



This week at Magdalen Road church we finished our series in 2 Corinthians. During this journey in Corinth we have seen that Corinth 'the city' has invaded Corinth 'the church' - They are a people, like us, who are too easily impressed with worldly power and strength.

At this point, Paul has lowered himself to use their tactics by "boasting" - though not as they would expect. Last week he listed the catalogue of calamities that describe his ministry career - ending up with him being lowered from a wall in Damascus in a fish basket!

This week Paul's boasting begins with a peculiar description of an experience that he had

- Paul's revelation from the Lord (v1-7)

It's almost certain that Corinth was a 'spiritual' place and this culture of 'spiritual experiences' would be admired in Corinth (for example through the Cult of Isis). Remember also 1 Cor 12-14 where certain spiritual gifts and experiences are dividing the church.

There is much we don't know about what Paul describes in these verses. It's confusingly spoken of - is it an in or out of body experience for example? A psychological or physical reality? What does it mean to be caught up in (v2) the Third Heaven? Or (v4) Paradise?

But more importantly there's much we do know. (1) it's special: Vivid, memorable a revelation (unveiling) and so showing some clarity about reality. (2) it's personal. This was a private thing and not meant as a public testimony. There's no book deal or bragging! (3) it's very unusual. This only happened once and it happened 14 years ago. Whilst perhaps we should be open to things like this, we should maybe not 'expect' them. (4) and importantly there is an associated danger of pride. As Paul talks about it firstly he talks about himself in the third person, secondly he refrains from speaking about it to avoid others giving him more respect than is warranted and thirdly v7 In order to keep him from being conceited the Lord gives him a thorn in his flesh.

- Paul's thorn allowed by the Lord (v7-10)

We asked five questions if this section:

1. Who sent it?

It's a fine distinction to make but important because (v7) the thorn is described as a messenger of Satan whilst in (v8) Paul pleads with the Lord to remove it. God, in his sovereignty allows suffering and hardship, he is not culpable for them, but he is able to weave them into his plans and purposes.

2. What is it?

Broadly speaking there are 3 categories of conjecture:

- A) physical or mental illness (eg Gal 4:13, 14, 6:11) or in 2 Cor 1:8 we sense Paul is especially low.
- B) a particular besetting sin or temptation for Paul (usually sexual)

C) an individual or individuals who are constantly hounding Paul and seeking to undo his gospel work. Just as the super-apostles we're doing Satan's work, so Paul here perhaps describes a particular person in a similar vein.

What we **DO** know again is (1) that thorns are always a negative thing in the bible (whether the thorns from the curse (Gen 3:18), the thorns of the enemy inhabitants of the Promised Land (Num 33v55) or even the crown of thorns that Jesus wore at the cross but also that (2) the point of the thorn is stop Paul from becoming conceited.

3. What is the Flesh?

Paul uses flesh in various different ways, but here it seems to mean both his flesh as in his body, his mortal existence but also the flesh as in his selfish self, his sinful worldliness. There is a thorn in his flesh means both-suffering in his physical flash means that he is humbled and his pride is deflated.

4. Why does he have it?

The important thing is the affect upon his ministry rather than specifics of what the thorn or indeed the flesh actually is. The thorn was God saying to him you are more useful to me with suffering, than without it. The thorn means you look to me and keep looking for me and you know that my grace is enough - that I am enough.

5. What does it mean for us?

The application of this is very stark and challenging. Because of our tendency towards pride, God longs for us to look to him in humility and so at times he allows life to hurt to keep reminding us that we were meant to look to him and that we weren't meant to do this alone. We find this hard because in the West we enjoy huge amounts of comfort.

Sometimes God doesn't answer our prayers, he leaves us in discomfort so that we learn to look to him and trust him for strength and grace each day. In v10 Paul widens the conversation to include all manner of experiences that highlight his weakness. For us this might mean ongoing pain or frustration? Relational difficulties? Problems at work? Or even for us at the corporate level of the church as we engage with our local community?

A huge danger for Christians though is that we can get absorbed by the 'thorns' and end up in self pity and wallowing, turning away from God rather than towards him.

We ended with a quote from Joni Erickson Tada who was paralysed aged 17 in a diving accident-her conclusion as she wrestled with her condition, was that "God permits what he hates, to accomplish what he loves".

In a world of strength and power, Paul delights and in weakness and suffering, so then he knows what true strength in Christ is. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Here are a few questions to start you off

- how does God use the thorn from Satan? What do you think it is? Are there ways that you have experienced similar things - seemingly really hard and difficult, yet used by God for your good and growth?
- why does God allow us to have these things? Why do we 'need' them?
- what weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties do you have in your life?
- how can we be less addicted to 'comfort' in the West?
- how can we help each other in the midst of hardships?