

The Thorn in the Flesh

2 Corinthians 11:30-12:10, especially 12:7-10

Will you turn to 2 Corinthians 5 please? This is called “the thorn in the flesh,” pure and simple, which is in 2 Cor 12, but I will read something from 2 Cor 5 first.

There is a book on the Sermon on the Mount called *The Divine Conspiracy*, by Dallas Willard. The divine conspiracy? God is conspiring to do something? I had to dig around in that book to find out what the divine conspiracy actually was.

It is in a couple of paragraphs in the introduction. It is a catchy title, but it is not mentioned elsewhere, and I don't think it was Mr. Willard's plan to give the book that title.

Here's the divine conspiracy. God has a kingdom, and we each have a kingdom. Our kingdom is whatever we control. We often want to control things we cannot control, but never mind about that. What DO you control, in a day, a week, a month? That's your kingdom. God will not take your kingdom away. That's your kingdom.

But he's conspiring to have you put your kingdom at the service of his kingdom. He wants my kingdom to be devoted to his kingdom. He wants me to use my control to take his kingdom forward not mine. That, pure and simple, is the Divine conspiracy, God's conspiracy. Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and he will watch over you and care for you.

2 Cor 5:14-15 *For Christ's love for us compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died [in the sense that if he had not died for us, we ourselves would have died]. And he died for all, so that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

And he died for all, so that those who live [that would be you and me] should no longer live for ourselves but for him who died for us and was raised again.

He died for all so that this would happen, he died for us so that we would no longer live for ourselves, but for him who died for us and rose again. And that, my brothers and sisters, is the divine conspiracy. Our kingdom at the service of his kingdom.

Now to 2 Corinthians 11. From 11:22 to 12:10 we get what Paul himself calls his “fool's speech.” False apostles in Corinth have told people that Paul is not really an apostle, don't listen to Paul, and they are taking the Corinthians away from Christ. Paul can't bring them back to Christ unless he speaks about himself enough to get them to listen to him.

The false apostles make speeches bragging about themselves. Paul finds this desperately foolish.

But he does something like it, so perhaps the Corinthians will listen to him. But Paul does two things in his speech that the false apostles would never do. One, he keeps saying this is foolish, it is not the way Christ's servants speak. Two, he brags about his troubles and weaknesses, and all the ways God has not rescued him. The super apostles were nothing like that.

Paul's fool's speech has four paragraphs. The first we covered last week, 11:22-29, where he lists all the hard things that have happened to him, all the ways the Lord let him be vulnerable.

The second paragraph is 11:30-33. It is the story of escaping from Damascus by being let down in a basket through a window in the city wall. All are a little baffled that this story is here, but point must be that this was not impressive. Perhaps the false apostles told stories of powerful miraculous rescues.

Paul had experienced at least one of those, too, the midnight earthquake in the Philippi jail. But here, he's rescued by friends, nothing about God's power at all, nothing about Paul's boldness, Paul was helpless and passive, a piece of luggage. We assume he means something like that.

The third paragraph is 12:1-6, Paul's vision 14 years earlier. We'll read this. *I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord.* ² *I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows.* ³ *And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—* ⁴ *was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.* ⁵ *I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.* ⁶ *Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.*

Paul had a remarkable experience of God. The first heaven is right above us, where the birds fly, the second heaven is where the sun and moon and stars and planets are, and the third heaven is where God lives. This was something like John in Revelation.

But notice: 1, Paul has to go back 14 years to get a good vision or revelation. Nothing more recent apparently. 2, he has nothing to tell. It is either forbidden to speak of it, or he can't put it into words. Either way, nothing to tell. And 3, Paul writes as if it was someone else. It clearly is his own story, but he won't say that directly, it would be too much like the boasting he hates.

