

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Pentecost 7

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Sermon by Pastor Dan Pautz

Thorns can be blessings

—2 Corinthians 12:7-10

“Count your blessings.” You have often heard that said. And it is really something you should do. Something I call the ABC’s of blessings can be helpful as you count your blessings. For each letter of the alphabet think of the name of a person whose name begins with that letter whom God has used to be a blessing to you. For example, for the letter A, I name Arlene, an aunt of mine; B – Ben my grandson; C – Christ. Then there is a second time through the ABC’s of blessings from God. This time think of things. A – America, apples, Arizona; AC; B – baptism, broccoli; C – communion, church, cake. You got the gist of it. Well, let’s jump ahead to the letter T – t-bone steak, teens, technology, teachers, thunderstorms....thorns. “Thorns – did I hear you right?” Yes, you did. However, I don’t think that my most recent experience with thorns was a blessing. It was a Saturday ago that I was trimming my bougainvillea bush. No matter how careful I was, no matter that I was wearing gloves and a long sleeve shirt in this 100 degree weather, a thorn got me. It always does. I don’t count that as a blessing. But wait a minute! The Apostle Paul speaks about a thorn which turned out to be a blessing for him and for Christianity. This thorn was from God Himself. Paul called it a thorn in the flesh.

What was Paul’s thorn in the flesh? We really don’t know. It was something that occurred about fourteen years before the apostle wrote these words. It was in the beginning of his first missionary journey. Some speculate that it was a chronic physical problem such as the after effects of malaria which he might have contacted fourteen years earlier on his first missionary journey when he was in the city of Perga which was subject to malarial infections. Some think that it was a stammering voice, an eye problem, a disfigurement. The bottom line is that we do not know. The thorn was troublesome.

Now it would be easy to think that God’s faithful people should never have any thorns or serious problems. But that is not how it works. Think of Job who through no fault of his own had a multitude of tragedies and pains, think of Sarah who had not been able to have children, a man in the New Testament who had been an invalid for thirty eight years, another who was born blind. You can think also of faithful Christians in our congregation and in your families who have what they might call thorns in the flesh – physical conditions and handicaps and pains that affect them along with members of their families. Maybe right now you have a thorn in the flesh.

From where did Paul’s thorn in the flesh come. Paul answers that question. “There was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.” The thorn was not an accident. The giver was God Himself. As God allowed Satan to test Job of old, the same was true for Paul. If a thorn in Paul’s life came from God or one in your life comes from God, it must be good. God is the giver of good and perfect gifts. The thorn was a blessing.

More often than not, we do not know the reason why God has thorns in our lives. Perhaps the Apostle Paul did not at first know the reason why God gave him that thorn. But he found out later. At the beginning of his missionary journeys Paul had been given something very special. God took Paul to Paradise which is heaven. He was given a glimpse of heaven and he heard inexpressible things. Can you imagine that? Our loved ones who have died in faith are experiencing that right now but Paul experienced that for a short time already in this life. It was meant to encourage him. But there was the temptation for Paul to feel really proud and special, a cut above others because he and he alone had been permitted to see and hear what he did. But God would not let that happen. Here are Paul’s words. “To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh.” Paul was to be kept humble.

There would be other things in his ministry about which Paul could have become conceited and pat himself on his back for all the successes. Congregations after congregation were being established. He had the ability and attitude to keep on preaching and teaching even though he was beaten, stoned, imprisoned. He was a tough guy. Think of people who were converted through his ministry – Timothy and Titus who in turn became pastors, Priscilla and Aquila, Jason, the business woman Lydia, the jailer of Philippi. Based solely on numbers, it seemed that Paul’s ministry was more successful than that of his contemporaries. It would have been easy for Paul to be puffed up with pride. But that was not going to happen. God gave Paul a thorn in the flesh to keep him from being conceited.

Maybe God has given you a thorn in the flesh. You have difficulties and problems but this much is sure. Not all difficulties are thorns that have come from God. If you are really sick but it was after you had been drinking too much, that hangover is not a thorn from God. It was self-inflicted. If people seek to *avoid you* because you are obnoxious, that is not a thorn from God. Should you be receiving bad grades in high school or college because you refuse to study, that might be a thorny problem, but it is self-inflicted. Or should you be having a hard time making ends meet because you refuse to work even though you are able bodied and work is available, that is not a thorn from God..

Paul at first did not recognize that the thorn in the flesh was a blessing from God. Likely he felt that whatever the problem was, it was hampering him in effectively carrying out his ministry. What should a person do when there are problems? You know the passage and so did Paul. From the Old Testament Psalm 50:15 are the words of God, "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me." So Paul called upon the Lord. He wrote, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me." Three times likely means three different times that Paul pleaded and begged the Lord to take it away. But the Lord did not.

Well, doesn't the Lord answer prayers spoken by Paul and by us today? Oh, he does. Sometimes God says "No" and that too is an answer just as sometimes a parent will say No to something his child wants. But there is more to it than that. Although God did not remove Paul's thorn in the flesh, He gave Paul the strength to endure. Here is what God said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." God gave His grace and strength to Paul to endure the thorn in the flesh. It was a blessing. That led Paul to say these amazing words, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." Paul would be able to endure hardships because God would give him the strength. The blessings and successes of his ministry were from God, not from Paul. And Paul knew it.

God's answer to our prayers might be Yes, Not Now, In a different way, or No But. I am not going to remove the problem but I will give you the strength to endure. It will turn out to be a blessing for you and for the Lord's Kingdom.

To keep Paul from being conceited God sent him the blessing of that thorn in the flesh. It is easy and sinful to have a wrong opinion of self. We can think too highly of self or that matter to think too lowly of self. Maybe you feel that you are a nothing and that everybody else is better than you or is better off than you. You feel that God has shortchanged you. You tend to have a pity party. Be careful for that attitude is insulting God who has made you and given you the talents and abilities that you have. He tells you in Psalm 139 that He formed you and knit you together in your Mom's womb. He carefully crafted you. Jesus has suffered and died for you; the Holy Spirit has brought you to faith. You are not a nothing. You are a child of God, a precious blood-bought soul, a saint. You are one that Jesus blesses every day. You are heading for heaven. God is giving you opportunities to serve. If you think others are more blessed, thank God for those blessings and get on with life. Use the ABC's to count your blessings.

But there is also a great danger that we become conceited and full of self. Perhaps you are smarter than most, good looking, more athletic, more financially secure than others, healthier than most. Be careful of conceit. Repent of that sin. Fight against it. The Lord warns us against that sin. The book of Romans says "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. ... Do not be conceited." Galatians 5:26 says "Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other."

Our number one goal in life is to praise the Lord and someday to end up in paradise. What could be better than that? The Lord has goals for you too. One is that you grow in faith and in being the kind of person He wants you to be. The Christian is always under construction. The Lord's number one goal for you is that you end up in heaven. He has placed you on the road to heaven and He will do what is necessary to keep you from straying. He loves you enough to send thorns and troubles and tribulations if that is what it takes to keep you from straying and to keep you in His Word. These thorns will be blessings.

The Lord will do what is necessary to bring you to heaven. He will go to extreme lengths to do so. The most amazing thing He has done to accomplish this is that He sent His one and only Son to this world to be your Substitute, He lived a perfect life in your place. And as your Substitute He took the punishment that you deserve for your sins.

Be still, my soul, The Lord is on thy side
Bear patiently, the cross of grief or pain
Leave to thy God, to order and provide
In every change, He faithful will remain
Be still, my soul, thy best thy heavenly friend
Through thorny ways, leads to a joyful end

(Christian Worship Hymnal 415:1)