

The Test of the Thorn

Tests of God #5

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me. But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart will rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me.

For those of us who weren't born in Florida but got here as quick as we could, there is a reality about this great state that we had to come to grips with the moment we arrived. This reality confronted us in the yard and on the beach. It confronted us when we traveled to North Deland. It confronted us when we arrived in South Bradenton. It confronted us when we sojourned to East Palatka. It confronted us when we landed in West Palm Beach. And it still confronts us here, in Vero Beach. It is the reality of the Florida Sandspur. No man, woman, child, sock, sandal, or bare foot is exempt from its wrath. It's been here for centuries and thrives in our sandy soil. But it still makes grown men cry and children freeze in their tracks. For here in Florida, we know that the sun burns, red ants bite, and Florida Sandspurs hurt.

There is a phrase for the Florida Sandspur in the Bible. It's not the devil's weed, nor is it Satan's stickers. Instead, it is this: "thorn in the flesh." The Apostle Paul used it to denote his prolonged pains. Sometimes Paul's "Thorns in the flesh" were relational. Sometimes they were spiritual. Sometimes they were physical. And sometimes they were all three. When he asked the Lord to take them away, God's answer to Paul was not only "no." It was "Paul, I love you. But they are going to remain. You are going to have to learn how to live with them because those thorns in the flesh I planted in your life serve a purpose."

We know what's it's like to be on the receiving end of a divine Florida Sandspur, don't we? Like Paul, we know from experience they come in the form of prolonged pains. Like Paul, we know from experience those thorns can be relational, spiritual, and physical. And we know from experience, like Paul, how it feels when we ask God to remove them and he responds with: "No, Derrick. They are going to remain. You are going to have to learn how to live with them because those thorns in the flesh I planted in your life serve a purpose."

Today, people of God, I want to show from the Word of God that the piercing of the thorn is not only a test. That piercing has a divine purpose. (1) It prevents conceit. It's impossible to be conceited while taking the test of the thorn because the thorn itself is evidence of a prolonged pain that torments. It also (2) provides an avenue for grace. Paul pleaded for God to take it away three times. God gave him this response each time: "My grace is sufficient for you." It also (3) produces power in weakness. The thorn exposed a weakness in Paul, though we don't know what it was. Without the thorn, there was no opportunity for God to show Paul how His power is made perfect in his weakness. And finally, the thorn (4) produces a prosperous attitude. "I delight in weaknesses. For when I am weak, then I am strong." To see these divine purposes the Florida Sandspur that exists in your life right now and is not going away anytime soon, please turn with me to 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given 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 Test of the Thorn:

1. Prevents Conceit (7)

- **Lessons in Humility:** (1) What happens to the best surfers in the world when they run into the ocean and immediately get stung by a jellyfish? They run out. (2) What happens to be best hunters in the world when they come up on a Grizzly Bear and realize they are out of ammunition. They stop in their tracks. (3) What happens when your favorite sports team gets beat on national tv like a tied-up goat while all the nation is watching? They go home. (4) It's impossible to be conceited with a thorn in your side. And that's always the first reason God gives it to you.
- **Why the Thorn:** "To prevent from becoming conceited" equals "To prevent from being exalted above measure." There's nothing wrong with being exalted. There is something wrong accomplishments giving you sense of grandiose importance in comparison to God or others. This was a temptation for Paul. He wrote this on his 3rd missionary journey. He had led numerous people to Christ, established church, and wrote letters.
- **What It Was:** We are tempted to think of a small rosebush thorn. But the term *skolops (thorn)* designates objects in which one can be impaled. We have no idea what this "thorn" was. It could have been physical because it lasted for a while. It could have been a person/group. We don't know. But we do know it was a prolonged pain that didn't seem to be going away.
- **Where It Came From:** "I was given a thorn... a messenger of Satan. "I was given" is passive voice. That means Paul received it. In the Book of Job, Satan afflicted but God allowed. That's the essence here.
- **What It Does:** It torments. "Lord, this pain is severe. Lord, it hurts.
- **App:** "It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men like the angels." – Augustine. A thorn in the flesh, though painful, prevents us from being devils.

