



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

DESIGNER THORNS

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ NOVEMBER 14, 2021

If I wanted to boast, I would be no fool in doing so, because I would be telling the truth. But I won't do it, because I don't want anyone to give me credit beyond what they can see in my life or hear in my message, ⁷even though I have received such wonderful revelations from God. So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.

⁸Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. ⁹Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. ¹⁰That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

2 Corinthians 12:6-10

The Wounded Hero

One of the most common themes in contemporary fiction is the wounded hero. We love to imagine and populate our stories with people who are larger-than-life in their attributes of courage and strength, but we seem to prefer that they also have personal flaws and weaknesses.

Among the most popular novelists of our day was Tom Clancy; in dozens of novels (including ones written after his death by others, to keep the “franchise” going), we follow the exploits of his hero Jack Ryan: former Marine and Naval Academy graduate, brilliant scholar, successful businessman, CIA consultant, and ultimately, by some strange plot twists, President of the United States. He’s been played on screen by Alec Baldwin, Harrison Ford and Ben Affleck. Starting with *The Hunt for Red October*, Ryan repeatedly comes to the rescue of his country in its darkest moments. But he has his own inner problems. As a Marine he was badly injured in a helicopter crash, spent a year in surgeries and traction, and continues to suffer periodic intense back pain. He is a wounded hero.

Another popular series of adventure novels and films, based on the writing of Lee Child, feature the lone-wolf vigilante and former military M.P. Jack Reacher. He’s the hero in 25 novels, and was played in movie versions incongruously by Tom Cruise (because in the books Reacher is 6’5” while Cruise is a diminutive 5’7”). He travels from town to town, with no family and no permanent home, stumbling upon crimes and problems and solving them in his own way. Jack Reacher is tough and resourceful, but he too carries scars. Some of his scars are literal: from the wounds he received in the terrorist bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut; and some are emotional, including the death of his parents. Jack Reacher usually seems to be in complete control, but he is also a wounded hero.

And then the prototype of the All-American Hero: the original comic book character Superman, first published in 1938. His literary creator made him an extraterrestrial from a doomed distant planet, and endowed him with superhuman powers—including the ability to fly like a bird, an imperviousness to bullets and diseases, the speed of a runaway freight train, and X-ray vision. The American public embraced such a fantasy hero, but the writer quickly realized that people wanted him to not be completely perfect; if he had no weaknesses, no one would be able to relate to him on an emotional level. So after a few episodes it was revealed that Superman’s Achilles’ heel

was “kryptonite,” a material from his home planet that could threaten his powers. Now the character was complete.

We prefer our heroes to have at least a few flaws. Why? Because we know ourselves too well. We know that none of us is without handicaps and weaknesses. Nobody makes it through childhood to adulthood without at least a few scars—physical or mental or emotional. Nobody’s family life is perfect; nobody’s experience with their siblings and peers is without some stress or conflict. None of us has been able to avoid making some dumb or selfish mistakes that brought consequences. And, certainly, none of us makes it all the way through life to a quick and painless death without having to face personal challenges and problems of numerous kinds. We all have our scars, though each one’s experiences are unique and personalized.

The naïve approach to life would be to believe that we are owed a problem-free and pain-free existence, and that when something difficult happens to us it’s not fair and God has somehow cheated us. The mature approach to life is to accept the inevitability that we will have our issues, and that God’s intention is to help us either overcome those problems that seem bigger than we are, or at least cope with them—drawing upon His strength and comfort within to fortify us.

A Real-Life Hero

We now turn our attention from modern fictional heroes to a very real human being who was a great hero many centuries ago—a man who had a profound and enduring impact on the world. We refer to him today by his chosen nickname of Paul, the secular version of his given Hebrew name Saul. He’s often called “St. Paul” and “The Apostle Paul.” He was brilliant and accomplished, an intellectual giant. He straddled the worlds of Orthodox Judaism and the Greco-Roman world of travel, commerce and scholarship. The books he wrote, which constitute the core of our New Testament, laid the foundation for two millennia of Christian theology and practice. He was a great Christian.

But was he the “GOAT”? This is the kind of debate that has become all the rage in the sports world. Who was the “Greatest of All Time” football player ... basketball player ... tennis player ... golfer? Whenever I hear the blatherers on sports talk radio and tv and web-sites discussing this, I tune out. Who knows whether the greatest was Jordan or Lebron, Tiger or Nicklaus? It’s pointless and irrelevant. It’s impossible to compare different people in different eras.

And we’re not going to debate today whether Paul was a greater Christian than Martin Luther, Mother Teresa, Francis of Assisi or Billy Graham. Whether or not he was the “GOAT,” Paul was certainly a “G”: a great hero for all believers. The Christian church is built on his shoulders, just as modern tech innovators like Gates and Jobs and Musk stand on the shoulders of the giants of a century ago: Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Nikola Tesla.