If I boasted, I'd be speaking the truth. He said a similar thing earlier in the fool's speech, 11:31, God knows he's not lying. My brothers and sisters, when people brag about their spiritual life, sometimes they are lying. Paul at least suspects, perhaps knows, that these false apostles that boast in their successes are not telling the truth.

V6b *But I refrain [even from telling the truth about my vision], so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.* P wants evaluation by daily speech and actions.

People, even genuine spiritual experience, real visions and revelations, tell us nothing important about the person who received them. Jesus said we can tell true and false prophets from each other by their fruit, not by their call story or their spiritual experiences.

Even if the story is true, it doesn't matter. Paul wanted people to test him by his life and daily words. I have in mind two different people, a woman and later a man, both had powerful experiences of God, both I think were telling me the truth, and in neither case was there real fruit in their lives at all. People with no experience show far more love for the Lord.

Paul wanted to be tested by his daily life and daily words. He knew he'd do okay by that test, and he knew the false apostles would not.

Fourth paragraph, the thorn in the flesh. 12:7-10.

V7b Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, to keep me from being conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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.

1. V7 Paul had a conceit problem. The NIV only has this once, I've added it to my NIV version, but it is in there twice, there's not much doubt, and most of your versions have the conceit problem mentioned two times, although one is enough.

This was "experience" conceit. Paul was conceited because he had a great experience of God, a great revelation of God. To God, this was a big problem. Perhaps one reason Paul mentions it twice is that the false apostles had much conceit because of their experiences.

And I have to say this: Paul does not seem distressed by his conceit. He's not wringing his hands. Does he feel guilty? Not that I can tell. Is conceit okay? Certainly not, Paul knows that. God wants no conceit. Does Paul confess and ask forgiveness? Not mentioned. God sends a severe thorn, and Paul wants that to go away. That's all we know.

2. V7 *I was given a thorn in my flesh, to torment me.* What is the thorn exactly? No one knows. People have suggested a many different things. A common one is physical suffering, a painful problem in his body, taking "flesh" as physical body.

But "flesh" can also mean "human weakness," and then it could be a temptation, or a mental health problem, or other false teachers that follow him around.

We don't know. But my brothers and sisters, this is clear: God has made it wide open, because he wants to comfort and encourage us. Something that torments you. A thorn to torment you. Paul was no softy. This had to be pretty severe, and we also have such.

3. V7 *I was given a messenger of Satan.* Satan? 1 Th 2:18 *We wanted to come to you, certainly I Paul did, again and again, but Satan blocked our way.* Why does the Lord let Satan do these things? But, Paul is not distressed, he takes this also in a matter of fact way, it does not disturb his theology.

When he writes "I was given," more accurate would be "it was given to me," but either way this comes from Christ or from God. It was because of Paul's conceit, and this kind of passive phrase occurs often in the Bible, it given by the Lord. Satan wanted to torment Paul, and the Lord said, "this one I will let through." Paul knew that, and knew the Lord loved him, so not offended.

Even though it is a messenger of Satan, the Lord is really the one who gave it, Paul asks the Lord to take it away, and he does not. Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, everything answers to him.

4. *Three times I pleased with the Lord to take it away from me.* Satan or not, Paul knows who is in charge here. It is the Lord. Usually prayers are to God, but sometimes to the Lord, like here.

Three times: someone else prayed three times, "*Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me.*" Mark 14. That is a desperate prayer, too. My brothers and sisters, the Lord has been on the other side of this one. He knows about asking three times and not getting the answer he wanted.

We must completely get rid of the idea that there is a prayer trick. I mean this, that if we pray a certain way, then God will certainly give us what we asked. By this thinking, if we don't receive, we are not asking properly. That is so wrong. If there was a right way to pray, Paul certainly knew it, he's seen many miracles. If there was a right way to pray, he used it these three times.

Paul has faith, but he does NOT know what Christ will do, just as Christ did not know what the Father would do. Some prayer verses in the Bible make is sound like doubting means we know God will give what we request. I do not understand all of those Scriptures, but in this story, prayer is just asking for something we want very much, and that is a good way to pray.

