

“Every Thorn has its Rose” II Corinthians 12:1-10
Pastor Mary Scheer
Brewster Baptist Church

Today we are looking at Paul’s 2nd letter to the Corinthians.

After writing his first letter that dealt with some of the problems the church was having, Titus brought word to Paul that his letter had accomplished much good but now there were problems with some people contradicting his letter.

There were some folks in Corinth dubbed the “Super Apostles” (12:11) who were preaching a different message than Paul, undermining the work he had done.

The Corinthians’ were influenced by good looks, fast taking charm and persuasive public speaking, but they couldn’t see that behind the charisma was a bogus message (11:3-6; 12-15; 18-22)

The church was being swayed by these men because they were basing their decisions on outward appearance (10:7). So Paul wrote back to the Corinthians saying; ^{10:7} The trouble is that you’re making your decisions on the basis of appearance... ¹⁰ For some say, “Don’t worry about Paul. His letters are demanding and forceful, but in person he is weak, and his speeches are really bad!” ¹¹

What they were saying about Paul caused folks to question his authority as an apostle. They criticized his appearance, his presentation and preaching. They questioned his success and his motives. It was a sort of smear campaign. They validated themselves by putting Paul down. (10:2; 7; 10; 11:16).

Have you ever had someone talk about you behind your back? Or told lies about you in order to make you look bad?

Oprah had Lisa Ling on her show recently after she hosted a challenge day at Monroe high school in Michigan as part of a challenge to break down barriers and encourage reconciliation between cliques and gangs and students in general. Student & teachers met in the gym for an assembly. All the students started out standing on the same side of the gym, then she asked them to step across a line moving to the other side of the gym if anyone had ever talked about them behind their back, if anyone has ever gossiped about you, ever called you a demeaning name, ever put you down or made fun of you because of

the way you look or a physical characteristic, move to the other side etc., By the time she was done every single student had crossed over to the other side. She asked the teachers the same question with the same results. Then she asked them if they had ever talked about anyone behind their back, every hand raised. She asked them to talk about how it made them feel and it seemed like the whole gym had dissolved in tears as they shared how it was affecting them. It was a really emotional show. Most of Oprah's audience was also crying while they watched clips of the tape.

We all care about what other people think about us. Nobody likes to be unfairly criticized or have untrue things said about them, especially for the purpose of making us look bad.

And this is what was happening to Paul. What really upset him is that their efforts to make him look bad caused people to doubt his message. Paul says, "I fear that you will be led away from your pure and simple devotion to Christ..."⁴ You seem to believe whatever anyone tells you, even if they preach about a different Jesus than the one we preach, or a different Spirit than the one you received, or a different kind of gospel than the one you believed.⁵ But am I inferior to these so called "super apostles."⁶ I may not be a trained speaker, but I know what I am talking about. I think you realize this by now, for we have proven it again and again. (my paraphrase of 11:3-6)

They say they are Hebrews, do they? So am I. They say they are Israelites? Me too. They are descendants of Abraham? So am I.²³ They say they serve Christ? I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in jail more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again.²⁴ Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes.²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea.²⁶ I have traveled many weary miles, faced danger from flooded rivers and robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, Jews, as well as Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the stormy seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be Christians but are not.²⁷ I have lived with weariness and pain and sleepless nights. Often I have been hungry and thirsty and have gone without food. Often I have shivered with cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.²⁸ Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of how the churches are getting along.²⁹ Who is weak without my feeling that weakness? Who is led astray, and I do not burn with anger? (11: 21b-29 NLT)

While Paul doesn't want to get into a bragging contest he says he will "to cut the ground out from under the feet of those who boast that their work is just like ours."¹³ These people are false apostles. They have fooled you by disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.¹⁴ But I am not surprised! Even Satan can disguise himself as an angel of light. (11:12-14)

Listen, he says, if anyone could boast, I could boast. Let me tell you what happened to me 14 years ago.

