

2 Corinthians 12:7

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 December 2007

Preacher: Donald Macleod

- [0 : 00] We shall turn again to chapter 12 of 2 Corinthians and the words we find in verse 7 of chapter 12.
- There was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Amen.
- Some looked at the Apostle Paul. They saw too someone who outwardly sinned to be coping so well with life.
- He was after all an Apostle. He was a man greatly gifted. He was a man greatly used by God.
- A man whose work God had blessed. A man held in high esteem in so many quarters. And a man too seemed so well put together and so coherent and perhaps in some way so confident and so authoritative.
- [1 : 42] And yet, just beneath the surface, Paul is telling us that he was finding it very hard to cope.
- That's often the case. That outwardly, things look so normal and seem to be going so well. And yet, inwardly or beneath the surface, things are so different. There was something in Paul's life and it was getting him down.
- He was finding it really hard to cope with it. He calls it a thorn in his flesh.
- And you know how irritating and painful that could be. We don't know what the thorn was.
- [2 : 43] There should be much speculation as to its precise identity. It wasn't a sin because God allowed you to stay in his life.
- It was a messenger, almost an apostle from Satan. And that suggests to us that in some way it was a hindrance in the work that Paul was trying to do.
- It was a tannit. It was from hell. It seemed to Paul to be holding him back and undermining his work in the cause of the gospel.
- And it tormented him. And it buffeted him. In a way the metaphor slips from the thorn that simply picks us to the rod that beats us.
- It was as if Paul was being pummeled by this thing in his life. So it was a thorn in his flesh.
- [4 : 00] It was a messenger or an angel of Satan. And no doubt Paul was saying, Lord, without this I could serve you ever so much better.
- And in so many lives there is something very similar to what Paul was experiencing here. And sometimes those who have served God even in a most evident way, are not to serve him in the context of the same kind of destruction and a disadvantage.
- You think of Martin Luther with that great black dog of depression, his black dog as he called it.
- You think of C.H. Burton again with his own experience of that same problem, despondency, sometimes despair, which field with his asthma.

So many others who have sought to serve God with all kinds of disadvantages. Perhaps we ourselves struggle with various forms of headruns and drawback and destruction in our own lives.

[5 : 24] Maybe we have a stammer, maybe we scutter, maybe we have insomniacs, maybe there's some visual defect, maybe we have bipolar depression or whatever.

But whatever it is, it's there, it's there all the time, it's there holding us back in our own imaginations. And we say to God, Lord, without this I could serve you ever so much more effectively.

Maybe there is some relationship, there is some family difficult, there is somebody at work, but it's there, and it's authority in flesh, and it is an angel, or a messenger from Satan, and you keep on saying to God, Lord, I can't serve you with this in my life, or I could serve you so much better, if this weren't in my life.

So this is where Paul is. He has this thing, this horn, this angel from hell, in his life, and it's there all the time, and it's not coping.

And then you see what the apostle does. He says, For this thing, I besought, he said, three times, I pleaded three times with the Lord, to take it away from me.

[6 : 43] Note several things there. Notice that it was to the Lord he prayed. That is, to the Lord Jesus. This great reflection here for us of the absolute deity, of the Lord Jesus.

That Paul addressed his prayers, not only to God the Father, which he did indeed, but also to God the Son, to the Lord Jesus.

And so he says, I went to the Lord, to the risen Lord, to my Savior. I went to him, about this problem. Because, where else could I go?

So I went, and I fell on my knees, before him, and I spread the matter, before him. And so he went to the Lord with it.

And he said, when I went to the Lord, I pleaded with him. It wasn't simply some kind of, matter of fact request, but it was urgent.

[7 : 53] It was in fact, an exhortation. It was an advocacy. I pled with the Lord. I exhorted him. I besought him.

I wrestled with the Lord, three times. And, there's an echo here, a deliberate echo here, I'm sure, of the story, of Christ in Gethsemane.

because, because in Gethsemane, we know that the Lord himself, went three times, and pled with the Father, let this cup pass from me.

And, Paul knows very well, that the thorn, wasn't Calvary, wasn't a cross, and nothing of those, terrible dimensions, knew it wasn't redemption, victorious suffering, or enduring of the curse, true to sin.

But yet, just as the Savior, went to his Father, three times, in that agony of prayer, so, Paul went, with his own problem, to the Lord, to that, very Lord, who had prayed in Gethsemane.

[9 : 04] And he besought him, and he pled, he exhorted, the Lord there, three times. In Gethsemane, the Lord, threw himself to the ground. In Gethsemane, there was that bloody sweat, because the Lord, so wanted the cup to pass.

And so here, Paul, so wanted things to be different. And so wanted things to change. And it may be that sometimes, that's how we are.

