

# GAME OF THORNS TO THRONES

Sermon, January 23, 2022

78<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting

Text: II Corinthians 12:1-11

At first glance, Paul's words from II Corinthians can come across as almost platitudinous. When he writes things like, "*I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong ...*", the uninitiated reader may be tempted to say, "Sure, Paul. That's right up there with the platitude, 'God never gives us more than we can handle.'" As I've said before, it's been my experience that God most certainly DOES give us more than we can handle. He does so all the time! Paul certainly had more than he could handle ... on his own. Actually, to be clear (*and as Paul intimates*), it is not God Who is always the One giving us more than we can handle, but I'm getting ahead of myself a bit. I would venture to say every person sitting here this morning has at one time or another received more than s/he could handle. It happens all the time! In fact, I think if you knew all the difficult burdens graciously born by those you sit with in these pews, you'd be absolutely amazed. There are many things which come our way that we can't handle ... on our own. It is precisely those things that should drive us to God, Who really is our only hope ... which, by the way, is at the core of Paul's message to the Corinthian church and to us.

When we really learn of the life of Paul, we know when he writes "*I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong ...*" that these are not just insipid platitudes. He really means it. To be clear, he is certainly not saying that God *wants* us to be weak, or sick, or to suffer "*... insults, hardships, persecutions, difficulties.*" What he is proclaiming is how God works precisely through our weaknesses and hardships. In Romans 8:28, the same Paul wrote, "*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purposes.*" Again, to be clear, Paul isn't saying all things are good; he is saying in all things **God is able to work** for good ... especially for those who love and serve Him.

Paul has been having a very trying time with the church at Corinth. Certain outsiders have intruded into the Corinthian church and were leading members astray with bad teachings, and they were challenging Paul's authority and authenticity. I love how Paul refers to these people rather sarcastically as the "super-apostles" in verse 11. These "super spiritual" people have trumpeted their own "qualifications" ... *they've* had visions, *they've* spoken in tongues, *they've* performed miracles, *they* are very eloquent, *they've* experienced other expressions of "super-spiritual" power ... unlike "ordinary" old Paul. *They* are intimidating in no uncertain terms Paul is just not up to snuff; he's not a *real* apostle; he's not preaching the *real* Gospel.

In response to these charges, Paul reluctantly, but forcefully, in the final four chapters of this letter, lays out his credentials. He doesn't like doing so; he doesn't like to appear boastful, but his hand is being somewhat forced to ensure stability in the church. He's experienced everything these super Christians had experienced, and in today's reading he describes a pretty unique and impressive mystical/spiritual experience of his own, in which he was taken up into heaven and heard inexpressible things, things he was not permitted to speak about (*a word about the "third heaven": Literarily speaking in this historical/geographical setting, the "first heaven" is the blue sky where the birdies fly; the "second heaven" is the starry heaven beyond the blue sky; the "third heaven" is the heaven where God dwells. Seventh Heaven is a TV show*). In short, Paul has trumped his opponents, although he has taken no delight in doing so. Not only has Paul more credentials than any of the super-spiritual "super apostles", he has learned and experienced things NO other human being knows or has experienced, things he cannot and will not repeat. But Paul doesn't want to dwell on all the "super spiritual" stuff. What he wants to talk about are his weaknesses, and more precisely, he wants to talk about how he has experienced and discovered the life-changing power and grace and reality of God THROUGH those weaknesses.

Paul goes on to describe what he enigmatically calls this "thorn in the flesh" that tormented him. "*To keep me from being too conceited, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.*" Scholars have speculated for centuries about the nature of this "thorn." Speculations have included that maybe Paul had bad eyesight (*which, these folks suppose, is why Paul wrote in such big letters in his own hand referred to in Galatians 6:11*), or stomach problems (*which, these folks suppose, is why he knew what to tell Timothy about how to handle digestive problems; see I Timothy 5:23*), or crippling migraine headaches, or epilepsy, or a Mediterranean malaria known as the Malta Fever that produced headaches that felt like a red hot bar (*i.e., thorn*) being driven through the forehead. Some even speculated that maybe Paul had a bad, "thorny" marriage (*maybe that's part of the reason he traveled*

*alone so much*); others speculated his "thorn" was a physical disfigurement that made him somewhat repulsive in his appearance. One convincing speculation that I happen to think makes the most sense is that the "thorn" may have been a crippling, stabbing *guilt* that haunted Paul, a barb of personal guilt and shame that worked to humiliate and at times immobilize him.