2. Provides an Avenue Grace (8-9a)

- **Florida Aquifer:** (1) There exists an aquifer below our feet that spans an area of 100,000 miles. It underlies all of Florida and southern most parts of Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. It's called the Florida Aquifer. (2) It will never run dry. For it flows with living water. (3) Friend, where there is a thorn, there is an aquifer for the grace of God that never runs dry. It is sufficient to overcome any prolonged pain — whether it be personal, spiritual, or physical — that you may have.
- **What Paul Did:** (1) Three times I pleaded; (2) He didn't "ask" the Lord. (3) He "pleaded." It means to mean to make an argument for a particular position. Paul was arguing his case before the Lord on three separate occasions about this mysterious thorn.
- **What Paul Reasoned About the Way Forward:** (1) If God removed the thorn, he could get on with life and ministry. We often have the same mentality. "God if you take this away, then I can be of better service." (2) If God left the thorn, Paul would be slowed in life and in ministry. "God, if you don't take this away when I'm doing everything I can to be faithful to you, then please don't ask me why I didn't do more on Judgment Day."
- **What God Reasoned:** The Lord didn't like either of Paul's "pleadings," apparently because he responded with a third option: Leave the thorn but give Paul grace.
- **The Type of Grace God Had in Mind:** We think of "grace" as "saving grace." We should. That's one aspect of the grace of God. But the idea here is grace that "sustains." It's empowering. It's calming. It's supporting. It's comforting. It's emboldening. It's satisfying. For "my grace is sufficient for you," means "I am sufficient for you" and "I will sustain you."
- **App:** Sometimes he removes the thorn. Sometimes he allows it to remain. And friend when he allows it to remain, his grace will sustain you. For Jesus is perfectly sufficient for handling it.

3. Produces Power in Weakness (9b)

- **Uncle Sam and King Jesus:** (1) There is a patriotic nursery rhyme I learned when I was young that goes like this: "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy. A Yankee Doodle, do or die. A real live nephew of my Uncle Sam, born on the Fourth of July. (2) Friends, Uncle Sam won't enlist you unless you are strong and healthy. Jesus won't enlist you unless you are weak and sick. (3) The gospel isn't a help wanted ad. It's a help available ad. For there is power, power, wonder working power not just in the precious blood of the lamb. But also, in your weakness.
- **The Boast of God:** (1) Verses 9-10 contain two boasts: one from God; one from Paul: (2) He said to me "my grace is sufficient...my power is made perfect in weakness." (3) My grace will sustain, but my power will strengthen. (4) The point God makes is a critical one: Our weakness doesn't repel God. It attracts him. The weaknesses that we fear are the precise places where God loves to dwell. (5) That's why the Bible contains so many stories of God turning people's weaknesses into strengths (i.e., Moses as Spokesman, Gideon as Mighty Warrior.
- **The Boast of Paul:** (1) Therefore (because of what God just said), (2) I will boast about weaknesses so that God's power rests on me. (3) Paul learned to see a direct correlation between his weaknesses and God's power. We must as well.
- **App:** You see, if we rely on our strengths for power, we get the glory. But if we rely on God's strength in the midst of our weakness, He gets the glory. That's why some thorns will remain and continue in our lives.

4. Produces a Prosperous Attitude (10)

- **The Vulture and Hummingbird:** (1) Both fly over our nation's deserts. All vultures see is rotting meat because that's what they look for. Hummingbirds ignore the smelly flesh of dead animals and make a beeline (no pun intended) for the blossoms of desert plants. (2) Both find exactly what they are looking for. (3) Paul saw the thorn as the blossom in the middle of the desert and concluded that his weakness made him strong. That's a prosperous attitude. So, it is with you. Everything can be taken away from you but one thing: your attitude. Choose one that attracts hummingbirds, not vultures.
- **Prosperous Attitude Marker #1: Every lemon you are dealt, every prolonged thorn that remains, contains a powerful acid.** Every insult, hardship, persecution, ailment, and difficulty were an occasion for Paul to "delight" (to find satisfaction) because it was an occasion for the power of God to be displayed. That's the acid for the lemonade in the lemons.
- **Prosperous Attitude Marker #2: I'm at the strongest when I am weak.** That's why you look up to people who handle suffering without complaining. There's a mystery to it that's deep. And real. When we are weak, we are strong.
- **App:** *I asked God for strength, that I might achieve. I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey ... I asked for health, that I might do great things. I was given infirmity, that I might do better things ... I asked for riches, that I might be happy. I was given poverty, that I might be wise ... I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men. I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God ... I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life. I was given life, that I might enjoy all things ... I got nothing I asked for—but everything I had hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered. I am, among men, most richly blessed."* (The Prayer of the Unknown Confederate Soldier)