Transformed – **2 Corinthians - wk 14 – Thorn in the Flesh**

**Praying for the sick, a broken family, finances, a trial, a wayward son, a distant husband, a terminal child, an internal battle... sometimes it seems God is not there.**

**Perhaps no burden is greater than what seems to be unanswered prayers. Today we deal with this very thing.**

**2 Cor – An ongoing conversation with Paul and a troubled church.**

**A church he planted is struggling with/ division, sin, and shifty leaders.**

**So-called “super-apostles,” aka. the “wolves” came to tear down what he started. Calling Paul physically ugly, a terrible teacher, a weak leader, and an unbeliever (2 Cor 10)**

**The wolves like to brag about how great they are. But Paul boasts about his hardship, persecution, imprisonments, beatings, lack, dangers, and near-death moments – for the sake of Jesus Christ!**

**2 Corinthians 12:1 I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, (I could go on, though I doubt you care. What’s the point? - He then describes a very interesting and debated portion of the Bible) 1 …I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ… (Most scholars believe Paul is talking about himself. Talking in third person. Use of sarcasm and a reference - v7 – first person) …who fourteen years ago (roughly 8 yrs after the resurrection) was caught up to the third heaven - (1st = sky / 2nd = space / 3rd = heaven) whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows.**

**It happened shortly after he would have been born again, and he is unsure if he was dreaming/vision or if he was there.**

**The wolves like to talk about visions/revelations. Paul reluctantly mentions one - he would rather talk about Jesus. He never mentioned it for 14 yrs and then never again.**

**Wolves glory in themselves talking about their so-called visions (pink-haired kat ker). Paul distances himself from that.**

**Jesus told his disciples regarding God’s power in them - Luke 10:20 Do not rejoice that the spirits are subject to you but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.**

**12:3 And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows – (says twice - I’m not sure) 4 and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. (No mention of what he might have seen, only things he heard – and he could not relay it) 5 On behalf of this man I will boast, on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses… (he mentions his weakness 6 times)**

**This person (me) could brag about it, but I won't.**

**That would draw attention to me – but I want to point to Jesus.**

**I want to highlight my weakness and God’s strength in me.**

**6 though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; (I could boast of my education, accomplishments, successes, miracles, visions, political influence, souls saved - I could brag but I don't want this to be about how great I am) but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.**

**Ironically the super-apostles / wolves – call Paul weak. Paul says, “Maybe I am – but Christ is in me is strong!” They were great in their own eyes – I want to be great in the eyes of God.**

**Why was Paul given the vision? The time frame places him in seasons of persecution. Perhaps it was a way for the Lord himself to comfort and encourage Paul for the work he was to do – in the face of trials.**

**Acts 9:16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”**

**Ultimately, we don’t know. Paul never says.**

**I want to say this again from last week**

**\*\*\* Run from the self-glory chasers**

**Those who exalt themselves and seek their own glory and prominence.**

**(The next thing Paul sarcastically boasts about - is also debated) 5 …but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses… 7 So to keep me from becoming conceited (BTW - no one, not even Paul, is immune to the danger of pride) because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, (1st person reference to his vision) a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.**

**What was this "Thorn in the flesh"? We don't know exactly. Some say it was mental or emotional struggles; some suggest sinful temptations, blindness, severe malaria, stress, migraines, and some even - baldness. Some suggest it was his persecution or a person.**

**I think for Paul - the words lean to actual physical pain**

**Thorn in the flesh: lit. means “a stake of pain in my flesh”**

**Keep in mind he was flogged, beaten nearly to death, stones, broken bones, snake bites... and we can't help but wonder he probably had a lot of pain as a result. Possible new handicap?**

**7 …a thorn was given me (by God) in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, (buffet me, punch, strike me – keep me low) to keep me from becoming conceited.**

