

With Paul in the School of Affliction, Part 1

2 Corinthians 12:7–10

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Introduction

It's often been said that the one thing people are willing to pay for and yet not receive is an education. And my own experience has testified to the truth of that maxim. I remember during my time in college several friends who counted it a mark of their intelligence to see how many classes they could avoid attending. I never quite understood that. I mean, some of these people had moved from across the country to attend university, ostensibly because they believed this institution had something to teach them that they didn't know before. And all of them were paying a very high price to be there. I don't have to remind you of the truly exorbitant costs of a university education. And then, if some of these folks decided to go to class, they'd bring their laptops and surf the internet. They'd check in on social media! So even when they *were* there, they *weren't* there, and weren't receiving the product they were paying for. Education is one of the few things people are willing to pay dearly for, and yet not receive.

Well, I wonder if the same thing isn't true for many professing Christians. It was Charles Spurgeon who said, "There is no university for a Christian like that of sorrow and trial." And if you've been following Christ for very long, your experience testifies to the truth of that statement. "There is no university for a Christian like that of sorrow and trial." The school of suffering often has more to teach us than any sermon series ever could.

Suffering teaches us to be humble, to despair of navigating life in the strength of our own resources, and to depend on God for all things. Suffering teaches us the character of God, as we flee to Him in prayer for consolation and endurance. Suffering drives us to the Word of God, as we seek to understand the sovereign workings of divine providence according to God's own revelation—as we search for God's promises upon which we can act faith in troubled times. And we learn the Scriptures in a different way when we're hanging on for dear life than we do when we're just checking the boxes on the devotional reading plan.

Romans 5, verses 3 to 5, says that tribulation brings about perseverance. And perseverance brings about proven character. And proven character brings about hope. The tribulations that we suffer as we walk the path of obedience in following Jesus teach us perseverance. And perseverance trains us to be men and women of character. And proven character equips us to be hopeful. And so it's true! "There is no university for a Christian like that of sorrow and trial." The academy of affliction will teach you more than what you'll learn in a theology book!

But not if you're not paying attention in class! I think many Christians go through trials the way some of my college friends went through their classes. Instead of letting our trials drive us to Christ and Scripture for consolation, for comfort, for instruction, for understanding, we literally waste our suffering. We don't give ourselves to prayer and meditation over the Word, asking, "Lord, what are You trying to teach me through this trial? Lord, how do You intend to make me more like Jesus in this affliction? Lord, what is a biblical, God-glorifying response in this suffering?" We simply tolerate our sufferings as a fact of life. Or worse, we grumble and complain about them, and let them become an occasion of sin for us. We pay, dearly, the steep costs of the tuition at the university of affliction, and then we skip class! We ignore the lessons that God designs for our suffering to teach us! And so we don't receive the education that we're paying for.

Well, this morning I want to focus on the **lessons** that our afflictions can teach us—to ensure that we don't waste our suffering, and that we get the education we're paying for in the school of affliction. And to do that, I want to turn to a text which famously describes the greatest suffering of the greatest sufferer—aside from the Lord Jesus Christ, that is. And that is the passage where the Apostle Paul speaks of his thorn in the flesh: 2 Corinthians chapter 12, verses 7 to 10.

Now, this text comes in the context of the portion of 2 Corinthians known as "The Fool's Speech," which runs from chapter 11 verse 21, through to chapter 12 verse 10. The Apostle Paul has decided that, because the Corinthians had become infatuated with the foolish boasting of triumphalist false teachers claiming to be apostles, he was going to don the mask of a fool and do a little boasting of his own. He reasons that if the Corinthians were enamored with fools, he'd become like a fool in order to win back their affection and allegiance for him, and for the one, true, biblical Gospel that he preached. As Proverbs 26:5 says, Paul answers a fool according to his folly, lest that folly ensnare the hearts of the Corinthians, and drag them to judgment. In the first half of The Fool's Speech—in chapter 11 verses 21 to 29—Paul turned the false apostles' foolish boasting on its head. Instead of bragging about his strengths and successes, like they did, he boasted in his sufferings and his weaknesses. His entire ministry was marked by one trial after another.

