

The Gift of a Thorn

2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

Andrew Spidahl

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Focus: Power is not ours—we are channels

Function: Trust in God's power, not our own accomplishments and qualifications

When I was a kid, my friends and I liked to go barefoot. We would run races barefoot, climb trees barefoot, and play soccer barefoot. We loved being barefoot.

And one of our badges of honor was “Who had the toughest feet?” We would do contests sometimes, like walking across rocks and seeing who didn’t wince. Or, I remember on really hot summer days—like the days we just had—we would line up on the smooth cement porch, just on the edge of the shade. We’d have a time keeper, and then each of us would take turns stepping out of the shade onto the baking cement and seeing how long we could last on that burning concrete until we jumped back into the relief of the shade again...that was our badge of ‘toughness.’

Of course running around barefoot you had plenty of opportunity to pick up thorns in your flesh. Mostly in your feet. And I have a confession to make: I kind of like getting thorns in my feet. It’s not that I enjoy the pain of it, but I think I developed a liking for the satisfaction of removing the thorn. I liked the fact that you could identify this little tormenter and dig it out with a sterilized needle and tweezers...

No matter how much I enjoyed digging the thorn out, I certainly did not like having the thorn in.

And there was one thorn where I lived that was dreaded; we called it a ‘goat head’. It was a small, hard knot of a seed, but it had two spikes sticking up. For some reason we had a lot of these on our playground. And these goat heads had the ability to take us out of whatever it was we were doing, whether racing, or playing soccer, or playing tag...you could always tell when someone picked one up, because they would stutter hop a few feet to a halt and plop down on their behind while grasping their foot, usually grimacing.

These came out quite easily, but for that moment, they rendered you powerless. Whatever you were doing in the moment suddenly took a back seat. It didn’t matter if you were the fastest runner or the best soccer player, when you picked up a goat head in your bare foot, you found yourself debilitated, on the ground, unable to continue in the same way...

Thorns have the ability to remind us that we are not invincible.

Paul says he was given a thorn in the flesh. We don't know what it was exactly, because he doesn't tell us. He just calls it a thorn in the flesh. Whatever it was, it tormented him and made him weak, and he prayed for God to remove it.

One thing I know from picking up a lot of thorns is that a thorn feels like a thorn. It's painful, it makes you limp, and every time you try to do anything, you are made aware of its pain. You can't run, you can't play soccer, you can't do the same things when you have a thorn. A thorn is a leveler; it reminds us of our weakness.

The thorn in this passage that Paul talks about—the weaknesses he faces—remind me of a question I kick around in my soul every once in awhile:

Why is it that even after we are saved by God, we are given new life in Christ, “life abundant” as Jesus promises, why is it, after receiving the very presence of God in the person of the Holy Ghost, life is still... hard?

Shouldn't we be “living our best life now”? Shouldn't we be experiencing the blessings of living as one of God's children? Why are we facing hardships? Why are we facing persecutions—from our own families!? Why do we feel so weak and powerless? Why do we still suffer from self-doubt, anger, fear, lust, hostility, apathy? If we are living in what we call the “already and not yet” – the in-breaking of the kingdom of God – then why do we so seldom *feel* it?

These questions are equally an expression of longing as they are questions that might find answers... but our passage for today seems to have a clue that might help us negotiate the weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities that face us in this life even though we are children of God.

The thorn offers three gifts to us.

Paul was given a gift. He says, “A thorn was given me in the flesh... to keep me from becoming too elated...” ... To keep me from thinking I could do it. To keep me from thinking *I* held the power...

The first gift of the thorn is that it reminds us in this world we don't hold the power.

We don't know what to do with power. History tells us that. How much destruction has been wreaked by those trying to possess power?

We try to possess it, but power cannot be possessed. Power can only be channeled.

We want to be able to do it ourselves.

Weaknesses remind us that we can't do it. We are not able to do it. Functional atheism says we can do it. Parker Palmer says that one of the pitfalls of our life is what he calls “functional atheism” – the belief that unless we do something, nothing will get done. Unless it's done in our power and our understanding, it won't be done at all.

When we fall into the temptation of functional atheism, weaknesses become a threat.

This is an exceptionally gifted congregation. We look around and we see brilliant scholars, faithful Christians, successful businesspeople, talented artists, educated, refined, and cultured individuals... and for that we celebrate. We rejoice in the strengths found here, and the gifts of God exercised on behalf of the community. I'm proud to belong to Hope Church.

But to keep me from being too elated...to keep me from thinking that we've got it all, that we can do it with the power, the gifts, and the money we've been given, Paul is telling us his lesson of the thorn in the flesh – that it's God's grace that is sufficient; that power is made perfect not in strength, but in weakness.

Weakness is not a threat, but a place where power is accessed.
The gift of the thorn in the flesh is that it can save us from functional atheism.

The second gift of the thorn is that it opens for us a new attentiveness, not to our own weaknesses or strengths, but rather to God's power at work in our midst. God's power through ourselves and God's power through others who are weak. The gift of the thorn is that we begin to see others who are "weak"—who have no power and nothing to commend them to the world—as hotspots for God's power to work. We begin to value them in their weakness.

Just as the virgin Mary was weak and powerless in so many ways to this world and yet carried Christ, so too those who are weak and powerless in our world can become vessels of our own salvation by bearing Christ's power within their weakness.
Seeing God's power in others' weakness gives us strength to face our own...

Are you too old? So were Abraham and Sarah when they had the child Isaac.
Are you unable to speak well? So was Moses when God called him to be a prophet.
Are you too small? So was David, when he faced Goliath.
Are you too few? So was Gideon's army when God called them to face the hordes of Midian—300 against 10,000.
Are you too insignificant? So was Mary when God chose her to bear Jesus.
Are you too sinful? So was Paul when God chose him to be an evangelist.
The gift of the thorn is that in our weaknesses we can more clearly see God's power and become a channel of that power.

And finally, the gift of the thorn is that it reminds us that Christ's power is the power of life through death—the power of resurrection. The experience of death at work in our bodies reminds us of what Jesus said, that “unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit...” (John 12:24). Or listen to what Paul told the Corinthians in his first letter: “what you sow does not come to life unless it dies” (15:36).
And death feels like death. Thorns feel like thorns. When life is hard, it really is hard—and with the gift of the thorn we can see this hardship as opportunity to experience the power of life in God rather than fear the experience of pain and death.

Perhaps this is the hardest mystery to understand this side of death—so I've called a witness this morning, a wild iris...

I would like to offer you a poem from a woman who looked at flowers, and then considered what it feels like for a flower to experience life and death. I think this poem gets at the mystery of the experience of death and life in Christ.

The Wild Iris by Louise Gluck:

At the end of my suffering
there was a door.

Hear me out: that which you call death
I remember.

Overhead, noises, branches of the pine shifting.
Then nothing. The weak sun
flickered over the dry surface.

It is terrible to survive
as consciousness
buried in the dark earth.

Then it was over: that which you fear, being
a soul and unable
to speak, ending abruptly, the stiff earth
bending a little. And what I took to be
birds darting in low shrubs.

You who do not remember
passage from the other world
I tell you I could speak again: whatever
returns from oblivion returns
to find a voice:

from the center of my life came
a great fountain, deep blue
shadows on azure seawater.

The gift of the thorn is that it reminds us that Christ's power in us is a door at the end of our suffering. It is the same reminder we celebrate in baptism—that we taste death only to rise to new life. And in our daily suffering, God's power is being made perfect in us – so that we can say with Paul, “When I am weak, then I am strong.”