

Hard Truths – Week 9 – The Thorn Remains – Bible Study Helps

Title: The Thorn Remains: Finding Purpose in What God Allows to Stay

Sermon Summary:

This sermon explores the profound spiritual truth that God sometimes chooses not to remove our difficulties, but instead uses them for a greater purpose. Drawing from 2 Corinthians 12 and the Apostle Paul's experience with his "thorn in the flesh," the message reveals that our weaknesses can become the very place where God's strength is most powerfully displayed. Paul prayed three times for God to remove his thorn, but God's answer was "no"—not because He didn't care, but because He had a more important purpose. The thorn kept Paul humble, protected him from pride, and created a dependence on God that allowed divine grace to be more visible. The central theological insight is that when we are weak, then we are strong, because God's power is perfected in our weakness. This counterintuitive truth challenges our natural desire for immediate relief and calls us to trust that what remains may be proof that God is working something more important than our comfort.

Key Points:

- Prayer does not always mean God will remove the problem immediately; sometimes His answer is "no"
- God sometimes allows difficulties to remain because they actually help us by keeping pride low, deepening our prayer life, restraining self-sufficiency, and providing protection
- The thorn in Paul's flesh was both a protection against pride and part of spiritual warfare
- God's grace is sufficient—He provides the strength to overcome weakness rather than always removing the weakness itself
- Our greatest spiritual strength often comes from the place of our greatest weakness
- Long burdens teach lessons that quick relief cannot
- What we most want removed may be exactly what God is using for a greater purpose
- The thing that remains can stop controlling us when we surrender it to God's purpose
- Grace becomes more visible in daily burdens than in sudden miraculous interventions
- When we are weak, God can be strong through us, bringing Him greater glory

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Scripture Reference:

- 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 (primary focus on verses 7-10)
- Genesis 32 (Jacob wrestling with God and receiving a permanent limp)
- Deuteronomy 3:23-27 (Moses praying to enter the Promised Land)
- 2 Samuel 12:15-23 (David praying for his child)
- Matthew 26:36-44 (Jesus praying in Gethsemane)
- 1 Timothy 5:23 (Paul's advice to Timothy about his infirmities)
- John 11 (Martha, Mary, and the raising of Lazarus)
- 1 Kings 19 (Elijah and the widow of Zarephath)
- Mark 14 (Peter's denial and restoration)

Stories:

- Moses praying earnestly to enter the Promised Land but God saying no, allowing him only to see it from a distance
- David fasting and praying for seven days for his child's life, but the child dying anyway
- Jesus praying three times in Gethsemane for the cup to pass from Him, using the same words repeatedly
- Joseph waiting in prison for two years after being forgotten, but God's timing bringing him out at the perfect moment to save nations
- Jacob wrestling with God and receiving both a blessing and a permanent physical limitation
- The widow of Zarephath using her last meal to feed Elijah first, then experiencing daily provision from an inexhaustible barrel
- Job's long season of suffering (42 chapters) before understanding the spiritual warfare behind his trials
- A modern testimony of a man born with no arms and legs who became a powerful evangelist, his weakness becoming his greatest strength for ministry
- Personal testimony of being delayed in traffic and later discovering it prevented involvement in a serious accident

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Discipleship Questions

Paul recognized his thorn in the flesh kept him from pride and was part of spiritual warfare. How might our struggles serve dual purposes we don't initially recognize?

The sermon highlights that God sometimes answers prayer with 'no' rather than silence. How does receiving a clear 'no' from God differ from waiting without an answer, and how should we respond to each?

Paul said he took pleasure in infirmities because God's strength is made perfect in weakness. What would it look like practically to 'take pleasure' in our limitations rather than just endure them?

The widow of Zarephath experienced God's provision one day at a time rather than receiving abundance all at once. Why might God choose daily provision over immediate relief from our struggles?

The sermon suggests that without thorns, we wouldn't appreciate God's sustaining grace. Can you identify a past difficulty that, in hindsight, deepened your dependence on and appreciation for God?

Moses, David, and Jesus all prayed earnestly for something to be removed and received 'no' as an answer. What does this pattern teach us about the nature of prayer and God's sovereignty?

The message states that sometimes thorns stop controlling us even when they don't leave. What is the difference between having a burden and being controlled by it?

Paul's greatest ministry strength came from his weakness. How does this challenge our cultural emphasis on capability, self-sufficiency, and presenting ourselves as having it all together?

The sermon mentions that long burdens often teach what quick relief cannot. What spiritual maturity or character qualities can only be developed through sustained difficulty?

If God allowed a thorn to remain in your life for a greater purpose beyond your immediate comfort, how would that change the way you pray about your current struggles?

