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Psalms 34:17–18, ESV

- 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.*

We shall see God.

A few years 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 Sam. 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 short all white hair; he was clean shaven. He was very thin. He had edema, or swollen legs, a sign of his failing heart. But he was articulate, clear-headed, and extremely kind-hearted. Even though he had a sad story to tell me, there was a spark in his voice. 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. Sam thanked me for coming. 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. His wife was adamant and gave him two weeks to move out. He did so, and he moved to Colorado because he had been there once and loved it. Then he said that he had something specific that he wanted to talk to me about. I will get back to this.

We're going to consider a passage from 2 Corinthians, from Chapter 12. 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 in our passage, but we need some context. To do this, let's step back and look at 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 is too weak to bully the Christians of Corinth. Hell, if he was as good as those false prophets, he would badly abuse them instead of teaching them the true way. He then starts "boasting" in an ironic fashion: 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, has at times been weak and has been a failure.

In Chapter 12, we get to the quote I want to look at. Here are verses 1–10:

***12** I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— ⁴and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— ⁶though 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. ⁷So 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. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹But 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. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Apparently, these evil teachers have captivated the Corinthian Christians by claiming they have supernatural powers. Paul in our passage 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 describes 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. ⁹ 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.

Sam the retired reverend told me that he had something very important to talk to me about. He then quoted the beginning of 2nd Corinthians, Chapter 12, our passage. Yes, he knew it by heart. 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. There are passages in his letters where he clearly despairs and even welcomes the possibility of death. Sam 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. Maybe we might pray about it over and over, but God refuses to take it away. Our thorn makes us humble, causes us to turn to God, keep God in our minds, and lets us accept God's grace with the realization that it is far more valuable than having our thorn removed.

Sam said that's what he believes. But, Sam 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. Your wife tossed you out. And now, you have a potentially terminal disease. What am I supposed to do? Sam 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 gave him any joy. He said that yes, but his daughter and her husband lived in Arizona, and they didn't have much room or much time. He said that he talked to her on the phone a couple of times a week. Sam shook his head. He said the truth was that the true thorn in his flesh wasn't his wife kicking him out and losing the home where he thought he would live the remainder of his life, and it wasn't being told that his

heart might kill him. The real thorn 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. Sam 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.

I asked about his life in ministry. He said that although he had thought he was retired, his ministry wasn't over. In an animated way, he told me about the retirement complex where he was living. His energy rose as he told me about a prayer group and a Bible study group that he was running. 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 their families. He said that he wasn't earning anything. 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 thorn. 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. Sam then hugged me, and I left. I never saw him again.

Finally, consider Chapter 5 of Matthew, where Jesus delivers his famous Sermon on the Mount. In this extended speech, he summarizes at the beginning of his ministry all he will ever teach. He begins with what we call the Beatitudes:

³ *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴ *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

⁵ *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*

⁶ *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

⁷ *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

⁸ *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

⁹ *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

¹⁰ *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹ *“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*

We see that Jesus himself focused heavily on how God loves, supports, and is loyal to all those who suffer. He made it clear that we are all like Paul. When we suffer God fills us with an empowering grace that gives us strength, helps us develop empathy for others who are suffering, and guides us through the process of turning our pain into something brilliant. When things go wrong, God, if we let

him, will allow us to live in a radiant fashion. He will help us serve those around us more effectively than if our lives had proceeded without any problems whatsoever.

There is also something fundamental about living through painful periods, at least in the eyes of a Christian. Of course, there's nothing wrong with being happy, with living in joy. God wants that for us. But while God made us in his image, he made us imperfect, and he gave us an imperfect home with imperfect lives. In our theology, the theology of Christ, the belief system of our faith, one of the most important virtues is humility. And it's not just to make sure that we learn to reflect on the pain of others, to make sure that we never become brutal, that we are kind and forgiving. It's because humility is a major trait of Jesus. We find ourselves living like Christ, and there is no better source of happiness on this planet. Rather than walking through some esoteric, intangible Kingdom of God, we walk through a kingdom that feels very real, one that is not made of the things of this world.

Most importantly, it is the chaos, the unpredictable nature of this world that makes us aware that there is only one constant – and that is God. Jesus didn't give us those Beatitudes just to make people who are suffering feel better. We do need to remember that surviving bad things brings us closer to God. Paul said that he was made perfect in his weakness. And, as the Beatitude says, our challenge is to also remain pure in heart despite what happens – and then we shall see God.