In the second half of the Fool's Speech, he gives **two specific illustrations** of his weakness. The first comes in chapter 11, verses 30 to 33, where he tells the story of the time the governor under the King of Nabatean Arabia conspired with the Jews in Damascus to hunt Paul down at the city gates. And he reports how he snuck away, hiding in a basket used to transport dead fish, as his disciples lowered him out the window. Saul of Tarsus! The august young Pharisee who set out for Damascus to persecute Christians now has to retreat from Damascus as a persecuted Christian!

Then, he gives a **second illustration** of his weakness—his famous thorn in the flesh. But he prefaces the account of the thorn with the reason for which the thorn was given to him—namely, his own personal rapture into heaven. Now, boasting like this so disgusts him that he talks about this experience in the third person. He fabricates a person so he can distance himself from the folly of boasting. But he says, verse 2, that this “man in Christ,” who is really Paul himself, was “caught up to the third heaven,” that is, verse 4: “into Paradise.” Paul was literally snatched away up to heaven, into the glorious paradise of the immediate presence of God Himself. And this experience was indescribably glorious! He says in verse 4: I “was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.” It was so wonderful, so transcendent, so marvelous, that it could not be adequately expressed in human language. The loveliness and beauty of heaven was inexpressible.

But then we learn in verse 7 that such glorious privileges tempted Paul to become prideful. He says in verse 7, “Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself.” Even a man as sanctified as the Apostle Paul needed to stand on guard against the temptation to become arrogant, to glory in his privileges, to think himself spiritually superior, and to exalt himself. And so in order to keep him humble—and thereby to keep him useful for ministry—the Lord God afflicted His servant with this thorn in the flesh, to remind him of his fallenness, his weakness, and his utter dependence upon divine mercy.

And there have been innumerable proposals offered concerning the identity of Paul’s thorn. The commentators have proposed virtually every idea one can think of. They usually fall into **three broad categories**. The first category is that Paul’s thorn was some sort of emotional anxiety. Some say it was the nagging guilt over the sins of his past life; the way he had so fervently persecuted the Church and blasphemed Christ’s name would plague him almost until he couldn’t bear it. Others say it was his “great sorrow and unceasing grief” over the unbelief of Israel, his kinsmen according to the flesh, which he speaks about in the opening verses of Romans 9.

But I find those suggestions unlikely, because Paul understood the sovereignty of God and the sufficiency of the cross better than anyone. Yes, the sins of his past life were grievous, but he had been crucified with Christ, and the man he was no longer lived, but Christ lived in him, Galatians 2:20! The certificate of debt consisting of decrees against him had been nailed to the cross, Colossians 2:14! More than anyone, Paul lived in the freedom of the forgiveness of sins. And though he did indeed grieve over the lostness of Israel, that very chapter—Romans 9—demonstrates his unshakable trust in the sovereign election of God. More than anyone, he understood the right of the Potter to make from one lump of clay a vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use. So, I don’t think the thorn was some sort of emotional anxiety.

A second category of thought is that Paul's thorn was some sort of opposition to his ministry, whether (a) the general opposition that he faced all throughout his life, (b) a particular, single opponent, or (c) even the opposition in the conflict with Corinth specifically. In this case, the phrase "messenger of Satan"—which is literally translated, "an angel of Satan"—would be understood literally, since the false teacher would be energized by demonic power. That's a strength for this view, because everywhere else Paul uses the term *angelos* 13 other times in his letters, it refers to literal angels, and not merely human messengers.

A third category says that Paul's thorn was some kind of physical malady, and just about every physical malady has been proposed as a possibility. Here's a list of what the commentators have come up with over the years: hysteria, hypochondria, gallstones, gout, fever, rheumatism, migraine headaches, sciatica, gastritis, leprosy, lice, defective vision, deafness, some sort of dental infection, and neurasthenia all have been suggested as the identity of Paul's thorn. Now, the physical-malady position is not without merit. You might remember that Paul told the Galatians, in Galatians 4:13, that "it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself." Then he says, "I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have *plucked out your eyes* and given them to me." And so it seems plain that the bodily illness he speaks about in Galatians was some sort of eye condition that might normally appear to be especially loathsome. Now, Paul doesn't specifically say that that eye condition was his thorn, but it's a possibility.

