

Welcome the Thorn

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All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the King James Version. Italics for emphasis are ours.

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INTRODUCTION

Several times, the apostle Paul uses the analogy of a race to describe our lives as Christians. In 2 Timothy 4:7, he says, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.” But in 1 Corinthians 9:24, he said that though many run, only one wins the prize.

In Hebrews 12:1, the author spoke of running the race with *patience*. With hope? Yes. Perseverance? Yes. But patience? That is an unlikely attitude for a competitor. But if we look past the runner, we will see that the race he is speaking about is not just an outlet for physical exercise. According to 2 Corinthians 12:7, the runner is prodded on by a thorn, and he is in this race for his life.

This booklet will show us that God wants to take His people beyond the “grit your teeth and bear it” mentality. When we face hardships, deserved or undeserved, God wants to bring us to the place where we welcome the thorn that buf-

fets our flesh. Only one wins the prize, and His name is Jesus Christ. Therefore, as His Body, we have the privilege of participating in His victory, having been made one with Him in His suffering and conformed to His image—because of the thorn.

Chapter One

WHY GOD ALLOWS THE THORN

“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” (2 Corinthians 12:7).

“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 12:8-9).

“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” (2 Corinthians 12:10-11).

When a servant of God, placed in the Body of Christ, has been given a gift, there are things that God always does, must do, and will do.

Knowing his own temperament, the apostle Paul knew that he could become proud and arrogant because of the abundance of revelations he received from God while writing the epistles. At one point, having been brutally tortured and left for dead, he was taken up into the third heaven where God revealed unspeakable things about heaven. Paul could have been in serious trouble because of pride, but I love how he took on God’s activity by receiving God’s authority in his humanity.

Where the Thorn Works

Consider the five areas where a thorn was working in Paul’s life. He declared openly that he suffered infirmities, reproaches, necessities, persecutions, and distresses—but he also understood why. Everything Paul went through was for *Christ’s* sake.

“Infirmities” refer to Paul’s limitations, the weakness of his flesh as well as the weakness of his soul. “Reproaches” indicate the strong dis-

approval he suffered for Christ's sake and the sake of the gospel. "Necessities" imply that often he did not have food or proper shelter. "Persecutions" reveal that he was hated and that he was the subject of attacks because of his stand for Christ. Finally, Paul faced "distresses," revealing that he was often placed in tight spots (such as prison) and not allowed to come out.

Paul went through each of these trials several times, and ultimately he took pleasure in them. It is not natural for any of us to suffer demonic attacks from five different directions. But to take pleasure in that kind of suffering, as Paul did, can only be because of a gift of grace.

The thorn is a demon designed to go after specific traits of an individual. Paul's suffering was not due to natural causes. Behind each infirmity, reproach, necessity, persecution, and distress was a demon with a specific target. God allowed the thorn to come against his flesh with one thing in mind: that Paul would allow God's grace—and God's grace alone—to become sufficient, and that he would allow God's strength to be made perfect in perfect weakness.

To Glorify God

"Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him

not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf" (1 Peter 4:16).

There is a process that believers must go through just to understand this principle, yet the average believer does not discern what is happening. God allows five progressive attacks to be worked against believers. He is going to use—men and women—and the demons are allowed to come against us. This teaches us to take pleasure in the thorn as God has made us victorious through grace and in His strength.

Every believer is naturally occupied with those five areas of vulnerability to some degree. The demon army classified for infirmities has one job—to bring pain and sorrow into our lives. God allows these demons to bring on infirmities until humility brings us a capacity for grace and human weakness brings in a capacity for God's strength.

Another army of demons has a goal to bring reproach upon any who would call himself a Christian (1 Peter 4:14). As an army, these demons operate by counterfeiting godliness as an angel of light toward a sincere believer. Then they come in and slap him in the face with reproaches if he fails or cannot live up to his own standard of holiness. If you were to ask that per-

son who is being attacked by reproach-bearing demons, “How are you doing?” his response would probably be, “Pray for me.” Why? As that process is being worked into his life, he may go about his usual business, being faithful to God and sincere, but the attack goes far beyond what others can see.

To Learn How to Fight the Good Fight

Ephesians 6:12 says that “we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual [infections] in high places.” Unfortunately, the average Christian does not deal with the thorn as a demon piercing the flesh. The point that we need to understand is this: This process, though God allows it, is being worked into us by demons. The issue, therefore, is not what happened with your boss at work, or your latest problem with your husband, or the latest situation with the teenagers. No, a messenger of Satan, a thorn in the flesh, is working in the level of grace that God wants to see in our lives.

