

THE THORN IN THE FLESH

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A SERMON
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“And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”
2 Corinthians 12:7-9

MANY persons have a morbid desire to roll up the curtain, and gaze upon the secret lives of eminent persons. Paragraphs detailing the private habits of public men are delicacies for such minds. Books stuffed with idle gossip and mere trash are sure of a wide circulation, if they tell how princes ate, how warriors drank, how philosophers slept, or how senators arranged their hair. For once we are able to gratify curiosity, and yet minister to edification, for we have unveiled before us a portion of the secret life of Paul, the great apostle of the Gentiles.

We may not only see his bed-chamber, but learn the apostle's visions. We may not only see his private infirmities, but learn the cause of them. Let us not however be actuated by so low a motive as mere curiosity, while we gaze upon the open secret. Let us remember that the apostle never intended to amuse the curious, when he penned these words, but he wrote them for a practical purpose.

Let us read them with a desire to be instructed by them, and may the Holy Spirit teach us to profit. This record was not sent to us merely that we should know that this eminent servant of Christ had abundant revelations, or that he suffered a thorn in the flesh, but it was written for our profit.

One excellent end that may be answered by this narrative lies upon the very surface. We are plainly taught how mistaken we are when we set the eminent saints of the olden times upon a platform by themselves, as though they were a class of super-human beings. Because we fall so far short of them, we excuse our indolence by conceiving them to be of a superior nature to ourselves, so that we cannot be expected to attain to their degree of grace. We elevate them upon a niche out of the way so that they may not rebuke us, thus rendering them a homage which they never sought, and denying them a usefulness which they always coveted.

As we never try to fly because we have no angelic wings, so we do not aspire to supreme holiness because we imagine that we have not apostolic advantages. Indeed, this is a very injurious idea, and must not be tolerated. What the ancient saints were, we may be. They were men of like passions with ourselves, and therefore are most fit and practical examples for us. The Spirit of God which was in them is in all believers, and He is by no means straitened. Their Savior is our Savior. His fullness is the fullness out of which all of us have received.

Let us put far away from us every notion of separating the holy men of former days from ourselves, as if they were a saintly caste to be admired at a distance, but not associated with as comrades. They fought the common fight, and won by the strength available for all believers, let us esteem them as our brethren, and with them pursue the sacred conflict in the name of our common Leader. Let us fix our eyes upon these companions of our warfare, and regarding them as a sympathetic cloud of witnesses, let us run as they ran that we may win as they won, and may glorify God in our day and generation as they did in theirs.

Paul, my brethren, doubtless enjoyed more revelations than we have done, but then he had a corresponding thorn in the flesh. He rises above us, but he sinks with us also, and so encourages us to emulate his rising. He was a good man, but he was only a man. He was a saint, but he had the infirmities of sinners. He is our brother Paul, though he be “not a whit behind the very chief of the apostles.” And as we read his experience this morning, I hope we shall be made to feel a fellowship with him, and so be spurred on to imitate him.

I. Our text suggests to us, first of all, A DANGER to which the apostle was exposed—“Lest I should be exalted above measure.”

Upon that let us speak first. Here is a peril to which we are all exposed, more or less, but the apostle Paul was especially liable to it because of his peculiar circumstances. He had been caught up into the third heaven, secret things which had not been seen before were laid bare before his gaze, nor was his eye alone filled, his ear also, was sated, for he heard words which it was not possible for him to repeat, and which, could he have repeated, it would not have been expedient for him even to whisper in the unpurified ears of mankind.

He had been taken into the innermost part of the third heaven, into that secret paradise where Christ dwells with His perfected saints. He had entered into the nearest communion with God possible to a man while yet in this life. Should he not feel somewhat exalted? Surely exultation must fill that man’s bosom that has been brought within the veil to see his God, and to hear the unutterable harmonies! It was natural that he should be exalted, and it was not unnatural that he should stand in danger of being exalted above measure.