Ultimately, it's impossible to say with certainty precisely what the identity of Paul's thorn was. One commentator wrote that this "is another one of those questions which, on the evidence available, must remain unanswered." (Hughes, 442). Another said, "[Scarcity] of data and the ambiguity of Paul's language have frustrated—and will always frustrate—all efforts to reach finality in this enigmatic question" (Harris, 857–58). I think the demonically-inspired false teacher and the physical illness are equally possible. But the reality is that God in His wisdom did not reveal the identity of Paul's thorn, and so no one can be absolutely certain as to precisely what it was.

But I think it is exceptionally wise on God's part to have never revealed that detail. This text has been gloriously used to minister consolation and comfort to suffering saints throughout the centuries. I doubt there are many Christians at all who have read this text and have experienced some difficulty in their lives who haven't considered some trial—whether physical or emotional, whether visible or unseen—to be their 'thorn in the flesh,' which, even after earnest, persistent prayer, God has chosen not to remove. If we knew the precise identity of Paul's thorn, perhaps those believers wouldn't have felt as personally comforted in their trial, because their affliction wasn't Paul's affliction. But as it is, this experience has been a fountain of sweet comfort to dear believers in the face of a multitude of afflictions.

But one thing we do know is that it was so severe that Paul described it as a *torment*. He calls it in verse 7: “a messenger of Satan to *torment* me.” And it was such a torment that, verse 8, “I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.” But the Lord answered no to that prayer. Verse 9: “And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’” You see, rather than change his circumstances, Jesus gave Paul the grace that would change him! Paul wouldn’t be delivered from his trials, but he would be equipped to endure his trials as a testimony that the presence of Christ is sweeter than the absence of suffering.

And when you understand that—when you have tasted the sweetness of Christ’s consolation in the midst of the most debilitating suffering—when the storms of life come, you start to sound like Paul in verses 9 and 10: “Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 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.”

Now from that text, there are no fewer than **six lessons** that we can learn that will equip us to make the most of our time spent in the school of affliction. These are **lessons** to learn *about* suffering that will prepare us to learn the lessons that can only be learned in the *midst* of suffering. They’ll help us ensure that we don’t waste our trials—that we don’t shell out the costly tuition to the school of affliction without getting the education that we’re paying for. And we’ll get to **two** of those **lessons** this morning. Then, Lord willing, I’ll be back with you in this pulpit at the end of this month—on July 28th—and we’ll work through the other four.

I. Pride and Humility (vv. 7–8)

But the **first lesson** this text has to teach us is a **lesson** concerning **pride and humility**. In particular, it teaches us that pride is evil, that boasting is stupid, and that humility is lovely.

In the first place, this passage teaches us about the detestable wickedness of pride. In verses 2 to 4, Paul narrates his exhilarating ascent into heaven, where he hears things so wonderful that if they could be put into words he wouldn’t be allowed to speak them to such a wicked and perverse generation. And he tells us in verse 7 that that revelation, and others like it, were so surpassingly magnificent, that he was tempted to become prideful. And because the temptation to exalt himself was so real, the Lord followed Paul’s exhilarating ascent with what Paul calls “a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.”

“Torment” translates a Greek verb that literally means “to strike with the fist” (*BDAG*). The NASB translates the word that way in Matthew 26:67 and Mark 14:65, where it describes the scene at the trial of Jesus where the members of the Sanhedrin “spat in His face and *beat Him*

with their fists.” In 1 Corinthians 4:11 it’s translated “roughly treated.” In 1 Peter 2:20 it’s “*harshly* treated.” This was the torment of Paul’s thorn. And this torment was *so* severe that, as we said, in verse 8 Paul “implored the Lord three times that it might leave” him!

And I wonder if you can hear the overtones of Gethsemane in that verse. Jesus also implored His Father three times, that the cup of wrath would pass from Him. Paul’s talk of imploring the Lord in the midst of torment is reminiscent of Luke 22:44: “And being in *agony* (torment) He was *praying very fervently* (imploring), and His sweat became like drops of blood.” The Lord Jesus, who knew what it meant to earnestly pray for the removal of torment, nevertheless sent this tormenting thorn, through the agency of Satan himself, to His dear servant, the Apostle Paul.

