**MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM**

**PART VIII**

**THE FELLOWSHIP OF THORNS: HOW WEAKNESS LEADS US TO JESUS**

**2 Corinthians 12:7-10**

**INTRODUCTION**

Please open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 12. We are now in Part VIII of our series on gender and sexuality called “Male and Female He Created Them” and are heading into the last leg of this series. Last week we looked at Romans 1, which contains the clearest New Testament passage on homosexuality, and we saw two important truths.

The first is that the Bible clearly teaches that homosexuality is wrong. That conclusion is inescapable on any fair interpretation of the text. Homosexual practice is described as unnatural – that is, contrary to God’s created order and therefore an offence against God. It is the product of “dishonourable passions”, and an action that attracts God’s punishment.

The second truth, and perhaps the more important one, is that the reason why some experience same-sex attraction is that it is part of God’s judgment on the entire human race for our idolatry. We have put other things – money, careers, family, beauty – at the center of our lives instead of God. And so, in response to our disordered worship, God hands us over to disordered sexuality.

The crucial lesson for us from these truths is that it tells us how we must respond to those who experience same-sex attraction or are members of the LGBTQ community. It tells us that, rather than respond to these people with pride, arrogance, or malice, we must respond with compassion and conviction over our own sin, because the judgment of their sexual brokenness is the judgment that we all deserve.

That was a hard passage of Scripture and a hard message to hear. Today I want to look at a related and equally difficult issue. Last week was about why God allows same-sex attraction to be experienced by people in general, and this week is about why God allows same-sex attraction to be experienced by Christians.

We know that the Bible calls Christians to sanctification, which is growth in godliness, in personal righteousness, in moral purity. We also know that God, through the power of the gospel applied to us through the Holy Spirit, helps us in our sanctification – a promise not made to humanity in general, but made exclusively to those who trust in Christ. Based on these truths, we know that those who are apart from Christ are slaves to sin and cannot free themselves from its power. But what about Christians? We have the gospel, we have the Holy Spirit, and we have the command to be morally pure, so shouldn’t we be free from sexual brokenness?

God certainly does give freedom from sexual brokenness to his people. In his book *Compassion Without Compromise*, Ron Citlau admits that, before he was a Christian, he was involved with multiple same-sex partners beginning as a teenager and extending into his early adult life. But after he became a Christian, he found radical sexual transformation over the course of five years and found that he was free from his former homosexual feelings. He is now a pastor in the Chicago area and the married father of four boys.

As joyful and glorious as a testimony like that is, it’s not everyone’s experience. In his book *Same-Sex Attraction and the Church*, British pastor Ed Shaw writes candidly about his personal, on-going struggles with homosexuality:

“I have what I call ‘kitchen floor moments.’ I call them that because they involve me sitting on my kitchen floor. But I’m not doing something useful like scrubbing it, although it could always benefit from that. Instead I’m there crying. And the reason for my tears is the unhappiness that my experience of same-sex attraction often brings. The acute pain I sometimes feel as a result of not having a partner, sex, children and the rest.” (p. 61).

What do we make of an experience like this? Does it show that God is not faithful to keep his promise to sanctify us, or that God is not powerful enough to redeem us, or that God isn’t good because he just doesn’t care that much about us?

Our text today from 2 Corinthians 12 is going to help us understand why God allows his people, even pastors like Ed Shaw, and perhaps even someone listening to this message, to continue experiencing same-sex attraction.

**Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.**

The title of this message is **The Fellowship of Thorns: How Weakness Leads us to Jesus.** We will have three points today:

1. The Lord of our Weakness
2. The Power of our Weakness
3. The Peace of our Weakness

(1) **THE LORD OF OUR WEAKNESS**

Our text today comes near the end of a lengthy defence that the apostle Paul is giving of his ministry which began way back in Chapter 10. The Corinthian church had become enamoured by a group of so-called “super apostles” who spoke impressively and claimed to have supernatural experiences with God. Compared to these super apostles, Paul, who planted the church in Corinth, now seemed insignificant and unimpressive in the eyes of the church in Corinth.

