



“Living in Grace”

Text: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

July 7, 2024

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Isn't it amazing how something so small like a splinter of wood in the skin or a thorn that has gotten under the flesh can cause so much pain? You may be surprised to learn that I did woodworking all through high school. I even made a hatch cover table my senior year. I remember that one time I got a sliver of wood under my nail and I couldn't get it out for anything. So small and yet the pain was intense!

Biblical scholars have a lot of theories about what Paul's thorn was over the years. Whatever it was, it seems that it started 14 years before this passage, after the rapturous event he refers to. Because he doesn't tell the readers, the Corinthians, it is assumed that they knew what this thorn was he was referring to. While they may have known, it is good that we don't know. Because then we avoid the risk of comparing our thorn to Paul's. We can now hear this passage in light of whatever our personal thorn might be.

Just about all of us have some thing that makes life hard or causes us to suffer. If you haven't then please stop to thank God for his blessings to you. However, if you're hearing Paul's words about his thorn and can identify with his struggle, then it might be disappointing to hear God's reply that his grace is all you need.

When we are suffering from thorns, it's fair and right to ask God to take them away just like Paul did. It makes sense to think that because God loves us he wants us to be happy. We can also assume that because God is all powerful, God can take away any thorn - any bad habit, any mental health issue, any health challenge. When God doesn't take the thorn away, no matter what the thorn may be we can start to doubt the love and goodness of God. We can begin to question if God cares, or if he is able to do what God promises, or even if God exists at all. When God fails to take away our thorns, we can start to feel like God has failed us. Where is this Love that never fails?

So what does it mean when God says that Grace is all we need? God is asking us to look for God beyond our immediate experiences. Rather than focus on our own subjective understanding of God and what God can do, God wants us to look to the most complete expression of his grace - the person of Jesus. When we contemplate Jesus suffering, death and resurrection, we can encounter the grace of God in three main ways:

God is with us - with our thorns because Jesus suffered from his crown of thorns, the metal thorns of the nails that held his hands and feet to the cross, as well as the spiritual thorn of being abandoned by his father. No matter how isolated we might feel, we are never alone because Jesus has shared our thorns and still carries their scars in his flesh.

Jesus trusted his Heavenly Father even while he was enduring his thorns. He never gave up on God and so, as "the champion who initiates and perfects our faith" (Heb.12:2), Jesus will carry us through the times when we find it hard to trust in God's goodness and love because of the thorns we are enduring.

Because Jesus is risen from the dead, we can look forward to the time when our thorns are removed and we are free from their inflection. 2 Corinthians 4:18 says that what we endure now will pass away, but the life we have to look forward to through the resurrection of Jesus will last forever. That life will be thorn-free!

It would be poor pastoral care to say to someone who is suffering their own particular thorns not to worry about them because God's grace should be enough. It can trivialize both the thorns they are enduring, as well as the grace of God. However, I do believe that whatever our thorns may be, God's grace, and Jesus has everything we need to not only endure the thorns we

may be experiencing, but for God to work good through them in our lives and in the lives of the people around us. Paul's thorn was given to him so he would rely on God's grace rather than his own experience. What if it is the same for us – that God allows us to carry our own thorns so that we would learn to rely on his grace, grow in grace, and become more grace giving to the people around us?

The challenge for us, then, especially when we are carrying thorns in our lives, is to dive deeper into the grace of God for us in Christ Jesus. One step in faith development is growing in our understanding of God's grace to us in Jesus and how it has all we need for our lives with all the thorns. As we grow in our knowledge and understanding of God's grace to us in Jesus, God also equips us to bring his grace to others who are also carrying their thorns. This isn't by any means easy work. The pain of our thorns can cause a huge distraction, even if it is a relatively small thing, like a sliver of wood. Our thorn is our thorn. Our pain is our pain. When you think of whether God's grace could ever be sufficient, think of people like Corrie ten Boom. People who survived Nazi prison camps and found that Christ's grace was sufficient.

The times that we are in are very challenging for the Church. Challenging for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, when hate seems to be the prevailing attitude of certain Christians. If one were to read so many people's views online, one would see how physical or mental illness are seen as something that prove that God doesn't exist, yet is through these things and anything that would be for you a thorn, that is where we find God. Where we find God's grace.

Paul believed, that despite the pain of his thorn, all he needed was God's grace to get him through. Do we find that too, for ourselves, when dealing with our own thorns? Because, what if, no matter what our personal thorns might be, all we need is the grace of God in the person of Jesus? Then maybe, the more we find God's grace in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the more we'll find that his grace has everything we need to live with the thorns we carry now until that Day of Resurrection when all suffering will end. Amen.

First Presbyterian Church Staff:

Pastor
Director of Music
Children and Youth Ministry Coordinator
Office Administrator

Anna von Winckler
Robert Nicholls
Carrie Aiken
Lora Blaylock



**First
Presbyterian
Church**

609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.fpcevv.com

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