

# In Praise of Thorns

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Sermon prepared for **9 July 2006**,  
eleventh sermon.<sup>1</sup>

Reading: **2 Corinthians 12:1-10**  
(12 minutes)

Theme: *"Behind every attack of Satan is God's loving hand"*

## Introduction

I look over your heads each week:

- Wonder what's happening in your lives,
- Spiritual highs, experiences
- Spiritual lows, troubles

Are you like me? Questioning? Troubled? Beset? Suffer?

And how do you make sense of these low times?

Do you pray?

What if God doesn't answer? What then?

Many answers to why we suffer. Must be multifaceted. No single 'one-size-fits-all'.

Paul shares two answers, which are personally meaningful to him.

How he's made sense of his own suffering.

What can we learn from him?

## Exegesis

Paul describes his suffering with the metaphor of a thorn

– like a splinter, which can be very painful and frustrating.

He doesn't say what it is – could be epilepsy, eye problems, enemies who undermined his work for the Gospel, sexual temptations, etc.

Had he wanted us to know, Paul would have told us.

His silence allows us to define our own thorns for ourselves.

Although he's sharing something very personal, he's also sharing a universal spiritual truth.

Then he shares two things that he's learned about this thorn.

Firstly, he's learned that this thorn is a messenger of Satan.

This suffering is of Satan, not of God.

In Matthew 7, Jesus says: "Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? <sup>11</sup>If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

Jesus is saying that bad things are not sent by God – God only desires good things for us.

In the book of Job, we learn of a righteous man who suffers profoundly. The suffering comes from Satan – who wants to test Job, to see if Job really loves God because God is God, or if just loves God because he is blessed by God. But again, the suffering is not of God, but of the Devil.

All suffering comes from Satan – either Satan personally, like in demons (in this passage the "messenger of Satan" could be translated "angel of Satan"), or from sin and evil in the world, sometimes our own sin.

The important realisation that Paul makes is that his thorn – his suffering – has its root in Satan.

Secondly, he's learned that God's hand of providence lies behind this thorn of Satan. He says, in verse 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."

Paul recognises that there is nothing that Satan can do to us, that God cannot use and transform into something God.

Paul talks about this in Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God".

It is not that bad things are actually good things. Rather, it is that God is able to take bad things and bring good things out of them.

So Paul presents us with a kind of a conundrum. For him, this thorn is from Satan and yet it is also of God. And doesn't this reflect some of our own experience – we believe that God is powerful and in control. And yet we also experience the work of Satan in our lives.

Paul grapples with this conundrum and he concludes that God is using Satan's thorn for God's own purposes. For Paul, this purpose is to keep Paul humble and dependent on God, despite the unique and powerful revelation and visions that he has experienced.

And knowing that God's hand of grace lies behind Satan's machinations helps Paul reconcile himself with the thorn. It still torments him, but it now has meaning and purpose.

## Application

So what can we learn from Paul's experience? Three things: acknowledge, pray and listen.

Firstly, we need to **acknowledge** the thorns in our lives. We can't hide from them, pretend they don't exist. There is pain in life, there are thorns. This is the reality of living in the World. It is only one day, in paradise, that there will be no thorns, no sufferings.

You received a pin with your pew leaflet this morning. Have a feel of the sharp end of the pin – it's sharp, not so? This is how life is – it's a fact, we can't hide from it.

Secondly, we need to **pray** that God will deliver us from thorns. Sometimes Christians come over as superficial because they just capitulate – of well, God's in control, everything's great. But Paul grapples with God over this thorn. He prays three times that God will take this thorn away from him. Just like Christ, who prayed three times in Gethsemane that God would take away the cup of suffering. Coming to grips with the thorns in our life is not as easy as ABC. It requires us to grapple, to communicate with God, to fight with him, to question and challenge him, to grapple with our selves. And sometimes, in this process, God does deliver us from thorns – removing them. But sometimes, he doesn't. And then what?

Thirdly, when God does not remove our thorns, we need, eventually, to quieten down and **listen** for God's voice behind the thorn. What does God want me to learn from this? How can I grow through this? What good can God bring out of this? For Paul, he realised that he needed this thorn, because it kept him humble and dependent on God. Perhaps, given his experiences of God, had he not had this thorn he would have become proud, self-sufficient and arrogant. He needed this thorn to keep himself in check.

Now if you look at the other end of the pin that you have, you'll find a little gold ball. And this is what Paul discovered. While the one of the thorn is sharp, tormenting, painful; the other end is gold, beautiful, of God. There is often, in the midst of life's pain, something beautiful and gracious from God. This is what Paul found in his suffering. This is what we need to seek in our own sufferings.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> This was my first sermon since the arrival of Fr Allan Kannemeyer at St Martins. There was about a two-month gap since the last sermon on Maundy Thursday. I was beginning to wonder if I would be permitted to continue preaching. So, I was very happy for the opportunity.

Coincidentally, Michael & Nancy arrived in Pretoria on the Friday (two days before) for a brief visit. So it was nice that they could be there to hear this one, as Mum had earlier in the year.