In the face of such criticism, Paul needed to defend his ministry, not for his own sake, but for the sake of the gospel. He knew that if the Corinthian church abandoned him and chose to follow these so-called super apostles, they would be abandoning Christ. For these super apostles promoted a ministry and message that made much of themselves and not the gospel.

But how would Paul defend his ministry? He needed to speak about himself, because he needed to re-establish his credibility, but he didn’t want to speak about himself like the super apostles did. After all, Paul didn’t care about his reputation itself. He only cared about his reputation to the extent that it affected Christ’s reputation.

And so what does Paul do? His response is absolutely brilliant. In the first few verses of Chapter 12, Paul starts speaking about a man he knows who was given revelations from God so great, so overwhelming, and so weighty, that he could not speak of them to anyone else:

“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven…And I know that this man was caught up into paradise…and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.” (12:2-4)

That man of course was Paul himself, as he reveals to us in verse 7. He writes, “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations”. The man who was caught up into paradise and heard things that man may not utter was Paul himself.

So why did Paul write in the third person earlier about his own experiences with God? He did that in order to teach the Corinthians that, as profound as someone’s spiritual experiences may be, they do *nothing* to validate that person’s ministry. The so-called super-apostles were claiming extravagant experiences with God and deep personal revelations, and the Corinthians saw those testimonies as a mark of their authority. But f spiritual experience added to one’s apostolic resume, Paul would have said, “You think their spiritual experiences are amazing? Well take a look at mine!” He doesn’t say that. Instead, he says “I know a man who was taken up to the third heaven, caught up into paradise, and heard things so sacred, so holy, that they cannot be uttered in this world.”

The lesson Paul is teaching is that spiritual experiences do not equal spiritual authority. The claims of the super-apostles to having mind-blowing encounters with God were *completely* *irrelevant* to their qualifications as actual apostles of Christ.

But if Paul is defending his ministry, and spiritual experiences are irrelevant to establishing his ministry, why mention this experience at all? Paul is telling this story to set up his real point, the thing that actually functions to validate his ministry. And it is this: God’s power shown through Paul’s weakness. This is what our text is ultimately about. It’s not *specifically* about same-sex attraction, but as we will see, what Paul says about his weakness can and should apply to same-sex attraction as well.

Paul begins to write about his weakness in verse 7: “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of 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 becoming conceited.” Over the centuries, much has been written about Paul’s thorn. He doesn’t tell us what it is, and scholars have ventured hypotheses ranging from a physical ailment, to relational difficulty, to personal temptation.

The conclusion that many have reached, which is a conclusion that I agree with, is that God, breathing out his words through the apostle Paul, intentionally left the thorn vague so that generation after generation of Christians could take their particular struggles and fit them into this passage. This text is a “catch all” for all different types of “thorns”, the sharp pains of life that just don’t seem to go away.

Your thorn could be the pain of a broken relationship with a loved one. Your thorn could be the lingering weakness caused by physical disease and illness. Or your thorn could be the ongoing struggle with temptation towards a particular sin. Whatever your thorn may be, this passage is meant to speak to you.

What we need to remember is that, for many Christians, their thorn is their ongoing struggle with same-sex attraction. They don’t want it. It hurts them. Like Pastor Ed Shaw, they often find themselves crying on their kitchen floor because of the pain of these powerful but unrealized emotions. How does our text help these dear brothers and sisters in Christ?

It tells us first that God is the Lord of their weakness. The same Lord who lifted Paul up with the surpassing greatness of heavenly revelations is the same Lord who brought Paul down through the weakness of the thorn in his flesh. The thorn may be “a messenger of Satan”, as verse 7 tells us, but ultimately the thorn only remains because God has decided that it will remain. That’s why Paul pleads three times in verse 8 that the Lord would cause the thorn to leave him.