Small Group Guide: The Thorn Remains

Finding Purpose in What Remains

Based on 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Opening Prayer

Begin your group time asking God to open hearts and minds to understand His purposes in allowing difficult things to remain in our lives.

Ice Breaker

Share a time when you prayed for something to be removed or changed, but God's answer was "no" or "wait." How did you initially respond?

Key Scripture

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

"And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."

Key Takeaways

1. **Prayer doesn't always mean immediate relief** - God sometimes says "no" for our greater good
2. **Thorns can keep us humble** - Paul's thorn prevented pride from spiritual revelations
3. **Weakness creates dependence on God** - Our limitations become opportunities for God's strength
4. **Grace becomes visible in daily burdens** - We experience God's sustaining power through ongoing challenges
5. **What remains may become our greatest ministry** - God uses our weaknesses for His glory

Discussion Questions

Understanding the Passage

1. **What was Paul's "thorn in the flesh"?** Why do you think God didn't specify exactly what it was in Scripture? How does this help us apply the passage to our own lives?
2. **Paul prayed three times for God to remove the thorn.** What does this teach us about persistent prayer? How is this different from "vain repetitions"?
3. **Read verse 7 carefully.** Paul mentions being "exalted above measure" twice. What does this reveal about God's purpose for the thorn? How does this challenge our view of difficulties?

Personal Reflection

4. **What is your "thorn in the flesh"?** (This could be physical weakness, emotional struggle, relational difficulty, financial limitation, or ongoing challenge) How long have you been dealing with it?
5. **Have you experienced a clear "no" from God about something you desperately wanted removed?** How did you respond? Has your perspective changed over time?
6. **The sermon mentioned several ways thorns can help us:**
 - o Keeping pride low
 - o Deepening prayer life
 - o Restraining self-sufficiency
 - o Protection from greater harm

Which of these resonates most with your experience? Share an example.

Going Deeper

7. **"When I am weak, then am I strong."** This seems like a contradiction. How do you understand this principle? Can you share a time when you experienced God's strength in your weakness?
8. **The sermon gave examples of people whose greatest ministry came through their greatest weakness** (the man with no arms or legs, Joni Eareckson Tada in wheelchair, etc.). How does this challenge our thinking about "ideal" circumstances for ministry?
9. **Review the biblical examples mentioned:**
 - o Moses not entering the Promised Land
 - o David's child dying
 - o Jesus and the cup in Gethsemane
 - o Joseph's years in prison
 - o Job's suffering

Which story speaks most to your current situation? Why?

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10. **The sermon stated: "The burden remained, but it stopped controlling me."** What does this mean practically? How can something painful remain without controlling our lives?

Application Questions

11. **How might your thorn actually be helping you spiritually?** Consider areas like humility, prayer life, compassion for others, or dependence on God.
12. **Are you limiting your thinking because of your thorn?** What might God want to do through you *because of* your weakness, not in spite of it?
13. **The widow of Zarephath had to trust God daily for provision.** How does this daily dependence differ from having everything we need stored up? What might we miss if God removed all our needs immediately?
14. **Paul said "most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities."** This is a radical perspective shift. What would it look like for you to "glory" in your weakness rather than constantly complaining about it?

Practical Applications

This Week's Challenge

Choose one of the following to practice this week:

Option 1: Shift Your Prayer

Instead of praying only for removal of your thorn, pray specifically for God to show you:

- How it keeps you humble
- How it deepens your dependence on Him
- How He might use it for His glory
- What you're learning through it

Option 2: Testimony Time

Share with someone younger in the faith how God has used a difficulty in your life for good. Help them see that thorns can have purpose.

Option 3: Daily Grace Journal

Each day this week, write down one way you experienced God's sustaining grace in the midst of your ongoing challenge. Notice how His mercies are "new every morning."

Option 4: Perspective Shift

Identify one area where your thorn has been "controlling you" and limiting your service. Ask God to show you how you can serve Him differently, not waiting for the thorn to be removed.

Generational Wisdom

For Older Members: What thorns have you carried that you once desperately wanted removed but now see God's purpose in? How can you encourage younger believers facing similar struggles?

For Younger Members: What questions do you have for those who have walked longer with God about enduring difficulties? What fears do you have about long-term struggles?

Memory Verse

2 Corinthians 12:9

"My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

Challenge: Memorize this verse this week. When you feel the pain of your thorn, quote this promise.

