

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

August 21, 2022

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Credentials of Authenticity

(Studies in 2 Corinthians 10-13)

In Praise of Weeds and Thorns

(2 Corinthians 12)

Study #3

Introduction: Your life. A garden...

Imagine your life as a garden. You might immediately think of a flower or a vegetable garden. Of course, I think of a vegetable garden, the fall version of which I'll start planting soon.

So, now, I'm not thinking of my life as a garden. I'm thinking about my fall garden.

I imagine it's mid-November. Cooler weather has hit, but it's still warm enough to grow beans, squash, broccoli, spinach, lettuce, Swiss chard, and more...

In the garden of my imagination, I'm watering infrequently because we are having regular rains. Everything is doing great in the garden.

Everything...including the weeds. Gardening would be so much more enjoyable if I could just keep the weeds out.¹

If only I could eliminate weeds from my garden, I would be a happy gardener. But dealing with these annoyances is the price of collecting vegetables.

And, since I really love eating fresh vegetables, I'll gladly put up with weed-pulling.

Hope for a harvest makes dealing with the problems of gardening worth the bother. The product makes the process bearable.

That's my real-life garden. But at the beginning, I didn't ask you to imagine a garden. I asked you to imagine *your life* as a garden.

Assuming that you are seeing fruit from your life's garden - joy and peace, a rich walk with God and relating with others - are there weeds in the garden of your life?

You might quickly list normal, everyday afflictions, on-going irritations, specific temptations to sin, relational fractures, or pain - physical or emotional.

Now, quick. Out of all the weeds in your life, if you could remove one weed, which would it be?

I'll bet it didn't even take that long to think of it. You dream of your life without this one weed. And there is certainly nothing wrong with eradicating weeds.

Now, back to my actual garden...

What if, one day, I went out to my garden and found a weed that I couldn't pull? Its roots were so deep and its stalk so prickly I couldn't get rid of it. What would I do then?

Well, I'd have to learn to garden around it. I'd have to learn some new strategies for gardening.

It would be annoying, sure, but I'd have to learn how to cope with this ever-present weed if I wanted to keep on picking veggies.

And now, back again to the garden of our lives.

¹ And let's not forget the bugs, the other bane of my gardening life. :-(

What are we to do when we are dealing with deep-rooted and prickly weeds that grow in the garden of our personal lives, weeds we can't remove?

We have tried everything we can think of, but nothing works. This trial never goes away. This pain never ceases. This temptation never lets up. What do we do then?

This morning, the Apostle Paul serves as our guide today for those times when the weed won't leave, and he leads us into the disciple's art of weed appreciation.

Paul's life had more than its share of weeds. He knew what he was talking about, so we would do well to listen today.

Last Sunday we listened as Paul resorted to boasting. But he didn't boast about academic degrees, converts, the great crowds he spoke to, his international reputation, or his stunning miracles.²

Instead, he boasted about his hardships and sufferings. He boasted about an embarrassing night in Damascus when he was let down over the city wall in a basket to escape a plot to take his life.

If all of that doesn't seem much like boasting, keep reading.

At the beginning of chapter twelve Paul mentions an experience that looks more like what any of us might call a boast than anything he has mentioned yet.

The Gift of Visions and Revelations... (vv. 1-6)

Paul Lets Fly with a BOAST! (v. 1)

² In fact, in the one place in the New Testament where he mentions his rabbinic training - Philippians 3 - he said it was worth less than barnyard dung in comparison with the value of knowing Christ.

[1] Boasting is necessary, though it is not beneficial; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.

Paul was not a big fan of boasting. But, given what was happening in Corinth, he made an exception to his normal policy, and boasted.

Here, he decided that it was time to share with the Corinthians what was the most amazing of all his experiences as a Christian.³

Paul's Trip to Paradise (vv. 2-4)

Fourteen years previous

This thing he's going to tell us about happened fourteen years before he wrote 2 Corinthians.⁴

After having studied the chronology of Paul's life, it seems likely to me that this "thing" happened while he was serving in the church at Antioch. (~AD 44; Acts 12-13)

In fact, I think it happened just before he and Barnabas left for the First Missionary Journey, and it was a very supernatural "thing."

We know that Paul was no stranger to the supernatural. God gave him visions and special dreams. His gifting as an apostle allowed him to perform miracles. The Lord spoke to him more than once.

³ It may be that Paul's enemies in Corinth had boasted of visionary experiences themselves. Some have suggested that they were seeking to undermine Paul's influence for the Gospel in the Corinthian church and were using their claims of having had ecstatic experiences to support their teachings as opposed to his.