Devout exaltation very rapidly degenerates into self-exaltation. When God lifts us up, there is only one step further—namely our lifting up ourselves, and then we fall into serious mischief indeed. I wonder how many among us could bear to receive such revelations as Paul had? O God, You may well in Your kindness spare us such perilous favors! We have neither head nor heart to sustain so vast a load of blessing.

Our little plant needs not a river to water its root: the gentle dew suffices—the flood might wash it away. How many has God blessed in the ministry for a little while, or if not in the ministry, in some other form of service? and alas! how soon have they swollen with conceit, and have become too big for the world to hold them! Puffed up with vanity, the honor put upon them has turned their brain, and they have gone astray into gross folly, sheer vanity, or defiling sin. Many branch, but little root has brought down the tree, wing without weight has made the bird the sport of the hurricane.

Even Paul’s bark, when it enjoyed so mighty a wind of divine revelation, was nearly upset thereby, and would have been totally wrecked had it not been for the Lord’s casting in the sacred ballast, of which we shall have to speak by and by, when we consider the preventative sorrow which saved Paul from being exalted above measure.

Now, observe, if Paul was in this danger, we cannot hope to be free from it, for he was eminently a holy man, eminently a humble man, eminently a wise man, eminently an experienced man. Though specially favored, he was one to whom the highest privileges were not such novelties as to intoxicate him with vanity. He had enjoyed earthly honors, he had once been a highly esteemed Rabbi among his fellow countrymen, and this did not elevate him with pride. He counted all his honors but loss, for Christ’s sake.

He afterwards became a well-beloved apostle of Jesus, and the narrative of his doings and sufferings, which you have in the preceding chapter, is far too long for us to give you even a digest of it, yet he does not seem to have been exalted thereby. He achieved a thousand marvels of heroism, and left them all behind him, pressing forward as though he had hitherto done nothing. And when he had done all, he counted himself to be less than the least of all saints, and the very chief of sinners.

He was a man by no means childish and vain, but a man of great mind, deep comprehension, and profound knowledge. He was not readily carried away by approbation, or puffed up with self-esteem. If

he knew much, yet he knew also that he knew only in part, and if his judgment was very acute, as it certainly was, yet he often cried, “Oh, the depths!”

His was a splendid, well-balanced intellect sanctified by the grace of God. Yet, for all that, he was in danger of being exalted above measure, how much more likely, then, are we who have not his judgment, who have not his knowledge, have never occupied so lofty a station, and have never performed such mighty deeds? If so massive a pillar trembles, what peril surrounds poor reeds shaken of the wind?

Observe that in Paul’s case the favor which threatened to intoxicate him with pride, was one which did not operate in the common, coarse way in which temptations to vanity usually assail mankind. The most of men, who are exalted above measure, are puffed up with the approbation of their fellow men. They love flattery, they court esteem, and admiring words are the very food their souls feed on.

But Paul’s gifts from heaven were not things which were likely to excite the high esteem of his fellow men. It is probable that had he spoken to his fellow disciples and said, “I have enjoyed revelations,” they would have doubted his statement, or have attached but small importance to it. And had he spoken to the outside mass of Jews and heathens upon the subject, he would have become more than ever the subject of their ridicule.

What would have excited more the laughter of the Greek, or the sneer of the Roman, or the wrath of the Jew, than to hear that Paul, the tent maker, had entered the invisible world, and heard words which it was not lawful for him to utter? Brethren, you thus see that our apostle was not tempted with the common, vulgar temptation of adulation and flattery, his soul would easily have risen superior to so gross an assault, and he would have trodden down the evil like the mire in the streets. But the temptation was more subtle, and more adapted to the noble caliber of the man.

