

## Living with thorns

27/11/2011

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

This is the final message in our series on character. As such, it's not surprising that today we are going to look at one of the more difficult aspects associated with Christian character, and that is, 'living with thorns'.

Now, I don't know anyone who likes thorns. They are so often hidden, long, very sharp, and they really hurt when they scratch your skin. Some even have a poison tip, which can cause a very unpleasant irritation or infection.

In our reading this morning, the Apostle Paul used the imagery of 'a thorn in the flesh' (vs.7) to convey the idea that, in his life, he had to constantly deal with something that caused him great hardship, pain and suffering.

I would guess that most of us, during our lives, have also experienced a variety of hardships, times of pain and periods of suffering. They seem to just be part of this life, but, some can be worse than others.

We experience pain when we lose a loved one - a husband, wife, child, parent or friend. We experience pain and suffering if we have an accident that leaves us with a significant injury. We know hardship and suffering when we are made redundant, retrenched, or suddenly lose our job or career. These are just a few examples of how many people today are going through times of hardship, pain, suffering and loss; and they can be far more painful than a thorn that jags our flesh.

What was Paul's thorn in the flesh? Was it a physical, medical, emotional, relational or spiritual difficulty?

We don't know! Without going into some of the many interesting theories as to what this 'thorn in the flesh' may have been, it does highlight for us the issue of why God allows pain and suffering in the world, **especially for God's people**.

Many, of course, would simply argue that pain is a chemical reaction within the neuron pathways of our body. When the nerves are stimulated by either another chemical reaction, or a physical injury, then we feel pain and say something like - 'Ouch'. They would argue that pain is therefore a natural part of the bodies defence or coping mechanisms.

While this may be true, as a naturalistic or physical explanation, is there however another understanding for the presence of pain and suffering? I think so!

Today, in many Charismatic or Pentecostal circles, we hear **a theology** of pain and suffering that effectively says believers endure hardships and pain because of a personal lack of faith or unconfessed sin. It is a theology that leads many to think there is no place for pain and suffering among God's elect, and selected scriptures are often quoted, out of context, to verify or justify this view.

I don't think anyone would deny that, **from a theological perspective**, God's intent for mankind is that we would live in perfect peace and harmony with Him, **free** from all pain and suffering.

I also don't think anyone would deny that, from **a theological perspective**, pain and suffering entered the world as a consequence of mankind's wilful disobedience against God.

The record of God's dealing with Adam and Eve, in Genesis 3, paints a vivid picture for us of their disobedience and broken trust, resulting in hardship, pain and suffering now being part of the experience of all mankind.

Now that pain and suffering **are** part of the reality for all mankind, there are two issues that we need to consider in the world today.

1] How do we come to terms with the purpose and place of pain and suffering in the world, and especially upon God's faithful?

2] How do we move forward in our lives for God to that point of acceptance or victory, despite the presence and reality of pain and suffering?

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1a] When we consider the possible purpose and place of pain and suffering in the world we are constantly bombarded by people asking the question, 'How could a loving God let this happen?'

A rather simplistic answer is that it is God's judgement, taking the theme of Genesis 3 and applying it universally. But, does this really help?

A more complex answer lies in the fact that this world, and all that is in it, including us, is not perfect and is now prone to corruption and deterioration.

Rather than teaching the 'Theory of Evolution' to our children in schools, I sometimes wonder if governments and teachers should be teaching 'Devolution'. After all, mankind is the main culprit on this planet who is no longer capable of living within the constraints of its God given natural environment.

Despite thousands of years of so called progress and development, not only have we lost this ability to live in harmony with God's created order, but, because of our mismanagement of this earth's environment, atmosphere and natural resources, we are today contributing to the demise of so many natural ecosystems upon which most animals depend.

