

Blessed Thorns

It's easy to thank God for the blessings he gives us – the “good” stuff like life, health, family, safety, prosperity, fun times – but have you ever thought to thank him for the opposite, for the “thorns”? The Apostle Paul did.

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” ...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. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

Paul had been given extraordinary endowments of mind, education, energy, and experience that uniquely qualified him for the ministry God called him to do. No doubt he at first saw the “thorn” he speaks of as an inconvenient (and probably painful) impediment to his work for the Lord. Rather than removing the difficulty, however, God revealed to Paul its purpose. Once Paul accepted that his physical affliction was a necessary safeguard against the sin of conceit, and also that it allowed him to glorify Christ all the more, Paul stopped asking for relief and rejoiced instead!

What about you? It's absolutely right, of course, to thank God for comfort, health, and every other source of happiness he sees fit to give us. But we are told to give thanks in ALL circumstances (1 Thes. 5:18). That means being grateful even for painful thorns, like Paul's, and ALSO for blessings God has withheld. That's not so easy, is it? But consider the possibility that God gives/withholds these things for our ultimate good.

Perhaps God didn't grant your desire to marry your first love because he had someone much better in mind for you. Perhaps he withheld a certain person, thing, ability, or experience from you for your own safety. Did he never give you the wealth (or beauty or fame or power) you craved, knowing that these things would lead you into temptations you weren't strong enough to resist? Has an illness – not a cause for rejoicing in itself – ended up working for your higher good in some way?

How have you seen God's hand of protection and the sufficiency of his grace in these kinds of situations? Remember, we grow more in challenging times than in times of ease. The hardships you've come through have no doubt strengthened your character (Rom. 5:3-4). They may also have prepared you to effectively minister to others for God's glory, as Paul did. Take a moment to prayerfully consider this, and then thank God for the blessing of thorns!

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