He was eminently a self-contained man, a man who had learned to think for himself, and speak for himself, and act for himself, and now the temptation was that he should say within his own soul, “I have seen for myself and with these eyes as others have not. I am a seeing man among blind dotards. What know these grovelers? What are they compared with me? I am the favorite of heaven. I have been indulged by the Eternal with an admission into His secret audience chamber. I am something more than the rest of the sons of men.” Paul cared nothing either for the frown or the smile of men. He was superior to all that, but his temptation lay within himself, and hence it was the more difficult to grapple with.

It may be, brethren, that some of you, not having revelations, yet may possess a something within yourselves—a deep experience, a secret penetration into the marrow of the divine Word, an intimate knowledge of some portion of divine truth—and though you would not care about the esteem of your fellow men, or be puffed up by praise, yet this personal consciousness that you have a something that others have not, this sense of superiority to them in some things, may be to you a daily stumbling block, and create in you an overweening self-esteem.

Now, let us observe that although in Paul’s particular form of it, this temptation to exaltation above measure may not be very common nowadays, yet, in some shape or other, it waylays the best of Christians. The common run of Christians—and they are very numerous—may not be tempted in this way, but the choice spirits, the elect out of the elect, the *elite* of the saints of God, are most likely to be molested by this tendency to be exalted above measure, through the abundance of gracious revelations.

Some real Christians have a constitutional tendency towards inordinate self-esteem. They never err through timidity, but they are very easily led into self-confidence. Every man loves the commendation of his fellow men, no man living is indifferent to it.

***“The proud to gain it toils on toils endure;
The modest shun it but to make it sure.”***

It is vain for us to boast of not caring about it, we do care about it, and our duty is to keep that propensity in check. He who thinks he is humble, is probably the proudest man in the place. But there

are some men in whom self-consciousness is so uppermost, and so evidently powerful, that you can see it in almost everything they do. It is their struggle, if they are Christians, to keep it down, but it will come up in the form of being very easily annoyed because they are overlooked in some good work, or in being easily irritated because they fancy that somebody is opposing them, when probably that somebody never thought of them.

The too great prominence of the *ego* is the fault of many, and the danger of all. Not a few have to battle with this all their lives, and I should not wonder if they should be the persons who all their lives also will endure a thorn in the flesh.

But there are others to whom the temptation comes in a more refined fashion. They have more knowledge than those among whom they dwell. I mean more Scriptural knowledge, more real spiritual knowledge, and a deeper inward experience, and when they hear the prattle of young beginners, or listen to the fearful blunders of many would-be great saints, they cannot help smiling to themselves, and almost as naturally, they cannot help saying, "Thank God I do know better than that."

The temptation to be exalted above measure, in such a case, is near at hand. They have probably also enjoyed some success in sacred work, while they have seen others idle, indifferent, and consequently unsuccessful.

Now, if God gives any man success in winning souls, I am certain that he will be lifted up to his own perdition, unless a corresponding source of humiliation is opened at the same time. We must rejoice in spiritual success, it would be ungrateful not to do so, but we must be on our guard against boastfulness of spirit.

My dear friend, if the Lord shall make you the spiritual parent of a score of souls, will you feel no exultation within your spirit, as you shall see these arrows in the hands of a mighty man—these spiritual children of your youth? Will you feel no elevation of joy? Shall the father's heart never leap at the sight of his offspring? We must and will rejoice, none shall hinder us of this sacred gladness. But mark well, that here will be our danger! Among the flowers of gratitude will grow the hemlock of pride. While our thoughts of thankfulness, like angels, adore the Lord, the Satan of self-exaltation will come in among them.

It is most noteworthy that all the things we have spoken of, are none of them, justifiable grounds for boasting, if such grounds there ever can be. What if a believer should have received more divine illuminations than his fellow? Did not the Lord give them to him? Why should he boast as if he had not received the favors? Have his own reason, wit, and effort wrought these things?

There are two beggars in the street, I give one a shilling and the other a penny—shall the man who obtains the shilling be proud, and glory over his companion? If I give him the larger alms, irrespective of any consideration of merit, but simply because I choose to do what I will with my own, shall he boast? Yet thus foolish are we.