If our Father, who loves us, who is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort (2 Cor 1:3), is willing to send a messenger of Satan to torment the choicest of His servants—despite persistent, desperate, faith-filled prayer—in order to keep them from exalting themselves, how wicked and detestable must the sin of self-exaltation be! Presumptive arrogance, a sense of spiritual superiority, pride in oneself—no matter how well-cloaked in Christian clichés and humblebrags—are so dangerous, so destructive, so harmful to the spiritual fiber of God’s people and to the health of Christ’s Church, that God is willing to send a debilitating weakness into the lives of His people to purify us from it.

John Calvin, quoting Augustine, put it this way. He said, “Now let all the pious take notice as to this, that they may see how dangerous a thing the ‘poison of pride’ is, ... inasmuch as it ‘cannot be cured except by poison’” (375). So often, the poison of pride can only be cured by the poison of affliction. Pride is spiritual cancer. Some of you know what it is to do battle with cancer. And if not personally, many more of you have had a loved one afflicted with that horrible disease. And in so many cases, the prescribed treatment for cancer is chemotherapy, which is the introduction of toxic poisons designed to kill the cancerous cells in the body. And unfortunately, chemo also kills healthy cells. But under the care of a qualified physician, we willingly inject our bodies with the poison of chemotherapy to destroy the devastating disease of cancer.

Well, while cancer can ravage the body, pride ravages the soul. Pride is the rot of the human soul. It is the most malignant of spiritual tumors, which, if left untreated, will metastasize, and will permeate our spiritual circulatory system until no part of us is left untouched by its corruption. Every sin that you can think of can be traced back to the evil of pride, because every sin is fundamentally a declaration of our own autonomy and independence from God and His Word. Every time we sin, we say, “No, God! That may be what Your Word says, but I know better!” What is that but pride? It was pride that lay at the root of the disobedience of our first parents, that plunged humanity under the curse of sin. They had heard the commandment clearly, but decided that they would be lords of their own lives. Other sins are closely associated with

evil deeds—covetousness and theft, lust and adultery, hatred and murder. But pride tempts us when we've done things *right*!

Friends, pride is an evil, wicked, tenacious cancer. And our Great Physician will take the most extreme measures—even sending the severest of afflictions—to eradicate it from our hearts! In Psalm 78:34, Asaph says of God's dealings with Israel, "When He *killed* them, *then* they sought Him, and returned and searched diligently for God." In Psalm 119:71, the psalmist says, "It is good for me that I was *afflicted*, that I may learn Your statutes." In both of these instances—whether Israel as a whole or the psalmist in particular—we see that God brings affliction upon His people in order to humble them, so that they might be freshly affected with their powerlessness and frailty, and would seek all their dependence from their Heavenly Father. You see, the fires of divinely-ordered affliction burn away the dross of pride and self-confidence (MacArthur, 405).

What does that mean, then? It means that the moment you discern pride acting up in your heart, you must rise up with all your might against it! Stand guard at the city gate of your soul! Keep watch over your heart! And the moment you discern any inflated spirit, any exaltation of self, any self-congratulation or self-satisfaction, draw the sword of the Spirit from its sheath and sever that prideful attitude at its root! Wield that sword! Proverbs 16:18: "Pride goes before *destruction*, and a haughty spirit before stumbling." Proverbs 29:23: "A man's pride will bring him *low*." Isaiah 66:1: "Thus says Yahweh, 'Heaven is My throne and earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being!'" God's saying, "You've got nothing to be proud *of*! I am the source of all good things!" And then verse 2: "But to this one I will look." This magnificent, all-sufficient storehouse of blessings looks upon a certain kind of person with His favor. Who's that? "To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word." 1 Peter 5:5 "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Grace Church, settle it in your heart today: you need to go to war with the pride in your heart.