In Paul’s case, five demon armies were allowed to produce a thorn. But why, if there were five demon armies, does Paul mention just one

thorn? It is because of the supernatural unity among demons. According to Job 41:16, there is no air between them. They are so single-eyed in their purpose to destroy us, they come right in and pierce the flesh, and that includes attacks against the physical body. If you read 2 Corinthians 11:23 to 33, you will notice the physical suffering that Paul endured.

When Paul said, "I take pleasure" in the things he suffered (2 Corinthians 12:10), it means that he experienced contentment in the suffering, that he was more than ready and willing to go through it. In fact, it means that he preferred what was happening to him.

Set Apart for God's Purpose

Now, imagine getting to the place where you prefer infirmities. That is not normal. What kind of a guy was he?

A person who is afflicted with infirmities for Christ's sake is not suffering correction because of sins. The Greek word for infirmities is *asthen-eia*. Other words that define it are incapacity, inner poverty, inability, and deficiency. These are synonyms for infirmities, and that is what the demons tried to do. But they are allowed to cause affliction so that God's grace can become

sufficient and God's strength can be made perfect in the one whom God has set apart for His purpose.

God's strength made perfect in a Christian speaks of someone going through the most terrible situation we can imagine, yet the strength of God keeps him. God's strength is so perfect that there is no occupation with weakness, and the grace of God is so enabling that there is absolutely no occupation with the flesh or with what the flesh is feeling in its pain and suffering, including heartaches, rejection, and resistance.

Then he says, "in reproaches." Insults, injuries, arrogance, mockery, and hostility are among the characteristics that the Greek word for reproaches brings out.

Then, in "necessities," Paul speaks of the lack of things that most people consider as the basics for living. As those who have experienced hunger and suffered exposure due to a lack of proper food, clothing, and shelter know, the lack of necessities can compress the strongest individual with the compelling force of a supernatural affliction.

"Persecutions" comes from a word that means to harass because of a belief, with the goal to drive away, to pursue, and to force one

to leave where God has placed him.

Many beautiful Christians have suffered persecution, and they were victorious in it. They took great pleasure in it.

“Distresses” speaks of being confined in a narrow place and experiencing extreme affliction and anguish. This army of demons has one job, which is to put you in a corner and not let you out. It could mean to be oppressed with a tremendous anxiety attack. Just imagine what that is like.

People who have experienced anxiety attacks know what this means. The attack goes on and on, while they do everything in their power to resist. In the middle of the night, unable to sleep, they might walk the floor and praise God, yet they feel the attack come in stronger and stronger. As they resist, and as the attacks keep coming, they wear out their natural capacity. God, on the other hand, is working in a greater capacity to know Him.

These armies of demons operate in unity. When a believer receives a supernatural affliction, that affliction is not going to stop until he recognizes that God’s grace is sufficient, that God’s strength is being made perfect in his weakness, and until he takes great pleasure in

knowing that this is for Christ's sake.

The average believer might say, "Why is God doing this to me?" Then at the end of a long conversation they say, "Well, maybe it's the devil." Maybe? That is not too scriptural. It *is* the devil!

Every person who really knows God will not escape having these attacks. And everyone who really knows God will remember His character of love and receive His provision of faith-rest while they wait for God's purpose to be served.

Chapter Two

THESE THINGS ARE FOR
OUR SAKE

“Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:

“By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

“And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also; knowing that tribulation worketh patience;

“And patience, experience; and experience, hope:

“And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy [Spirit] which is given unto us.

“For when we were without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:1-6).

To live in faith-rest doesn't mean you live in this nice little mountaintop experience all the time. Remember that! You may be going through

hell, and the best you know how you resist the devil. Though you do not know the specifics, you know why it is happening, and you resist. To live in faith-rest means that you put the cause and the origin of the problem where it belongs and you trust God for the consequences while you remain in the situation. That is the definition of faith-rest. It is what blesses you in the midst of the trial.

While we go through the trial, we are gaining experience. According to Romans 5, because we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. By faith, we have access to God and to His grace through the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, it is by His grace that we stand. But what happens next? Tribulation worketh patience.

