

## **“The Splinter in Your Soul”**

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

*Series: Grace Week 7. Sustaining Grace*

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

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From the age of fourteen, I spent every summer of high school and college working at my father’s company: Hoglund Triordinate Corporation. He built massive machines which cut and ground and shaped metal into parts for jet engines, automobiles, firearms and even hip replacements. The “shop” where those behemoths were born was, as you might expect, greasy, gritty and very grimy. It was full of metal shavings and wood splinters.

So it was bound to happen that one afternoon, while loading a slab of metal onto a shelf, I was viciously skewered by a huge splinter. It did not impale me in the arm, the palm of my hand or my fingertip. No, with the accuracy of an acupuncturist, it stabbed me right under the fingernail. And I can’t show you which finger.

Eddy, the faithful old shop mechanic, grabbed my finger with one grimy paw and reached for a greasy needle nose pliers with the other. Holding me in his vice grip he said, “I know this is going to hurt, Doug” as he proceeded to dig out the spike. He didn’t remove it, but he did get me to confess to forty-three things I didn’t do.

So my next stop was the doctor. Normally a physician will say, “This won’t hurt a bit. It’ll be over before you know it. Relax, you won’t feel a thing.” Not this time. The doctor said (I’m not making this up), “This is going to hurt like...” Then he produced a needle longer than the splinter and shot Novocain directly into my fingertip. I heard someone screaming in agony and then I realized it was me. In the end the doctor had to cut away my nail in order to remove the invader.

Are you pierced by an unwelcome invader? Is there a splinter in your soul? This is not a wood sliver or metal shaving. It’s some physical, emotional or spiritual pain. It’s a thorn in your side that will not go away. Somewhere, at sometime, you brushed up against a few prickly circumstances that left their teeth in you. Perhaps you removed some of the barbs and bristles. But there is still a good bit embedded deep under your skin. You can’t pluck it out, it won’t work its way out, and it won’t go away. What’s the splinter in your soul? It may be:

- Something you did long ago and the shame of it keeps coming back to haunt you.
- A demanding or difficult person in your life.
- A son or daughter who keeps using.
- A debt that keeps growing.
- A persistent craving you can’t resist.
- A low self-image that continually whispers you’re no good.

- An unreconciled relationship.
- A loved one lost.
- A chronic illness, personal handicap or just the reality that you're getting older.

How can you tell if you have a splinter? It's that place in your life that is tender, sore or raw. It's that thing you've tried to remove unsuccessfully. It's the pain you've begged God to pull out and, for some reason, He just leaves it in. You've worn holes in your jeans praying for a thorn-free life and it's still as red and swollen as ever.

Perhaps it will comfort you to know even the great Apostle Paul, author of most of the New Testament and star of the Book of Acts, was pierced by a thorn in his side, skewered by a splinter in his soul. In his second letter to the Corinthian Christians he makes this confession, "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassing revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me" (2 Corinthians 12:7-8). This passage fires the curiosity of Christians down through the ages. What thorn could possibly cause this great missionary of God such anguish?

In his other book on Grace, *The Grip of Grace*, Max Lucado draws together some clues from the Bible in order to identify five possible splinters Paul may have picked up along the way.

1. *Temptation*. Paul was a single man who felt called to the celibate life (1 Corinthians 7:7-9). He knew the turmoil of internal struggle and temptation. "I want to do the things that are good, but I do not do them. I do not do the good things I want to do, but I do bad things I do not want to do" (Romans 7:18-19). After all, Paul was a human being and therefore subject to the same desires we all face.

2. Maybe the splinter was *Opposition*. Paul earned numerous enemies during his ministry. He calls it "a messenger from Satan, to torment me" (2 Corinthians 12:7). Paul constantly defended his authority as an Apostle. Factions at Corinth, a church he founded, pushed him aside in favor of other, more charismatic preachers. He also faced stiff opposition from his Jewish and Gentile audiences. In the previous chapter Paul detailed some of his war wounds:

I have been near death many times. Five times the Jews have given me their punishment of thirty-nine lashes with a whip. Three different times I was beaten with rods. One time I was almost stoned to death. Three times I was in ships that wrecked, and one of those times I spent a night and a day in the sea. I have gone on many travels and have been in danger from rivers, thieves, Jews and Gentiles. I have been in danger in cities, in the country and on the sea. And I have been in danger with false Christians (2 Corinthians 11:23-26).