This speculation fits in with the "messenger from Satan" theme; after all, Satan is called elsewhere in the Bible the Accuser of the Brethren, and guilt is a stinging message the devil likes to poke to great effect to hinder Christians. There are few things that can depress you, limit you, immobilize you, frustrate your good actions and intentions, than the at-times paralyzing diabolical scorpion stab of guilt. God does not remember forgiven sin, but we do ... and the Adversary loves to stick us again and again with that painful, debilitating barb of guilt to keep us down, to keep us from doing anything worthwhile and constructive and good. *"Who do you think YOU are, you who have done such and such and this and that?"* We do know Paul had failures. At the close of the previous chapter he writes about his failed mission in Damascus just after his conversion, where he had to get out of town in a basket. However, that wasn't his greatest failure. How about his participation in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1)? How about all the time he spent brutally persecuting and ravaging the church before he got to Damascus, where he entered home after home dragging men and women off to prison, some of whom were executed? Paul had some terrible, horrible moments in his past, and I'm sure these memories often came back to haunt him. Yes, when he gave his life to Jesus on the road to Damascus, he also gave Jesus his failures; however, even though by the grace of Jesus Christ God forgets our sin, our memories remain, as do some of the very real consequences of our sin.

Novelist Anne Lamott once wrote, *"Forgiveness is giving up all hope of having a better past."* The one occasion when it is actually a *virtue* to give up hope is in genuine forgiveness ... both when we receive forgiveness and when we offer it. Genuine forgiveness acknowledges and accepts the past cannot be changed. It cannot be altered. What's done is done. It can be *forgiven*, it may even be *redeemed*, but it cannot be undone. Some of you may remember the words inscribed over the gates of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*, *"Abandon hope, all ye who enter here."* Well, imagine Dante's words emblazoned over the "gate" of Forgiveness. As you walk through the "gate" of forgiveness, *close* the gate door behind you, and fasten the latch. Turn your back on the past! Abandon any hope of changing that past. Don't keep going "back" there. In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven! So, don't let your past have a future. Now, that's easy to say, but hard to do, as I'm sure Paul would agree. But he would also agree that it's our thorny weaknesses which actually make room for the grace of God. Our thorny weaknesses allow God in. It is through our thorny weaknesses that God graciously goes to work in and through us.

To be sure, God does not cause our suffering, but God shares our suffering and transforms it by His grace extended through the person and work of Jesus Christ. I don't think it is a coincidence that when Jesus hung on the cross, His head was crowned with *thorns*. Thorns which had led to His ultimate throne. As Paul would certainly attest, thorns can be a most effective means of grace. I've actually never seen the HBO series, "The Game of Thrones," but the name of the show obviously inspired my (*admittedly corny*) sermon title. It is precisely our thorny weaknesses which lead us, DRIVE us, to the throne of God's grace, where we are forgiven, restored, redeemed for His purposes and glory.

In the Assurance of Pardon this morning, we read these familiar words of God, *"I will remember their sins no more,"* quoted by the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. Sometimes for our Assurance of Pardon we hear the similar words quoted by the Psalmist, *"For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."* You know, for the Psalmist that phrase *"As far as the east is from the west ..."* is a literary allusion to a *flat map*; it is not an allusion to a *globe*. On a globe, east and west eventually come around to meet ... you keep going in one direction, east or west, you'll come full circle! No, God's grace works with a flat map, not a global one (*figuratively speaking*). God doesn't "remove" our sins, go "east" or "west" with them and then after He's gone full circle come up from behind to whack us and/or shame us with them all over again! No, Satan is the Accuser of the Brethren who does that. His is the diabolical barb, the thorn, the tormenting message of guilt. When God removes our sins; **He remembers them no more!** God does not use our guilt to *dis-grace* us, but to grace us ... and to make us able and willing to go on and be useful and wholesomely productive and to be messengers of His grace and goodness to others. This is why Paul can write, *"I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."*

Because God says, *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* Amen.