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**2 Corinthians** 12:1–10, ESV, edited.

*12 Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. <sup>2</sup>I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. <sup>3</sup>And I know that this man was caught up into paradise. <sup>5</sup>On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— <sup>6</sup>though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. <sup>7</sup>So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. <sup>8</sup>Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup>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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup>For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

**Psalms** 34:17–18, ESV

*<sup>17</sup> When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears  
and delivers them out of all their troubles.*

*<sup>18</sup> The LORD is near to the brokenhearted  
and saves the crushed in spirit.*

**My thorn.**

Not long ago I was asked to visit a retired pastor who was only a few years older than me and had been hospitalized. As always, I am changing details of this story to protect his privacy. Let’s call him Ollie. He had just been diagnosed with a very

serious cardiovascular problem; his heart was quickly failing, and they were struggling to find some sort of effective treatment for him. When I walked into his room, he was sitting there with very short all white hair; he was clean shaven, looking very old and weak. He was thin and somewhat bent over. His legs were very badly swollen, a sign of his failing heart. But he was articulate, clear-headed, and extremely kind-hearted. He asked me if I was a Lutheran pastor, like him, and I said no, I'm a Methodist, and he said, that's fine, we're all the same in the end. The reason I had been asked to see him is because his family was back in New York and they knew he would appreciate a visit by another reverend, someone who could understand his values, someone who could pray with him. That family member in New York knew someone in Boulder, and I was the only reverend that person knew. Ollie thanked me for coming and then got right down to business. He told me a bit about his past, starting with where he had served as a pastor over his long career. He had once been the pastor of a very large church in New Jersey but had ended his career at a very small one. When he retired, he and his wife of thirty-seven years took a good chunk of their savings and bought a small but beautiful house on the coast. He said that it was his dream come true. He could watch the ocean, read his theology books, and take walks on the beach with his wife. But then, a handful of months after he retired, his wife said she wanted

a divorce. She had had cancer ten years before and he had seen her through the chemo and the radiation treatments, and back to full health. They had raised a daughter together, and she was living in Colorado; but she is not a Christian. His wife was adamant and gave him two weeks to move out. He did so, and he moved to Colorado to be near their daughter. Then he said that he had something specific that he wanted to talk to me about. I will get back to this.

Our quote from Paul's second letter to the Christians in Corinth is very famous. It is mysterious and much has been written about it. There is something very powerful being conveyed here, but it demands some explanation. To do this, I need to start with the previous chapter, which is 11. In Chapter 11, Paul is trying to warn the Christians of Corinth that false prophets are teaching them corrupt beliefs, that they are being turned into immoral people. He says that these false leaders disguise themselves as righteous people defending all that is good, but they are, in truth, like Satan. Satan, he says, pretends to be an angel of light. These people order the Corinthian Christians around, treating them as inferior. Paul sarcastically says that he is ashamed that he was too weak to bully the Christians of Corinth. Hell, if he was as good as those false prophets, he would have badly abused them instead of teaching them the true way. He then starts "boasting" in a fake way, but instead of saying how great he is, like the false

prophets do, he makes fun of himself. He's doing this to show them that true Christian leaders are humble. His sarcastic boasts consist of saying that he, like all people, have at times been weak and a failure. Then, in Chapter 12, our chapter, he continues to attack these false teachers who are trying to lead the people of Corinth away from the true faith. Apparently, these evil teachers have captivated the Corinthian Christians by claiming they have supernatural powers. Now, we get to our passage. Paul talks of an experience he had fourteen years ago, but he tells the story as if he is talking about someone else. He talks about this person being caught up in heaven. In truth, he is talking about the time on the road to Damascus when, as Saul - which was his name then - he was struck blind and saw visions of the risen Christ. He talks about this magnificent, incredible gift from God as if it were someone else because he wants to be modest and not brag. He is trying to show that true Christian teachers do not boast, even when they have a reason to. Then Paul says that this person, whom everyone knows is himself, was also given a thorn in his flesh. God did this to keep him from becoming arrogant – like the false prophets. He says this: *To keep me from becoming conceited, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.* Paul talks about his constant struggle with Satan. Paul says that he prayed to God to get rid of this thorn. He says: *Three times I pleaded*

*with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* In other words, God's grace is far more valuable than having this thorn in his side removed. Paul then says: *For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* He is content to have weaknesses and faults, to fail sometimes, to be persecuted by people who hate him for teaching the Word. He is fine with having that terrible thorn in his flesh, because when he is weak, he knows that he has chosen God's grace over all else. He is strong when he is weak.

