

WINNING THROUGH LOSING

PASTOR SANDY ADAMS, CALVARY CHAPEL STONE MOUNTAIN, GA



When a reporter visits the winning team's locker room, players often credit God for their success. But no one in the losers' locker room ever claims the loss was God's will. Apparently, the god of sports reveals himself only when you win. But not so with the true God, the God of the Bible! He shows up, and especially in a loss.

In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, we see God work through weakness. “[A] *thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure*” (verse 7b). In a heavenly vision, Paul had been shown things too holy to utter. But with this revelation God gave Paul an aggravation. He didn't want Paul to get the big head, so a thorn in the flesh was given to him.

This “thorn” was more than a pebble in his shoe. It was a stake, a stabbing physical pain. We don't know exactly what it was, but we do know what Paul did about it: he prayed. In verse 8b, Paul writes, “*I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.*” Yet God refused to remove the thorn.

Why does the Scripture never identify what Paul's thorn was? Perhaps God left the blank empty so we could fill it in with our own particular malady. By not answering, “What was Paul's thorn?” Scripture prompts us to ask, “What is my thorn?”

What is your thorn? Is it an illness—migraines, allergies, high blood pressure, chronic pain, a recurring cancer? Is it a chemical imbalance, substance addiction, clinical depression? Perhaps it's a personality trait—too timid, impulsive, or abrasive? A lack of confidence or too much confidence? Have you prayed—perhaps far more than three times—for God to remove your thorn, and He hasn't?

God refused to remove Paul's thorn, “*lest [he] be exalted above measure*” (verse 7b). It kept Paul grounded. The thorn was

a permanent reminder of how much he needed God, how dependent he was on Him. We assume when God says “no” it means He doesn't love us. To the contrary, God's “no” is as laced with love as His “yes.”

Yet, Paul didn't see his thorn as a gift, not at first. He pleaded three times for God to remove it. It's difficult to see the value of a thorn, especially in its initial stages. A thorn is painful. It's an unwanted hassle. We pray, “God, take your tweezers and pluck it out.” But over time its purpose becomes apparent. It's seen as a gift. Imagine, a thorn gift.

God answers Paul's plea to remove the thorn in verse 9b: “*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.*” Finally, Paul concludes, “*I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of*

Nothing is as sinister as pride. And God knows the uneasiness, squirming, or even the pain caused by a thorn is going to keep your spirit in line with Him. God knows the proper mix of blessings and buffetings needed to insure that we grow up without puffing up. If a thorn keeps us at God's throne, then mission accomplished.

Rather than get mad at God for not removing his thorn, Paul learned to view his thorn as God's gift. He rejoiced in the weakness it caused; for it became God's opportunity to demonstrate His supernatural strength. Paul rejoices in verse 10, “*Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*” He took pleasure in circumstances where he was no longer in control. A weak Paul

empowered by God's grace was more effective than a strong Paul at peak performance. Paul was confident that God's grace was sufficient.

In her hymn “He Giveth More Grace,” Annie Flint writes this about the Lord: “For out of His infinite riches in Jesus, He giveth and giveth and giveth again.” Grace means favor. By

His Spirit, God pours out the fruits of His favor—joy, peace, love, endurance—on those who trust in His Son.

This is God's way, so don't despise the thorn. You might never enjoy it; but when you embrace it, God uses it in the way He intended to all along. God does His greatest work in our defeats, not victories; in losses, not wins; in weakness, not strength. Rest in this: When we are at our weakest, God makes us strongest. ✨

Sandy Adams is pastor of Calvary Chapel Stone Mountain in Atlanta, GA. He is the author of Chapter by Chapter and Kid Gloves: Biblical Guidelines For Handling Your Kids. You can access his teachings at www.sandyadams.org.

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Christ may rest upon me” (9c). His thorn was still a thorn. It still caused pain. But Paul accepted it as a gift. A wise old saint once said that there is peace and power in “an accepted sorrow.” When Paul accepted his thorn as a gift, God gave him strength.

All too often we want the elimination of our weakness, yet God opts for transformation. We hope He removes the obstacle, heals the disease, changes my personality, wipes out my enemies, plucks out the thorn—but God answers, “no.” Instead, God works to transform our weakness into a strength. P.T. Forsyth wrote, “It is a greater thing to pray for pain's conversion than for its removal.”

There is one thing more lethal than any thorn we endure: our pride. Pride is the sin by which Lucifer fell. Pride made a devil.