Because if you don't, your Father, the Great Physician, will send the chemotherapy of affliction to root out your cancerous pride. And that leads me to another observation. In the midst of suffering, don't be too quick to dismiss your afflictions as "mere" persecution. In Paul's case, he could be sure that many of his trials were indeed genuine persecutions for his faithfulness to his ministry calling. But that didn't mean that those trials weren't *also* designed to mortify pride and keep him entirely dependent on Christ. It's the same with our sufferings. Even those trials that we can identify as being unjustly perpetrated against us by the messengers of Satan are nevertheless sovereignly sent to us by God to accomplish His purposes in us. The next time you find yourself in the midst of a trial, especially in one you've faithfully prayed to be removed from you, consider whether the design of that trial is to keep you from exalting yourself—or, in some cases, to stop you from *continuing* to exalt yourself. Consider whether the Lord is afflicting

you that you might learn His statutes, whether the fires of this affliction are meant to burn away the dross of pride—or any other sin—in you.

What will that look like? When pride begins to be mortified in you, what noticeable change will that effect? Well, for one thing, you'll come to have Paul's attitude about the stupidity of boasting. We see it throughout The Fool's Speech. In verse 31, Paul introduces the account of his embarrassing escape from Damascus with an oath that he promises he's telling the truth. Now that's something you'd expect before a boastful retelling of some great personal accomplishment! But what follows is the story where, unlike Roman military heroes who were rewarded for being the first one *up* the enemy wall, Paul was the first one *down*, as he snuck away from his enemies under the cover of night, hidden away in a basket!

Paul makes fun of boasting, of calling attention to oneself, of glorying in one's own accomplishments. He recognizes that he's got nothing that he hasn't received as a gift of God's grace, 1 Corinthians 4:7. That all the glory for anything praiseworthy in his life is due entirely to Christ and not at all to himself. And so he recognizes that to boast in himself is utter foolishness, so much so that he's disgusted by the boasting he's forced to do. Chapter 11 verse 30: "If I *have* to boast." Chapter 12 verse 1: "Boasting is *necessary*, though it is not profitable." And as we said, in verses 2 through 5 he invents a person because he can't stand the thought of speaking about himself in this way.

And I want to exhort you, friends, to cultivate this attitude in yourselves. Cultivate a distaste, an aversion, a disgust in boasting, in drawing attention to yourself, in magnifying your own accomplishments. We need to be so enamored with the glory of Jesus, that we instinctively run from opportunities to magnify our own glory. Because it *is* one or the other. We will delight either in Christ's glory or our own glory. John 5:44: Jesus says, "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?" You say, "Oh, Jesus, it's OK. I seek both!" No! No man can serve two masters! He will be devoted to one and despise the other. Friends, will you despise the glory of Jesus in favor of your own? Then give up boasting. Learn what it meant for Paul to say, "I am the chief of sinners" (1 Tim 1:15), "the scum of the world" (1 Cor 4:13), "not fit to be called an apostle" (1 Cor 15:9), "the very least of all the saints" (Eph 3:8). And believe it!

One more thought concerning this **lesson on pride and humility**. I've highlighted the evil of pride and the stupidity of boasting. Third, consider the loveliness of humility. See, Paul's distaste for boasting doesn't stem from having nothing to boast *about*. He says, in verse 6, "For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth." If he wanted to boast in his ministerial accomplishments, he'd only be stating the facts! "But," he says, "I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me."

And I can't help but marvel at this. For so many of us, that's not how that sentence gets written! For us, it's, "I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with *less* than he sees in me or hears from me! I work hard and expend effort so that no one will think *less* of me than my diligence warrants! I'm concerned that my labors won't be esteemed or praised or rewarded highly *enough*! that I'll be underappreciated! Undercompensated! Under-recognized! Sure, there are things about me that are less than flattering, but I'll do what I can to cover those things up! I'm going to accentuate the positive! Put my best foot forward! Put the game face on! Fake it till I make it!" But for Paul, he refrains from speaking true things about himself, because he doesn't want people to think too *highly* of him! He's concerned not that he won't get his due, but that he'll be praised for something he's not due! He doesn't want his reputation to precede him. He wants people to evaluate him on the basis of what they see in him and hear from him. And that's it!

And I call that the loveliness of humility because it *is* lovely! Isn't it? "I don't want people to get the idea that I'm better than I am. I just want them treat me on the basis of my life and my doctrine. That's it." Doesn't that make you want to spend time with Paul? Don't you want to hang out with someone like that? That kind of humility is lovely! It's attractive! It reflects the beauty of holiness! Pride, on the other hand, is not lovely; it's not attractive. Pride is ugly. It's unseemly. To the redeemed heart, pride is repulsive. Just as much as Paul's humility makes you want to spend time with him, pride in someone makes you want to run the other direction.