Paul doesn’t say, “Lord, do what you can to rid me of this thorn.” God doesn’t just “do what he can”. God does *all* that he *wills*. Make no mistake. There is a struggle between good and evil, between angels and demons, between God and sin. But it is not a fair fight. All forces, good and evil, are subject to the absolute sovereignty of God. The “messenger of Satan”, though opposed to God’s will, must ultimately bow to God’s will.

The same is true of same-sex attraction. God’s children adopted in Christ may *continue* to experience same-sex attraction. Why? Because God in his wisdom has decided not to cut that thorn from their side. God is sovereign over all things good and evil, including our thorns, and including our weaknesses.

But if God leaves them with same-sex attraction, does this mean that they’re not at fault if they act on those attractions? Not at all. They may not be responsible for their *attraction*, but they are responsible for their reactions to those attractions. It really is no different from a married man who is attracted to a woman who is not his wife at the office. The attraction itself is not sinful. But it can become sinful if the man acts on his desires. It’s sinful if he starts thinking about her constantly. It’s sinful if he starts trying to impress her to get her attention. It’s sinful if he starts looking for opportunities to spend time alone with her. It’s sinful if he begins to form an inappropriate emotional bond with her. And, of course, it’s sinful if the relationship becomes physically intimate or if he fantasizes about her. The initial attraction was something he could not help, but what he could help was his response to his attraction.

The same is true for those who experience same-sex attraction. Just because God leaves them with their weakness doesn’t mean that they are excused if they give into their weakness. God may leave you with a difficult relationship. That doesn’t excuse you if you become consumed with anger and bitterness towards that person. God may leave others with physical ailments. That doesn’t excuse you if you become lazy. The Bible always teaches that, although God is sovereign over all things, we, and we alone, are responsible for our sins, no matter how weak God may leave us.

(2) **THE POWER OF OUR WEAKNESS**

So what do we do with the knowledge that God is the Lord of our weakness? How does that help us? It tells us that God has a purpose in leaving us with our weakness. If God could remove our thorns but chooses not to, then he must have a reason for leaving it with us, and that reason must accord with his love for us and his goodness. But what is that reason?

Paul may not have been permitted to share what the Lord spoke to him in his heavenly revelations, but he is permitted to share what the Lord said to him in his pleadings for the removal of his thorn. These precious words are revealed in verse 9, and they provide the answer to the purpose of our weakness: “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’” This leads to our second point: the power of our weakness.

This is counter-intuitive. Weakness is the inability to do something. Power is the ability to do something. They’re opposites. How can there be power in our weakness? How can our inability lead to our ability?

In order to understand this, we need to understand first how the Lord revealed this truth to Paul. It’s clear that the Lord’s words in verse 9 came to Paul while he pleaded with the Lord in prayer. But what truths was Paul relying on as he prayed? What was he thinking about? This is where verse 8 can help us. Paul writes, “three times I pleaded with the Lord about this”. Why include this detail? If it was just to show us how persistent he was, then three times actually doesn’t seem like that much. If you’ve ever pleaded with God for a loved one’s salvation, or the healing of a sick child, or a seemingly impossible financial situation, you’ll pray about it a lot more than three times. So why three?

Scholar Paul Barnett is so helpful here. In his commentary on 2 Corinthians, he points out that Paul’s “three times” stands in parallel with Jesus’ threefold prayer to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane immediately before he went to the cross in Mark 14:32-41:

“And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I pray’ (*first time*)…and he came and found them sleeping…and again he went away and prayed (*second time*)…and again he came and found them sleeping…and he came the third time (*third time*) and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.’”

Paul pleaded with God three times just as Jesus pleaded with his Father three times. And what was it that Jesus pleaded to his Father?

“Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. *Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”* (Mark 14:36).

As Paul struggled with his weakness, his heart was brought to meditate on the weakness of his Saviour. And as he pleaded with the Lord to remove his thorn, he remembered how his Lord pleaded to be saved from his thorns: the thorns on the crown that would cut through his scalp as he hung suspended on a cross for our sins.