⁴ It is hard to pin down where Paul might have been when he received the revelation he describes in this passage. It wasn't his conversion experience on the Damascus Road which we read about in Acts 9, because that happened more than twenty years earlier. Nor is it a reference to Paul's time alone with the Lord in the deserts of Arabia, for that, too, was more than the fourteen years he mentions here. It couldn't have been associated with anything that happened when he was stoned and presumed dead at Lystra (Acts 14) or in connection with the vision he had about the need for the Gospel in Macedonia (Acts 16), because those events were more recent than fourteen years.

But what he is about to describe tops any of that.

You may be surprised to learn that Paul never wrote about what we are about to read in any of his other letters. Nor, evidently, did he mention it to the Corinthians when he had been with them.

Today, if someone had an experience like what Paul describes here, it would be on the Web within hours. It would be all over social media. Book tours would follow.

But Paul kept this thing private. It took him fourteen years to let this cat out of the bag, and he does so now only because he feels compelled to do so.

I would have appreciated it if Paul had given us more details about this experience. But he doesn't. He leaves the details to our imagination.

Physically inexplicable (vv. 2-4a)

[2] I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago - whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows - such a man was caught up to the third heaven. [3] And I know how such a man - whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows [4a] was caught up into Paradise...

(I know it seems like Paul is writing about someone else. It will soon become clear that he is writing about himself.)

His vagueness about the whole thing leaves us with more questions than answers.

But notice that he doesn't describe the experience as a dream or a vision. This was not a fantasy trip, or something that just happened in Paul's mind.

He actually went to Heaven. He was "caught up" to Heaven.⁵

Evidently, Paul was uncertain as to the role his physical body played in this experience, but it really happened.

Paul said that he went to "the third Heaven" - and that aligns with what we know of the Jewish conception of the universe.

They called the atmosphere we breathe and in which the birds fly the "1st Heaven." The "2nd Heaven" is the place of the sun, moon, and stars. And the "3rd Heaven" is the place of God's dwelling.

They didn't think that God's Heaven was a long way off, spatially. The thought is that the 3rd Heaven is not visible, it is not accessible to our senses like the other Heavens are.

But this 3rd Heaven is where God took Paul.

The Old Testament characters, Enoch and Elijah, were taken to Heaven (this third Heaven). But they didn't come back. Paul is the only one who has come back from the third Heaven.⁶

You'll notice that Paul doesn't try to regale us with other-worldly descriptions of Heaven. He just says he went there.

We don't have any specifics about what Paul saw - and he makes sure that we don't know what he heard.

Verbally incommunicable (v. 4b)

He simply tells us that he ***[4b]...heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.***

⁵ The word for "caught up" is a word that is also used in 1 Thessalonians 4 to refer to a time when Christians will be physically taken *while still living* to Heaven to be with the Lord. We refer to this event as the "rapture."

⁶ Interestingly enough, Lazarus, who was dead for four days and raised from the dead by Jesus, is never said to have gone to Heaven.

It may be that the words were inexpressible, as in unpronounceable.

Or (what I think is more likely), that the words were about truths so other-worldly that there was no way to translate them into an earthly language.⁷

Paul experienced things that could only be experienced in Heaven, heard things that could only be heard in Heaven, and saw things that could only be seen in Heaven.

Paul has revealed that this happened to him, but not so that we would think of him as someone special because of this revelation.

Paul Hesitates to Boast (vv. 5-6)

[5] In behalf of such a man I will boast; but in my own behalf I will not boast, except regarding my weaknesses. [6] For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.

So, if he didn't want us to think of him as some big deal for having gone to Heaven and back, why mention it?

Well, a big part of the reason he tells us is to validate his claim to be a genuine apostle. But Paul also tells us about this heavenly visit, because telling us about that made it necessary to tell us about another experience that he REALLY wants us to know.

There is not a one of us here who can identify with a trip to Heaven. None of us have had that experience.

We can all, though, identify with what Paul went on to describe as another of his experiences.

Paul had a ***"thorn in the flesh."***

⁷ In agreement with some of my commentaries, I would suggest that whatever Paul heard must have had a profound impact on his subsequent life and ministry, giving us a clue as to the source of his astonishing zeal and indefatigable labors.

God allowed a weed to sprout in the garden of Paul's life, a deep-rooted, thorny weed.

I'm intrigued by his description of the thorn's invasion.

...Leads to a Chronic Thorn in the Flesh (vv. 7-10)

A Thorn to Prevent Pride (v. 7)

[7] Because of the extraordinary greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me - to keep me from exalting myself!⁸

God uses Satan

God gave him the thorn, but Paul called it ***"a messenger from Satan."***

God and Satan were both involved in the gift of this unidentified thorn. But Satan's activity is here - and always - limited by what God allows. Satan is very powerful, but God is always in control.⁹

Satan's purpose was to make life miserable for Paul. After all, Satan hated Paul, just like he hates you and me and all believers in Jesus.

