

2 COR 12.1-10: GOD'S GRACE IS ALWAYS SUFFICIENT

[Chelmsford 31 July 2011]

1. WE ALL HAVE PROBLEMS

Hands up all those who haven't a care in the world - for whom life is like a feather mattress – for whom life has always been sweetness and light! I see before me smiling faces, and yet I know that behind many a smiling face lies heart-ache and pain.

But all too often we pretend otherwise

All too often we say we are 'fine', when in fact the reality is very different. Why is this? Sometimes we don't want to own up because we are fearful that people will think less of us.

To make matters worse, there are some Christians who appear to teach that Christians shouldn't have problems. '*The family that prays together, stays together*' they say – if you have problems with your children, then clearly you have problems with your prayer-life. Believe it or not, I have heard people say the same thing about ill-health. If you or a loved one are unwell, then clearly there must be some hidden sin in your life.

What utter rubbish. Yes, problems can be associated with sin in our lives.

But it is nonsense to suggest that all life's problems are due to sin our lives

We only have to look at spiritual giant like the Apostle Paul and we discover that he had problems – and what was true of Paul has been true of many other Christian leaders.

So please don't be bowed down by a false sense of guilt.

This morning I want us to look at how the Apostle Paul coped with his particular problem – what he called his “**thorn in the flesh**”. So turn with me to 2 Cor 12.

The context is that there were a group of so-called 'super apostles' who were trying to take over the church at Corinth. They sought to usurp Paul's authority by bragging about their spiritual experiences. Paul, by contrast, they were saying is a spiritual wimp – he may be able to write a strong letter, but he can't even preach a decent sermon (10.10).

Clearly he is not a “**true apostle**” (11.12).

Paul was forced to defend himself. I too can brag of “**visions and revelations**” (12.1).

On one occasion I was caught up into the very presence of God himself – I had an 'out-of-the-body' experience when I heard things which I am not allowed to tell anybody (12.3-4).

BUT, he says, “**I will not boast about myself except the things that show how weak I am**” (12.4). He goes on\: “**To keep me from being puffed up with pride because of the many wonderful things I saw, I was given a thorn in the flesh**”

Thank God for his “**thorn in the flesh**”. It shows that even a great Christian like Paul could have problems. What an encouragement that it to ordinary punters like you and me. Thank God for Paul's honesty. If Paul had only spoken of his mountain-top experiences with God, he would have been economical with the truth – he would have been hypocritical/dishonest.

Alas, there are Christians who will only share one side of their lives – the topside, not the bottomside – and in so doing they are hypocrites – they are dishonest.

But what was Paul’s particular problem? .

Literally Paul says he was given “**a thorn in the flesh**” (so NRSV).

Have you ever pruned roses and got a thorn in your finger? Ouch! Or perhaps you trod on something and got a splinter in your foot – ooh, that can be painful.

The actual Greek word Paul used (*skolops*) suggests something worse than that. It could be used of a fish hook – of the kind of sharp stake on which criminals were impaled.

In other words this “thorn in the flesh” Paul had was not some minor affliction – it was agonizing – it was as if a stake was being twisted into his body.

Martin Luther spiritualised the pain and thought it referred to the Devil’s tempting:

“*Paul’s thorn in the flesh means.... the tempting of our faith. He saw it as a big skewer to impale out soul and flesh*”. Most commentators, however, think Luther was wrong.

The thorn in the flesh may well have resulted in a tempting of his faith, but in fact it probably was some physical problem. Indeed, the GNB translates “**a painful physical ailment**”; similarly the NEB “*a sharp physical pain*”, on the other hand the REB keeps the expression “*a thorn in my flesh*”.

There have been all kinds of speculations:-

- Some have suggested that the thorn was *epilepsy* – the fact that Paul fell down on the road to Damascus has been seen as evidence that he was epileptic.
- Or did he suffer from a virulent *malarial fever*? We know that malaria haunted the coast of the Eastern Mediterranean.
- Or was it *eye trouble*? We know that after his experience on the Damascus Road Paul became blind. Perhaps he never recovered? In Gal 4.15 he tells his reader that he would have plucked out his eyes and given them to him; then in Gal 6.11 he writes: “**See what big letters I make as I write to you now with my own hand**”
- Others have suggested that he suffered from a *speech impediment*. Gal 4.14 makes it clear that Paul could make a bad first impression – while in 2 Cor 10.10 implies that he was not an impressive preacher. Did he perhaps stutter? This impediment may not have been physically painful, but it could humiliate, and evoke ridicule and scorn.
- Yet another suggestion is that Paul had a *nagging wife*!