Ollie the retired reverend told me that he had something very important to talk to me about. He then quoted the beginning of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, Chapter 12, our passage. He asked me a question that countless Bible scholars have asked. Just what was Paul's thorn? Was it a physical ailment? Lots of diseases were prevalent at the time of Paul's ministry. They often lived with chronic conditions like tuberculosis. There were countless viral and bacterial infections they couldn't cure with their medicine. People got leprosy and malaria. Or Paul could have been referring to the fact that people kept beating him, trying to kill him, and imprisoning him. He could have been talking about an emotional problem, like depression. Ollie asked me what I thought Paul's thorn was. I said that I don't

know and that I think we are not supposed to know. That's so that we can see in Paul's thorn in his flesh whatever it is that we suffer from. Each of us has a thorn. We might pray about it over and over, but God refuses to take it away. Whatever it is, our thorn is just like Paul's. It makes us humble, causes us to turn to God and keep God in our minds, and lets us accept God's grace with the realization that it is far more valuable to have that than to have our thorn removed.

Ollie nodded. He said that's what he believes. But, Ollie said, I have more thorns than I can handle. I said I know that you have two thorns and that they are extremely painful ones. His wife had tossed him out. And now, he had a potentially terminal disease. What am I supposed to do? Ollie asked me. I believe in God. I have served God's people. I am indeed humble. But I cannot manage these two massive thorns. I asked him if having his daughter in his life, if living close to her was giving him any joy. He said that yes, but there was a hesitancy in his voice. It's not like he was living with his daughter. His daughter and her husband didn't have much room and they didn't have much time. They were busy people. He said that he talked to her on the phone a couple of times a week – exactly what he had done before moving to Colorado. Ollie shook his head. He said the truth was that the thorn in his flesh wasn't just his wife kicking him out and losing the home where he thought he would live the remainder of his

life, and it wasn't just being told that his heart might well kill him. Those things were bad, he said, very bad, but worse was the sense that he had lost control of his life. I reminded him that of course, he had never been in control of his life, and perhaps that was the problem, that we all need to accept this. Ollie said that yes, he knew that God was in control, but that doesn't make it wrong to work hard to build a good life, with a home and a wife, both of which he loved.

Ollie changed the subject and asked me some things about myself. I told him that I was caring for a couple of churches and that I worked as a chaplain. We started talking about ministry. It was then that he began, in a very animated way, to tell me about the place where he was living. It was a retirement complex, not a very nice one. I was familiar with it. But he smiled and his energy rose as he told me about a prayer group and a Bible study group that he runs in his complex. When people found out that he was a retired pastor, they began to come to him, asking for his spiritual advice, asking him to lead Bible study, asking him to pray with them, to pray for siblings and adult children and nieces and nephews and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He said that he wasn't earning anything, that he was barely getting by, but that he was very active in ministry. Then, before I could say anything, he said, yes, I know – I am doing more for God's people than I would be if I were living a calm, easy retired life on the ocean. I told

him that I knew that being able to offer grace and God's Word to his neighbors, many of whom are disabled and cannot attend church, while it was a blessed thing, did not remove the pain of his two huge thorns. But I offered the following two lines from Psalm 34:

*17 When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears  
and delivers them out of all their troubles.*

*18 The LORD is near to the brokenhearted  
and saves the crushed in spirit.*

I said that like the great evangelist Paul, when he is weak, he is strong, and that indeed, God will hear his cry and God will be near him as he struggles to recover from his broken heart. I then offered a prayer for Ollie. Here it is, as best as I can remember: *God, every one of us has a thorn. Most of us have multiple thorns. Some of us have one or more extraordinarily painful thorns. May we find strength in being weak because it makes us need you. May we always seek your guidance as we navigate the world while suffering from the thorns in our flesh. May we embrace the opportunities to serve you and your people that arise because we have these thorns in our flesh. May we be joyful when you save us from our crushed spirits. And God, please heal Ollie's broken heart and his physical heart, which is broken. Let him live for many, many more years, to serve your people and to live in joy while living with the thorns in his flesh. Amen.*