But God gave the thorn, sent the messenger, and allowed the pain to accomplish His own purposes in Paul's life. God's plan was to use a satanic thorn for Paul's good.

⁸ One thing becomes clear from verse 7: God REALLY doesn't want His people to exalt themselves. His concern for Paul in this regard was especially great in light of the ***"extraordinary greatness of the revelations."***

⁹ We learned this from the Old Testament book of Job. God allowed Satan to wound Job and to take away everything that was dear to him. But all of Satan's attacks were allowed - and limited - by God both to prove and to improve the purity of Job's faith.

So, what was the thorn? I get it. We all would love to know what Paul's thorn was. I am sure that none of us knows what that thorn was.

What was the thorn?

Through the centuries, though, many people have tried to figure it out, and many believe that they've arrived at the answer.

Some have suggested that his thorn consisted of remorse over the way he had lived before coming to faith in Christ. Some believe he was excessively tempted to sexual sin.

Some think that he suffered from a nagging wife, frustration over his inability to win Jews to Jesus, or from overtly demonic attacks.

Others have wondered if the thorn was a disease like malaria or leprosy, or a chronic condition like epilepsy, gastritis, rheumatism - even hypochondria.

Still others are of the opinion that Paul suffered from earaches, headaches, dental problems, deafness, gallstones, gout, sciatica, lice, bad eyesight, or a speech impediment.¹⁰

It is anyone's guess as to the precise thorn from which Paul suffered. Who knows, maybe he had a thorn stuck in his flesh?

About all I can say is that Paul's "thorn" was a chronic, painful thing.

But we don't know what it was. And I, for one, am glad that we don't. As far as we know, it could have been anything.

Thank God we don't know!

That means that Paul's thorn just might have been the same thorn with which you struggle.

It is common for Christians to come to this text and identify Paul's thorn as their thorn.

Those with cataracts wonder if he had an eye problem. Wheelchair bound people wonder if he walked with a limp. People with asthma suppose he had compromised lung capacity. Depressed people assume he was depressed.

Not knowing what Paul's specific thorn was frees us all up to recognize that as Paul coped with his "thorn" so we can learn to cope with our "thorn" (whatever it might be), too.

Whatever the thorn was, it was a problem so severe that this man who endured beatings, imprisonments, stonings, rejections, humiliations and more, begged God to take it away from him.

Paul Wanted the "thorn" Gone! (v. 8)

[8] Concerning this I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might leave me.

Paul wanted the thorn gone. And so, being a man who believed in prayer, Paul prayed that the Lord would remove it. Pull this weed!

He prayed three times. No. He implored the Lord three times.

I'll bet the Lord Jesus listened and I'll bet that He listened with great compassion.

After all, Jesus knew what it was to be in anguish. He prayed three times in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup of God's wrath would pass Him by.

There is nothing wrong with you or with me wanting a stubborn weed to be removed from our life's garden.

Have you ever prayed that God would remove a weed from your life's garden? Ever prayed three or more times?

¹⁰ Many think that we should associate this "thorn" with the physical ailment he mentions in Galatians 4:13ff. If so, then he is certainly speaking of a physical disability. And that reference makes us think, too, of a problem with his eyes.

It may well be that there have been times when your prayer for relief has been answered. God graciously delivered you from a thorn. And praise God for that deliverance.

Paul's prayer was perfectly legitimate. It was fine for him to want relief and it is fine for you to long for relief.

But, while God welcomes a prayer for relief, He is not obligated to say "Yes" to that prayer. Sometimes, God will say, "No" to our prayers for relief from a thorn.

God's Response: no (v. 9a)

[9a] And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."

Paul's "thorn" was going to stay. It will not be removed.

Most of us are like Paul. If we identify a painful, thorny, deep-rooted weed in the garden of our life, we want to get rid of it.

So, how would you like to receive the response Paul got to his request that God would take away the thorn?

"No, Dave, I am not going to take your thorn away. I love you, but because I see more than you can see, My love for you will not always look or feel the way you think love should look or feel. I am going to allow THAT thorn to remain, to fester in your body and soul."

Don't miss this.

God said "No" to the Apostle Paul's perfectly reasonable request for relief.

He said "No" so that Paul would not exalt himself (v. 7). He said "No" so that Paul would learn to rely on God's grace. He said "No" so that Paul's weakness would be replaced by God's perfect strength.

Isn't it reasonable that He might, at times, do the same thing with us when we ask Him to remove our thorns?

Shouldn't we expect that if this is the way He dealt with the Apostle Paul, He will also allow hardships in our lives, too, in order that we might know His power?