SCRIPTURE (v1-7): "This boasting is all so foolish, but let me go on. Let me tell about the visions and revelations I received from the Lord. I was caught up into the third heaven fourteen years ago. Whether my body was there or just my spirit, I don't know; only God knows. But I do know that I was caught up into paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be told. That experience is something worth boasting about, but I am not going to do it. I am going to boast only about my weaknesses. I have plenty to boast about and would be no fool in doing it, because I would be telling the truth. But I won't do it. I don't want anyone to think more highly of me than what they can actually see in my life and my message, even though I have received wonderful revelations from God. But to keep me from getting puffed up, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from getting proud." (12:1-7)

Have you ever stepped on something sharp like a piece of glass, a sharp rock or a thorn? Just a little thing causes so much pain. And then what do you do after it's stuck in your foot? We hobble along balancing on the side of our foot, or on the heel, anything to avoid putting pressure on it right, because just a little pressure, the slightest touch hurts like heck. It definitely slows you down and makes it harder to get where you were going.

What does Paul mean by the word thorn?

He used the word "Skolops" which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for word for "thorn," and means duress or irritation, something which frustrates, or causes trouble in the lives of those afflicted."

(Thorn) σκόλοψ [*skolops* /*skol·ops*/] n m. Perhaps from the base of 4628 and 3700; TDNT 7:409; TDNTA 1047; GK 5022; AV translates as "thorn"

n n: noun or neuter

once. **1** a pointed piece of wood, a pale, a stake. **2** a sharp stake, splinter¹ something that causes distress or irritation — often used in the phrase *thorn in one's side*² 1. a. It is first attested in the sense "pointed stake" (Suid. s.v. σκόλοψ· ξύλον □ξύ, Hesych., s.v. σκόλοπος· □ξέα ξύλα □ρθά³

Author Frank Peretti writes Christian Fiction. In his book, "The Wounded Spirit," he shares the story of his own personal thorn. It was during a terrible snow storm on a January night in Canada that Frank's mother went into labor. The snow storm was so bad that getting to the hospital very difficult. The delays led to some complications. "Shortly after birth Peretti was diagnosed with a lymphatic cyst, a growth on the side of his neck that grew so large it threatened to strangle him. Barely two months old, he was rushed to the hospital, where doctors tried to remove as much of the mass as possible. After 10 days in the hospital, he went home, "a tiny bag of bones with a long scar and black sutures that made it appear as if "my head had been nearly severed and then sewn back on," he says. He underwent many surgeries in the following years, and because of his physical struggles his body did not mature as quickly as other children's. Aside from the scar on his neck, the most obvious symptom of his malady was his tongue: swollen to the point it stuck out of his mouth, black, scabby and oozing, and it left him with a speech impediment. If Peretti ever wanted to forget about it, his classmates were sure not to let him. (From Tom Neven www.family.org)

He was picked on at school, the target of bullies who tormented him relentlessly everyday for years...

m **m**: masculine

TDNT Theological Dictionary of the New Testament

TDNTA Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume

GK Goodrick-Kohlenberger

AV Authorized Version

¹Strong, J. 1996. *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible : Showing every word of the test of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order.* (electronic ed.) . Woodside Bible Fellowship.: Ontario

²Merriam-Webster, I. 1996, c1993. *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary.* Includes index. (10th ed.). Merriam-Webster: Springfield, Mass., U.S.A.

Suid. Suidas, author in the 10th century A.D. of the most comprehensive Greek lexicon, ed. G. Bernhardt, 1853; A. Adler, 1928 ff.

s.v. *sub voce*.

Hesych. Hesychius, of Alexandria (5th century A.D.), lexicographer, ed. M. Schmidt, 1858 ff.

³*Theological dictionary of the New Testament.* 1964-c1976. Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin. (G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed.) (electronic ed.) . Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI

He is not alone. A recent study published by the Journal of the American Medical Association found that nearly a third of children in sixth through 10th grades had either bullied or been bullied. Years of torture drove him to seclusion, retreating behind walls of fantasy and stories searching for meaning and purpose. These troubles became the ultimate source of success fueling his writing. His first book out was on the Christian Book Association top ten best seller list for over 150 consecutive weeks. He has more than twenty books in print many of which have been turned into movies.