Paul prayed three times, as the Lord did. Don't make too much of the number three. I would hate anyone to turn this sermon in a new kind of prayer trick. The "three" is mostly to remind us of Christ, I think. Paul did ask repeatedly, that's obviously okay to do, no problem there.

5. V9 *But he said to me, "my grace is sufficient for you."* Paul did not get what he requested, but the Lord did hear his prayer. He has always heard our prayers, my brothers and sisters.

My grace: grace here is not forgiveness or welcoming a sinner, but rather “help.” The NT uses “grace” this way quite often. Free undeserved help. What is that help? 4:16 *outwardly we are wasting away, but inwardly we are renewed day by day. Day by day.*

Lam 3: *The Lord’s compassions never fail, they are new every morning, great is your faithfulness. New every morning. Inwardly we are renewed every day. My grace is sufficient for you.*

The Lord may not give us what we want, but he never gives us *nothing*. Never. Every day, some kind of Holy Spirit injection, some spiritual help and strengthening. The Lord always responds to a prayer like Paul’s, even if not what Paul wanted.

6 *My power is made perfect in weakness.* Did Paul stop feeling weak? No, he continued to be pressed, perplexed, chased, and struck down, as he said in 2Cor4. It does not seem that Paul could feel this daily grace, except that he kept going. The experience of weakness continued.

What does this power of Christ look like? Let’s do some chronology here. Paul’s revelation was 14 years earlier. How long did it take him to get conceited? Probably not long. How long after the conceit did it take to get Satan’s thorn from the Lord? Probably not long.

It is only 5-6 years since Paul began the Corinthian church. The Corinthians have only known him with this thorn and with the power of Christ resting on him.

And they have been persuaded to dismiss him because he was too weak and troubled. Paul did not feel powerful, and he did not look powerful, still looked weak and troubled, at the same time as Christ’s power is being made perfect in Paul, BECAUSE of these weakness.

What is the real reason for the thorn? Paul’s conceit? No. Christ’s power. At the start, the reason for the thorn was a character weakness of Paul. But now something more important has taken over. Now the reason is so that Christ’ power can rest perfectly on Paul.

Vv9b-10a *Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.* ¹⁰ *That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses.*

Therefore I will boast gladly in my weaknesses. That is why I delight in weaknesses. This enjoyment requires two things. One, the divine conspiracy succeeded. That is we have decided to put our kingdom at the service of God’s kingdom. We have decided not to live for ourselves, but for the one who lived and died for us.

Two, we believe what the Lord is telling us here, that his grace is enough each day, and that his power works far better. What does his power resting on us actually do, and what does it look like? I cannot answer. Let Christ decide. Trust him, he knows what he’s doing, let him decide, it is not our business. But we need to grasp that we are more use to him in our weakness.

Many of us are disappointed in ourselves. We cannot do for Christ what we thought we could do. We DO want to live for him, we are too weak and troubled to do what we had hoped. In this Scripture, Christ says to us, “No, this is perfect, what **I** want to do with you, what **I** really want, works better this way. You said you would live for me, and I am taking you at your word.”

Here’s another way of looking at it. Success. Maybe your life has not turned out at all as you had hoped. Your desire for a certain kind of success was honourable, but it never happened. Things have come up, and you have never gotten there. Others have had that kind of success, but not you.

Maybe the Lord has re-routed you so his power could rest you more perfectly. You will say, “I don’t see any power of Christ on me.” True. But Paul rarely if ever felt this in himself, and the believers found him a weak and troubled man, not at all what an apostle should be, by their definition.

We each need to picture ourselves having this conversation with the Lord. We speak to the Lord:
Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take my thorn away from me.

The Lord answer us: *But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

We are encouraged to hear this, because we want to live not for ourselves, but for him: *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, because then Christ’s power rests on me.*

Amen.