

3 Thorns In Our Flesh: Worry, Anger And Fear

In his *2nd Letter to the Corinthians* Paul refers to “a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan.”

He writes: “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”

His words have provoked endless speculation.

What was the thorn that Paul had in his flesh?

Was it some enemy who was causing him trouble?

Was it a chronic sickness that couldn't be cured?

Was it the Jews who followed him around and tried to discredit his ministry?

The fact is we don't know.

Personally I think that the thorn was some sin that Paul struggled with.

That would make sense of God's reply to his prayer: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

God's grace is sufficient to forgive all sins: when a sinner repents, God forgives. It's no more complicated than that.

So when Paul says “God's power is made perfect in weakness,” and, “When I am weak, then I am strong,” I think he is referring to the power of God's grace at work in Paul's weakness before the power of sin.

In any event, we are a lot like Paul in this respect.

We struggle with a “thorn”—maybe sometimes more than one thorn—in our flesh.

There are three particular thorns Christians struggle with which I would like to talk about today.

Those are the thorn of worry, the thorn of anger and the thorn of doubt.

There are times we can be almost overcome by the assault of these thorns and our struggle to get rid of them can seem futile.

We long for the peace that God has promised to give us, but worry or anger or doubt get in the way.

So let's see what we can do about them.

We'll start with worry, which is a thorn in the life of many a believer.

Worry can so dominate a person's thinking that peace becomes impossible.

But if we can't get rid of our worry, God can.

First of all, try to remember something that you were worried about ten years ago.

You can't, can you?

You know why? God took care of it.

How about last year's worries? Last month's?

Funny how those worries disappeared, isn't it?

And that's great, but you've drug up new things to worry about, haven't you?

Worrying didn't solve the problem you had then but that doesn't keep you from worrying now, does it?

Your problem is not the problem you're worried about; your problem is the fact that you worry about it.

Of all the counterproductive and useless ways we can squander our time and emotional energy, worrying is near the top of the list.

Jesus said, *“Which one of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”*

And we know that this is true, but we worry anyway.

Sometimes we even try to make a virtue out of worrying by telling ourselves that worrying something that **responsible** do and that only irresponsible, undependable people don't worry.

I've even heard people say: “Worrying is what gets the job done.”

Folks, do you know what worry is?

It's a lack of faith that God can help you solve your problem.

You might want to give some thought as to whether or not that makes sense.

But there's a way to stop worrying.

Paul describes it in *Philippians 4:4-7*:

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

Notice that he doesn't say that God will always grant your petition.

What he says is that God will give you peace.

If worrying is the problem, praying is the answer—**but we have to be clear on what is meant by “praying.”**

“Praying” doesn't mean waiting until you have a problem and then asking God to fix it.

“Praying” means ***having a prayer life!***

It means dedicating serious, focused time each and every day to prayer.

There’s an old saying to the effect that he who doesn’t pray at a specific time and a specific place probably doesn’t end up praying at all.

You know how it goes: “There’s just too much else to do—I’ll get to it later—and praying gets short shrift, or maybe no shrift at all.

And it happens again and again. Yet it is the most important thing you can do in your life to stop worrying.

Of what does praying mean?

It means praising God for the blessings He has lavished on you—and as the song goes, it doesn’t hurt to count them one by one.

It means asking God each and every day to forgive the sins you have committed that day and then asking him to help you refrain from committing them tomorrow.

It consists of thanking and praising Him for giving you your life in this world and eternal life in the next.

Of begging Him to bring salvation to people you know to be unbelievers, naming them one by one.

Of asking Him to help you stop worrying and give you His peace.

Of asking Him to draw unbelievers you know to repentance and to turn their hearts to faith in Jesus Christ.

Of asking Him to keep the leaders of our country safe and healthy and to help them rule wisely and honorably—***whether you voted for them or not.***

Cultivate a prayer life like that and God will change your life.

Your worry will evaporate and you will find peace.

Then there's the thorn of anger.

Anger is mentioned 389 times in the Bible and the only time it's described in a positive light is when Jesus directed his anger at the merchants and moneychangers in the temple.

Anger is perhaps the most dangerous thorn we can have in our flesh.

We bring worry on ourselves but we share our anger with other people.

That is why in God's eyes, anger is a form of murder: he says in the *Sermon on the Mount* that anyone who is angry with his neighbor is subject to the same judgment as those who commit murder.

He adds that when we direct our anger at someone we put ourselves in danger of the fire of hell.

Anger begets anger. The Proverb says, "Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared." (*Prov. 22:24*)

Anger is not only a personal sin, it is a social evil.

It destroys peace within and it destroys the peace of those around you.

Prov. 30:33: "For as churning the milk produces butter, and as twisting the nose produces blood, so stirring up anger produces strife."

Anger was considered one of the seven deadly sins.

Some of its effects were: impatience, misanthropy, revenge, self-destructive behavior, murder and suicide.

I know a couple who are devout believers and who have a grown son who has considerable artistic talents.

They have shown me some of his paintings and they are beautiful.

One day he found out that his girlfriend was carrying on with another man.

He flew into a rage and attacked her with a hammer.

She survived, but he was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to prison.

Such is the power of anger.

The Bible tells us that anger is what chiefly motivates Satan.

After God cast Satan out of heaven, he proclaimed: "...rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short." (*Revelation 12:12*)

When we allow ourselves to get angry we are serving Satan whether we know it or not.

So what is the cure for anger?

Anger is personal: we don't get angry at "things"—we get angry at people.

Therefore in the *Sermon on the Mount* Jesus says that the cure for anger is to seek reconciliation with whoever is making you angry.

Matthew 5:23-24: "...If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift."

Anger cannot simply be extinguished—it has to be replaced by something better—and stronger.

That “something” is forgiveness.

And forgiveness is something that God is delighted to share with you. Finally, there is doubt.

Doubt is a synonym for “unbelief.”

When a father brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus and begged him: “...if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

Jesus replied, “Everything is possible for him who believes.”

“Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, ‘I do believe; *help me overcome my unbelief.*’”

Unbelief is not the absence of belief, it is anti-belief and it comes from the sinful nature that dwells in every person born into the world since Adam and Eve.

Even after a person has heard and believed the Gospel and is striving to live a life of faith in Jesus Christ, his sinful nature sows unbelief in his heart and mind.

That is why Luther said that every believer struggles with “unbelief in the inmost heart.”

Unbelief doesn’t disqualify you for citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven or rob you of eternal life, but it can and does disturb the peace which God wants you to have in your assurance of salvation. There is a simple way to get rid of unbelief: just remember that unbelief comes from Satan but that your faith comes from God.

No one—not Satan, not your sinful nature, not anyone, not anything—can rob you of the faith that God has given you.

Paul wrote, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor

life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (*Romans 8:35-39*)

Jesus said, "You are mine and no one shall pluck you out of my hand."

And like his Father, Jesus cannot lie.

And so my Advent prayer for you is that if you are not already doing so, you will begin to set aside a regular time each and every day for serious, thoughtful prayer.

I promise you that if you do, God will change your life and you will be able to say farewell to the thorns of worry, anger and doubt.

Amen.

Father, please continue to heal Donna Pospisil and alleviate her pain.

Bless Judy with faith and perseverance as she seeks your love and forgiveness.

Bless Ed Hartung and keep him safe as he adjusts to living alone.