

## Sermon Notes - July 4, 2021

### II Corinthians 12:7-10

I wanted to talk just for a few moments today about the Apostle Paul. In your reading, he says that God or somebody gave him a thorn. He had a physical disability, and it was transformed from a weakness into a strength -- because Paul relied on God's grace. I want you to understand that the Apostle Paul was somebody who was steeped in Jewish theology. He knew all the Jewish laws and sub-laws, and he persecuted Christians for years - he tortured them and put them to death. Until one day, on the road to Damascus (found in the book of Acts), he had this conversion experience with God, and became a follower of Jesus. He stopped persecuting the Christians. He went on to become an evangelist and a missionary. He started many churches and one of those churches was the church at Corinth. Corinth was a seaport town with a lot of wealth and people of different nationalities (Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, etc.) who were committing idolatry and immorality. Paul started a church in Corinth and that church was struggling in the faith. He was always trying to encourage them. In II Corinthians, he is trying to tell them a little bit more about who he is and what he believes. He's trying to encourage them to stay away from false teaching and to become more like Christ. But, he gets real with them - it almost becomes like an autobiography, and he tells us a little bit about himself, so we can identify with him.

He says, "You know, I had this thorn." Now, Greeks understood "a thorn" as a sharpened wooden stake. They used it to punish their enemies. They would dig a hole outside, put these sharpened wooden stakes in the ground, and if an enemy came to jump across that hole, they would fall in it and kill themselves. They would be impaled on the stakes. So, Paul uses the idea of a "thorn" to mean something sharp and painful. We don't know what his thorn was, but he had some kind of physical disability. Now, some of the early church fathers thought that he had headaches -- kind of like migraine headaches. You know how debilitating they can be - you want to be in a dark room, away from people and noise, sleep for a day or two, and just be in the quiet until the medicine takes affect and it passes. Maybe it was headaches; we don't really know.

Some people think that he had blindness, that he was going blind. We do know that he dictated to a scribe... maybe he was going blind. Some have said that he had epilepsy, and they believed that epilepsy was caused by the demons. So, if he had an epileptic seizure and somebody saw it, they would spit on him because they thought their spit would cast the demon of epilepsy away from them. Some thought he had a back problem like scoliosis. We don't really know what his thorn was. There are lots of scholars and different opinions on it. All we do know is that he had a physical disability that would keep him from working sometimes and being able to preach, visit churches, write, and teach. He said, "I prayed to God three times to take it away." I don't know about you and me, but I believe we would be praying every day, wouldn't we? It said that he prayed three times and he asked God to take it away.

***This is the message that God gave him: "My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in your weakness."*** What did that mean - "My grace is sufficient for you"? I want to give you an example. Chuck Swindoll tells a story about going to a memorial service of a friend who died of liver cancer. He said, "One of the things that I want you to know about my friend was that he lived with gusto every minute of life he had - even after the doctors told him that he had liver cancer and it was terminal. (He was a strong Christian, and he didn't let his life sink down into self-pity and sorrow for himself.) He kept living and wanting to grab onto every bit of life that he could. The doctors told him that he wouldn't make it 'til Thanksgiving, but he did. He also made it to Christmas, Easter, and the 4<sup>th</sup> of July cook-out. He was on his way to the next Thanksgiving. In fact, he told a friend that he was getting ready to buy some new dentures." He said, "I'm not ready to go yet. I'm going to take all of life as long as God gives it to me. God's giving me strength for one more day and one more day." This man knew the sufficiency of God's grace and strength.

Some of you know the name of the late, great tennis superstar, Arthur Ashe. Arthur Ashe was well-respected on the court and off the court. He was a talented tennis player, but he was also a strong Christian. Arthur Ashe contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion during his heart surgery,

and he died from that illness several years later. In an interview, the TV reporter asked him, “Arthur, don’t you feel sorry for yourself? Why the troubles? Don’t you get angry at God?” Arthur Ashe said, “If I have to ask God, ‘Why the troubles?’, I would also have to ask God, ‘Why all the blessings?’ Why all the blessings of a good wife, a beautiful child, the Wimbledon, all the wins I’ve had, the money I’ve earned, and the beautiful home? If I ask why all the troubles, I better ask why all the blessings. I believe that God gives us joys and sorrows in life to help us become the persons who reflect his glory and his character.” ***You see, Arthur Ashe had learned to live in the sufficiency of God’s grace and God’s strength, and to depend on him.***

It is said that sometimes we Americans may have a hard time putting our faith in God. Years ago, there was a young man who went to Communist Russia to preach in an underground church. Do you remember years ago in Russia that they couldn’t profess faith in Christ publically? They often had these churches underground. He went to speak in one of those underground churches. After he finished speaking, he said this lady came up to him and said, “Sir, I guess it’s hard to have faith in America.” He didn’t quite understand what she meant. After the meeting was over, he asked his interpreter, “What did she mean when she said that it was hard to have faith in America? These people live in a country where they have nothing - they hunger; they need clothing; they are starving to death; they’re punished if they’re caught as Christians. What did she mean?” The interpreter said, “I think she meant this: In the United States, you have a lot of money, lots of nice homes and clothes, fast food restaurants, and everything you want. ***Sometimes, when you have a life of ease and have everything you want, you tend to place your faith in yourselves and in things rather than God.*** These Christians in Russia have learned to depend on God.”

