

Sermon Manuscript: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

On the Stake of Suffering

7th Sunday after Pentecost – July 11, 2021

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. [NIV]

Pain comes in many forms. There is the intense pain of something like a broken bone or a major burn. There is the sudden pain that comes from stubbing your toe or jamming your finger. There is the excruciating pain of a migraine headache or an infected tooth. There are the waves of pain that a woman endures when she delivers her baby. There is the ongoing pain of things like arthritis or bad back.

And pain comes in varying degrees. If you go to the doctor with some pain you will be asked indicate how bad the pain is on a scale of 1 to 10. Labor pains or some forms of cancer may top out at 10. The sprained ankle might be something like a four. And while a burned finger might hurt, it probably doesn't even rate a 1. Even the itch from a mosquito bite or a sunburn is a form of pain.

The fact that we can feel pain is a part of how we are fearfully and wonderfully made by God. Pain serves a very important purpose. It lets us know that something isn't right. The pain that comes from heat makes us pull away from the flame. The pain that comes from injury let us know to seek a remedy. When we feel pain it often serves the purpose of keeping us from hurting ourselves even worse.

Pain also comes in different degrees. The words of Paul for us today are where he talks about his "thorn in the flesh." This was a source of pain for him. What was this thorn? Just how much pain did it cause him? The word he uses for thorn can mean anything from the splinter you get in your finger to a thorn like the ones that pierced Jesus brow to a sharpened pole or stake that was used for torture and execution. From the stake of pain and suffering that Paul experienced in his life, he teaches us about what to do when we are **ON THE STAKE OF SUFFERING**.

1. We May Be Threatened by the Thorns

Do we have a realistic view of suffering? To a degree I suppose it depends on the kinds of suffering we have experienced in our life. But I also think that we would all agree that we would like to avoid suffering if it all possible. We live in a culture that likes to propose that we should be free from pain and suffering. The prevailing attitude is that it's unfair to have to suffer. If suffering does come we should be able to get rid of it immediately. I should be able to go to the doctor and receive a pill that will take the pain away. The pain of stress can be relieved with a few favorite cocktails or a different kind of pill. When I'm tired, there's coffee for that. We can be left with the impression that we shouldn't even be uncomfortable, let alone suffer pain.

But this is simply not realistic. If you look at the world we live in, it is obvious that suffering will inevitably come. Illness, injury and loss part and parcel of experiencing life in this world. You can't escape it. To think that you can is to live in a world of fantasy.

Paul looked at life through a different set of eyes. In the first part of this chapter he describes how he saw a marvelous vision of paradise and heaven. He saw how things are completely different there. The paradise of his vision shows us that suffering is something that is for the here and now in this world. But something better waits for us in the life that comes after this one.

Paul was certainly a man who is familiar with the suffering that occurs in this life. Last week we heard about his being in prison. He faced imminent death. The week before that we heard about the terrible storm at sea that he endured and how it ended in shipwreck. If we read through the book of Acts we see how he was rejected, beaten, stoned, imprisoned on other occasions. On his many travels he went without food, without proper clothing. He endured heat and cold, exhaustion and danger as well as many other hardships.

In addition to all of this there was this "thorn in the flesh" that he describes here. We don't know exactly what it was, but we can get an idea of what he experienced from the way he describes it. First of all, it was a source of pain. His word for it could mean anything from a splinter to a thorn to a stake used for torture and death. It would seem to be something that caused him physical pain.

It was also something that was ongoing and long lasting. He says that it tormented him. This word describes it like a fist or a club that struck him over and over again. He was beaten by the thorn of the suffering. Some have suggested that it was pain that he experienced when he walked. And Paul walked a lot of miles! Others guess that he suffered from the repeated debilitation of malaria that would periodically make him so weak and sick that he couldn't carry out his work. Whatever it was, it struck him again and again like repeated blows from a boxer.

He calls it "a messenger of Satan." In a way it was a little taste of hell. It was ongoing suffering that seemed like it never would end. It was the kind of thing that surely tempted him to doubt the Lord's love and care. It was the kind of thing that must have caused sins of frustration and anger. Think of your own life. What is that thing that happens to you that makes you curse under your breath or lash out at the person who has the misfortune of being near you at the time. Paul's thorn in the flesh tormented him with suffering.

What do we do when suffering comes into our lives? It can threaten us with its thorns. It can threaten us with despair. Some forms of suffering like the one that Paul endured are ongoing. They never seem like they will have an end. This can lead us to want to give up on ever being free of it. We can think the thought of the pessimist who says: "Life is hard and then you die!"

It can also lead us to blame God. Like so many people do, we can cry out, "Why me!?" Job did it. He questioned God and his motives. He doubted that God loved him. He declared that God was unjust and unfair. If God hadn't intervened with his grace toward Job, Job might have ended in total despair and unbelief. He might have ended up hating God. Do you know someone who has declared their hatred for God because of some suffering they have endured? Satan has delivered his message and whispered in a fragile ear: "How can a loving God allow you to endure this?"

Suffering can also make us into stakes of suffering for others. We can be that thorn in someone's side. "I'm miserable so why shouldn't they be too? Misery loves company." Our pessimism and irritability can become like a briar patch of barbs and thorns to bring pain to others. Forgive us, Lord!