And so I exhort you to imitate Paul as Paul imitates Christ, here. Mortify pride, give up boasting, and put on the loveliness of humility. Not because you'll be more likeable, though that *is* a service to your brothers and sisters. But because the most effective servant of the Gospel of Christ crucified is crucified to the world and its applause. He does all he can to deflect attention away from himself and whatever grace-given successes God has seen fit to bless him with, and to fix attention on the glory of Jesus—the sufficiency of the sweetness of Christ to sustain him in the midst of weakness.

II. Prayer and Problems (vv. 7–8)

Well, there was quite a bit there, in that **first lesson** on pride and humility. But there's a **second lesson** we can glean from this passage. And that is, number two, a lesson on **prayer and problems**. And for this we look again to verses 7 and 8. In response to receiving his thorn, Paul says, verse 8: "Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me." And if we slow our minds down enough to meditate on what the Holy Spirit has given us in this word, we find rich treasure for our own consolation. In verse 8, I find evidence of both Christ's deity and His humanity—and how His being the God-Man uniquely suits Him to minister all manner of comfort to us in our need.

First, note whom Paul implores. “Concerning this, I implored *the Lord*.” Paul directed His prayers immediately to the Lord Jesus Christ. You say, “How do we know ‘the Lord’ here refers to the Son and not the Father, or not the Three-in-One conceived generally?” Well, the response that Paul receives from Him in verse 9 is that “*My grace* is sufficient for you.” “*My grace*.” Whose grace? Well, in the final verse of the book, chapter 13 verse 14, which is Paul’s benediction upon the Corinthians, he ascribes grace peculiarly to Christ, while to the Father he ascribes love: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.” And while we can’t make sharp divisions, remembering that any act of one Person of the Trinity is the act of all three, it’s worth noting that Paul seems to ascribe grace to the Son in a peculiar way. Besides that, Christ’s response in verse 9 also speaks of power: “*for power* is perfected in weakness.” And at the end of the verse he calls that power “the power of *Christ*.” So, the Lord to whom Paul prays is the Lord Jesus.

And this, I say, is an indication of His deity. Why? Because prayer is in act of worship. The one you pray to is the one you worship. Isaiah 44:17 makes this connection, as the prophet mocks the idolaters who worship and pray to idols made of wood and stone. Isaiah 44:17 says, “He falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god!’” (ESV). You see the connection there: He worships it; he prays to it. Prayer is an act of worship. Prayer is a confession of powerlessness in oneself and a confession of trust in the power of the one prayed to. “Deliver me, *for* you are my god!” That’s just what God does. He delivers His faithful worshippers, who call on Him in a day of trouble, and thereby magnifies His power.

And that’s just precisely what Psalm 50 verse 15 says: “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will *deliver* you, and you shall *glorify* Me” (ESV). In other words, you glorify as powerful and dependable and mighty the one you call upon in the day of trouble. You glorify the one you pray to, simply by virtue of being needy and trusting Him to be sufficient help in your need. And Paul says, “The One *I* call upon in the day of trouble is *Jesus of Nazareth*! The carpenter’s son! The One beaten and whipped! The One condemned and crucified! He is sufficient to meet my every need! *He* is the object of my worship! Because *He* is none other than Almighty God Himself!”

But then notice the next words: “Concerning this, I implored the Lord [Jesus] *three times*.” Now, whether this refers to three intense supplications repeated when Paul first received the thorn, or whether it refers to prayer on three separate occasions when the assaults of the thorn were especially severe, we can’t be certain. But what we can be certain of is that Paul is intentionally pointing us back to the Garden of Gethsemane. In the great trial of His own life, the Man Christ Jesus implored His Father three times, first: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me” (Matt 26:39). And there was silence. And then again: “My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done” (Matt 26:42). And there was silence. And then a third time: “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me” (Luke 22:42). Silence once again. And Luke 22:44 says, “And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became

like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground.” Certainly the Lord Jesus knew what it meant to implore the Lord three times in the midst of torment!