In the face of so much opposition, no one could blame Paul for begging God to lighten up on him.

3. Some say Paul's thorn was his *Aggression*. Some probably said he was abrasive. You can't read his letters without feeling the heat. Max Lucado writes, "Before he knew grace, he had killed Christians. After he knew grace, he grilled the Christians. Example? 'When Peter came to Antioch, I challenged him to his face, because he was wrong'" (Galatians 2:11)<sup>1</sup>. That's not always the best way to win friends and influence people.

4. Perhaps the splinter was not temptation, opposition, or aggression but simply the *Exhaustion* of a body that was giving out. Maybe he dictated his letters to a scribe because his eyesight was so poor. Remember how he was blinded when he saw Christ in the great light on the road to Damascus (Acts 9)? Maybe he never recovered completely. Severe myopia is a hazard for one who must travel, write letters and preach to crowds. I wonder if, after preaching how Jesus opened the eyes of the blind, Paul turned to the Lord and asked, "Jesus, do you think you could work that miracle on me?"

5. Finally, despite what you may think, Paul was not a dynamic speaker. He overheard the Corinthians say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing" (2 Corinthians 10:10). I've been working my way through a massive biography on the life of Ulysses Grant. A repeated refrain throughout its pages is the shock people receive when they meet the great general and savior of the Union. He strikes them as small, awkward and terrified to speak in public. Perhaps the Apostle Paul left a similar impression. Max Lucado concludes,

Let's back away for a minute and tally this up. (I don't know how you envisioned Paul, but that image may be about to change.) Tempted often. Beaten regularly. Opinionated. Dim-sighted. Thick-tongued. Is this the apostle Paul? (Could be he never got married because he couldn't get a date.) No wonder some questioned if he were an apostle. And no wonder he prayed.<sup>2</sup>

Now if Paul begged God to pull out the thorn three times, why was it still stuck in his side? Wouldn't he be a better apostle for Christ without these impediments? Perhaps. And yet the Lord left it there for a reason. Only one who wrestles with temptation can appreciate the freedom and forgiveness of grace. Only one scorched by the fire of opposition can learn to truly love his or her enemies. Only one with a bold, in your face personality can stand up to those who water down the Gospel. Perhaps Paul's dim eyesight drove him to seek deeper insights and higher visions (2 Corinthians 12:1-6). And his poor preaching? In Paul's own words, "To keep me from becoming conceited" (2 Corinthians 12:7).

Is the thorn in your side a temptation, an opponent, a personality flaw, a physical weakness, or a lack of skill? Have you prayed repeatedly for the Lord to pluck it out only to find it's just as raw and sore and deep as ever? Why does Jesus leave it there? I don't know. I would not presume to give a reason. Only God knows.

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<sup>1</sup> Max Lucado, *In the Grip of Grace*. (Word Publishing: Dallas, 1996), p. 134

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

But here is one way you can use the splinter in your soul. Let it drive you to Christ. When it comes to thorns, we think we only have two options: fight it or give in. If we give into our weaknesses, they rule over us. If we fight them, they only get stronger until we ultimately give in. But there is a third option: surrender yourself to the power of God. Our pride and our declarations of independence drive us to do everything on our own until we come up against something we cannot budge. As Paul pleaded for Christ to remove the thorn, he heard instead this reply, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9) Paul had to reach the point where he admitted he was utterly powerless so the power of Christ could enter in. And he concluded

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

That's the secret we all miss. You can't be strong until you admit you are weak. You can't fully receive Christ's power until you confess you are powerless. You can't save your life until you lose it to Him. And even when you think you've done that, you still discover there are thorny parts you are holding back. Surrender it all to Him. Not in one grand act of sacrifice but every day as you feel the sting or struggle of your thorns. Ask other believers to help you. The Spirit gives God's power through other members of the Body of Christ. We need each other. Rejoice that you have weaknesses because they are opportunities to surrender yourself to Christ and receive His power. Let Him bear your thorns.

At the Last Supper, Jesus told His disciples, "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5). And then the next day, on a dark hillside, He showed them that His power is made perfect in weakness. The weakness of the Cross became the power that heals us, saves us, and sets us free. And I don't think it was a coincidence that Jesus, our King, wore a crown of thorns.

One of those thorns was yours.