Generally the fondest boasting in this world is excited by accidental circumstances. If there be a boy in the school who is conceited, it is not the lad who has worked hard and long at his studies, and so obtained a distinguished position, but the young boaster is generally a youthful genius, who has great readiness at his tasks, and is as lazy as he is gifted.

You will not often find that man assume great airs, who has achieved a great invention, and blessed his fellow men by a valuable discovery. But lofty is the carriage of the brainless aristocrat, who owes his position to the accident of his birth. If we must glory, let us wait till we can do so legitimately, but the bounties of sovereign grace are prostituted when they become the subjects of pride. Shall Jesus, who had all things in Himself, be lowly, and shall we, who owe all to His charity, be lifted up? God forbid.

Beloved, above all things it is dangerous for a Christian to be exalted above measure, for if he be, he will rob God of His glory, and this is a high crime and misdemeanor. The Lord has said, "I will not give my glory to another." To give God's glory to graven images is bad, but to usurp it for ourselves is by no means better. I see no difference between the worship of a god of stone and the worship of a god of

flesh. Self is as degrading an idol as Juggernaut or Kalee. God will not honor that man who retains honor for himself. The meek He will exalt, the proud He will abase.

Self-exaltation is equally evil to the church with which the man associates, and the more prominent he is, the more pestilent is his sin. Suppose Paul to have been lifted up, he would have been of small use to the Gentile church afterwards. He would have sought himself, and not the things of Christ. And very soon Paul would have become a maker of parties and the leader of a sect. The cry of, "I am of Paul," would have been sweet music to him, and he would in all ways have encouraged those who adopted it, so that a schism would have been the result.

Had he been exalted above measure, he might have become a rival rather than a servant of Jesus. He might have disdained his lowly office, and have aspired to lord it over God's heritage. We might have heard of him as a right reverend father in God, rather than as the servant of Jesus Christ and His church.

It would have been bad for ungodly sinners too, for a proud Paul would never have gone from city to city to be persecuted for preaching the Gospel. Proud preachers win not men's hearts. He who is exalted in himself will never exalt the Savior, and he who does not exalt the Savior will never win the souls of men.

It would have been worst of all for the apostle himself, for pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. We should have had in Paul's history an awful instance of how men may be like Lucifer, Son of the Morning, for brightness, and yet may fall like Lucifer, into the blackness of darkness forever. If God had not taken Paul in hand, the danger with which he was surrounded would have been fatal to him. To God's glory, to himself, to sinners, to the Gospel, to his own salvation it would have been a danger indeed. Thus have I spoken upon the peril.

II. Now, secondly, let us consider THE PREVENTATIVE.

Paul says, "There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure." Now, note every word here. First, he says, "There was *given* to me." He reckoned his great trial to be a gift. It is well put. He does not say, "There was inflicted upon me a thorn in the flesh," but "There was given to me." This is holy reckoning.

O child of God, amongst all the goods of your house, you have not one single article that is a better token of divine love to you than your daily cross. You would fain be rid of it, but you would lose your choicest treasure if it were withdrawn. Blessed be God for the crucible and the furnace. "There was given to me a thorn in the flesh." Rich grace bestowed the benison.

At first the apostle may not have seen his thorn to be a gift, but afterwards, when experience had taught him patience, he came to look at that sharp, pricking, festering torment as a boon from his heavenly Father. You, O tried one, will come to do the same one of these days.

When the vessel first was launched upon the river, and was about to cross the sea, it felt itself light and airy, and ready to bound over the waves, so that it longed for a voyage across the Atlantic, that it might fly like a sea bird over the crest of the billows. But suddenly, to her sorrow, the gallant ship was stopped in her career, and moored close by a bank of sand and shingle, and men began to cast stones and earth into her.