When we feel the sting of a thorn, we need to realize this: God is in it.

He is either allowing it or He is orchestrating it. He might be using tools like health or money or relationships or even satanic pressure. But God is in it.

It is possible that this idea - that God is in your pain, either passively or actively - may be hard to hear. So, lest you think that I'm suggesting that God is a cosmic sadist, let me assure you of God's goodness.

There are two truths that we hold in tension. There is the truth of the goodness of God. And there is the truth that life is hard.

Those two truths are both true at the same time. The fact that life is hard doesn't mean that God is not good.

God is good. Period.

The exclamation mark to the idea that God is good is Jesus. God sent His Son to die for us, to rise again for us, and to send the Holy Spirit to indwell us. God is good and every good gift comes from God. He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

To say that God is in our pain doesn't mean that God is mean. It means that He sees things that we don't see. It means that His goodness and grace and love will sometimes have sharp edges and hard sides.

Judging by how God dealt with Paul - leaving the thorn in place - I conclude that it was more important to God to keep Paul trusting than it was to make Paul comfortable.

Same for me. Same for you.

He wants us each to learn to draw on His resources for living. And one of the sharpest tools in His toolbox to mold us into dependent people is the chisel of pain - be that pain physical, emotional, relational, psychological or spiritual.

God is more interested in our welfare than we are. He cares more that we flourish than we do.

But His methods for promoting our welfare don't always align with our self-perceived need for safety, creature comforts, or for rest.

I said a minute ago, that God's answer to Paul's prayer was "No." Well, I'm going to amend that slightly. God's answers to prayer are never negative, except in a superficial sense.

In the final scheme of things, God's dealings with His people are always "Yes!" (See 2 Corinthians 1:19-20). And His "No" here was qualified by an assurance: By leaving the thorn to torment Paul, Paul would experience the power of Christ.

With that "Yes" attached to the gift of the thorn, listen to Paul's reaction. His response is what some have called the high point of this whole long letter. Faith just doesn't get any more authentic than this.

The Weakness That Leads to Christ's Power! (vv. 9b-10)

The marriage of weakness and faith

[9b]... Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

Having heard God's answer, Paul stops pleading with God to release him from the thorn. Instead, he welcomes thorns. He glories in them. He embraces weakness and pain.

This is not Christian masochism. In and of itself, pain does not necessarily manifest God's power. It does so ONLY when we turn in our weakness and pain to Jesus.

So, listen as I read the list of weaknesses with which Paul is "**well content**" now that he embraces how God is willing to use them in his life.

Well content with weaknesses

[10] Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.¹¹

Today our understanding of "**thorn in the flesh**" greatly expands. Before we started this morning, we would have guessed that persecution qualified as a tool God would use to sharpen us. We might not have guessed that any weakness or pain also qualifies.

Any minor annoyance and any personal catastrophe can be a tool God will use to promote our growth, our purity, and our faith - IF, in them, we will turn to Jesus.

Take a careful look at the weaknesses listed here. Do any of them correspond to what you are going through right now?

Paul lists "**insults.**" Have you been insulted lately? How did that insult make you feel? Angry? Weak? Depressed?

Paul says that if you'll turn to Jesus when you're insulted, you'll experience and display God's power.

Same thing with "**difficulties**" and "**distresses**" - just in case any of us have ever experienced a difficulty or a distressing situation.

God can use anything that makes us feel pain to teach us to rely on His strength.

He can use cancer or covid, a hard marriage or a rebellious child, a hard-starting car or a near fatal car wreck, a stubbed toe or a relational snub, a lost job, a smaller than normal bonus at work, or a lousy grade on a major exam.

¹¹ Note 4:7-10 and 6:4-10 for similarities in thought with what is here.

So, here's a one question final exam from what we've seen in the Bible today.

Question: What is one way in which God's strength can be developed in us?

Answer: God will gladly use our pain and weakness to teach us to trust Him and to manifest His strength.

Conclusion:

Weeds are always present in any garden, just like *thorns* are ever present parts of our lives. In our gardens and in our lives, we can pull some weeds and thorns; some we can't. Some stay.

It's not at all wrong to seek relief from painful thorns or to try and remove stubborn weeds.

But if we can't find *legitimate* relief from pain, maybe it's time to accept the pain as a thorn, the way Paul accepted his own "***thorn in the flesh.***"

Maybe God intends to keep that thorn in place to teach you to trust Him more fully. Maybe it is time to stop trying to use God to relieve your pain, and time to start using your pain to seek and find God.

When the weeds and thorns that sprout in our lives can't be removed, we will either live in resentment OR we will turn to Jesus and allow Him to perfect His strength in our weakness.

May God so move in our hearts that we turn to Him and really know the power of God - to love and to serve.