

# *This Week at the Creek*

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**the Church at Dyers Creek**

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Here's the text from the pastor's Sunday message:

## **Just a Closer Walk with Thee**

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

June 8, 2008

In the early 1900s a young man named Clarence took his girlfriend on a summer outing. They took a picnic lunch out to a picturesque island in the middle of a small lake. She wore a long dress with about a dozen petticoats. He was dressed in a suit with a high collar. Clarence rowed them out to the island, dragged the boat into shore, and spread their picnic supplies beneath a shade tree. So hypnotized was he by her beauty that he hardly noticed the hot sun and perspiration on his brow. Softly she whispered to him, "Clarence, you forgot the ice cream." Clarence pulled the boat back to the water and rowed to shore. He ran to a grocery store nearby, bought the ice cream, and rowed back to the island. She batted her long eyelashes over deep blue eyes and purred, "Clarence, you forgot the chocolate syrup." Clarence got back into that boat and returned to the store for syrup. Rowing back toward the island, suddenly he stopped. He sat there in the boat the rest of the afternoon, fascinated by an idea. By the end of that afternoon, Clarence—oh, I didn't mention that his last name was Evinrude, did I?—had invented the outboard motor. And by the way, Clarence later married the girl who waited so long on the island.

Clarence Evinrude illustrates a basic principle of Christian living: When life delivers a problem or pain, force it to pay dividends. If life gives you a **thorn** that you can't and God won't remove, make it produce a **rose**.

In this Scripture passage, the apostle Paul illustrated this truth in his own life. What was this thorn? We don't know. We do know that it was some very painful, chronic affliction. Sometimes Paul was totally disabled by it. It was a debilitating problem that at times kept him from working. Some cynic has suggested that this thorn in Paul's flesh was his wife, but there is no evidence to support that. The best guesses are that the thorn was epilepsy or migraine

headaches or a malarial fever common in the eastern Mediterranean area or — what I think most likely — a disease of the eyes. Whatever the case, that pestering handicap kept him in constant touch with his limitations.

It was a hindrance to his ministry, and he prayed diligently for its removal; but God refused. Paul tended to be a very self-sufficient person, making this handicap all the more difficult for him. But in the end, the apostle considered it a **gift** — something to keep him humble, something reminding him of his need for constant **contact** with God, something that benefited everyone around him because they could see that God was at work in his life. This thorn in the flesh led Paul to a closer and more intimate walk with his God.

Still, Paul referred to the thorn in the flesh as a "messenger of Satan." The Bible teaches that all diseases and death came into the world because of sin. God's perfect original creation didn't include disease or death. People don't get sick and die because God wills it. People get sick and die because our world is flawed by sin. In this flawed universe, thorns like Paul's are distributed indiscriminately as one would deal a hand of cards, to the just and the unjust alike. In this case, Paul said it was Satan's angel doing his best to get him down. But what actually happened was the opposite effect. It drove Paul to his knees! It eliminated the danger of his walking around all high and mighty!

At first, Paul didn't think of it as a gift. That's why he begged God to remove it. But God's response was "My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness." Once Paul heard that, he was glad to let it happen! He quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. Christ's strength was moving in on Paul's weakness! And from that time on, Paul took his limitations in stride and with good cheer, remembering that they cut him down to size. He let Christ take over! And the **weaker** he got, the **stronger** he became!

A thorn in the flesh in today's terminology might be called "a royal pain in the neck" — a sensitive and ongoing physical, mental, or emotional hurt. A thorn is whatever causes you pain or frustration or sadness. And thorns come in all shapes and sizes: migraine headaches, bad backs, arthritis, depression, anxiety spells, shingles, an unhappy marriage, an impossible boss, a child on drugs, accidents, bad breaks, and on and on. Varying in severity, most of us have at least one at any given time. In fact, do you know what your thorn is?

As you think about that, don't forget what Paul did about his thorn and how God responded. Where does it say in the Bible that our prayers for whatever we want will always be answered affirmatively? Jesus prayed three times in the Garden of Gethsemane that He be spared the agony of the cross. But God's answer was no, and Jesus accepted it. Paul prayed three times that his thorn in the flesh would be removed. But God's answer was no, and Paul accepted it.