Then the barque murmured, "What! am I to be weighed down and sunk low in the water with a cargo of mire and dirt? What a hindrance to my speed! I thought I could fly just now like a sea bird, am I to be weighted till I am like a log?" It was even so, for had not the vessel been thus ballasted, she had soon been wrecked, and had never reached the desired haven. That ballast was a gift, a gift as much as if it had been bars of gold or ingots of silver. So your trials, your troubles, and your infirmities, are gifts to you, O believers, and you must regard them as such.

The apostle says, "There was given to me a *thorn*." Note that—"a thorn." If the English word expresses the exact meaning—and I think it is pretty near it—you need not be at a loss to understand the simile. A thorn is but a little thing, and indicates a painful but not a killing trial—not a huge, crushing, overwhelming affliction, but a common matter, none the less painful, however, because common and insignificant.

A thorn is a sharp thing, which pricks, pierces, irritates, lacerates, festers, and causes endless pain and inconvenience. And yet it is almost a secret thing, not very apparent to anyone but the sufferer. Paul had a secret grief somewhere, I know not where, but near his heart, continually wherever he might be, irritating him, perpetually vexing him, and wounding him. A thorn, a commonplace thing, such as might grow in any field and fall to any man's lot.

Thorns are plentiful enough, and have been since Father Adam scattered the first handful of the seed. A thorn—nothing to make a man remarkable, or give him the dignity of unusual sorrow. Some men boast about their great trials, and there is something in feeling that you are a man greatly afflicted. But a thorn could not drive even this wretched satisfaction. It was not a sword in the bones, or a galling arrow in the loins, but only a thorn, about which little could be said.

Everyone knows, however, that a thorn is one of the most wretched intruders that can molest our foot or hand. Those pains which are despised because they are seldom fatal, are frequently the source of the most intense anguish—toothache, headache, earache, what greater miseries are known to mortals? And so with a thorn. It sounds like a nothing, "It can be easily removed with a needle," so those say who feel it not, and yet how it will fester, and if it remain in the flesh it will generate inconceivable torture. Such was Paul's trial, a secret smarting, incessantly irritating, something—we do not know what.

It was a thorn "*in the flesh*"—in the flesh. He was not tempted in the spirit, it was in the flesh. I suppose the evil had an intimate connection with his body. Many as the leaves of autumn have been the guesses of learned men, as to what Paul's thorn in the flesh was, almost every disease has had its advocates. I was particularly pleased to find that Rosenmuller thought it to be the gout, but then other critics think it to be weak eyesight, stammering, or a hypochondriacal tendency.

Richard Baxter, who suffered from a very painful disorder, which I need not mention, thought that the apostle was his fellow sufferer. One divine is of the opinion that Paul endured the earache, and I generally find that each expositor has selected that particular thorn which had pierced his own bosom.

Now, I believe that the apostle did not tell us what his peculiar affliction was, that we may every one feel that he had sympathy with us—that we may every one believe that ours is no new grief. It was a trial mainly of the body, and from the use of the term "flesh," rather than "body," it would seem that it excited in the sufferer some fleshly temptation.

It may not be so, but still, the writer is so accustomed to associate with "the flesh" the idea of sin, that I think it no idle conjecture that some temptation which the good man considered he had effectually overcome, fell upon him by reason of his bodily ailment, and it became, therefore, to him not merely a thorn in his flesh, but "a messenger of Satan," tempting him to an evil which he abhorred, and which for many a day had been so trampled down by his nobler nature, that he almost thought such a propensity extinct within him.

Then he adds, "*The messenger of Satan.*" Not Satan—it was not a great enough temptation for that. It was a "messenger of Satan," one of Satan's errand boys, nothing better, a suggestion from an inferior evil spirit. He does not set it down to the Great Master Spirit, but to a mere messenger of the prince of darkness. It was not intended by God that Satan should, on this occasion, come forth against Paul, for such an encounter might not have humbled him.