And this is why I say this text pictures Christ’s humanity alongside His deity. The Lord whom Paul implored, confident in His Almighty power to deliver, was none other than the Man Christ Jesus, the Mediator between God and Man, our Great High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, who, in the days of His flesh, says Hebrews 5:7, offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death. Paul doesn’t pray to an utterly unfeeling, totally transcendent, aloof deity, untouched by the weakness and infirmity of human existence, unacquainted with what it feels like to beg for relief in the midst of Satanic torment! No, he prays to his Great High Priest, who is not unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin! One who has had to endure what we have now to endure! One who is eager to give mercy and grace to help in time of need! Philip Hughes says, “And we can imagine with what compassion [Paul’s] petitions were received by the Lord, who Himself had been so savagely buffeted by Satan” (450).

And this teaches us, dear friends: in the midst of trials, go to your priest! When you find yourself laboring under the thorns of temptations and afflictions, may it be the reflex of your heart, as it was for Paul, to fly to Christ in prayer. He is perfectly suited to your need. He is Almighty God, the receiver of prayers, and thus sufficient and powerful and able to deliver you. And He is the God-*Man*, of the same nature as us, acquainted with the weakness and frailty of humanity, able to mediate between God and men: For since He Himself was tempted in that which he has suffered, Hebrews 2:18, He is *able* to come to the aid of those who are tempted. Oh friends, in any and every affliction, may your first instinct be to run to your High Priest, who receives you to the throne of grace, who sympathizes with your struggle and gives bountifully out of His own compassion!

And persist in such prayer! Neither Jesus nor Paul received an answer to their prayers after their first petition. Or even after their second petition. It was only after the third time that Paul implored the Lord to remove the thorn that he received an answer. This only reinforces Christ’s own lesson to His disciples, that we must persevere faithfully and trustingly in our supplications to the Lord in the midst of our trials. We can’t be like the disciples who couldn’t watch and pray for an hour without fainting. We must be like the importunate widow, who will wear the judge out before relenting from her cries for help. And what does Jesus say? “Will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?” There *will* come an answer. Now, the answer that comes might be, “No.” It was that way for Paul. The Lord did not remove his thorn. But He did better than change Paul’s circumstances; He changed *Paul*, by supplying him with the grace to endure his thorn in weakness in a way that glorified Christ’s strength.

Conclusion

So, brothers and sisters, let us heed these lessons. Concerning **pride and humility**: recognize that pride is evil, that boasting is stupid, and that humility is lovely. And concerning **prayer and problems**: may it be the reflex of your heart to fly to Christ in the midst of temptations and afflictions, for in Him we have an Almighty God, able to save, and a compassionate High Priest, able to sympathize.

And just a word, before we close, to those here this morning who yet remain outside of Christ. Dear sinner, as long as you remain destitute of a saving knowledge of Christ, you *have* no such Great High Priest to sympathize with your weaknesses. All the strength and comfort that the children of God receive from their merciful and faithful High Priest lies entirely beyond your grasp. The only thing you may expect from the Lord Jesus Christ is swift judgment executed in accord with the principles of strict justice. And because you remain outside of Christ, devoid of a saving union to Him by faith, you remain in Adam. You remain in your sins. You remain under the guilt and penalty of having broken the law of the Holy God of the universe. All you can expect from Him is eternal punishment.

But dear friend, things don't have to stay that way! This merciful and faithful High Priest stands ready to receive you! To this day, He occupies *your* human flesh—ever and always the God-*Man*, in a full human nature, presenting before the throne of His Father the wounds of His cross, wounds by which He made atonement for sinners *just like you* by receiving in Himself the full exercise of His Father's wrath in the place of His people. This Great High Priest bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors, and now He lives to forever and ever make intercession for them—to be their compassionate high priest, graciously dispensing mercy and grace to help in times of need. Dear sinner, come to Christ! Own your guilt before a holy God. Despair of any effort to save yourself. And run to this Great High Priest who has accomplished salvation in full, by His life, death, and resurrection. Rest all your hope for acceptance with God in the doing and the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ. Trust in Him alone for righteousness and for forgiveness, and you shall have Him.