

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Ah, the rose. It is the symbol of love, the essence of beauty, the most beloved flower. And yet, grab a hold of it quickly by its stem and the blood will flow. Yes as everyone knows, roses have thorns. But have you ever wondered what purpose thorns serve on roses? Well I did this week. In researching this a little, I came up with two answers over and over again. First, thorns protect the rose. They protect it from things like wild animals devouring the rose. Secondly, it is thought that thorns enable a rose to climb higher than other flowers to get needed sunshine. Yes, thorns both protect and also perfect the rose.

But I suppose you didn't come here to learn about roses. Or if you did, you will be quite disappointed by the end of the sermon.

So then, why all the talk about roses and thorns? Well because Paul in our text for today, talks about thorns or at least one thorn in his flesh that constantly caused pain for him.

Paul says that he prayed three times earnestly that this thorn would go away, but God refused to remove it. Instead, God told him two important things. First, "My grace is sufficient for you." In other words, God's presence in Paul's life was sufficient to get him through the piercing of that thorn into his flesh. And secondly, he told him this, "My power is made perfect in your weakness."

The second of these truths will be our focus for the day. For while most of us realize that God is there with us in the difficult times, I am not sure if we truly understand that God works more powerfully in our weakness even than he does in our strength. Yes through our thorns, the power of God, that perfect rose of power, is both protected and perfected.

You and I live in a society where only strength is desired. Babies who might be born with some sort of weakness are aborted. The aged and disabled are kept out of sight in most cases, and put to sleep in other cases where the law allows it. Males who cry are considered to be less than true men and women in our day are taught to always be independent and strong.

Weakness is abhorred. And yet Paul says that he boasts of his weaknesses. And let's not get this wrong. Paul hated his actual weakness. He called it a messenger of Satan that came time and time again to torment him. But he boasted in it only because he realized that his thorn both protected and perfected the rose of God's power.

His thorn protected the rose of God power from that wild animal of pride. Paul had every reason to be prideful of his life and his ministry. He was an Israelite of Israelites, born of the tribe of Benjamin. He had been more places and endured more persecution than anyone else on the planet for the faith. He had reason to be proud.

But he also had a thorn. No one knows what it was. Everything from malaria to a speech impediment to poor eyesight has been put forth as a possibility of Paul's thorn. But whatever it was, it was enough to tame the wild beast of pride inside Paul from devouring the power of God. It was that thorn that kept Paul always aware that his life and his ministry were God's working and not his own.

And that truth became evident not only to Paul but to others as well. Yes, when this happened, Paul's thorn perfected the rose of God's power, allowing it to grow high. His thorn made the rose of God's power to rise high above all other flowers for all to see. Other people recognized also that the man they saw before them doing such great things was not great in and of himself for Paul's thorns were large enough for people to recognize. So each time Paul's thorns were exposed to the world, the rose of God's power was also perfected in their sight. It became evident not only to Paul but to all that the real power behind the apostle Paul was God's power, that perfect rose.

What are your thorns? Do you have a disease that God has not brought relief from? Do you not seem to fit in with everyone else because of some trait of your personality? Do you struggle with anxiety or have a tendency towards depression?

I suppose each of you knows what your thorns are. And I hope that you understand that God's grace is sufficient for you, that God's presence is more than sufficient to get you through the piercing pains of those thorns.

But today, I hope that you also understand that just like Paul, your thorns protect and perfect the rose of God's power.

Do you realize that if all of your thorns were gone, your pride would likely overshadow and devour the rose of God's power? Haven't you ever noticed that it is in weaknesses that our dependence upon God is so clearly manifested? Isn't it in weakness that we shrink to size and submit to the awesome power of God, falling on our knees?

Look at those who came to Jesus so quickly, those with thorns the size of flowers, the tax collectors and the prostitutes. Those Pharisees who thought of themselves as thornless would not come. Their pride sought and did devour the rose of God's power in their minds. Thorns are important because they help protect the rose of God's power from the beast of pride inside of humanity.

And your thorns also perfect the rose of God's power. They cause it to rise up before the eyes of the world. I can guarantee that there is no better witness in the world than a person of faith dieing from a debilitating disease professing that same faith until the end. That kind of weakness, that ever evident thorn, allows the rose of God's power to grow and to bloom before the eyes of all who are watching. And your weaknesses too give opportunity for that rose to bloom. People being aware of the working of God in you even in your weaknesses causes such blooming to occur.

Remember the man born blind. And why was he blind? Jesus said for no other reason than that God's power would be manifested in him. How about Lazarus' death which could have been prevented had Jesus gone sooner to his house? But again his weakness, his death, his thorn was an occasion for the rose of God to bloom before all the world's eyes.

Carol Hicks is a modern day example to us. She has weaknesses that all of us can see. And yet, I don't know how many people have commented to me on her faith and her joy in those weaknesses. Many people through Carol's thorns have beheld the powerful working of God's rose.

No one likes weakness. Neither did Paul. But we as Christians understand that if God allows weakness to remain, he does so to protect and perfect his power in us. He does so that Christ can come and dwell in us and make manifest to us and to the world the powerful working of salvation.

And let us not forget, Jesus hated weakness also. He prayed in the garden that the thorn of the cross might be taken away from him. But God allowed it to remain. And no doubt that thorn has perfected the power of God. Lifted even higher than Jesus was upon the cross, the rose of God's power was made known at Calvary in weakness, in thorns.

And the power of God that was manifested at Calvary and in Paul and is manifested in you and me is the power of God to save. It is the power of God to remove sin and grant life. It is the power of God to take you and me and place us with Christ in a new heaven and a new earth on that last day.

And when we recognize that our thorns protect and perfect that rose of God's power, we come with Paul to boast in our weaknesses. We lay aside our tendency to act strong and allow ourselves the freedom to be weak and to allow God to work in that weakness. For we come to know, that that when we are weak, then are we strong. Amen.