This is one of the most comforting truths we can receive in our times of weakness and suffering. We who suffer worship a suffering Saviour who knows our suffering because he tasted it himself! We do not worship a stoic, unfeeling God who weighs the weight of our suffering on the cold metal of a scale. We worship a God who has weighed the weight of our suffering in his heart. He feels our deep suffering because he has felt the deepest suffering. He has pleaded for relief just as we have pleaded. And perhaps most profoundly, he has heard the Father say “no” to his pleas to be saved from his thorns, just as many of us, pierced by our own thorns, have heard the Father say “no”.

This is what Paul meditated on as he prayed to God for the removal of his thorn. And as he rooted his prayers in thoughts about his Saviour, he came to the glorious realization that God’s power is made perfect in weakness. Was it not through the weakness of Christ on the cross that the power of God over sin, Satan, sickness, and death was revealed? And was it not through the death of Christ that the power of the resurrection was made manifest? As Paul says just a little later in 13:4,

 “For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God.”

It was through the *in*ability of Christ to save himself that the *a*bility of God to save us was accomplished. It’s not that Christ *could not* have delivered himself from the cross. With one word a legion of angels would have descended from heaven and freed him from his thorns and destroyed all his enemies. But that’s not what he did. He hung there on the cross until the full wrath of God was satisfied, *unable* to save himself because he was *unwilling* to save himself out of his holy love for sinners.

This is the gospel, the good news that God save sinners. The gospel shows us that God has always been pleased to manifest his greatest power in the greatest weakness. And it is the gospel that comforts us in our moments of greatest weakness. The revelation from God in verse 9 that God’s power is made perfect in our weakness is a reminder that our weakness is no more and no less than our participation in the gospel. It is in our weakness that the death and resurrection of Christ are reproduced in the lives of Christ’s redeemed people.

Now we are in a position to understand what verse 9 means. The power of God made perfect in our weakness is none other than the power to become more like Christ. Our weakness enables us to relate to Christ’s weakness on the cross on our behalf, to have fellowship with him in his suffering, to have fellowship with him in his thorns. As we grow in this fellowship of thorns, we will grow in our knowledge of his deep love for us. And it is in the knowledge of Christ’s love for us that we become more and more like him.

This is the ultimate confirmation of Paul’s apostolic ministry. It wasn’t the greatness of his spiritual experiences or the grandeur of his public speaking. It was his Christ-likeness. He was confirmed as an apostle of Christ by the conformity of his character to Christ. And the only way that could be done was through his profound experiences of weakness, the thorn in his flesh. This is something that none of the so-called super-apostles, with all their boasts of personal power, could ever begin to experience or demonstrate.

Sam Allberry, a British pastor who has struggled with same-sex attraction since adolescence and continues to struggle, helps us understand how the rich gospel truths we have seen so far in our text help those who continue to experience same-sex attraction, including himself:

“Such passages provide great encouragement to those wrestling with SSA. For some the battle may be acutely painful. For some it may last for many long years. But in God’s purposes it is not a wasted experience. Through it we can be made more like Christ, and better able to grasp the vast dimensions of his grace. There is nothing better for us than that. And so a “win” for Christians struggling with SSA is not that the temptations would go away, but that in the heat of them Jesus would be prized more and more. (p. 58).

(3) **THE PEACE OF OUR WEAKNESS**

This leads to our last point: the peace of our weakness. This is the *effect* of the truths we have seen so far in our text. Through a deeper gratitude and trust in the gospel, we are brought from being “harassed” day in and day out by our thorn to being content with the ongoing presence of our thorn.

We see this reflected in Paul’s experience in the second half of verse 9 and through verse 10: “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 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.”

It was “for the sake of Christ” that Paul became content with his weaknesses. It was “for the sake of Christ” that he even boasted in his weaknesses. He was content with the thorn in his flesh because he knew it would lead to a deeper relationship with Jesus and a stronger resemblance to his character.

