# THE THORN IN THE FLESH

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
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"Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"(II Corinthians 12:8f.)

In that classic children's book, The Little Prince, there's a story about a fox. This fox learns about a certain planet where there are no hunters. And he immediately decides to go there. But then he also learns that there are no chickens. The fox comments, "Nothing's perfect."

That's true. And most people are willing to accept the fact. We may say on an application blank that we are in the best of health, but then we come down with a cold. We may have a good day at the office, only to come home to some trouble with the children. We may think we write a good exam, only to receive a contradictory postcard some days later. Nothing's perfect. We can agree.

Most people are also realistic enough, I think, to admit that the balance of life can shift to the negative side. Not only do we come down with a cold, we sometimes contract a serious illness. Not only do we have trouble in the home, sometimes we have disruption. Not only do we do badly on an exam now and then, we sometimes come to the edge of leaving school. At such times it's rather inappropriate to remark flippantly, "Nothing's perfect." At such times we'd much rather say something like "Everything's wrong."

With such a realistic perception of life many people will agree. Where the disagreement emerges most strongly, it seems to me, is concerning our reaction to life's serious disappointments. How are we inclined to react when we meet a serious illness or when disruption emerges in the home or when our academic career seems to be threatened? To put this in terms of our text, how are we inclined to react to that painful thorn in the flesh?

## I.

One possibility is just to accept things as they are. Resign ourselves to whatever happens to us as our fate. Accept your karma, that's the only thing to do. I suspect that there's a good deal of this in Leary's League for Spiritual Discovery and other religious groups influenced by oriental religions. In this connection it's no accident that men like Karl Marx and Albert Camus were Westerners. They were inclined to say a virulent No to human suffering and human despair. And here they stand on an old tradition.

It's characteristic of biblical thinking not to accept the woes of man as the last word. Here St. Paul's reaction is typical. He is pained, perhaps tormented, by what he calls a thorn in the flesh. What it was exactly we don't know. But the important point is his reaction: "Three times," he says, "I besought the Lord about this that is should leave me." Paul doesn't simply resign himself to some overpowering

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fate. He asks for a way out. Jesus, of course, did the same. Three times in the Garden he prayed that the Cup of the Cross would pass from him.

So if we want to enter into biblical faith, or continue in biblical faith, we won't be embarrassed at all to ask for a way out in times of trouble. Disease is not inevitably the last word. Disruption in the home is not inevitably the last word. A threatened academic career is not inevitably the last word. We disagree with those who only know how to accept things as they are. We call on the Lord and ask him to give us a way out.

II.

And that, precisely, is what the Lord will do, according to the Apostle. In I Corinthians Paul writes, "God keeps faith, and he will not allow you to be tested above your powers, but when the trial and tribulation come he will at the same time provide a way out, by enabling you to sustain it."(I Cor. 10:13[my revision of NEB]) I think the Apostle means to be taken literally here. God will answer our prayers in the sense that he will send healing to our bodies and minds, in the sense that he will restore families to wholeness, in the sense that he will provide the resources for a new academic beginning. God will provide a way out.

But more has to be said here. Biblical faith isn't quite that simple. If it were, it would be the most popular religion of all time, I'm sure. Some time ago a representative of a church publishing house was in this area asking for advice about new publications. One professor told the man that he had an idea for a best seller. He was going to write a book, he said, entitled "Prayers That Work."

Clearly prayers don't always "work" in the sense that we intend them. We don't regularly or even usually get the way out when we want it. This is the point where those who are looking for a religious road to happiness begin to fall away, or so it seems. What would happen to American Christianity, I wonder, if we experienced severe economic reversal, if we had to go hungry for long periods of time? What would happen if our nation were torn to bits by war as Europe has been so many times? What would become of our pious patriotic prayers without peace, progress, and prosperity?

In his book, Rabbit, Run, John Updike seems to give a well-tutored answer. The life of the main character, Rabbit, comes to its peak on the high school basketball court, and the only thing Rabbit can do successfully thereafter is run: run fast away from the ambiguities and suffering of life, and from the people who are involved in them. As Updike comments at one point, "[Rabbit] has no taste for the dark, tangled, visceral aspect of Christianity, the going through quality of it, the passage into death and suffering that redeems and inverts these things..., He lacks the mindful will to walk the straight line of paradox."

That's what biblical faith entails. And that's why it stands over against a good deal of popular American piety, which seems to invite us to run when the going gets rough. Sometimes the way out

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doesn't come when you want it. Sometimes you have to wait and wait and wait, even until the end of life. Sometimes the answer you get from the Lord is, -- bear with it for a time. So Paul says, "Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" It's clear from this that Paul's thorn in the flesh stayed with him. The way out didn't come as he had hoped.

This is the complicated dimension of biblical faith, walking the straight line of paradox, bearing with the suffering, not running from it. This is what Updike aptly calls the "visceral side" of Christianity. We have it in Jesus's prayer, don't we? Three times in the Garden Jesus prays, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."(Mt. 26:39)

III.

Yet the crucial point remains. At such times we <u>don't</u> have to depend on sheer viscera. The Lord doesn't say, -- Grin and bear it, Paul, while I tend to other things. The Lord says, as Paul recounts it, that Divine Power will be with Paul in his agony.

The God whom Paul confesses is the God who is especially with those who cry out to him in time of trouble and tribulation. We all know this theme well from the Twenty-third Psalm: "even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."(Ps. 23:4) In this way God's power is made perfect in our weakness. It shows forth in all its magnificence when we are in trouble.

As people who are struggling to be Christians, then, you and I will disagree with those who simply accept trial and tribulation as inevitable. We will also disagree with those who only know how to run away from suffering and despair. When serious trouble comes, we'll pray(and work) for a way out. And when one comes, we'll give thanks for it. On the other hand, when the way out doesn't come as we'd like it to, we won't automatically run away. We'll bear with it. For, we know that <u>then</u>, especially in the valley of shadows, the Lord's Power is with us.

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