It is a grand thing to fight Satan face to face, and foot to foot, a stern joy fills a brave man's heart when he feels that before him stands a foeman worthy of his steel! A combat with the arch-enemy might not, therefore, have humbled Paul—but to be beset by a mean, sneaking devil, not a great, grand fiend, but a mere lackey of hell, and to be troubled and tormented by so mean an adversary, this was galling and humiliating to the last degree, and therefore, all the better for the purpose for which it was sent, namely, to prevent his being lifted up.

"What," Paul seemed to say, "am I to fight with such a contemptible temptation as this? Am I, who have built up the church, and seen the Lord, and been caught up into the third heaven—am I to do battle with this miserable, base, despicable propensity, which I thought I had done with these fourteen years ago?" Yes, so it was, the Lord had sent "a messenger of Satan" to buffet him.

And that word, “*buffet*.” Note that—to cuff him. That is it. Not to fight with him with the sword, that is manly, soldierly work, but to buffet him as masters used to cuff their slaves, or as pedagogues box the ears of boys. Paul seems to feel the degradation of being buffeted. “I that would do battle with Satan, and put on the helmet of hope, the breastplate of confidence, and go forth against all the powers of hell—am I to be cuffed as though I were a slave, and chastened as though I were a boy? Must I be smitten by these vain and wretched temptations which even in my spiritual youth I was able to subdue?” Every part of the process tended to lower him, and it was intended to do so, lest he should be exalted above measure.

You see, brethren, that this preventative was well adapted to work out its design, for assuredly it would recall the apostle from ecstasies and excitements, and make him feel that he was in the body after all. He said once, “Whether in the body, or whether out of the body, I cannot tell,” but when the thorn in the flesh was tearing him he soon settled that question. This made him feel he was a man, even as others.

He had dreamed, perhaps, that he was growing very angelic, but now he feels intensely human. This made him feel only a man—that, though he was filled so full with God, still he was only a man, and could be filled as full with the devil too, if deserted by grace. This made him feel that he was a weak man, for he had to do battle with base temptations, temptations that seemed not worth fighting with.

He had to be cuffed and buffeted in a small way, like the babes in grace. This made him know that he was a man in danger, and needed to fly to God for refuge, for here he was, ready to be exalted above measure even by divine blessings, and ready to be provoked into sin by the mere buffetings of an evil spirit.

From all this I gather that the worst trial a man may have may be the best possession he has in this world, that the messenger of Satan may be as good to him as his guardian angel, that it may be as well for him to be buffeted of Satan as ever it was to be caressed of the Lord Himself, that it may be essential to our soul’s salvation that we should do business not only on deep waters, but on waters that cast up mire and dirt. The worst form of trial may, nevertheless, be our best present portion.

I perceive, also, that the worst and deepest experience may only be the needful complement of the highest and the noblest. I mean it may be necessary that if we are lifted up we should be cast down. It may only be part and parcel of the cry, “Nearer my God to Thee, nearer to Thee,” that we should have to groan out, also, “O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” The two fit into each other like the pieces of a puzzle, they rise and fall like the scales of a balance, and without its fellow, either of them might be ruinous to us.

Learn, also, that we must never envy other saints. If we hear Paul speak of his visions, let us recollect his thorn in the flesh. If we meet with a brother who rejoices abundantly, and whom God owns and blesses, let us not conclude that his pathway is all smooth. His roses have their thorns, his bees their stings. As for ourselves, let us never wish to be without our daily cross.

The kite broke away from its string, and instead of mounting to the stars it descended into the mire. The river grew weary of its restraining banks, and longed to burst them, that it might rush on in the wild joy of freedom, down went the embankments, the river became a flood, and carried destruction and desolation wherever it rushed. Unrein the coursers of the sun, and lo! the earth is burned. Unbind the girdle of the elements, and chaos reigns! Let us never desire to be rid of those restraints which God has seen fit to lay upon us, they are more needful than we dreamed.

