

## *The Thorn*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on the 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, (5 July), 2009.*

Text: 2Corinthians 12:7b-9

To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*’ ~ St. Paul.

The Corinthian Church was full of people proud of their spirituality. They boasted about their religious experiences and tended to think highly of their status before God. Paul in both his letters to the church tried to get them to realize faith was not so much about them but God. In his famous love chapter in the first letter, he reminded them that they might be able to speak like angels, but if they did not have love, ‘you are only a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.’ They might be great prophets who understand the deepest things of God, but if they didn’t have love, ‘you are nothing.’ They might think they have the greatest of faith, but without love, all the faith in the world means little. They might be more generous than everyone else when the offering plate is passed, even giving life away in some grand spiritual gesture, ‘but if you do not love it will gain you nothing.’<sup>1</sup> He encouraged them to focus not on spirituality but on love, ‘the excellent way.’<sup>2</sup> In the second letter, in today’s passage, Paul told them a little about himself, about his own spiritual revelations and experiences, not to boast, but to get them to listen to him. Then he told them about his own struggle with God. In a deeply autobiographical passage, after telling them of his spiritual *bona fides*, he wrote:

To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*’<sup>3</sup>

Preachers and scholars have studied this passage for generations. It is, of course, the key to his argument, the centerpiece of his persuasion. Paul though an apostle who could match revelation for revelation with the spiritual athletes of Corinth had learned something they had not. He had a weakness and that weakness had taught him something about faith they needed to know. The spirituality they boasted about was usually to demonstrate their strength as Christians. Yet for Paul, it was the opposite that taught him real power. Weakness, not strength, is the thing.

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<sup>1</sup> 1Corinthians 13:1-3.

<sup>2</sup> 1Corinthians 12:31.

<sup>3</sup> 1Corinthians 12:7b-9a.

He told them he had *a thorn in the flesh*. What was the thorn? Professor Louis Martyn, a Pauline scholar believed that the apostle had chronic eye problems.<sup>4</sup> At the moment of his conversion he lost sight on the Damascus road and later after meeting with the Christian Ananias ‘scales fell from his eyes.’<sup>5</sup> He ended the letters to Galatians and 2Thessalonians<sup>6</sup> implying that he had an amanuensis writing the bulk of those letters for him, that he dictated them. This is further evidence that he may have had serious problems in later years with his eyesight. There is also a comment in Galatians 4:13-14 about a winter he spent among the Galatians with an illness.

You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God.

Martyn wrote that it is probable that in an early mission journey, Paul had to stop among the Galatians in Asia Minor because of this illness. Paul’s malady may have made him odious to look at. Martyn posits Paul suffered from an eye disease with periodic discharges of puss, a condition that also was extremely painful. The particular disease, he said, is so excruciating that it feels like having a thorn in the side of your head. The illness would have kept Paul from his scholarly reading of Scripture, given him stabbing pains and perhaps disfigured him to others.

We know Paul had the gift of healing—stories in Acts tell of his powers as a miracle worker.<sup>7</sup> If Paul referred in 2Corinthians to the same illness as in Galatians, and if Martyn’s theories are correct, we see why Paul prayed healing. If no answer to these prayers came, Paul must have struggled in his own prayer life to understand why. “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me.” At some point it dawned on Paul that his weakness was part of the revelation of God’s power in his life. And that weakness, limitation and suffering are not punishments but rather doorways into the power of the Gospel. Each time he asked God to take it from him he heard the message, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” It is easy to state this but difficult if you are the one with a pain in your eyes so intense that it feels like a thorn. Easy for us to theologize about it, but hard to live with something that hurts so much.

I know a minister whose wife left him. He was devastated, embarrassed, ashamed. Each week he would look out at his parishioners whose marriages had worked. Why had his not? To him it seemed very much like a weakness. He prayed intently for God to bring his wife back, yet

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<sup>4</sup> See Martyn, J. Louis, *Galatians* (New York, Doubleday, 1997). Note the similarity in Galatians 4:15 to 2Corinthians 12:7-8. Paul wrote (literally) of “the intense elation you felt,” because they saw him as an angel of God. And the ‘sickness’ is literally ‘a weakness in the flesh.’

<sup>5</sup> Acts 9:8, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Galatians 6:11 and 2Thessalonians 3:17.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 14:8ff, for example.

there was no answer—only that awful silence. His prayers overflowed with pain, grief and self-reproach. He seriously considered leaving the ministry and told God so. Yet, through conversations with church deacons and wise friends, slowly something began to dawn on him. He realized the experience was making him a better minister, a more empathetic listener, a person who could understand and commiserate with human failure. The minister found, despite his occasional remonstrance against the divine injustice of his situation, that he now relied more on God and less on himself. He had always been capable. He was talented. It was easy to think his successes were due to his own strengths. But now he discovered a new reliance on God, not just in the abstract, but because of his own failing and humiliation. His preaching on the cross changed. After all Jesus, too, prayed for a cup to pass from him, and it did not.<sup>8</sup> All those passages about taking up the cross and following Jesus,<sup>9</sup> suddenly had a different and very personal, new meaning to the minister. Indeed, this very passage from Paul also began to sound like his own prayers. “Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*’”

This is what I call the cross paradigm. The cross is the key to Jesus’ ability to save us but also the key to discipleship. Though ‘we accounted him stricken, struck down by God and afflicted, yet he was wounded for our transgressions.’ ‘Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great.’<sup>10</sup> Because Jesus ‘emptied himself...humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross, therefore God has highly exalted him and given him a name that is above every name.’<sup>11</sup> The cross though seeming like failure and weakness is *the way of Jesus and also the way for us*. “Therefore, if any want to follow me, he (or she) must take up a cross...” This is another way of saying that the way of discipleship is not through worldly power, but weakness, ‘for God’s power is made perfect in weakness.’ To have these weaknesses is human. In some of us the weakness is obvious, in others it is hidden. What God does through our weakness is the work of grace, and surprisingly it often also becomes the way we tap into the power of Christ. “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*”

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<sup>8</sup> Mark 14:36.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 8: 34.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 53:4-5, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Philippians 2:7-9.