Instead, when suffering comes, look to the example that Paul gives us. He took his suffering to the Lord in prayer. He repeatedly pleaded with Jesus to take the thorn away from him. He formally prayed on three different occasions for the stake to be removed. We can be sure there were other times when he cried out, "Lord, help me!" Not only did he pray. His attitude was always one that said, "Your will be done." He understood and welcomed the fact that the Lord's answer to his prayers would be the best answer. "What God ordains is always good!" as the hymn says. He wanted a "yes" answer but willingly accepted "no." He trusted his Lord and Savior to do what was best for him for the long haul.

The secret here is that when we pray as Paul did, God will change our hearts to be like his. He will change our perspective on our suffering. We will understand that this world cannot help but be a place of pain. Pain is a warning sign that something isn't right. This world isn't right because sin is in it. Sin permeates our entire existence as long as we are in this world. There is something wrong in our lives. There is something that is wrong in us. It is only God who can change us. Only Jesus can bring relief when we are on the stake of suffering. When we are threatened by the thorns, let us cry out to Jesus and be made strong by his cross.

2. We Are Made Strong by His Cross

All our suffering has a cure in the cross. Paul's word for thorn can also mean a type of cross. It was a word sometimes used for a type of crucifixion. Jesus suffered the ultimate "thorn." Jesus' answer to Paul's pleas to take the thorn away was his grace. "My grace is sufficient for you," the Lord Jesus said. The undeserved love that Jesus had for Paul was what Paul really needed. Jesus' grace is all we really need in the end as well.

We really deserve nothing but suffering because of sin. The age-old question of why good people suffer bad things finds its answer in the fact that is clearly declared across God's Word. Because we belong to a race that is in rebellion against its Creator, anything above the suffering of eternal damnation is God's grace. There really are no "good people." Solomon declares God's verdict: *"There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins."* [Ecclesiastes 7:20] David writes in Psalm 53: *"Everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one."* [Psalm 53:3]

In spite of all of this, God's grace mapped the path that led to the cross – the stake of ultimate suffering for Jesus. Jesus has already freed us from the eternity of suffering in hell because he suffered on the stake of the cross so we don't have to. We are set free from the suffering for eternity that sin deserved. It's gone! In its place Jesus has provided and promised us an eternity that will be free from suffering. Knowing that this is what is in store for us gives us courage and patience to endure suffering that threatens us in our lives now.

But realize that we cannot overcome suffering and face it by ourselves. That's what Jesus explained to Paul. Jesus tells him to put his trust in grace. "My grace is sufficient for you." "Suffering will all

too often come. But trust me. It's for a reason. It will all work for your eternal good in the end. I am with you always." This is what the Lord told Job. It's what he told Abraham, David, the prophets who were persecuted and John who waited patiently on Patmos and prayed, "Amen. Come Lord Jesus!" [Revelation 22:20] If Jesus' grace was sufficient for all these, it will be good enough for us too!

Suffering finds its purpose in the cross of Jesus. Jesus' told Paul, "No." That answer certainly doesn't seem like a cure for Paul's problem! Jesus' purpose for Paul was to keep Paul as a useful instrument. Pride and conceit could render Paul useless. Paul understood that. Paul had been given many blessings from Jesus. The extraordinary visions Paul had seen could make him think he was special – better than other Christians. But Jesus made Paul realize that he wasn't. "To keep me from becoming conceited..." [verse 7] The big reason for the thorn was to prevent this. Jesus used it to keep Paul in the right spiritual place. Paul would rely on the strength of Jesus instead of his own misplaced pride in his own importance. "My power is made perfect in weakness." [verse 9] When Paul felt that thorn, he couldn't help but realize just how weak he was. His only true source of strength had to be Jesus. We only truly see the power of Jesus when we can stop looking for false, non-existent power in ourselves. Thorns of suffering – the stake of suffering can accomplish that. It is a tool of Jesus' grace.

We are honed by the stake of suffering. It makes us strong because it makes us rely on Jesus. It's easy and obvious to look at hardship and suffering as something that is always and completely bad. Paul's experience shows us how Jesus uses suffering to mold us.

Jesus wants us to be his servants. He wants us to be effective. But we can feel very ineffective as Christians. The problem may be that we are relying on ourselves. Jesus uses suffering to cause us to lean on him. When we do, we will become truly effective servants of Jesus. Whether it's serving him as we live and speak as his representatives before the world or in the lives we live in our families; whether it's at our jobs or how we manage our money and other blessings that God showers on us; whether it's in loving service to other people or in the faithfulness of our personal worship of God, Jesus will make us more effective by leading us to rely on him more and more. The stake of suffering is one way he accomplishes that.

It's hard to let go and listen to the Lord's Word when it says difficult things. But that's where true help in times of suffering lies. God says, "Be still, and know that I am God." [Psalm 46:10] The Sons of Korah declare: *I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?" My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, "Where is your God?" Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.* [Psalm 42:9-11]

Like them, like Paul, like so many other sisters and brothers who have come before us and found themselves on the stake of suffering, by God's grace let us also confess: "My hope is in God. I will praise him, my Savior and my God." Amen.