

A THORN IN THE FLESH

You have heard that expression before—a thorn in the flesh—and you probably have some curiosity about it. A great saint like Paul with his checkered past who gradually becomes one of the great apostles of the ancient world and eventually is martyred in Rome under the persecution of Nero. What was his thorn in the flesh? The truth is we don't know. We can try to imagine but it would only be guesswork. All we know is that he believed he had been given a thorn in the flesh. He had asked God to have it taken away and the response from the Lord was that His grace was sufficient.

But why wouldn't the Lord take something away that was irritating and debilitating and humbling and the object of a heartfelt request? Why wouldn't the Lord do that? After all we really want to be free of it and would be better off without this thorn in the flesh. Yes? Well maybe not. Maybe we are better off with the thorn in the flesh AND the grace that comes to us specifically to cope with that thorn. "My grace is enough for you." Perhaps we were given the thorn in the flesh so that we would ask the lord for his help, his assistance, his grace. And without the thorn we would not ask—and hence would not receive.

What would you say is your thorn in the flesh? And do you know when it was given or why? Is it a tendency in you? A particular desire? An orientation or proclivity towards something? What is that thing that you know you want out of you? Is it a weakness? A spiritual weakness or emotional weakness or psychological weakness? Is your thorn in the flesh a memory that holds power over you? Is it a habit that persists? Is it something you did? Or something you didn't do? That you believe you would be so much better if it were not now part of your life and was never part of your life? And why would Jesus not simply take it away? I know that there have been dimensions of my life where I have been beset and troubled by things, begged God to remove them and received that grace. Why wouldn't God do that every time?

Because God doesn't do just one thing. Do you think Peter might identify his thorn as the time he professed that he was willing to die for Jesus and the denied him three times the same night? Might the other apostles have identified their thorn in the flesh as their running away afraid on the night Jesus is betrayed by one of their

own. I could see all of them wanting that memory to be gone. I have no difficulty grasping how irritating and irksome such memories might be. Or when James and John approached Jesus with the request to sit at his right and left in his kingdom right after he told them he was going to be put to death.

Might Jesus himself have had a thorn in the flesh? In the agony in the garden he prays for his Father to “take the cup away” so that he did not have to drink it. But the Father doesn’t. The Father sends the Holy Spirit to comfort and sustain along with a few of the most faithful people the world has ever known. But Jesus dies. Why doesn’t the Father remove the cup when his Son asks? The Father says what Jesus says, “My grace is enough for you.” Even for his Son. Grit it out. Hang in with all you can bring to the task—and I will supply the rest. I will be with you—trust and believe. And the grace I supply to you in those moments: I am not thinking just of you. I am thinking of what I can accomplish in and through you if you allow me to and open to me and ask for my help and assistance. Without your thorn in the flesh you would not ask and I could not get the best access to you that would do the most good. So instead I give you a thorn in the flesh and the grace in abundance that comes when you pray and ask for help: such moments will transform the face of the earth. My grace will be unleashed precisely in and through you and your “thorn in the flesh” that you hate and want out of your life. But the Father says: Trust me. Believe me. My grace is enough for you.

Isn’t there better way? Perhaps. But we human beings have short memories. We do not always remember all that the Lord has done for us. Perhaps the thorn in our flesh is to serve as a reminder of the thorn in his flesh, the very crown of thorns that he wore to his death for our sake. Sometimes the Lord lets us participate in his own love and suffering for us in such a way that new life is born. We need a grace. We have to ask Our Lord to be able to recognize when it is appropriate for us like Paul to continue with a thorn in the flesh. Not because it is easy or enjoyable but because we recognize when a gift has been given which is an unlikely but grace-filled gift.