At the end of the day we have to confess we don’t know.

But this is surely helpful – it makes it so much easier for us to identify with him

2. GOD CAN TURN OUR PROBLEMS TO HIS GLORY

Paul describes the “**thorn in the flesh**” as ‘**an angel of Satan**’.

Or as GNB translates v7: “**I was given a painful physical ailment, which acts as Satan’s messenger to beat me and keep me from being proud**”.

This thorn was sent by Satan to wound, limit, if not defeat the apostle. Satan no doubt hoped that it would encourage Paul to give up his missionary work.

BUT at the same time Paul implies that this thorn was actually given by God.

“**I was given**” says Paul a thorn in the flesh.

Scholars say that what we have here is a ‘*divine passive*’ – God is the subject.

To keep Paul from becoming conceited, God gave him this thorn in the flesh.

Here we have a paradox.

- On the one hand the thorn was intrinsically evil; it was intended to harm Paul and his mission
- On the other hand, God in his sovereignty intended it for good.

How could something be at one and the same time both the work of the Devil and the work of God?

Actually we only have to look at the Cross to see how it is possible.

- The Cross on the one hand was the work of the Devil. Thus Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane says to those who came to arrest him “**This is your hour to act, when the power of darkness rules**” (Luke 22.53). To crucify the Son of God was a wicked act.
- Yet the Cross was also the work of God. For God brought good out of evil. There God triumphed over sin and evil. What appeared to be Bad Friday we today call ‘*Good Friday*’

Or consider the selling of Joseph into slavery by his brothers.

- On the one hand this was a wicked thing to do. The brothers were so jealous of Joseph that they sold him for 20 pieces of silver. Think of all the pain and all the trauma that Joseph as also his father Jacob experienced.
- And yet amazingly God was able to use such a wicked act for good. As Joseph later reflected on that event, he discerned the hand of God: “**You plotted evil against me, but God turned it into good, in order to preserve the lives of many people who are alive today because of what God had happened**” (Gen 50.20). Or as the NRSV puts it: “**You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives**”

Apply this way of looking at things which happen in our own personal lives

- On the one hand there are things that happen to us and to our loved ones which are undoubtedly evil. Let’s not try to whitewash trouble or tragedy and praise God for it – that is a foolish and blasphemous thing to do. We have a right to rage against those dark forces that blight our lives.
- But make sure that your anger is vented against those forces, and not against God! In particular as you rage, remember that even the worst can be turned to good. In the words of Paul: “**We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him**” (Rom 8.28).

Yes, even in the darkest of situations God can be at work.

Suffering need not have the last word. God can turn our problems to his glory.

Certainly this was true for Paul

3. GOD ANSWERS PRAYER IN SURPRISING WAYS

Although Paul came to see God at work in his trouble, this was not his first perception. His **“thorn in the flesh”** was highly unwelcome. So what did he do? He prayed

“I prayed to the Lord” (v8) – **“I pleaded with the Lord”** (NRSV) – **“I begged God to remove it”** (Peterson).

What’s more, Paul didn’t pray just once – three times he prayed.

“Three times I prayed to the Lord about this and asked him to take it away” (v8).

But in spite of his prayers, in spite of his faith in God, God did not answer his prayer.

Here we learn that God does not always answer our prayers as we desire

We are surely reminded of the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane – three times Jesus prayed that he might not have to go the way of the cross. **“Father, my Father! All things are possible for you. Take this cup of suffering away from me”** (Mark 14.35)

But God did not take the cup of suffering away. Jesus drank that cup in fullest measure.

Why did God not answer his Son’s prayer? Not because he didn’t care for his Son, God loved his Son. But God had a higher plan – a plan that involved the salvation of the world.