What Paul is talking about in this scripture passage is that sometimes we are tempted to rely on ourselves. If we’re strong and have a lot of abilities and resources, it is so easy for us to rely on ourselves and to believe in things rather than God. What Paul says is that God allowed this disability (whatever it is). Did God cause it? ... No, it just happened. ***God***

***doesn't cause all the pain and suffering we have, but he works in it to bring good. He works in adversity to bring good to us. Paul learned with his thorn to depend on God. He'd tell you that his thorn reminded him of his weakness and his dependence upon God.***

I don't know what your thorn is today -- maybe it's a physical disability, something mental, or a person. But, there are all kinds of things that can be thorns to our flesh - something that we have to deal with and have to depend on God to get us through it. Paul is talking about looking to God for your strength. Stop depending just on yourself, your stuff, and your resources. Lean on him and look to him for strength. "For my power is made perfect in your weakness." Paul had a weakness, but God used it. He went on to become a great evangelist, missionary, and teacher.

I want to tell you about some people who had weakness and God brought good out of it. He blessed and used them to inspire and touch others' lives. Some of you know the name Joni Eareckson Tada. When she was a young teenager (about 17-years of age), she went swimming with a bunch of friends. She dived into the water, but had misjudged the depth of the water. She hit her head and broke her neck. It left her as a quadriplegic. For months (almost two years) she was angry with God, the world, and everybody - herself included. As time went on, she began to grow in her faith, to pray, and to read her Bible. Somebody taught her to use a pencil in her mouth to draw. She eventually used a brush with which to paint. She had a beautiful voice and started singing. And, she's made several hits with her music. She's written a lot of books; she dictated while someone else wrote them. She's done a lot of paintings. She's a popular speaker and has inspired millions around the world. She has her own radio broadcast even now. Joni Eareckson Tada said that she has learned to depend on God in her weakness, and God used what happened to her to bring good out of it and touch other lives.

***You see, our adversity can enable us to know empathy for others. It makes us more approachable to others when we admit our weaknesses. But, it also reminds us to depend on God to get us through.*** All of us, at some point, are going to face some things in life

that we can't handle on our own. Some of you know the former actress, Mary Tyler Moore. She has a favorite expression that I want you to remember: "None of us gets out of here without pain." Mary Tyler Moore was married and divorced three times. Her son accidentally shot himself and died; her sister took an overdose and died in college. Mary Tyler Moore turned to alcohol to deal with all her problems and she contracted sugar diabetes. That diabetes almost caused her to go blind before she died. Mary Tyler Moore says, "None of us gets out of here without pain," and it teaches us a lot. You see, pain and suffering are going to come to ALL of us - some adversity, some disability, something. But, God wants us to know that we can depend on him and he will be our strength. He wants to grow us to reflect his character.

Ben Patterson is a Pastor who used to be on "The 700 Club" years ago. In the 1980s, he had two herniated discs. He said, "I was lying flat on my back. I couldn't preach, visit the sick, or go to the hospitals. I was flat on my back until they could do my surgery. One day, in sheer boredom and frustration, I pulled down the church directory and I began to pray for each person in there. I prayed that God would heal me. As time went on, I had my surgery and was back up preaching and teaching. I never stopped praying for all of my church members. I prayed for healing, but what I didn't expect was that God grew me during my temporary disability. **He grew me spiritually and he taught me to be a more effective Pastor, because I became a prayer warrior for my people.**"

You see, sometimes God is going to use our thorn, our disability, our adversity to bring good out of it. He wants to enable us to have empathy for others and for us to be more easily approachable. But, he wants to use us to be a blessing to others, too -- that's his power in our weakness. We become a living testimony of God's grace and strength, and faith in him. Whenever you and I come up against something that we don't know how to deal with, and it's beyond our resources, God's always there to carry us through. "My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in your weakness." I don't know what your thorn is, but God can use it.

A North Carolina Pastor told a story about a man in his church who was wealthy, had a nice wife and two sons, and thought he was doing well. He had everything that he could've wanted in life. One day, his older son was accused of murdering somebody and he went to prison. He kept wanting to believe that his son was innocent. He did everything in his power to find a lawyer who could get his son out of prison, but nothing worked. His son was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison without parole. He said, "My thorn became the shame of my son being in prison. I went to my Pastor and I asked him to pray for my son and pray that he would get acquitted. I asked the preacher to contact the church at the prison where my son was. Would you ask the church there to pray for my son and the minister to go and visit him?" And, they did. Whenever this father could go and visit, he would be there to visit his imprisoned son. The father said, "God grew me during that time. I was humbled. My thorn in the flesh was the shame was of my son being in prison. God taught me more about his love during this time than in any other time in my life. I learned to depend on God and that there are some things in life that are beyond us. Now, I am more approachable to other people. I'm more empathetic with other people who have children and issues with their kids. Did God do it? ... No, he didn't cause my son to do what he did. My son made a bad choice. But, God taught me a lot through it."

God's going to use my adversity and your adversity and our thorn to show his character, his glory, and that he did it in and through us. May each of us know that. "My grace is sufficient for you." Jesus is saying, "In whatever you do, I will give you strength. Trust me. I'll get you through and people will see me in you." May others see God in us. Amen.