A Chance to Grow

I must go through tribulation or I will never have patience. Without tribulation, I can never have the patience of God. For all these years, He has held back judgment as the world mocks Him and as members of the Church have been divided amongst themselves. But patience works experience in a willing heart.

You see, the whole purpose of our having to

go through supernatural warfare is that we might personally experience fulfilling the sufferings of Christ from Calvary that haven't yet been fulfilled (Colossians 1:24).

A man or woman of God is subject to demonic setups, attacks against his character, and misunderstanding. Yet, while all of that is going on, there is the experience of grace and God's strength. It is definitely a paradox, a seeming contradiction, but as this experience works in us, and when that painful experience is over, we begin to experience the substance of the Word of God and we experience the provision. It is not just faith for the provision that causes us to grow, but God will often let us experience the substance of His provision. And when we begin to experience what we need to counteract a specific problem, as long as we walk with God, we will have a special sensitivity in that area. Furthermore, we will always identify with brethren who go through similar situations.

Aman we know went through a horrible demonic attack that would not let up. But through it, he experienced grace. Grace was the only thing that kept him going. As he developed godly patience, he experienced God's strength. Though in his weakness he was totally impotent,

he let God in, and he kept right on resisting.

At times, we may go through terrible rejection, being lied about, and being misrepresented. But when we have gone through tribulation, we gain the experience of seeing God come through for us again and again, with grace and strength. We begin to be anointed for the situation because the spiritual victory we have experienced will be with us the rest of our lives. It all came out of tribulations we go through in this life because of infirmities, reproaches, necessities, persecution, and distresses.

Wisdom Risks the Thorn

The average Christian who has a lukewarm life never risks anything that might result in having difficulties. Because he does not operate by a living faith, he isn't apt to make any great choices that might disturb his contentment, happiness, and peace. That person will never do anything that might put his reputation at risk. Therefore he will never experience a personal provision from God, and he will remain in his weakness, without an anointing in certain areas of his life.

Welcome the trial. Welcome the thorn that

comes against your flesh. Welcome them, because out of the situation, you are being conformed to Christ's very image.

In Proverbs 8:34, Wisdom is crying out to the people of God: "Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors." That reminds me of our church, because it describes people who can't wait to go inside the doors of the church to hear the Word of God. They are so hungry for the Word and the riches of wisdom, they are often found "waiting at the posts" of the doors, just to go in early and get a good seat.

"For whoso findeth [Wisdom] findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the LORD" (Proverbs 8:35).

Chapter Three

KEPT BY GOD

In the Bible, *phulasso* is the Greek word and *shamar* is the Hebrew word most often translated as “to keep.” It means to guard someone or something with a sense of duty, to protect and preserve from harm, with safekeeping. It also means to watch over, as a watchman.

In Jude 24, God is our watchman. In Psalm 121:5, He is our keeper. In 1 Samuel 2:9, He keeps the feet of His saints. In Proverbs 2:8, He keeps our way. God is watching.

When you are going through a trial, when the thorn seems almost unbearable, if only you would realize that you are being kept by such a precious Watchman. Imagine if we could pull back the curtain of time and look into eternity—think of some of the things that have happened in our lives. Then we could see His fantastic, providential plan, and that God watched us and kept us.

Jeremiah, you haven't been conceived in your mother's womb yet, but God has a plan for you, and He is watching you (Jeremiah 1:5).

Saul, in your self-righteousness you have plagued and even murdered believers. But God is going to change your name to Paul and use you mightily. God is watching you. Christians, I'm watching you. I have chosen you in My Son, Jesus, therefore I am watching to protect you, to guard you (Ephesians 1:4-5). I see what the devil is doing, and I want to be your watchman.

Keeping a Watch

Jesus told the disciples, in Matthew 26:41a, "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation."

A watchman guards against enemy invasion. All Satan wants is a place (Ephesians 4:27). If a husband allows pornography to get into his house, he has given Satan a way in to his home. He is in, and you were the one to let him in, through X-rated movies, pornographic magazines and Internet sites—all foolishness that has no meaning to the mind of Christ.

And once we give him a place, Satan says, "Fine, I'm in! Now I'm going to infect your marriage, and I'm going to infect your family. I am

going to infect your mind and your emotions. You gave me a place, so now it's fair. You gave me a place, and I have simply taken it. And as long as you continue to give me a place, there is not a single thing you can do to keep me from taking it" (see 2 Timothy 1:12).

