

Living in Grace/ 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Isn't it amazing how something so small like a splinter of wood in the skin or a thorn that has gotten under the flesh can cause so much pain? You may be surprised to learn that I did woodworking all through high school. I even made a table my senior year. I remember that one time I got a sliver of wood under my nail and I couldn't get it out for anything. So small and yet the pain was intense!

Biblical scholars have a lot of theories about what Paul's thorn might have been. Whatever it was, it seems that it started 14 years before this passage, after the rapturous event he refers to. Because he doesn't tell the readers, the Corinthians, what the thorn was, it is assumed that they already knew what he was referring to. While they may have known, it is good that we don't know. Because then we avoid the risk of comparing our thorns to Paul's. We can now hear this passage in light of whatever our personal thorn might be.

Just about all of us have some thing that makes life hard or causes us to suffer. If you aren't currently suffering a thorn, then I'm sure you have in the past and undoubtedly will again in the future. Unfortunately, challenges and suffering are a part of life. And, perhaps like Paul, you've prayed for the thorn to be removed, only to have God say, as God said to Paul, I won't remove the thorn, but my grace is sufficient. And that is always difficult to hear.

When we are suffering from thorns, it's fair and right to ask God to take them away just like Paul did. It makes sense to think that because God loves us he wants us to be happy, and because God is all powerful, God can take away any thorn – any bad habit, any mental health issue, any health challenge, any relationship conflict.

When God doesn't take the thorn away, we can start to doubt the love and goodness of God. We can begin to question if God cares, or if he is able to do what God promises, or even if God exists at all. When God fails to take away our thorns, we may start to feel like God has failed us. Where is this Love that never fails? Even Jesus cried out on the cross, "why have you forsaken me?"

So what does it mean when God says that Grace is all we need? God is asking us to look for God beyond our immediate experiences. Rather than focus on our own subjective understanding of God and what God can do, God wants us to look to the most complete expression of his grace in the person of Jesus. When we contemplate Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, we can encounter the grace of God in three main ways:

First, God is present with us even as we face the challenges of our thorns. We know this because Jesus suffered from thorns, a literal crown of thorns and also from the metal thorns of the nails that held his hands and feet to the cross. No matter how isolated we might feel, we are never alone because Jesus has shared our thorns and still carries their scars in his flesh.

Second, Jesus trusted his Heavenly Father, even while he was enduring his thorns, he never gave up on God. Despite his questioning God's presence with him on the cross, he was still able to say near the end "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Trust. Faith. Jesus is "the champion who initiates and perfects our faith" as it says in Hebrews (Heb.12:2), Jesus will carry us through the times when we find it hard to trust in God's goodness and love because of the thorns we are enduring.

Third, Jesus is risen from the dead, and because Christ paved the way for us, we too can look forward to the time when our thorns are removed and we are free from affliction. 2 Corinthians 4:18 says that what we endure now will pass away, but the life we have to look forward to through the resurrection of Jesus will last forever. That life will be thorn-free!

Now it would be poor pastoral care to say to someone who is suffering not to worry about the thorns because God's grace should be enough. It can trivialize both the thorns they are enduring, as well as the grace of God. However, I do believe that whatever our thorns may be, God's grace, has everything we need to not only endure the thorns we may be experiencing, but for God to work good through them in our lives and in the lives of the people around us. Paul's thorn was given to him so he would rely on God's grace and remain humble. What if it is the same for us – that God allows us to carry our own thorns so that we would learn to rely on his grace, grow in grace, and become more grace giving to the

people around us? Maybe in the thorn we are able to find an even greater awareness of the presence and love of God.

The challenge for us, then, especially when we are carrying thorns in our lives, is to dive deeper into the grace of God for us in Christ Jesus. One step in faith development is growing in our understanding of God's grace to us in Jesus and how that grace sustains us. As we grow in our knowledge and understanding of God's grace to us in Jesus, God also equips us to bring his grace to others who are also baring their thorns. This isn't by any means easy work. The pain of our thorns can cause a huge distraction, even if it is a relatively small thing, like a sliver of wood. Our thorn is our thorn. Our pain is our pain. We cannot and should not deny that our thorns are painful and at times very painful, but if we keep our focus on Christ then the pain becomes more bearable and even blessings can be found.

A video popped up the other day when I was on the internet. It was a woman talking about her life. She'd been in a severe car accident when she was in her early twenties. The accident had killed her parents and left her a quadriplegic. At the time she felt that there would be nothing for her going forward, but she found the strength and the faith to move forward and she was now married and the mother of two precious sons. She said that she couldn't imagine how life could have been any other way. It was hard what she went through. It was painful and the loss of her limbs and of her parents were soul wrenching, but through it all she found faith and with that she found abundant life.

God's grace has gotten me through the challenges of thorns I've encountered over the years. I will never stop talking about the importance of remembering. When I think back over my life, I remember the grace that God extended to me through friends, through people that came into my life for just a moment but transformed it, for people who illuminated the path for me and reminded me that God was still with me, uplifting me, loving me and guiding my path. And with each difficult time I face, I can recall earlier times and how God saw me through and the strength comes and the faith comes to endure, knowing that God's grace is indeed sufficient. God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow and God was present, is present, and will continue to be present no matter how challenging life may become. That is why remembering those moments of grace are important as we journey through our days.

Finally, I think it is important for us to lean into God's grace when we are struggling. It is important for us to find ways to let go and let God, as the saying goes. Because when we are able to lean into God's grace then we grow in faith and we find resources within to share the Good News of God's grace and love to others who are dealing with thorns.

I think that is especially important in the time we are in as people encounter difficulties that are beyond their control as our government makes life harder for the average person and the poor. We need to share the Good News with confidence that even in the darkest of times, like when Jesus faced his crucifixion, God is there for all of us.

So the question is: Can we be like Paul, that despite our thorns, we proclaim and worship Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Indeed, we need to remember and proclaim that whatever suffering comes our way, Christ's grace is sufficient. It is sufficient for us and it will be sufficient for others if they would just believe. That is the Good News that our suffering country and a suffering world needs to hear - and we need to be sharing that everyday.

Paul believed that despite the pain of his thorn all he needed was God's grace to get him through. We **NEED** to believe as Paul did. The more we find God's grace in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the more we'll find that his grace has everything we need to live with the thorns we carry now until that Day of Resurrection when all suffering will end. Amen.