And yet Paul was a wounded hero, the kind we’re most drawn towards. And in one of the most honest and self-disclosing passages of his writings he tells us how he dealt with his personal problems. Paul was apparently granted by God not only a remarkable intellect and set of abilities, but also some personal experiences that revealed heaven and divine truth to him in a way most people never could imagine. Such gifts could easily make a person proud and puffed up.

But along with his great blessings, God allowed Paul to have some significant challenges. In today’s text, he calls it a “thorn in the flesh.” That’s a figurative description of a painful or difficult challenge. He’s purposely vague about his particular situation, and I’m glad he is—because we can all relate to it. Paul’s problem may have been a debilitating physical condition, or it may have been something else entirely.

Paul’s Response

What matters, and what Paul concentrates on, is not his specific issue but what he did about it. There are three interrelated responses.

- ◆ **Paul was humbled.** Verse 7 says that the “thorn in the flesh” was intended by God to “keep me from becoming proud.” Humility is a good thing. We need more of it. Our world needs more of it. The responses to the coronavirus pandemic too often descended into fear and panic, or blame, or self-righteous proclamations by scientists and politicians who didn’t really know all the facts. What the modern world should take away from Covid-19 is a renewed humility, a recognition that we are not always in control. The brilliant and blessed man Paul learned to be humble
- ◆ **Paul prayed.** He pleaded with God in earnest prayer three distinct times, asking the Lord in His mercy to remove the “thorn in the flesh” (whatever it was). It is right to pray, always. When you, or someone you love, faces a difficult thorn we should seek God for His help ... and take advantage of any means God has made available to us (whether it be modern medicine or the assistance of others). Many people here will testify that they prayed for divine help in a time of need, and that prayer was answered. But prayers are not always answered the way we prefer. There are some preachers out there who will promise you that if you have enough faith God will always give you what you want. I’ll never tell you that, because it’s not biblical (and our passage proves it).
- ◆ **Paul trusted.** This is what he focuses our attention on: We, too, are being called to trust and draw upon God’s strength whenever a problem is not removed. We would all much prefer that our difficult and challenging situations be removed (or that we have the internal strength to overcome them). But it doesn’t always work out that way. And when we aren’t strong enough, we must not give in to despair. Instead, we can follow Paul’s example. We can choose each day to turn to the Lord, draw as close to Him as we can, and seek to open ourselves up to Him. In doing so—acknowledging our weakness and our dependency—we, paradoxically, become stronger!

Strength through Weakness

The centuries-old discipline of jujitsu, and its more modern offshoot judo, were developed in Japan and have spread worldwide. Jujitsu and judo are based on a simple premise: When confronted with an adversary stronger than you are, trying to directly resist will result in defeat. But by using leverage and yielding to the strength of the opponent, you can actually turn his strength to your advantage. By yielding, you actually gain strength. We won't go into the details of the physical techniques, but the spiritual significance has been recognized by many—not just Buddhists and practitioners of Eastern spirituality, but Christians as well. Though Paul was not familiar with the athletic discipline of judo, he would affirm the inner principle: “When I am weak, then I am strong.” This mysterious, counter-intuitive practice of yielding in order to overcome isn't easy to describe analytically. It needs to be experienced—just as you can't learn judo just by reading a textbook, but have to practice it and discover what it feels like.

You and I—all of us—are either currently dealing with some challenge in life that could be characterized as a “thorn in the flesh” or will be before long. What might it be? Someone is dealing with a form of cancer and the painful treatments for it; someone has bouts of depression; someone is widowed after the death of their life partner and is riding the waves of loneliness and grief; someone has the challenge of raising a handicapped child, or is the caregiver of a spouse or parent with dementia; someone is facing potential bankruptcy; someone is battling an addiction to alcohol; someone is experiencing the loss of eyesight or hearing; someone has chronic lung disease; someone has a painful arthritic knee; someone has just gone through a disruptive divorce; someone is at a career crossroads.

It is right and fitting to do what Paul initially did: to seek God's help to remove or overcome that crippling condition or challenging obstacle. By all means, pray, and ask others to pray for you. By all means, seek—through every avenue you can find—to get help. But remember 2 Corinthians 12. Sometimes God says, “I'm not going to take

away your problem, but I am going to help you cope with it. I'm not going to lift the burden entirely from you, but I will give you stronger shoulders to carry it."

It's Personal

A few months ago, the daily reading in the popular devotional book *Jesus Calling* by Sarah Young sent me once again to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians. The book, in which the author imagines Jesus speaking directly to us in the first person, says this:

Don't compare yourself to anyone else. Their journey through life is different from yours. I may have gifted that person right now with the strength to defeat their challenges. But I have gifted you with weakness, so that you might learn to trust me more.

Is it possible, therefore, that what I'm dealing with right now (different from you) is actually a "Designer Thorn" — chosen for me by God, my loving Heavenly Father, that I might learn to trust Him who intends for me to grow through it into a life of deeper faith in Him? ■