The affect of a thorn can be devastating. They can leave us weak and wounded. But God can also work for our good in the midst of thorns.

Through out the years people have speculated about the source of Paul's thorn...was it trouble with his eyes, depression, anxiety, was it the difficulty he had with public preaching? Many theologians think he was referring to the obstacles and challenges he faced and these false apostles who contradicted and frustrated his efforts. Perhaps these were Paul's personal bullies, circling, sensing and using Paul's weaknesses against him. Paul is not specific about his thorn, for him it could have been any of those things, and for us something different, but the effect is the same. It was something he kept having to deal with, it hurt and was either the result of or the cause of weakness in his life. Paul said that he was being "buffeted," the idea means, "to strike repeatedly." He felt like he was taking a constant beating.

SCRIPTURE CONTINUES (v8-10): "Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may work through me. Since I know it is all for Christ's good, I am quite content with my weaknesses and with insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (12:8-10)

It's a radical message. He tells us not only should we not boast about our natural strengths, but we should boast about our weaknesses. I read that and think, "are you kidding me? I don't want to brag about my weaknesses, I want to fix them or hide them." Boasting about our weaknesses can be a difficult concept for people who prize winning. Our culture celebrates beauty, brains, strength and wealth as the evidence of success. We have games to see "who's the best,"

pageants to see "who's the prettiest," contests to see "who's the smartest," and tv shows that flaunt "who's the wealthiest."

Most of us would say we don't want to be weak. Yet Paul associated his thorn with his weakness and asked God to take it away, but God said "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

So, Paul says, alright, then I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me...in fact I will delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions and difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (from 12:8-10)

We learn from Paul that while we navigate the garden of life, at some point we may encounter a thorn and these thorns can be opportunities for God's power to be displayed in us.

So we should not despise the trouble spots and look for the ways God might be at work in them.

Are there any thorns in your life today? A thorny relationship; Unfair criticism or opposition; A reoccurring weakness or challenge, A problem that never seems to get better, Something that's a constant source of frustration or heartache? Or perhaps you know someone limping with a painful thorn?

The promise of Paul's words to us is that God will help us through it; he will give us his strength to deal with it. No thorn producing challenge, obstacle or weakness has ultimate power over us.

It's not what *we can't* do, but what *God can* do through us that matters. We just have to do our best and trust God to do the rest!

And with God's help we are assured something beautiful will grow in spite of the thorns. That's why I think Paul would say, "Every thorn has its rose."

Let's Pray:

Dear God, we're thankful that Paul was willing to share his personal struggle with us. It's hard when you're exhausted, tired of dealing with the same frustrating issue again and again, when hope for a change seems slim and the temptation to quit looms large. It can be disheartening to pray and pray for something with no apparent answer and yet we are encouraged by Paul's words that even when you say no to one aspect of a prayer, you say it with a promise...to be with us in it and help us in our weakness with "all sufficient grace." We may not always know what that means or what the practical implications of your grace are, but we know that sufficient means more than enough. Lord, I pray for folks who've come this morning struggling with a thorn, perhaps there's a friend or family member that they care about with a thorn. Please surround them with your grace and favor, relieve the pressure and the pain, strengthen and encourage them with a sense of your presence and practical help for the issue. Life is full of enough thorns of it's own, help us not to become one to anyone else & nudge us if we are. Help us to consider our weaknesses and see them as opportunities for you to demonstrate your power. Help us not to get caught up in the pressure of the world, in the outward appearance of things, but to relax, to do our best and trust you with the rest. In Jesus name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

"What is Sustaining Grace."

Not grace to bar what is not bliss,
Nor flight from all distress, but this:
The grace that orders our trouble and pain,
And then, in the darkness, is there to sustain.

John Piper

"And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, which is able to build you up so that after you have suffered, the God of all grace, who has called you will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you. Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen. (from Acts 20:32; 1 Timothy 1:2b ; 1 Peter 5:10-11 NRSV)