

Facing Giants: The Giant of Unfulfilled Longings

If you would have asked the 6-year-old Nate what I feared the most you would have had a long list...I was afraid of everything. But at the top of that list may have been getting a splinter. Can I get an amen? If my parents and brothers were here today they would be shaking their heads and recounting the hours of drama that splinters would cause, with me panicking, running from my parents who would be trying get a hold of me just to look at the splinter. The bargaining, threatening and bribing to get me to sit still so they could get the needle and tweezers to the splinter. This is it, this is how I'm going to die. Looking back, it seems like a trivial thing to get so worked up about, but in my immaturity of the moment, it seemed like too much to bear.

Well in our text today, the apostle Paul tells us of a splinter in his flesh (translated thorn). But Paul's splinter was no tiny speck of wood under the skin. The word translated "splinter or thorn" is also, depending on the context, the word for a **stake [Picture]** that would have been driven into the ground to hold something down. And that's the idea here. Paul's stake was something painful that held him back, held him down. It was something that burdened him to a degree that seemed too much to bear. But Paul was led to a profound perspective on his thorn that the very thing that he thought was holding him down, was his greatest weakness became the catalyst for Christ's strength through him. **What if your greatest weakness is Jesus Christ's greatest strength?** Pray.

Paul's Thorn and Your Thorn

⁷ Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

One of the favorite activities of Bible nerds throughout the centuries is to speculate as to the nature of Paul's thorn. How wise of Paul not to tell us so that we can relate to it. One type of thorn what we are calling **unfulfilled longings. Something you long to have that you don't, or something you long to lose that you can't.** Often the things that we long to have are good things... maybe you long to have a husband or wife but that just hasn't happened for you, or in your marriage you long to have intimacy that just seems illusive. Maybe for you long to have children but you are struggling with infertility. 1 in 8 couples struggle with infertility.¹ Or it is something we long to lose but we can't shake, it just clings to us. Maybe it's a physical condition that has taken aspects of your freedom or enjoyment in life. Maybe it is a temptation that you thought by this point in your life you wouldn't struggle with anymore. Or it may be more complex. There are some of us who have same sex attraction or you sense that your gender doesn't align with how you feel inside. And these longings and desires cannot just be shaken off. It's like a thorn deep in the skin. We have all experienced them in some season of life or as long as you can remember.

One Thorn: Two Sources, Two Purposes, Two Messages

¹ <https://www.fertilityanswers.com/13-stats-know-infertility/>

One Thorn, Two Sources: Where did these thorns come from?

⁷ Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

In Paul's case, did the thorn come from God or Satan? Yes. Let's just sit in the uneasiness of what Paul is saying here. It's clear that this thorn came from Satan. And yet, there is another source of this thorn isn't there? We know that because Paul says, "Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited." Who is more likely to not want us to be conceited God or Satan? Clearly, Paul saw the source of this thorn also from God. Does your theology make room for the possibility that the thorns of your unfulfilled longings may actually be sent by God and Satan? We are going to let that question sit for a moment and come back to it.

Paul recognizes that God has something to do with this thorn and so he did what all of us do. "Get it out!" ⁸ *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.* Now lest we think 3x doesn't sound that impressive, many scholars believe that in addition to all the normal, daily requests to remove his thorn, that he dedicated three significant occasions-maybe think of it like three prayer retreats where all he did was fast and pray for a weekend. And yet each time the pleading was met from God with a firm "No." If you have a thorn it is likely you have prayed, you have fasted, you have gotten a prayer army around you to pray, maybe anoint you with oil...and yet God keeps meeting you with a firm "No." Paul knows firsthand the angst, the despair, the disillusionment that you are going through with God. Have you ever been angry with God where you have said to him, "God in what possible scenario can this be a good thing in my life?"

One Thorn Two Purposes

Satan's purpose is clear: Satan wanted to make Paul miserable and turn him away from the faith and effectiveness in ministry. But Jesus also had a purpose. We might not always be able to detect it like Paul did, but if you are in Christ there is always purpose. There is no such thing as bad luck, misfortune or coincidence. Just as we see with Paul, God is even using "a messenger of Satan" to accomplish his purposes *"to keep me from becoming conceited."* Paul saw God's good purposes in his thorn. Think about it for a second, if you are Paul- you met Jesus in a powerful conversion moment, you were highly educated, you were the most successful church planter alive...Paul tells us just a few verses earlier that he was also given a powerful vision of heaven as well. What would you say is his greatest vulnerability? Spiritual pride. For Paul's sake, and the sake of the gospel the most loving thing God could do was give Paul humility. There are two ways to get humility- God can either zap you with it...which he never does, or he can use your circumstances to bring you to a place of humility, which he always does.