**\*\* God allows pain and suffering even for his followers**

**The thorn was conceived by God and carried out by Satan.**

**Job (Job) Punched around by the devil at the allowance/providence of God**

**Joseph – 20 yrs of struggle – in God’s divine purpose.**

**Peter (Lu 22:31 - I am allowing Satan to sift you – but it will strengthen you.**

**OT Prophets - We see it repeatedly with the prophets in the OT.**

**Today – missionaries and countless faithful Christians.**

**1 Peter 4:19 Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.**

**How does that work into your theology? God is in total control.**

**Some might have said to Paul - You lack faith; it's your fault. Pray harder, search your heart, and make positive confessions.**

**2 Co 12:8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.**

* **Know that God heals - In scripture and today. Miracles happen.**

**Paul's shadow, hankies, prayer of faith... Paul knew it…**

**He cried out to God over and over – knowing God heals.**

**His intense times of prayer - mirror Christ in the garden.**

**BTW - It is not a lack of faith to pray for something more than once. Even Jesus prayed to the Father 3X in the Garden.**

**“Three times I pleaded” - Some suggest that Paul is using a Hebrew figure of speech, which means many, many times – not just three.**

* **Know that God does not always heal - We don't know why.**

**We know he does and can – but he does not always do it.**

**12:9 But He (God) said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.”**

* **Know that God does not always give us the answer we want**

**“My grace is sufficient” - Not the answer Paul wanted.**

**Grace = is God's undeserved favor, love, and provision.**

**My grace is enough! The fact that I have you – that I am with you - is enough. Salvation in me - is enough.**

**Why does God allow Christians to suffer?**

**\*\* God allows Christians to suffer for their sanctification**

**7 …a thorn was given me (by God) in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. - to keep me humble!**

**Paul explains that it is to sanctify him - for him to grow in Christ. The world suffers because we live in a fallen world. Christians suffer because we live in it, and God uses it to transform us.**

**Romans 5:2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, (Miraculous assurance) and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.**

**Ever notice how - when we pray, what changes most often is not our circumstance - but ourselves? Growth.**

**2 Cor 12:9 But He (God) said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.” (Mine) Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses (my trials and unanswered prayers) so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. (the troubles of this life have nothing on me) For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

**My trials and my weaknesses draw me to Christ. Therefore, I am thankful for every one of them. They are more valuable than any great achievement. They put me in a place of need and reliance.**

**If I am full of my own achievements and accomplishments and satisfied with my successes and the things of this life – I might find myself not seeking God. Then pride sets in.**

**Some treat God the same way we treat our parents. We give Him a measure of respect; we give Him some time - but no longer feel we have to obey anymore. In our hearts, we have moved out of the house. We can make our own rules in life as long as we have supper at God’s house once a week and give Him a little recognition - we are fine.**

**But God in his grace - engineer’s circumstances that put us in a place of prayer and dependence on God.**

**John 16:33 “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (have peace in me, come to me - you cannot overcome the troubles – I have!)**

**While false apostles/wolves glorify their abilities and self, Paul describes how God humbled him. They saw his thorns and mocked him – he saw them and rejoiced in their fruit.**

**\*\*\* Pray for the thorn to be released from you (keep praying like Paul). But if it’s not lifting, embrace the thorns, for God is working in you something greater with them.**

**What are your thorns? Sickness, anxiety, depression, chronic pain, a job, disability, reoccurring situation, or a person. You pray but still have that pain or struggle.**

**How do we respond to our present thorns in the flesh?**

**Four wonderful gifts God’s grace provides in our suffering.**

**1. Peace - the contentment of God – Resting in his presence**

**2 Cor 12:9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.” 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.**

**In the face of trials. I have peace and contentment – because God’s grace is enough! More than enough! It satisfies!**

**And the great thing is - it’s there all the time!**

**(Paul practiced what he taught and took it to God – “I pleaded with the Lord…”) Philippians 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. 5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; 6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (This verse does not say it is all answered – but that we get peace.)**

**2. Endurance – the strength of the Lord**

**10 “For when I am weak, then I am strong.”**

**When you are not healed, when that trial is still there, when the issue is unanswered - God will give you the strength to endure it.**

**Many see the thorns of life as a burden to avoid – Paul embraced them as a vehicle for strength in the Lord!**

**There are two responses from God to our burdens:**

**#1 – He will remove the load or #2 – He will strengthen your shoulders**

**Job 13:15 - Though He (God) slay me, yet will I trust in him: (You can take my life God, but I will never stop trusting you)**