Do you remember the country music song some time ago that told about a young man who along with his wife returned to his high school for his tenth year reunion? There he encountered his old high school flame. Right away he noticed

that her appearance and personality didn't match up very well with his memories of her. He clutched his wife's hand a little tighter, happy he'd ended up with her instead of the old flame. But he remembered many occasions ten years earlier when he'd prayed fervently, "Lord, I ask only one thing of you: Help me win the heart of this girl." Then comes the refrain of the song: "Thank God for unanswered prayers." Some prayers don't receive positive responses because God in His wisdom knows that something else is better for us.

Although God didn't remove Paul's affliction, He promised to demonstrate His power in him. And that's a fact that we all ought to latch onto for courage and hope: God's power is displayed in our weakness. As we recognize our limitations, we'll depend more on God for our effectiveness rather than on our own energy, effort, or talent. For our limitations not only develop Christian **character**, but they also deepen our **worship**, because in admitting them, we affirm God's **strength**.

When we're strong in abilities or resources, we're tempted to do God's work on our own, and that can lead to pride. When we're weak, allowing God to fill us with His power, then we're stronger than we could ever be on our own. Of course, God doesn't intend for us to be weak, passive, or ineffective; life provides enough hindrances and setbacks without us creating them. But when those obstacles do come, we must depend on God. Only His **power** can make us **effective** for Him and can help us to do work that has truly lasting value.

You might think about it this way: we're all some type of Ford. Not all of us were given the same model by our Maker. Some of us are like the Ford Crown Victoria. We're strong, durable, and except for basic maintenance, we hardly ever need to get anything worked on. Now some of us are like the Ford Tempo. No, we're no Crown Victoria. We're not quite that strong, and yes, we do need to get a few things fixed every once in a while. But for the most part, we run well and chug along just fine. But then some of us are like the old Ford Pinto. We just putter along from one mechanic to the next, constantly breaking down, constantly dealing with problems, constantly trying to get things fixed, constantly living with suffering.

Do you ever wonder why some people go through their whole lives hardly ever getting sick? Looking ten or twenty years younger than what they really are? Able to travel or play sports or do whatever they want? While other people live with back pain, heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, clinical depression, macular degeneration, arthritis, or cancer? Have you ever been laid up in the hospital and flipped on the TV to one of those exercise shows? There's all these middle-aged people working out, looking trim and healthy, the Rocky Mountains serving as their backdrop, just having the time of their lives? Don't you wonder: *Why are they up there having a blast, while I'm lying down here in this humiliating gown on this humiliating bed – except for when I'm running to the john every fifteen minutes? What's up with that, God? Why do I have to live with this terrible thorn in my life? I thought you loved me! I thought I was doing what you wanted me to*

*do! I thought you had a plan for my life! This is interfering with my work, God. Take it away! Take it away! Take it away!*

It is quite often to you that God says, "I'll not take it away. You need this weakness in your life so that when you minister, you'll be forced to rely on My grace and power rather than your own. I want the world to know that your ministry isn't a demonstration of human achievement, but a demonstration of My power working in your life. I want the world to know that when you are weak on your own, you can still be strong in Me." Bruce Larson states this principle in this succinct fashion: "In every disaster, God has a gift for you. Claim it."

Things are going to come into our lives that are, at the base level, a challenge from God to truly believe that His divine grace is all that we need. Do we really believe that God can take care of us? Can we trust Him to use the adversity in our lives for good – to drive us to a closer walk with Him? Do we really believe that God works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose?

You're safe in God's hands. He'll love you and comfort you and care for you. Trust Him through it all. Through sickness, through opposition, through all your royal pains in the neck, trust Him to be strong in the midst of your weakness.

Let us pray: Lord, help us to trust You – especially when we're weak or sick or failing – to bring about Your strength from our weakness. Remind us again that Your grace is enough, that Your grace is truly all we need. We ask it in Jesus' name.

### **Sources**

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