

Learning to Love Thorns
2 Corinthians 12:1-10
Mark 5:21-43

I know of a young man in my parents' church who is just eaten up with cancer. He is 15 years old and the doctors have not been able to figure out what is going on in this boy's body. It doesn't seem fair for such a young person to have to go through something like that; His family is praying for him, his church is praying for him, and I have been praying for him.

You, too, know someone that has some unhealthy reality in their life. Their trouble may be physical, or it may be spiritual or psychological, or it may be relational. No matter what the problem, you have been praying for their healing. Or perhaps, the person you have been praying for is you.

Either way, if the healing you have been praying for has not come to pass yet you may be feeling like the prophet, Jeremiah:

"Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?" (Jeremiah 15:18).

Jeremiah is tortured in his spirit over what is happening in his life. He has been faithful to the Lord and yet he is suffering. We have all probably had times when we questioned why someone who seems to be a good person has to suffer.

Jeremiah's situation flies in the face of those people who try to encourage those who are suffering by reminding them that *"all things work together for good to those who love God"* (Romans 8:28).

Such examples of good people suffering can present a great challenge to our faith. At some point we may even blame God for allowing our pain, or the pain of those we love, to continue. Or we may ask ourselves, "How much more faith do *I* need to be healed?"

We hear the story of the woman who had the hemorrhage being healed because of her own faith. Or, we read the story of Jairus' daughter being healed, not because of her own faith, but because of the faith of her father. When we don't experience healing in these same ways, we may be led to question God's motivation, or doubt the validity of our own faith.

This kind of spiritual questioning would be fine, if these were the only examples we had of God's sovereignty when it comes to providing healing. However, the other passage that I chose for today provides a much different scenario.

I think we can all agree that the apostle Paul is one of the giants of our faith and served the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. So why do we hear Paul say the following:

I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud. Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. (2 Corinthians 12:7-9)

The Lord allowed Paul to be afflicted with some “thorn.” We don’t know exactly what this thorn was; however, many have speculated that it was some physical ailment that would not go away. Obviously, Paul had prayed for God to heal him, but to no avail.

The difference between us and Paul is that Paul learned to love his thorn. He saw his infirmity as a tool God was using to help him grow spiritually. The way he handled this infirmity was also a spiritual witness to others.

Paul remembered something that we too often forget. He knew that we must remember to focus on God and not on ourselves or our loved one; and, we must be careful not to put our faith in faith itself.

Even one of the psalmists learned that God sometimes uses illnesses or other afflictions to teach us: *“It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn [God’s] decrees” (Psalm 119:71).*

In Rick Warren’s book, The Purpose Driven Life, the first sentence of the first chapter is, “It’s not about you.” When I first read it some time ago I thought it was a rather “in your face” kind of statement to make. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized Warren was right. Even as Christians we have a tendency to make everything about us.

- We read the Bible so that we can understand more about *our* purpose and about what God can do *for us*.
- We come to church not to worship, but to “be fed” so that we can make it through the week.
- We pray in order to communicate *to* God *our* vision for *our* preferred future.

The truth of the matter is this. Neither scripture, nor worship, nor prayer is primarily about us...it is first and foremost about God.

The scriptures remind us His ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9). He understands realities that we cannot fathom; and, He has purposes that are higher and better for us than those that we would choose.

When the turbulence in our lives becomes overwhelming, it is hard not to take our eyes off God and stare fearfully at what is looming in front of us. The source of our fear and frustration becomes all consuming, and can become our god. When this happens we are not able to see our relationship with our Heavenly Father clearly. Our relationships become clouded by the storm.

I want to assure you today that God has an outrageous love for you. One that you could never truly understand. Just as a child cannot fully understand the love a parent has for them, you cannot fully comprehend the way God loves you.

Jesus cares deeply for you, otherwise He would never have offered Himself on a cross for you. Never forget that God is in control of healing, but His ways and reasons are not the same as ours. Perhaps He knows that something other than granting your wish for physical healing will serve your relationship with Him far better.

The Apostle Paul surely did not enjoy his infirmity; but he did come to love his thorn for the ways it drew him closer to his Lord. I would encourage you to continue to pray in faith for healing from God. At the same time, begin a practice of asking the Holy Spirit to reveal to you what the Lord wishes to accomplish through the storm that casts its shadows over you. Healing will happen...just maybe in a way you have never imagined.

The beauty of a rose springs from thorny stems.