

“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”

Most of us have something about our lives that we would like to change, but can't. It might be how we look, our health, a disability, an unhappy or broken relationship, something about our children or spouse we'd like to change, or our financial situation. Perhaps you'd like to bring back someone who has died, we long to find a husband or wife, to have a child or to find a new job.

When we are aware that we are living with some kind of limitation it can be a constant source of physical or emotional pain. We may forget about it for a while but then something reminds us of what is missing, what hurts, what we can't change, and it hurts.

Most of us here have probably banged on God's door in prayer about these things, perhaps many times over many years about the same thing, begging him to do something to take away our pain or frustration. And when God doesn't do what we ask, when he seems to say “no”, we can easily become frustrated, angry, bitter and walk around with a chip on our shoulder, or we lose heart and lose faith. What we feel we are missing and what God is not doing for us paralyzes our Christian life, robbing it of joy and energy. To have to live with something we'd desperately like God to change is a huge challenge to life and faith.

In these verses from 2 Corinthians St Paul talks about something in his life that he desperately wanted God to do something about. We aren't told what it was. Some suggest Paul had a sight problem, a speech impediment or a debilitating illness like malaria or epilepsy, migraines or depression. Some suggest he had a physical disfigurement. Whatever it was other people noticed it and Paul suffered because of it. It limited his life in some way. Paul called it a **“thorn in my flesh”**, and **“messenger of Satan” (v7)**. The word “thorn” in Greek also means a pointed stake used for torture or execution. Paul's problem was torture for him, it hurt badly, and the Devil wanted to use it to destroy his faith.

And God, where was God in all this? God seemed to allow it to remain. God didn't take it away. Three times Paul begged God to take it away, but Paul had to live with it. Now he could have become bitter about that, lost heart and lost faith, but as he wrestled with God about his problem, Paul learned three things from his “thorn in the flesh”.

1. Firstly, he saw God had a purpose in it.

In his case he was led to see that God was teaching him humility. You see Paul was an expert in theology, he had been a leading Pharisee. He was knowledgeable and could argue well. He became a Christian in a spectacular way. He literally “saw the light” - he saw Jesus himself on the Damascus road. In the verses before this (v1-6) he tells how he was also given a special vision of heaven. He saw paradise itself! It would have been so easy for Paul to run around the countryside giving his testimony with everyone falling all over him. He could easily have become spiritually smug and proud. Some in the Corinthian church were bragging about their own spiritual experiences and Paul could have trumped them all with his being caught up into heaven and seeing Jesus at his conversion, but he says he would prefer to boast of his

weaknesses. Over time as he struggled with the limits of his “thorn in the flesh” he saw God keeping him humble through his suffering.

I wonder what God is teaching you through the things you can't change but would like him to? [f we are always full of resentment to God we will never discover what God might want us to see and learn. That doesn't mean we stop asking God for relief, but we also need to ask God “what can I learn from this, about myself, about life, about other people, about faith?”

2. The second thing Paul learnt from “ his “thorn in the flesh” was to depend more on the grace of God. When we are at the end of our human strength, all we have is God's strength to carry us through. And it does. That's what Paul discovered. Every time he begged God to remove his problem God said: **“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”**. (v9) God did not change his life the way he wanted, but God gave him the grace and strength to live his life with all its limitations when Paul looked to him.

The very point where we might imagine God doesn't care and has left us is the point where he may well be closest to us, in our weaknesses. That should not surprise you because God was strongest to save us when he was at his weakest. When Jesus suffered and died for you he was at his extreme weakest. Yet he went through it in extraordinary strength, the strength of his love for us, his grace, to forgive and save us for all the times we have said “no” to God by the way we live. In the Garden of Gethsemane before he died Jesus himself asked his Father three times if this suffering could be taken away from him. He got no answer. He had to go through it alone, to hear God's “no” to him so he could say “yes” to us. Jesus understood that and went through it for us.

In his moments of helplessness Paul understood and saw Jesus most clearly, in his own crosses, and experienced the grace of God to him in Jesus. He rested in Christ, and discovered strength he did not have within himself. God said to him **“My power is made perfect in weakness”** (v9). And Paul could say **“When I am, weak, then I am strong”**, - “God strong” because I am relying on God's grace to me, his yes to me in Jesus. It reminds me of the favourite text I shared with you a few weeks ago – **“I can face anything through Christ who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13)**

Christians are not people who are necessarily people who are strong in themselves or have life all worked out or under control, rather they are strong in Jesus as we rest in his grace, his unquestionable “yes” to us in Christ, and take our helplessness to the one whose own strength was seen most clearly in his weakness. Like Paul we find “his grace is sufficient”.

There is a story in the book “the Hammer of God” about an old man who is dying. He can barely speak. His thoughts go all over the place. His daughter says to him: “Father, you are thinking about Jesus aren't you?” The dying man replied “I am not able to. I am unable to think any longer. But I know Jesus is thinking of me.” That is strength in weakness., That is God's grace literally being enough when we have no strength left.

3. Finally, Paul saw his weaknesses and limitations as his most powerful witness as a Christian. Not his spectacular conversion experience nor his special revelation of heaven, but he saw his weaknesses as the greatest demonstration of divine power at work in his life. Special experiences of God are very personal. Healings and other miracles are very personal and in a way most of us don't really relate to them because we haven't had them. But weaknesses, limitations, failure, prayers that don't get answered the way we would like – we can all relate to that. Paul says **“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".

I don't know about you but I don't run around delighting in boasting about my weaknesses. I usually like to hide and cover them up and hope to God no one notices! But the most powerful witnesses to Christ I know are those who rely on the grace of God when they are suffering, when they are living within limits, when they have failed and seek forgiveness from God. When life seems to have crushed them with a huge blow, yet their faith shines through, they seem somehow strong inside their broken bodies and lives – Christ strong. I had a lay-worker in my second parish who was 60 years old, had suffered from an abusive husband, and watched her grandchildren die in a car fire, but the grace of God shone through her. She did not give up, she set out at 60 on an adventure to work for God in a new way. She got through to many non-Christians in our town better than I could have, because they saw the grace of God shining most brightly through her when she talked of her painful experiences and memories. What kept her together and empowered her? It was the grace of Christ who was abused and who died for her.

You can either let your problems crush you and your faith in God, or with Paul you can let God use them as your greatest asset, your greatest witness to his grace in Christ. There is nothing more puzzling and drawing to God to an unbeliever than to see a Christian living within their limits but by the grace of God, grace which shines through the cracks in our lives. Grace that sustains us inside and helps us to keep going and not give up.

I have a book written by a man who was paralysed in a car accident. It is called "Living Within Limits". In it he says this: *"If you are in love with someone. If you have someone who really cares about you, then you can be thankful for all that this person means to you, even while unpleasant things are going on around you. No matter what is going wrong, you can still have deep joy in your relationship and confidence that this person will stay close to you through thick and thin. Paul did not hide from the pain in his life. He could not. But he could see that with God's love, his life could be transformed. It could be renewed in the present and totally transformed in the future. Paul knew that whatever his weakness, whatever his despair, nothing could stop God's love for him.*

Nothing can stop God's love for you. His love is there always to give you strength in weakness. By all means ask him to take them away and thank him if he does, but don't let them crush you if he doesn't. Ask him to show you his purpose in it, lean on him and discover his grace is enough to get you through, and let him use your greatest weakness as your greatest asset in witnessing to him.