We are desperate, that God would remove something. That God would change the circumstance. Almost that God would undo a fact, or recall an event.

And so there we are, and we are exhorting the Lord, pleading the Lord, almost the language of evangelism. Well, the preacher pleads with a sinner to come to the Savior.

So Paul pled with God, that things might be different. And he said to God, take it away. There is this thing in my life, and it is holding me back, in the service of the Gospel.

[10 : 30] It affects the way people see me. It affects the way people hear me. It makes me so inefficient, makes me so ineffective, makes me look like a fool, makes me look so inferior, compared to those great, gifted communicators.

Maybe it was something in Paul's appearance, maybe something in Paul's speech, Paul's mode of delivery, but whatever it was, Paul's view was, it was from hell, and it was hindering him in the service of the Gospel.

And so he said, take it away. And in a way, it legitimizes. I would always say to God sometimes, Lord, take this away.

It's in my providence. In a way, it's your own will for me. But nevertheless, I want it taken away, Lord, because it's holding me back.

And then we see the Lord's response. What did the Lord say? Well, the Lord said, no. He said, no, very, very clearly.

[11 : 57] I besought the Lord, I pleaded. But, He said, the Lord's adversity, but great, but, but He said, I said, but He said, I said, please, but He said, no.

And there are times when that's the answer God gives. The adversity, the but, the no, but no, please, Lord, but no.

You know, sometimes the time comes in our lives when we have to stop asking. When God makes it plain that things are not going to change and they're not going to improve and the thorn, the impediment, the weight, the hindrance, it's not going to be removed.

And perhaps this morning is something that we have to learn to live with and we have to come to terms with. In the same way as Paul had to come to terms with the thorn in his flesh, I said, please.

And I said, please again. And I said, but please, Lord. And the Lord said, but no, that thing is going to remain, the situation is not going to change.

[13 : 31] The Lord didn't leave it there. He didn't simply say no. He explained to Paul the reasons for his no, for his negative. And those came out clearly in the context here in verse 7.

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations there was given me a thorn in the flesh.

They were there for a reason. And Paul, God doesn't always tell us a reason, but sometimes God does tell us a reason. And here, God did tell Paul the reason why this thorn was going to remain.

Paul had had those tremendous revelations. And he, well, recalls them 40 years ago. He'd been taken up to the third heaven.

And he had seen things which were inexpressible, which were not lawful to be uttered. And you wonder just how glorious they were.

[14 : 37] Because remember all the revelations given to John, the Apostle John, on the Isle of Patmos. And all the glories that John saw, the slaughtered Lamb, in the centre of the throne.

and that those great Christians of Jerusalem, the bride, the wife of the Lamb, all these things were over on the water and life.

All these things John saw, John was allowed to tell them. They were glorious. And yet, John was allowed to tell them. But what Paul saw, those 40 years previously, was so glorious, that he wasn't allowed to tell.

Or so glorious, that no words could tell and no words could describe them. And there was a danger, that because he'd been so privileged, he'd be exalted above measure.

Raised up, hyper conceited, because of the great privileges he'd had. and perhaps he'd have been in the church there and saying when people spoke against him, he'd say, you remember, I had those visions, those great visions.

[15 : 57] Remember who I am, I had those great visions. And so, yes, he had. But Paul, but God also gave him a thorn in his flesh.

And that's sometimes the story of the believer's life. great privilege and great thorn in the flesh. And it was there for this reason.

It had this ministry. It kept Paul from being popped up, exalted, beyond measure. It was there to keep him humble.

Now, of course, let's remind ourselves that no thorn in itself, no mere circumstance can keep us humble. There are many people with great thorns in their lives and great problems who are not kept humble, but by the blessing of God it had this effect.

It kept Paul from being exalted above measure. And it may be that there's something that we had some great privilege.

[17 : 07] Or maybe we have been given great gifts. And maybe there's a real temptation that you be exalted above measure. And so God has sent the sword in the flesh.

Now, I'm not speaking of a sin. Because a sin is never God given. And a sin is never God sent. And a sin never has a ministry.

It's not a sin. It's something which is in itself not sinful, not evil at all, but which is there to prevent you perhaps being exalted at the measure.

It has a ministry in your life. And that's why God is saying no when you say please. And when you say please again, God still says no.

He says please again. God still says no because that thorn has to remain there. It's part of God's ministry to you. And it's part of the way that God shows His love for you.

[18 : 10] That that thorn is there. And so God explained to him why the thorn was there. But that wasn't all. God also went on to give Paul a great assurance.

My grace is sufficient for you. And my strength is made perfect in weakness. And notice what's going on there. Notice how God is defining grace.