To return to Paul, God did not answer Paul because he did not care for him – indeed the reverse was true – it was precisely because he did care for Paul that he did not answer the prayer.

“To keep me from being puffed up with pride... I was given a painful physical ailment, a thorn in the flesh” (v7). It was for his good. It was to make him a better person.

In the words of one commentator: *“What matters to God is not our health and our happiness, but our being made like Jesus”* (David Prior). God’s priorities are different – and indeed are better.

Here we touch upon what is perhaps the key mystery of life – the mystery of suffering.

It has been said: *“take away sharps and flats, and there is no music; take away suffering, and there is no life”*. Or in the words of an Arab proverb: *“all sunshine makes a desert”*

Suffering can undoubtedly be destructive, but it also can be creative.

It can make for bitterness, but it can also become a means of blessing

For the Polish priest Maximilian Kolbe, who gave his life at Auschwitz so that the father of a family might go free, suffering was *“the fire that purifies everything”* – he wrote in his diary: *“all these trials are useful, necessary, and even indispensable, like the crucible where God is purified”*. Auschwitz, a place of unspeakable suffering, was he said, *“the crucible of affliction to fire Christian love”*.

We do not want to go through tough times – and yet time and again, tough times can be our making.

God did not answer Paul’s prayer – precisely because he was concerned for Paul’s well-being. Just as parents do not always give their children what they want, neither does God. But that is not because he does not love us.

Do note, however, that although God not appear to answer Paul's prayer, the fact is that he did answer, only not in a way that Paul expected. His answer was: **'My grace is all you need for my power is strongest when you are weak'** (v9)

Calvin in his commentary on this passage made a distinction between *means* and *ends*. The *end* Paul wanted was relief from his thorn, and he assumed that the *means* would be the thorn's removal. But God granted the *ends* by another *means*. God gave relief not by removing the thorn, but by adding more grace, sufficient grace. He enabled Paul to cope.

Yes God does answer – but often in ways that surprise us
As the Scriptures remind us, God's ways are not our ways; his thoughts are not our thoughts. But the good news is that in one way or another God does take care of his children. As Paul wrote to the Philippians: **"My God will supply all your needs"** (Phil 4.19)

4. GOD'S POWER OPERATES WHEN WE ARE WEAK

"My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak"

Do notice: God doesn't say that his power will drive out our weakness, but that his power is greatest when we are weak" – or as the NEB put it his power **"comes to its full strength in weakness"**

Weakness is a condition for the operation of God's power.

This may sound strange, but if you remember your physics lessons at school, it is not so strange, I vividly remember playing around with resistors; by means of a device we were able to increase or decreases the flow of electricity. Although the source of the current remained constant, the end product did not. Everything depended on the amount of resistance applied. Where the resistance was strong, the flow was weak'; but where the resistance was weak, the current was strong.

The same is true spiritually: where we are strong, the flows of Christ's power can sometimes be weak; but where we are weak, the flow of his power can be strong.

Notice the word "can". Weakness in itself does not guarantee power – the weak are not always strong. Our weakness must pass into conscious dependence upon God, before God can work. Paul at the beginning of this letter tells of an occasion when **"the burdens laid upon us were so great and so heavy that we gave up all hope of staying alive. We felt that the death sentence had been passed on us. But this happened so that we should rely, not on ourselves, but only on God, who raises the dead. From such terrible dangers of death he saved us, and will save us"** (2 Cor 1.8-10).

God's power operates when we are weak.

Oswald Chambers, a great Christian leader, who used to be the Director of the OMF, once wrote: *"God can achieve his purpose either through the absence of human power and resources, or the*

abandonment of reliance upon them. All through history God has chosen and used nobodies, because the unusual dependence on him made possible the unique display of his power and grace. He chose and used somebody only when they renounced dependence on their natural abilities and resources”.

If God is to use us, we must acknowledge our weakness.

It was Paul’s experience of weakness – his thorn in the flesh – and his realisation that he could do nothing about his problem, which gave God the opportunity to work in his life.

So, if you have a problem, don’t despair

God is at hand – and God in his love will come to you.

He may not answer your problem in the way you would like – but one for sure, his grace will be sufficient, his power will enable you to cope – if you will but surrender yourself and your problems to him.