Remember, how the vine, when bound to the stake which upheld it, judged itself a martyr, and longed to be free, but when it saw the wild vine at its feet, rotting in the damps, and pining amidst the heats, and producing no fruit, it felt how needful were its bonds if its clusters were ever to ripen. Be content, dear brother, to keep the thorn in the flesh if it saves you from being exalted above measure.

III. THE IMMEDIATE EFFECT OF THIS THORN UPON PAUL.

First—it drove him to his knees. “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice.” Anything is a blessing which makes us pray. This thorn compelled Paul to cry unto God, and having commenced to pray, he resorted to prayer again and again. “I besought the Lord thrice.” It may be that this was the exact

number of his special prayers on that point, it may, however, only intimate that he often cried to God for deliverance from this trouble. Yes, we may be lax in prayer when all things flow with even current, but we multiply prayers when trials increase. In this way Paul was kept from being proud.

The revelations now seemed forgotten, for the thorn in the flesh was the more prominent thing of the two. Now, he would not speak about visions, and could not, for when his tongue was tempted to move upon that subject, the thorn began to prick his side again. A man does not want to tell pretty stories when his head is aching, or when sharp pains are goading him.

Paul was not allowed to dazzle himself with the brightness which God had set before him, his thoughts were turned in another direction, yea, blessedly turned to the mercy seat, where he could get no evil, but must derive much profit. He continued to pray till at last he received for an answer, not the removal of the thorn, but the assurance, "My grace is sufficient for thee."

God will always honor our prayers, He will either pay us in silver or in gold, and sometimes it is a golden answer to prayer to deny us our request, and give us the very opposite of what we seek.

If you were to tell your child that you would grant him anything he asked for, you would not intend by that that you would give him a poisonous drug, if someone should delude him into the idea that it would be useful to him. You would mean that you would give your child all that was really good for him. God therefore, knowing that this thorn in the flesh was a sacred medicine to Paul, would not take it away, even though most urgently requested to do so.

Well does Ralph Erskine say of prayer—

*"I'm heard when answered soon or late,
Yea, heard when I no answer get;
Most kindly answered when refused;
And treated well when harshly used."*

So, though refused, Paul was answered, for he got something better than the taking away of the thorn in the flesh, the result was that the grace given him enabled him to bear the thorn, and lifted him right above it, till he even rejoiced, and gloried to think that he was permitted so to suffer. "Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." This is a grand thing.

Suppose any person here is very poor, and he has prayed to the Lord many a time to raise him above want, and at last God has said, "My grace is sufficient for thee," what more can he need? My dear brother, rejoice in poverty, and thank God that you are poor, if the Lord is the better glorified thereby, be grateful for your low estate and say, "I have the honor to be permitted to glorify God in poverty."

Perhaps it may be you are the subject of a painful bodily infirmity, and you have prayed to have it removed, yet the Lord knows that your infirmity is for His glory and your good. Well, when He says, "My grace is sufficient for thee," accept and bear the trial not only with resignation, but with acquiescence. Wish not to change your estate. Your heavenly Father knoweth best.

IV. Now lastly, THE PERMANENT RESULT of this preventative upon Paul.

For the present you see it kept him from being exalted, by making him pray and by leading him to receive more grace, but permanently, the remedy was very successful, for through the power of the Holy Spirit, it kept him humble always. This thorn in the flesh made him humble in reference to his visions, for he became silent about them. Fourteen long years rolled away, and the apostle never told anybody that he had been caught up into the third heaven. I gather from the way in which he puts it here, that he never mentioned it to a soul. This was singular.

Why, if I were caught up into the third heaven, I should tell you of it the first time I had the chance of addressing you and I warrant that most here would not be long before they would impart to their friends the blessed secret.

The thorn in the flesh must have had a powerful effect upon the apostle's mind, when it led him to wrap up his treasure in his bosom, and go through the world, nobody being any the wiser for all that he had seen. He was a humble man indeed.