How the dynamics of God and Satan work specifically in our lives is above my pay grade. But if you know your Bible, there is a principle at work that what Satan has purposed for evil, God has purposed for good. Job, Joseph. Anyone practice Judo here?² In judo [Picture] you use the

² Once heard Tim Keller give this illustration

forward pressure of the opponent against them to throw them. Their very pressure against you ends up being their downfall. God is the cosmic judo champion. He is always using the pressure of the enemy against him to defeat him. **Satan does nothing to God's children that God cannot co-opt with infinite skill and love for our good.**³

God does not delight in your suffering, Satan does. Parents don't delight in the cry of their children getting their shots, but they delight in the protection from harm the shot provides. God is willing to use whatever means necessary to make us more like Christ. He will even use unfulfilled longings, hardships and heartbreaks if it detaches us from our idols of self-centeredness and self-exaltation. Story of **Lon, Brenda and Jill Solomon**

Not only are there two purposes in the same thorn, there are two messages attached to the same thorn. **One Thorn, Two Messages:**

Both God and Satan have messages in the thorn. **Satan attaches a message of torment with the thorn.** Have you noticed that it's often the message that comes with the thorn that torments us more than the thorn itself? Satan whispers half-truths, twisted truths and full on lies-speculating...but maybe the message Satan intended for Paul's thorn was, "God is sadistic and cruel, after all you have given for God this is how he treats you? How can you worship Him?"

What messages has Satan attached to your thorn? "God doesn't love you. If he did you wouldn't be struggling with infertility. How could you worship a God who won't even allow you to start a family?" "Look at how pathetic you are, just give up." "God cannot be trusted. You need to take things into your own hands." And so we seek to fulfill our longings on our own terms, outside of God's good boundaries and will. Isn't this what Sarah did with their thorn of infertility? If I can't get pregnant, we are going to have this child through Hagar (which is outside of God's boundary of a covenant marriage). How did that turn out? The enemy whispers- "Why are you waiting to find a Christian guy, you deserve to be loved so go find anyone to love you, who cares if they share your faith?" The enemy whispers- "Why are staying in this marriage? You deserve to be happy so go find it with that girl at the office who gives you compliments." You have same sex attraction? The enemy whispers- "God is holding out on you, if God made you like this that means you deserve to have your desires fulfilled how you want to express them." You are struggling with gender dysphoria; you feel like you are the opposite gender than your body? The enemy whispers- "God doesn't have the right to tell you what gender you are, you can be whoever you want to be."

And in our culture today, for every message delivered by the enemy with our thorn, there is an entire community, open armed to affirm, support and feed the message. Sadly, sometimes the lack of compassion or unwillingness to even talk about these topics in the church has driven many people into the arms of an alternative community. But Satan isn't the only one attaching a message to the thorn. In the same thorn...

³ Idea from John Piper Sermon

Jesus attaches a message of grace with the thorn. The message he had for Paul in his thorn is: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* In other words, Jesus is saying “Paul, this thorn is going to weaken you in such a way that, if you have any power, it will have to be the power my grace provides.”

⁹Therefore 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.

What does this mean? Well it’s something better to experience than to explain. But let me try. We think of power as antithetical to weakness, but it’s not. The power is just working in a different way than we expected. Paul wouldn’t have the courage, detachment from the things of this world, humility, “resting on me”- an experience of intimacy with Christ without this weakness. *Weakness isn’t wasted when it is the way God works in us.*⁴ I would go as far as to say that you will plateau in your spiritual maturity if you avoid thorns and weakness. It is the way of higher levels of maturity. God’s design is to make you a showcase for Jesus’s power. But not necessarily the way our culture demands: not by getting rid of all our weaknesses; but by giving strength to endure and even rejoice in weakness.⁵

Culture’s Strength vs. Christ’s Strength

See here’s what our culture wants to do- they want to rid everyone of the concept of weakness. They may even put this message in the category of psychological abuse to assert that some of our thorns are weaknesses at all, especially in the areas of marriage, sexuality and gender. The culture’s strength is pursuing divorce if your spouse isn’t meeting all your needs, Christ’s strength is the endurance to trust what God has joined together. The culture’s strength is self-identification based on how you feel about your gender/sexuality (gay, straight, bi, transgender), Christ’s strength is the power to identify yourself by God’s great design, love and purpose for you. But God’s message in your thorn is “My grace is sufficient for you. For my power is made perfect in your weakness.”

One Thorn: Two Perspectives

What is Satan’s purpose for your thorn? What is God’s purpose for your thorn? Which are you focusing on?

What is Satan’s message attached to your thorn? What is God’s message attached to your thorn? Which one are you listening to?

There was another who had a thorn in the flesh, who like Paul pleaded with God to remove the thorn who God answered with a firm “No.” *Jesus Christ[Picture]*. Satan used the suffering of Jesus, the cross, as a means of torment and defeat. He drove a crown of thorns into his head.

⁴ Quote from Clayton King

⁵ John Piper sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

The enemy nailed stakes to his hands and feet to pin him down. It seemed too much to bear. Satan attempted to attach the message that God had forsaken Him. That if he can save others, why can't he save himself? And yet, God used that same thorn, that same weakness as the cosmic judo champion that he is, to throw Satan to the ground, Jesus declared the victor in his resurrection and to accomplish our salvation. May Christ's example encourage you to endure and look to Christ as the author and perfecter of your faith, in the midst of your unfulfilled longings.