

Jesus Will Meet You in Your Place of Unanswered Prayer  
2 Corinthians 12:1-10

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*Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” 2 Cor. 12:8-9a*

Advent is a season that calls attention to the fact that we are waiting for God to act in our lives. And Advent stresses the idea that God does not act according to our plan or schedule.

For an example of the kind of waiting that happens when we wait for God, turn to the Apostle Paul where he tells about having what he calls a thorn in his flesh. Look first at the background of the story and then bring it straight into the foreground of your own living and waiting for God.

THE BACKGROUND

*There is Paul with his thorn.*

Paul never once explicitly identifies what his thorn is. That has led to much speculation as to what it might be. The best guess seems to be that Paul’s thorn is some kind of physical malady or chronic illness. Epilepsy and eye disease are the leading contenders among the guesses. In Galatians, Paul’s angriest letter, he somewhere says that it was a physical infirmity that led him to preach in Galatia and that the Galatians thought so much of him that they would have gladly torn out their own eyes and given them to Paul (Gal. 4:13-15).

While eye trouble of some kind is likely Paul’s thorn, I sometimes think his thorn is weariness from the stress and fatigue of his work as an apostle. Just a paragraph or two earlier in 2 Corinthians he lists all that he has endured – various imprisonments, beatings, floggings, stonings, shipwrecks, and other dangers that were near constant (2 Cor. 11:23-27). He includes right in that list as though it is on the same plane of severity daily pressure and anxiety over his churches (2 Cor. 11:28). Church administration, the loneliness of leadership and the burden of responsibility may be Paul’s thorn.

When I haven’t imagined Paul’s thorn to be physical hardship or mental strain I sometimes think it is old-fashioned guilt. Paul persecuted Christians before he became an apostle. He dragged people from their homes and from their children. He presided over their being thrown into jail or led to death. He knew in his heart that he was forgiven, but I wonder if the sights and sounds of his former life – the screams, the tears, the begging for mercy – didn’t come to him in the night and disturb his sleep. The one psalmist’s phrase – “my sin is ever before me” (Ps. 51:3b) – may have been etched on Paul’s heart making guilt the tormenting thorn in his flesh.

Paul never says what it is. He only calls it a devilish thing, a messenger from Satan, as if it is something straight out of Hell itself. It torments him and keeps him from being as happy as he could be. One old preacher was probably right when he said Paul had to deal with that thorn every morning, every night, every day of his life.<sup>1</sup> There is Paul with his terrible trouble.

*There Paul is with his hope.*

Still looking at the background now, there is Paul with his hope that the awful thorn be taken away. A Quaker poet in our hymnal prays,

Drop your still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease;  
Take from our souls the strain and stress,  
And let our ordered lives confess  
the beauty of your peace.<sup>2</sup>

Paul was like that about his thorn. He wanted to be rid of it. No doubt of the bliss he thought would be his without it. No thorn would make his travel as an apostle easier and freer. It would have made his work for the gospel so much more effective, efficient, and enjoyable. There is Paul with his hope that the thorn be taken away.

*There Paul is at his prayers.*

And, still in the background, see Paul at his prayers. I imagine Paul's prayers were magnificent. When Dr. Blackwood taught about the writing of sermons and liturgies he liked to say that when a person's heart is moved the words tend to flow.<sup>3</sup> There are passages in Paul's letters where he is teaching about theology and his heart becomes so moved that his words cascade one upon another, filling up a single sentence with more beauty and truth than any single sentence has a right to contain.

Paul does not allow us into the secret place of his prayers; he only says enough to let us know his prayers were repeated and they were specific. Three times he asked for the thorn to be removed.

He also says his prayer went unanswered. I don't know how to read the text well enough to know if Paul means that the first two times he prayed about the thorn no answer came at all and that he heard something only after the third time or if he means that every time he heard the same answer, namely that what he wanted would not be. Either way, especially before the third time he prayed, Paul is a man stuck with his thorn, hoping for God to do something about it, and waiting through a period of unanswered prayer.

#### THE FOREGROUND

*There you are with your thorn.*

Rare is the life that does not have its thorn, its agonizing and tormenting trouble that seems to be a devil of a thing that will not go away.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Parker, *The People's Bible*, Vol. XXVI (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, n.d.), p. 406.

<sup>2</sup> John Greenleaf Whittier, "Dear God, Embracing Humankind," *New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1995), #502.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew W. Blackwood, *The Preparation of Sermons* (New York: Abingdon, 1948), p. 176.

What your thorn is may be known only to you as Paul's was known only to him. It could be a chronic physical malady. You may have read recently that country singer LeAnn Rimes posed in the nude to show the terrible psoriasis she has long suffered and kept hidden as a way to bring awareness and sensitivity about that disease to the fore. You may know that Gary Burghoff, the actor who played Radar on *M\*A\*S\*H*, worked deftly to keep his deformed hand away from the camera. And Joe Biden's long and private battle with stuttering is now public and prominent. You may have some secret thorn such as one of these.

Or yours may be some deep-seated family concern. Someone has said that if you live in a town long enough you soon come to know that behind every front door is a sad story and a broken heart.<sup>44</sup>

Or near to everyone's reality, your thorn could likely be COVID fatigue. I had a routine doctor's appointment the other day and he asked the routine question: Are you depressed? I answered that I think everyone is at least slightly depressed these days. The weariness of the confinement and contained and curtailment is getting us down.

There you are with your thorn, whatever it is. It is there, it is there, it is always there. It's a tormenting thing. It's a messenger from Satan.

*There you are with the hope your thorn be taken away.*

The three characters in *The Wizard of Oz* who walked to the Emerald City with Dorothy each had a thorn that made their lives miserable. When they imagined what life would be without their malady they sang and danced and told how blissful life would be.

Israel of old thought of how wonderful life would be when God sent the Messiah whom they envisioned would remove the thorn of oppression they felt – first from Babylon and then from Rome – and make their lives free.

You may have an Advent hope like that. How wonderful life will be without the trouble that torments you now like it comes straight out of Hell! There you are with your hope.

*There you are with your prayers.*

You lay hold of the wonderful promises of prayer. You believe where it says if you ask in secret God will reward you in secret. You believe where it says ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find. You lay hold of the promise where it says that if you ask anything in the name of Jesus it will be given to you.

You lay hold of these wonderful promises and yet your knuckles are fairly well bleeding from all the knocking while the door remains unopened and your prayer remains unanswered.

Advent – the experience of it, not the four week season of it – is located in the in between time, in between the asking and the receiving. It is in the silence between the sound of the knocking and the sound of footsteps coming to open the door. It is the place where you live with

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<sup>44</sup> George E. Sweazey, *The Church as Evangelist* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 6.

life on your hands and no sense of the hand of God reaching out to help. Advent is in the prayers prayed and as yet unanswered. It has nothing to do with a season of four Sundays that soon passes and everything to do with life lived in the dark liminality of not knowing when the last candle will be lit and the light will come.

That is the foreground of your own life and it matches right up with the background we saw of Paul with his thorn-stabbed self, praying his unanswered prayers over and over again.

#### THE PROMISE

Peek with me though a bit yonder into the coming of the light. The text allows us to take this peek. The light – the Advent promise – is that God will answer your prayers. The answer, when it comes, will not be *less* than you hope for but *more*, vastly more.

Paul wanted something of his removed – take my thorn away. Something of Paul’s was not taken away but something of God’s was given him – “My grace is sufficient for you.” The answer was better than the request. Paul wanted something of his taken away but something of God’s was given him instead.

So Jesus will meet you in your place of unanswered prayer. Your request may not be granted, but God’s wonderful gift will be given.