When he did tell it, it was dragged out of him. He told it for a purpose. It was only because the Corinthians had denied his apostleship and said, "What does he know concerning divine things?" that he felt bound to vindicate his character, and he would not have told it else.

Notice how modestly he speaks of it—in such a way that it does not leave the impression on your mind that he was an eminently honored man through receiving the revelation. The impression received rather is, how weak it was of Paul to be exalted above measure, and how gracious it was of God to give him the thorn in the flesh to keep him where he should be.

Observe that his way of telling the story is modest in its very form, but it is especially humble in its spirit, for he takes us off from the idea of how gloriously God revealed Himself to Paul, and makes us rather look at the weakness of the recipient of the revelation than at the great honor conferred by the revelation.

It is no small matter when God sends a thorn in the flesh and it answers its end, for in some cases it does not. Without the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, thorns are productive of evil rather than good. In many people, their thorn in the flesh does not appear to have fulfilled any admirable design at all, it has created another vice, instead of removing a temptation.

We have known some whose poverty has made them envious, others whose sickness has rendered them impatient and petulant, and others, again, whose personal infirmity has rendered them perpetually fretful and rebellious against God. O, dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, let us labor against this with all our might, and if God has been pleased to put a fetter upon us in any shape or way, let us ask Him not to allow us to make this the occasion for fresh folly, but on the contrary, to bear the rod, and learn its lessons.

Pray that when we are afflicted we may grow in grace and in likeness to our Lord Jesus, and so bring more honor to His name. Does not this teach us all the solemn duty of being content, whatever our lot may be—content without the revelation if we are without the thorn—content with the thorn, if we have the revelation—content without either revelation or thorn, so long as we may but have a humble hope in Jesus Christ our Savior.

O, beloved, what a happy people God's people are, and ought to be, when everything turns for their good, when even the thorn that was a curse becomes to them a blessing, and out of the lion comes forth honey. If the thorn be a blessing, what must the blessing itself, be? If the smarts of earth heal us, what will the joys of heaven do for us? Let us be glad! Ours is a happy portion! Let us go on our way rejoicing that we are favored to possess divine life, and shoulder our cross cheerfully, for we shall soon (ah, how soon!), wear our crown.

The last thought of all is, what a sad thing it must be not to be a believer in Jesus Christ, because thorns we shall have if we are not in Christ, but those thorns will not be blessings to us. I understand drinking bitter medicine, if it is to make me well, but who would drink wormwood and gall with no good result to follow? I can understand toiling if a wage is in prospect, but I cannot see the sense of toiling when there is no reward for it.

Now, you who love not God, your lives are not all flowers and sunshine. It is not all music and dancing with you now. I know you have your cares and troubles, you have your thorns in the flesh, and perhaps a great many of them, but you have no Savior to run to. You are like a ship in a storm, and there is no harbor for you, you are as birds driven before the wind, and you have no nests in which to shelter, but must be driven forever before the blast of JEHOVAH's wrath. Consider this, I pray you, meditate upon your condition and prospects, and when you have so done, may your heart cry out, "I would fain have God to be my friend."

Remember that He who sent Paul thorns for his good, once wore a thorn-crown Himself, for the salvation of sinners, and if you will come and bow before Him as He wears that diadem, and trust Him

as the Son of God made flesh for sinners, and bleeding and dying for them, you shall be saved this morning. Your sins, which are many, shall be forgiven you, and though I cannot promise you that you shall be without thorns as you live, I can promise you that your thorns shall be removed, they shall become to you a rich blessing, which will be better still.

There is one thorn you shall never have if you believe in Jesus, the thorn of unforgiven sin, the fear of the wrath to come. You shall have the peace of God which passeth understanding, which shall keep your heart and mind by Christ Jesus. O, that some would trust in Jesus this morning. Go, brethren, and pray it may be so. The Lord grant it, for Christ's sake. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—PSALM 25

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.