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Paul's Thorn In The Flesh

By the late: C. D. Cole

"It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord.

I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven.

And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;)

How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities.

For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me.

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.

Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me: for I ought to have been commended of you: for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing" (II Cor. 12:1-11).

Our lesson passage is a page out of the autobiography of Paul. It shows us that he, too, belonged to the great army of martyrs who, with bleeding hearts and under great handicaps, did their work for God. Paul was a great servant of God, but had fleshly disadvantages to overcome. There has been a lot of stress placed on Paul's education as fitting him for the service of God. But he never speaks of anything he received at the feet of Gamaliel or in the University of Tarsus as fitting him for the Christian ministry. I expect what he got at both places did him more harm than good. The course that fitted him for the ministry was when he sat at the feet of the ascended Lord in vision where he learned more than was lawful to tell.

It is of little matter what his thorn was. The original word suggests far more sorrow and trouble than the metaphor of a thorn might imply. It really seems to mean not a tiny thorn that might lie half concealed in the tip of a finger, but one of those hideous stakes on which the cruel punishment of impalement was inflicted

in the long ago. Young says the word means a sharp stake. Paul's thought is not that he has a tiny thorn, a little trivial trouble to bear, but a thing of torture.

It must have been some bodily ailment. Some have thought it was indwelling sin, the sting of animal nature inciting him to evil. But this is altogether untenable for more than one reason. It was something given him after he had had such wonderful visions and revelations from the Lord. It was something given him to keep him from being puffed up with pride. And it was something that he learned to glory in, and no man can glory in the sin that indwells him. Indwelling sin brings grief and penitence, not glory and boasting. It was some infliction from God's hand as a messenger of Satan. It was something God gave and Satan used to hinder him in his work. And it also took down any proud flesh that might arise because of his religious privileges.

It was something that could only be compensated by the grace of God. It was in his flesh or body. It would, of itself, hurt his ministry. We know Paul's body was repulsive. His eyes were bad and his speech was contemptible. Apart from compensating grace, he would be able to win nobody nor even get a hearing.

I. This shrinking from that which tortured his body was made a matter of prayer. From this thorn he took refuge in prayer. He prayed three times for it to be removed. This reminds us of Christ who prayed three times that the cup might pass. But Paul addresses his prayer to Christ who prayed in Gethsemane.

Without this bodily infirmity, Paul might have thought his success was due to his natural attainments and religious privileges. But he was able to say, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (II Cor. 4:7). Paul must have argued that this bodily infirmity would disqualify him for his work.

In prayer, he is simply telling Christ what was in his heart. Prayer is talking to Christ about what concerns me and my work for Him. And if anything is large enough to interest me, it is not too small to tell Him about.

One reason our prayers are not more real is that we do not fit them to our real wants. Our hearts are full of matters of daily concern, and when we kneel down to pray, we do not mention them to our Lord. We talk about something else as a formal matter to be heard of men.

We learn that prayer does not change God's purpose for our lives. Two sets of things to be prayed about and over one set should be written, "If it be thy will." Over the other it need not be written, because we are sure the granting

of our wishes is His will. It may seem a poor kind of hope to give a man, that if his prayer is in conformity with the previous determination of the Divine will, it will be answered. But that sufficed for Paul. Over the other set, we can only say, "Not my will, but thine be done." We ought to take this, not as a formula for our lips, but deep down in our hearts let us take

everything—thorns and stakes, pinpricks and wounds, anything that hurts and disappoints, to the Lord for Him to do with as seemeth good. Paul prayed for the burden to be taken away, but it was a mistaken petition and, therefore, unanswered.

II. We see Paul's insight into the source of strength for, and the purpose of, the thorn that could not be taken away. The Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." The prayer was not answered, but neither was it ignored. Paul did not get what he wanted, but he had what was better. There are two ways to lighten a burden; one is to make the burden itself lighter, the other is to increase the strength of the shoulders that bear it.

Paul did not get anything new or fresh from the Lord, but his eyes were opened to see that he had all that was needed. The reply was not, "I will give you grace," but "My grace"—the grace you already have—"is sufficient." Open your eyes to see what you have, and you will not ask for the thorn to be taken away. Grace to triumph is better than the removal of the thorn. Grace is here viewed as a power in human life. Grace is divine strength. Paul thought of grace as power that saves and the power of works. "My strength is made perfect in weakness." Grace works through human weakness. Human success is not real success and the day of reckoning will so reveal. I am afraid much of the so-called success is human. God works with broken reeds. If a man thinks he is able, God does not use him. Moses, Jeremiah and Isaiah are all examples of this. All self-conceit and self-confidence must be taken out of a man if God is to use him. God's strength needs no human prop. When we know ourselves to be weak, we have taken the first step to strength; just as when we know ourselves sinners, we have taken the first step to righteousness.

III. Mark the final acquiescence in the loving necessity of keeping the thorn. "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Paul's will is in entire harmony with Christ's will. Look at the prayer process: He begins with instinctive shrinking, he passes onward to a perception of the purpose of his trial and of the sustaining grace, and now he merely reconciled to the inevitable and is glad that it is like

it is. He does not want the thorn taken away, for grace compensates and makes life richer. Paul saw what David saw when he said, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted." Paul says, "I am glad I have the thorn. I can cling to omnipotence which is far better than any human strength. When I am weak, then am I strong."



WHERE TO LOOK IN THE BIBLE

When God seems far away, read
Psalm 139.

When sorrowful, read John 14; Psalm 46.

When men fail you, read Psalm 27.

When you have sinned — Psalm 51;
I John 1.

When you worry — Mathew 6:19-34;
Psalm 43.

When in sickness — Psalm 41.

When in danger — Psalm 91.

When you have the blues — Psalm 34.

When you are discouraged — Isaiah 40.

When you are lonely or fearful — Ps. 23.

When you forget your blessings — Ps. 103.

When you want courage — Joshua 1:1-9.

When the world seems bigger than God —
Psalm 90.

When you want rest and peace — Matt.
11:25-30.

When you want assurance — Romans 8.

When looking for joy — Colossians 3.

When you leave home to travel — Ps. 121.

When you grow bitter or critical, read I
Corinthians 13.

When you think of investments — Mark
10:17-31.

Some rules of conduct? Read Romans 12.

Why not follow Psalm 119:11?