Deal with the Truth

What is causing problems in your marriage, in your family, in your home? Whatever it is, it *can* be dealt with! When we deal with the issue in the light of the Word and by the Blood of the Lamb, we take away Satan's place to stay.

Good or bad, whatever comes from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, we must deal with those things. We *must* deal with them and not back off in sentimentality. We must deal with them because we are to be God's watchmen.

Do not let the enemies come in (Ephesians 4:27). God holds us in close custody, the Bible says (Jude 24). He guards us from danger by setting up an impenetrable blockade and keeping us in a secret place (Psalm 91:1). Then, He sends us a special angel to guard us (Psalm 91:11).

We are weak. We are frail. We have demons on our trail. And God says, "I'm going to give you an opportunity. I'm going to protect those

secret places that the enemy wants to invade. I'm going to protect it. Just let Me do it! That is all I ask. Confess that My grace is sufficient for you and that My strength is made perfect in your weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Called to Be a Watchman

"Son of man, I had made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me" (Ezekiel 3:17).

Have you ever pondered on how miraculously God has kept us? Although we know that some beautiful believers have lost their lives because of their stand for Christ, with all the situations we face, in some mystical way, God has protected so many of us from harm. It is a miracle.

That is why Psalm 91 is my favorite psalm of provision and protection. He protects us, and I believe that we experience amazing protection because of the watchmen in our midst.

In every ministry, God calls mature men and women to keep a watch. In the Bible, there are four kinds of watches, each covering a specific division of time. In addition to the day watch, the night was divided into three watches:

Lamentations 2:19 refers to the beginning of the night watch; Judges 7:19, the middle watch; and Exodus 14:24, the early morning watch. If a watchman does not heed his watch, he is accountable before God. Let me illustrate it.

If we do not warn people that hell is real and make sure that they understand that they will go to hell if they do not receive the Savior, then we are accountable for not being faithful watchmen. Ezekiel 3:18 says that God puts their blood on the hands of those who would not warn them.

You say, "But, people won't listen!" Welcome the thorn of rejection.

We are to pray. We are to be available. We are to do *what* we can, *when* we can. We are to do everything that would make it possible for God to come in and take His place with that person. And for that reason, we are to become godly watchmen.

How do we become godly watchmen for each other but through the Spirit of love? It is a compelling love, a love that may not be loved back (2 Corinthians 12:15). Perhaps there is somebody you notice who is troubled. You are not going to judge them because you don't believe in that. And you are not going to invade their privacy because you don't want to do that. But

you do care, and you care because you love them.

So, privately, without telling people, you begin to pray, “Oh Lord, that person is suffering. I’m not sure why, because I am not You, but they are suffering. Please help them to welcome the thorn.”

A watchman in God’s army is one who watches because of love. He watches without invading, he watches without judging, but he watches to be a tremendous blessing—to put a wall around that person’s place in the assembly.

People who have experienced the painful piercing of a thorn and have allowed God to work in patience, experience, and hope—these are the ones God can use as watchmen. They know how to be sensitive and to stand for others who may be going through a trial. They have learned what every mature Christian desires, which is to welcome the thorn and to rest and rejoice in God’s plan.

CONCLUSION

A seven-year-old girl wrote me this letter recently:

“Dear Pastor and Auntie Barbara, I just wanted to give this card to you because I love you and because I want you to feel better. Thank you for everything that you have done for us. We want to know how you are feeling. We are feeling fine.

“We are praying for you and your family. You always preach great messages every time you preach. I love taking notes. I always take great notes. You would really love them. My parents love them too. I like sitting up front row during church and watching you preach, taking notes, singing, praying, and praising God. I always take a lot of notes.

“Love in God’s love and grace, Melanie”

It’s quite a thing when a girl that age takes beautiful notes and observes the way this young lady observes. At her age, she has not experi-

enced the wounds that can be inflicted by a thorn. Yet, she has parents who have persevered through infirmities, reproaches, necessities, persecution, and distresses. They have taught her to be sensitive to God and to others, and to make her little portion available for His use (2 Timothy 3:15).

Let us recognize the comfort and joy we can have in spite of, and sometimes because of, the thorn. As we welcome the thorn in our own lives, we will become sensitive to the needs of others. Instead of being choked by thorns and the cares of this world, we can offer to others the same hope that has set us free.