My grace is sufficient. My strength is made perfect so that God's grace equals God's strength.

strength. And it is that strength that is sufficient and that strength is made perfect. You obviously spoke of grace as being irresistible.

It didn't mean that you can't resist it. You can and you do very often resist it. But he meant that grace was invincible. It cannot be conquered.

[19 : 15] It can't be overcome. It can't be defeated. It can't be diverted. It always achieves its purpose. And God is saying to Paul, I know there's a thorn there that I'll make you strong and I'll give you all the strength that you need.

My strength is made perfect in weakness. That's the great promise that God gives him. And God is saying to him, by my grace, you'll be able to cope with that thorn.

I'm able to serve me despite that thorn. Maybe some speculate Paul had some blood for phalmonic disease.

And maybe his eye was discharging all the time. And maybe people thought that very off-putting. But God says to him still, I'll uphold you, my strength will keep you going.

maybe he was epileptic. And that again could cause severe problems for him. And yet God is saying that, my strength will keep you going.

[20 : 34] Maybe there's some speech impediment. And what a dreadful thing in a public speaker. But God said to him still, my strength is sufficient.

I'll keep you going. I'll help you cope with this thorn. And furthermore he's saying, I will help you cope with everything else despite the thorn in your flesh.

I'll help you cope with the thorn. And I'll help you cope with everything else despite the thorn. And you see that great catalog in the previous chapter, all the things that God had helped Paul to cope with.

The journeyings and the hunger and the shipwrecks and the imprisonments and the contempt of his enemies and the contempt of false brethren and those dreadful dreadful dreadful floggings.

And still God's grace had been sufficient. And we say Lord I just can't serve you with this.

[21 : 45] I can't go on with this. There's no way I can do my work with this. And God is saying my grace is sufficient and my strength is made perfect and weak.

And so God explained to Paul why the thorn was there. And God gave Paul his great assurance that by his own grace he would cope with the thorn and by his own grace he would cope with everything else despite the thorn.

And he showed Paul something too. He showed him that weakness was the ideal context for the grace of God to operate in.

my strength is made perfect in weakness. That's a tremendously important lesson that grace loves weakness as its context.

It's when we say I can't that grace says you can. And this is what God is saying to the apostle Paul your weakness is the context that grace loves.

[23 : 12] It's made perfect in weakness. So long as we are saying to God I can handle it. So long as you say to God you can leave me now and I can go solo now and manage by myself now I can do it.

I can face it. I can do it. I can conquer it. So long there's no place for grace. But when a great flea and confession go up Lord I can't.

How can I? Cannot Lord I'm too weak and to this to that. Then it is that God's grace flows into that sense of impotence and incompetence and weakness and vulnerability then the grace and the strength of God fly in.

These great demands that God makes of you they cannot be caught with by mere professionalism or by experience or by native gifts or native strength because so often the problems are insoluble the crisis too demanding the strength and stresses too much your own weakness how do you say weakness God says weakness I love that word weakness my strength is made perfect in weakness that's what God heard and that's what God was so filled by by you I cannot I cannot did I hear you say I cannot my strength is made perfect in weakness I can't cope I cannot bear the pain I cannot handle this temptation I cannot carry this load I can't discharge this duty

I can't do one more night one more day I can't do can't cannot my strength is made perfect in weakness and that's where Paul ends he ends up here I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses that's what he says in verse 9 so that Christ's power may rest to me in a way he's been boasting or mock boasting all down through this great section boasting boasting like a fool like a worldly man he's been boasting about this and that because there's been so much boasting around all these great people with so much to boast about and so Paul says well I'll be a fool and I'll boast too but now the boasting becomes all serious and Paul is boasting about some great realities and great truth and what is that great truth that Paul is boasting about is boasting about this that is weak he will glory he will boast in his weakness he will boast in the fact that time and time and time again he has to say

[26 : 41] I cannot sometimes outwardly sometimes under this breath Lord I cannot I cannot and now he's boasting in his cannot he's boasting in his weakness why because that's when Christ's power rests that's when he mounts up with wings like an eagle that's why he runs when he runs and isn't weary walks and doesn't face that's when he's powerful that's when he's omnipotent that's when he's competent when all his own strength flows out of him and into that vacuum that flows all the strength and empowerment of the grace of God well this morning the whole idea of the thorn is a very individual thing each one of us with our own form of limitation our own handicap all of us envying others because they don't have to cope with this or cope with that and all of us coming to

God with something that we wish weren't there and saying to God Lord take it away please please please take it away God said no again no and again no no but my grace is sufficient my strength is made perfect in your weakness and you are saying ah Lord I see it now I I see I see it now and so I will gladly boast in my weakness because then the power of Christ is going to rest upon me may God grant its soul let's join in prayer thank you you