**Some­times, unanswered prayer is the only way to get us there**

**Speaking of trials and needs, it was the grace-filled Paul who said, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” (**[**Phil 4:13**](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Philippians+4.13&t=NKJV)**)**

**James 1:2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.**

**Carl at Firestone – You guys are all smiling and positive. Wow – that’s a way to look at it. Maybe send up a call for me.**

**It’s been said - that "God won't give you anything you can't handle or more than you can take." He might - but that's when we give it to Him - and learn the sufficiency of Christ.**

**Paul needed only to look to Jesus to see how it - Hebrews 12:2 Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (We look to Jesus and the kingdom)**

**3. Faith – Grace provides a supernatural reliance and trust in God.**

**It's okay to be hurt, frustrated, weak, and tired. God is not just the God of the comfortable, but the God of comfort.**

**When you are at your greatest point of need – you know and look to the great provision and kingdom pf God.**

**Even when I am sick / weak / limited - God favors me - God is able to keep me, hold me, comfort me, encourage me, use me.**

**My greatest weakness - ignite God's greatest power in me.**

**After listing off trials, Paul says – Romans 8:31 - What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (I know He will take care of us in the trials!!!)**

**We live in a culture that celebrates a se lf-made, self-sufficient people. We are told to rely only on ourselves. But - It is only in our weaknesses that we find our sufficiency and need for God. He often allows us to lose it all to bring us to a place of faith and trust.**

**How could God let us go through that??**

**2 Corinthians 4:17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.**

**The goal is to chisel our devotion and character to God**

**Great suffering brings out the great strength of God.**

**If you've never known the weight of a sinking soul, how would you know the upholding power of the hand of God?**

**“Oh, there must be the weakness of man, felt, recognized, and mourned over, or else the strength of the Son of God will never be perfected in us.” (Spurgeon)**

**We can’t know the sufficiency of God’s grace until we know our own insufficiency – and God’s unfailing faithfulness!**

**A radio - picks up 100's of frequencies just by turning the dial. So many transmissions trying to get our attention, wants, worries, desires, dreams, temptations, and affections. How do we get a clear signal? How do we keep from getting lost in all the noise? Tune in to the grace and goodness of God.**

**His ever-present faithful peace and comfort - Tune into the HS**

**4. Praise - we can praise God in every situation**

**9b Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses (when life is pulling at me, the more I tune in) so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.**

**We can bear a thorn - and still be in victory!**

**That flies in the face of many people - it's unmarketable.**

**Many think spiritual maturity is perfect health, trouble-free, struggle-free life... but real spiritual maturity is living in victory despite your health, trouble, and struggle.**

**God works powerfully through the person turned inside out.**

**The worst trial of life may be the best possession of praise I have.**

**It's in those moments verses like these make sense:**

**Psalm 59:16 But I will sing of your strength; I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning. For you have been to me a fortress and a refuge in the day of my distress. 17 O my Strength, I will sing praises to you, for you, O God, are my fortress, the God who shows me steadfast love.**

**1 Thessalonians 5:16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. / Hebrews 13:15 Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. / Psalm 35:28 Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness and of your praise all the day long.**

**Habakkuk 3:17 Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, (when life is falling apart, out of work) 18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. 19 God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places. (When it’s a rocky path, I will leap over them!)**

**This life is not the reward – I’m passing thru - and until then, God I'm yours and I have a lot to be excited and joyful about!**

**Whatever comes - whatever happens in my life - that's my prayer - my heart. The enemy may punch me around... but you will not allow anything in this knock to take me out.**

**The very presence of a thorn in me - means the glory and grace of God are shining through me.**

**2 Cor 12:9 But he (God) said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”**

**Not just tomorrow but now. Right now. Every day, every time. God’s grace is enough to draw you, strengthen you, comfort you, enable you, hold you, & keep you. His grace is sufficient.**

**Think of your greatest need right now…Then proclaim,**

**“God, your grace is sufficient”**