But this contentment is not just tolerance. There’s a crucial difference between the two. Paul is not just saying, “it’s never going away, so I may as well get used to it.” Paul is not just *tolerating* his thorn. Mere tolerance of our weaknesses is actually quite dangerous, because it will likely lead us to bitterness towards God. We accept that our thorn will never go away, but at the same time we blame God for not taking it away.

Paul’s contentment is far deeper, and far more sustaining. It says, “I can live with my thorn, not because I know it’s never going away, but because I want what God is accomplishing in me through it. Yes, I can even boast about my thorn, because God is using it to give me more of Jesus!” This is the kind of peace we need to truly endure through our weaknesses, whether they are relational difficulties or struggles with sin.

But this peace only comes to us if we truly want more of Jesus. It is “for the sake of Christ” that we become content with our weaknesses. We value our weaknesses only if we value Jesus, because the purpose of our weaknesses is to lead us closer to Jesus. If you’re here and you’re not a Christian, or if you identify as a Christian but find yourself with no desire for Jesus, I want you to know that the peace we’ve been talking about isn’t only available to an exclusive club of people. It’s available to anyone who puts their trust in Jesus.

As you’ve listened, perhaps you’ve had moments when you told yourself, “I want what he’s talking about. I *need* what he’s talking about.” Here’s the good news: you can have what I’ve been talking about. But you need to know that it will cost you your life. Those who come to Christ do not need to earn their way to him, but they do need to surrender to him. I can assure you, however, that it is in surrendering your life that you will find true life that comes not only from peace with your thorns, but peace with God.

That is what the gospel does for those who struggle with thorns, whether they be anger, bitterness, greed, lust, or same-sex attraction. It is so easy to root our spiritual identity in our thorns. We start believing that, because we feel weak, it must mean that God is not with us. We start believing that our spiritual health is tied to how much we are currently struggling with our thorns. We tell ourselves that, when we’re not being tempted, we’re doing well; and that when we are being tempted, we’re doing poorly.

This is all a hideous lie. The presence of struggle is not the absence of power, and the absence of struggle is not the presence of power. The experience of same sex attraction does not make a person ungodly any more than the experience of opposite-sex attraction makes a person godly! Spiritual growth is not measured so easily, and spiritual identity is not rooted in so weak a foundation.

Our text teaches us that the greatest opportunities for growth in godliness are actually found in our greatest moments of struggle. But in order for that to happen, we need to let God use our weaknesses to lead us to deeper fellowship with Christ and greater conformity to his character. Then, and only then, will we see that it is in our struggle that God’s power rests on us. It is in the pain of our thorns that God’s power is perfected in us. And it is in our weakness that God makes us strong by conforming us to the beauty and glory of Christ.

This is the reason why we can boast in our weakness and be content with our thorns, whatever our thorns may be. All of us have thorns that make us weak, that cause us to plead to the Lord, that seem to harass us day in and day out. And all of us can be tempted to root our spiritual identity in either the presence or the absence of our thorns. We need to stop finding our identity in our weaknesses and start finding our identity in Christ instead.

**CONCLUSION**

These are precious truths for the suffering sinner. They tell us that our experiences of weakness are not wasted experiences. They are not meaningless, and they are not hopeless. Instead, God is using our weaknesses to give us more of himself. And where God is, there is always hope, and there is always meaning, for he works all things for our good.

This is the message that we all need to hear, not just the person who wrestles with same-sex attraction, but all of us. For we all have thorns, and we are all tempted to despair when they don’t go away. Like Ed Shaw, we have our own “kitchen floor moments” when the pain of our thorns seems unbearable. But his testimony doesn’t end on the kitchen floor. It ends with the same contentment we saw from Paul, as the Lord revealed to him his good purposes in leaving him with same-sex attraction. Listen as I close with these beautiful words from Pastor Shaw:

“My sexuality might not lead me into a loving marriage, but it does consistently lead me into a greater appreciation of God’s love for me in Christ. That is one of many reasons why I’m profoundly grateful for it.”