

September 9, 2012

The Word – A Thorn in My Flesh

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John 1:14-18 (NIV)

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

15 (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”) 16 Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

THE WORD – A THORN IN MY FLESH

An article in the Wall Street Journal reflected on our need for hope. The author attended a “new age” type church service in which participants wrote their regrets and failures on pieces of flash paper. (Flash paper is specially treated to ignite and burn instantly and brightly). Then they brought these “sins” to the front altar, set them to a candle, and watched them vanish in an instant as they put behind them last year’s failures. They believed that life had begun anew at that precise moment and was filled with possibility. The author explained that he still expected to have some of the same struggles, in spite of having burned them; nevertheless, he thoroughly enjoyed the exercise because it filled him with hope and optimism that this might be the time in his life in which he actually had faith and hope enough to be changed.

We need hope to press on. Not surprisingly, the Bible connects hope and perseverance. Hope sustains when circumstances clamor for us to give up. But from where will we get hope? From burning our sins on pieces of flash paper? Probably not. Instead, hope comes from knowing that God is powerfully working all things for our good and into his perfect plan.

Surely one of the most hope-giving verses in the Bible is Philippians 4.13: “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*” God works powerfully in us as we believe God’s promises and depend on God’s grace.

The Philippians church had experienced much failure:
They had failed / were failing in their relationships. They weren’t getting along. They couldn’t resolve conflict (4:2). Missing a dunk or not getting the yellow

jersey is nothing compared to this failure. They had failed / were failing in their mental attitude (4:8). They had allowed anxiety and fear to totally control their lives. They had failed / were failing in how to be content with what they had (4:11). Incidentally, we all have experienced failure in one or all of these areas. But Paul doesn't want us to be defeated. I don't think dunking a basketball or wearing a yellow jersey even comes close to the three areas that Paul addressed here.

And so when Paul says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," he's saying that you can overcome your failures in all of these areas too. You can succeed at resolving conflict in your relationships. You can have a positive mental attitude. You don't have to allow anxiety to control your life. You can learn to be content with where you are at this particular juncture in life until God's sees fit to turn you over to a new chapter.

If we suffer with Jesus, we will reign with him. Better days are coming because Jesus rose from the dead. *The grave will not have the last word.* Stay tuned, child of God. The best is yet to come.

We can imagine Paul's conversation with God.

"God would you please take away this source of irritation from my life?"

"No, Paul."

"God, please, I don't want to live my life with this handicap."

"No, Paul."

"God, I'm pleading with you. Take it away. I don't think I can bear this."

"No, Paul, you need it. I will keep you dependent upon me through it. I will not give you what you're asking for here, but I'll give you something even better. I'll pour in my grace. As you keep leaning hard on me, I'll shape you into a beautiful person."

There are some handicaps that God heals us from or that through other means, we are liberated from. And then there are those that we will deal with our entire lives, those things or situations to which we will have to submit. God's plan includes our handicaps, for in them we are corrected and we grow.

Maybe yours is a life that wanted love and you missed it for whatever reason and now you've lived out a life that you really never wanted. Can I encourage you to embrace it? Can I convince you that God's grace is enough for you? Maybe yours is a home where peace and joy does not reside. Embrace the struggles and burdens and let the Savior's power shine through your hurt. Maybe yours is a household where death has severed you from the one you loved. I am a witness that when

we're weak, the God we serve is strong? You have a thorn; cherish it because it drives you to your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Sometimes all we can do is dig in and hold on. And *when trouble comes, sometimes that's the best thing we can do*. More than anything else, our generation of Christians needs to "Stand fast." Take God at God's word! There is no reason to quit or to give in to evil.

Darkness must flee before light, and Christ is the divine light.

Jesus allowed the thorn for Paul, but He also wore the crown of thorns in order to help each and every one face the trials of life with hope – for you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

Prayer: Lord, we come to this moment that you have given us in order that we might be reminded afresh that there is only one way that we will ever be of use in your kingdom, and that is to come to the end of our natural self, to consent to it and to accept it and to rise again to a new life of trust and confidence in you. Thank you for your faithfulness that you keep sending us reminders of our weakness in order that we might trust your strength. Without those reminders we would all get conceited and boastful and confident that we have what it takes. Help us to be reminded anew by this experience that without the death there can be no resurrection, that nothing that does not die shall ever rise again from the dead. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.