Reflection Questions for Personal Time

1. Am I more focused on relief or on what God wants to teach me?
 2. How has my thorn actually drawn me closer to God?
 3. What would I lose spiritually if God removed this immediately?
 4. How might someone else be helped by seeing God's grace in my weakness?
 5. Am I willing to trust that God has "a bigger plan" even when I can't see it?
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Prayer Prompts

Pray for each other:

- For grace to endure ongoing thorns
- For eyes to see God's purposes in difficulties
- For strength to stop being controlled by limitations
- For willingness to let God be strong in our weakness
- For testimonies that will encourage others
- For trust when God's answer is "no"

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Corporate Prayer:

Take time to pray specifically for those carrying heavy, long-term burdens. Ask God to make His grace visibly sufficient in their lives this week.

Closing Thought

"Sometimes what we most want removed is being used by God for a greater purpose."

The thorn may remain, but so does God's promise: "**My grace is sufficient for thee.**" That grace is enough—not just to survive, but to thrive and bring glory to God through our weakness.

For Next Week

Come prepared to share:

- One way you experienced God's sufficient grace this week
 - How your perspective on your thorn may have shifted
 - Questions or struggles you're still processing
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Remember: The goal isn't to celebrate suffering for its own sake, but to trust that God wastes nothing in the life of a believer. Even our thorns have purpose in His hands.

5-Day Devotional: Finding Strength in Weakness

Day 1: When God Says "No"

Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Devotional: The Apostle Paul's thorn teaches us that God's "no" is not rejection—it's redirection. Paul prayed three times for relief, yet God answered with something better: sufficient grace. Sometimes we're so focused on removing our discomfort that we miss the transformation happening within it. God isn't ignoring our prayers; He's answering with eternal perspective. The thorn that frustrates you today may be the very thing keeping you dependent on Him tomorrow. When immediate relief doesn't come, ask yourself: What if God is offering something more valuable than comfort? His grace doesn't remove every struggle, but it empowers you to glorify Him through it. Your weakness becomes the stage for His strength.

Day 2: The Purpose of Our Limitations

Reading: Deuteronomy 3:23-27; Matthew 26:36-44

Devotional: Moses couldn't enter the Promised Land. Jesus faced the cup of suffering. Both prayed earnestly for different outcomes, yet both submitted to God's greater plan. Our limitations aren't always punishments—they're often protective boundaries or purposeful redirections. Moses' limitation kept him humble; Christ's obedience brought salvation. What feels like a closed door may actually be God's protection from something we cannot see. The burden you carry might be preventing pride, deepening your prayer life, or preparing you for greater ministry. Trust that God sees what you cannot. His plans transcend your immediate comfort. When you can't understand why something remains, remember: God's purposes are always redemptive, even when they're painful.

Day 3: Grace That Sustains

Reading: 1 Kings 17:8-16; Exodus 16:1-5

Devotional: The widow of Zarephath experienced God's provision one meal at a time for three and a half years. Israel received manna fresh each morning. Both learned that God's sustaining grace comes daily, not in lifetime supplies. Your thorn may be the very thing that keeps you returning to God each morning, experiencing fresh mercies you'd otherwise overlook. If everything were easy, you'd miss the intimacy of daily dependence. God doesn't always remove the need; He meets it consistently, building your faith with each provision. The barrel that never empties teaches more than sudden abundance ever could. What remains in your life may be your greatest opportunity to witness God's faithfulness—not once, but every single day.

Day 4: Strength Perfected in Weakness

Reading: 2 Samuel 12:15-23; Genesis 32:22-31

Devotional: David's child died despite fervent prayer. Jacob walked with a limp after wrestling with God. Both experienced permanent changes that shaped their ministries. David learned that God's will transcends our desires; Jacob's weakness became a constant reminder of God's blessing. Your greatest spiritual strength often emerges from your deepest weakness. When you can't rely on yourself, you discover God's sufficiency in profound ways. The limitation you despise may become your most powerful testimony. People don't remember those who had it easy; they're moved by those who trusted God through impossibility. Your weakness isn't disqualifying you—it's positioning you to display God's power in ways self-sufficiency never could. Embrace it.

Day 5: The Thorn That Teaches

Reading: 1 Timothy 5:23; Job 42:1-6

Devotional: Timothy had ongoing health issues. Job suffered immensely before understanding God's sovereignty. Both learned lessons through prolonged struggle that quick relief couldn't teach. The thorn that remains is often God's classroom. It teaches patience, humility, compassion, and unwavering trust. What you're enduring isn't wasted—it's developing character that shallow living never produces. Years from now, you may look back and say, "I wouldn't change it." Not because the pain wasn't real, but because the growth was worth it. God is working something more important than your comfort: He's perfecting your faith. The burden may not leave, but it will stop controlling you when you surrender it as God's tool for transformation. Trust His process.