more weakness he knows, the more of the strength and power of Christ will be seen in him. Those who feel self sufficient miss out on the power of Christ.

Notice Paul's reaction to this word from the Lord. "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me." The picture in the words about the "power" resting on his life is beautiful. The imagery is that of the shekinah glory of the Lord. The glory of the Lord is overshadowing the life of those who have been ministered to by the disabilities of life. When the thorn has done its ministry of preparation, then the glory cloud settles on their lives.

This text always bothers me a bit, As one of the servants of the Lord, I do desire to walk in the strength of the Lord and to labor in the power of Christ. However, am I willing to be brought to the place of weakness? Too often I find myself clinging to my human sufficiency and resisting the ministry of the thorn in my life. Instead of rejoicing in the weakness, I curse it, I renounce it! The very thing that God would use to bring me into His power I refuse. If you refuse, then the ministry of the disability is not accomplished. "This 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." I confess to you, that I am not there yet.

I do not find too much delight in insults and hardships. Do you? We would if we would realize what God is doing to us through hardships. They are preparing us to experience the power of God. They are removing the barriers to the power and are creating in us the kind of believing dependence upon the Lord that is necessary for the expression of the power.

Conclusion:

Can you identify the thorn in your flesh? If you are having difficulty in identifying it, you need not worry about it for this probably indicates that you do not have one. When the messenger of Satan arrives, you will know it! -How have you been responding to this disability? Unless you respond like Paul, the thorn could destroy you. The benefits of these disadvantages and disabilities are not automatic. They are available, but you must be ready to respond with a glad delight in the Lord in the midst of them. Friend, don't waste your sufferings! Let them accomplish what God has in mind!