How can the worldly authorities say we are evolving when things are continually going backward and our environment is being degraded and destroyed. Instead of new species being discovered in the natural environment, as espoused by the theory of evolution, today we are witnessing the loss (the extinction) of a diversity of animals that once had a place and thrived on this earth.

We are witnessing the fact that decline and deterioration are part of the natural world, and with this decline and deterioration pain is a part of the process. Why then did God create us to feel pain?

I can only suggest that it is part of God's ultimate purpose and plan to encourage us to both call on Him and depend on Him, as well as to prepare us for the next part of the journey of life God has purposed for us.

If we do not experience any discomfort, hardship or pain then we would not be prepared to move forward and we would simply want to stay where we are, never fulfilling the ultimate purpose of our creation - eternal union in peace and harmony with God.

To deny the place of hardship, pain and suffering in our lives; to assume the Pentecostal position, that it is a sign of continuing disobedience and sin before God, is, I believe, a failure to appreciate that a life of faith in God was never intended to cocoon us away from the rest of the world, or our humanity.

As we read in John 16-17, we are called to live **in** the world, but because of the Lord Jesus we are no longer **of** the world. Our sense of self and being is not invested in mankind's attempts to manipulate and control the environment for our own benefit.

**Our sense of self is now invested in the reality of God, as revealed in the risen Lord Jesus.**

If we, as followers of the Lord Jesus, never experienced or shared many of these things that are part of our humanity, how then could we understand and appreciate what others endure; how could we offer compassion and empathy toward others; how could we ever earn the right to share with others the strength and comfort of the Lord?

It is in this way that we are enabled to understand the purpose and place of pain and suffering in the world, and why we, as God's people, are not immune from it.

2a] Of course, the second issue was: How do we move forward in our lives for God to that point of acceptance or victory, despite the presence and constancy of pain and suffering? This, I believe, is the harder question of the two.

It may be fine to have all the intellectual and theological answers, **BUT**, when pain and suffering comes to you, it's another matter.

This is where the rubber hits the road. Let's make one thing clear, being a Christian does not shield us from pain and suffering, however, because of our relationship with God through the Lord Jesus, it should make it more understandable and bearable.

**Hope is the key!** When people have **no hope** they have **no** sense of purpose in the present, **nor** sense of a future. When people have **no** sense of a future they only have today. If all they have is today, then the pain and suffering tends to dominate and order their every waking moment.

**However**, where hope **is** the key, who is the lock that opens the door?

**The Lord Jesus Christ!**

When we are in a vital relationship with the Lord Jesus, we are given strength each day, through the Holy Spirit, to endure the times of hardship, pain and suffering that may come to us. We move forward each day in the sure knowledge that even this will pass; that it is only for a season. We move forward in the assurance that beyond the hardships, pain and suffering God has something better awaiting us.

**Why does God make us suffer?**

The simple answer is that **He doesn't!** Hardships, pain and suffering come to us because of our humanity, not because we deserve it, nor because God delights in our suffering.

**Why does God allow us to suffer?** This is not such a simple question to answer, because the permissive will of God remains a mystery, however, despite the presence of many kinds of corruption, evil and sin in the world, and their resulting consequences, God,

in His mercy and grace, can and does intervene to affirm for us that these things will never have ultimate power and authority over us.

Those who say that pain and suffering is our lot in life, and we can only hope that science will one day solve the problem, deny the power and authority of God to sometimes over-rule in our lives and bring miraculous healing.

To say that this is just old wives tales, not only denies the sovereignty of God, but also ignores the personal experience of so many who know God has touched and healed them. **Paul knew this power of God to heal.** That is why he asked the Lord to take away the 'thorn' that plagued him.

To Paul's request, the Lord said No! What the Lord did say was, '*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.*' (vs.9)

**And this is where we stand in victory today.**

In times of hardship, pain or suffering we know that in the Lord we have victory, either to receive God's healing power, or the Lord's grace and strength to endure it, until a better day.

**May you always know the all sufficiency of the Lord in your life.**