

I Hurt, and I Resent It

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Dr. Harry Winsheimer

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A month ago, June 30, Freddie died. He never became Fred, even though he died a month shy of his fifty-first birthday. His mother was my father's sister. She and her husband and three other children lived about six minutes from us, went to the same church, and traveled in the same social circle as we did. I saw Aunt Ruth and Uncle Bob and my cousins repeatedly, during some weeks several times. I felt like they were my family, and they were.

Births are greeted with joy usually. But his arrival was traumatic. He had cerebral palsy. He never spoke, never sat up on his own, never fed himself. Freddie was carried by Aunt Ruth and Uncle Bob to all our family gatherings, to church, to most places. They provided him with love and unending care. Freddie lived his entire fifty years as an infant.

Freddie was born when I was fourteen.

At fourteen, I was on a roll. Life was good. The future looked great. Then, Freddie. It was as if St. Helens had burst inside of me. Life was not always a sprint to bigger and better adventures. Life could go into the drink in a moment. I felt vulnerable as never before. I sensed that it would not be the only time. I locked my vulnerability behind the door of my mind. No one would know. Boys don't talk about fears young men defy life, take it on. But, I was aware of what was impounded. Theological disputes flared. What is God's function? God who is presented as loving us? I questioned. I read. I pondered.

I asked my family when they were here on July 6 for the wonderful celebration of my 40th anniversary of ordination (again, thank you for that honor) if they recalled Aunt Ruth ever being resentful or angry about Freddie. None of us could remember resentment or any expressions of negativity over his massive impact upon her life. She and Uncle Bob must have been extremely disappointed, must have grieved, must have resented how severely their lives were limited by Freddie. So how did they live positive, upbeat lives? How did they adapt and live constructive Christian lives? How did they process this? What role did their faith in God play? I wish that I had asked.

As I spoke, did your stories come to mind? How do we adapt to the unacceptable and painful and live faithfully as the people of Jesus Christ?

Prayer O Lord, life can be rough. It can grate on us, and we can be frustrated, disappointed, resentful. Help us hear what you have to say to us, so that we may serve you faithfully and live the abundant life Jesus came to give us. Through him we pray. Amen.

Let's talk about thorns. I mean those things that puncture our lives and hurt. They hurt and the hurt won't go away. It is chronic. Part of the pain is loss. This hurt causes us to say that life would be much better if we did not have this. It may be emotional and physical. It could be health problems, maybe a cardiac condition or cancer. It could be relational, maybe a marriage that is sour. It could be occupational, a job that is destructively stressful. It could be aging. It could be the death of a loved spouse or friend. It could be a career that doesn't go anywhere. The sense of loss and conviction that life would be better without this problem often is accompanied by resentment. This is not fair! Other people don't have this, why must I? If only, if only. . . .

Paul's spiritual experience when he prayed to be free of the thorn in his flesh.

The Apostle Paul had a story. I wish that he had given us details. He was a hard-driving, go-get-em missionary. He summed up what he had endured: great labors, imprisonments, countless floggings, often near death, five times given thirty-nine lashes. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once he was pelted

with stones. Three times he was shipwrecked, for a night and day adrift at sea. Traveling for the Lord Jesus, he was in constant danger. He spent many a sleepless night. His converts and newly formed churches were so fragile they weighed on his mind. II Cor. 11:23-28 You could say that a storm cloud followed him. As if those were not enough, he reported a personal problem. He called it his "thorn in the flesh." We do not know what it was. Because he wrote personal comments in very large print, it could have been an eye condition maybe. Painful. Distracting. Mind-grabbing. "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me. . . ." The agony in the cry! No miracle was given! Frustration! Disappointment!

"But, [the Lord] said to me, (My grace is sufficient for you. . . .¹ " How's that? You have enough? I don't think that I would have said so. Reminds me again of being fourteen and asking my parents for more allowance, and they said, "You have enough." I didn't agree! And, to make it worse, we live in a culture that spends millions and millions of person hours and dollars convincing us that what we have is not enough never, never enough. We always expect more. Let's admit that we may have a problem with the concept of sufficient, enough for contentment.

The temptation is to resent God, to resent life, to act out our resentment on everyone or to blame ourselves. Does acting out resentment or hoarding it help? I ask you. Does it help? Are you happy when angry over the pain? Do you sleep better at night? Do you feel relaxed? Do you have energy for your family and work responsibilities? If it does not help, then who are you hurting? Yourself! And, maybe those who live with you. Letting the energy of resentment be converted into helpful, Christ-serving emotions is the way to go. Forgiveness extricates us here and sets us on the road to health---spiritual, emotional and relational health.

Paul learned to be content with what he had. "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ [I think that Paul needed a good risk management consultant!]. . . ." The key, the integrating factor, was to release his own ego and to focus upon Christ. When he focused upon his ego, his own agenda, his thorn, he could not be empowered. His energy was consumed by his struggle within himself. He discovered power when he submitted himself, thorn and all, to God, and set his mind upon Christ's work. That directed his energy into positive, constructive purposes. God taught him to turn away from self-absorption toward God and mission, and the byproducts were courage, energy, contentment.

Contentment is not the pursued goal of life. Contentment is not an appropriate goal for Christians. It was not for Paul. God had to teach him that insight. Paul focused upon the thorn, upon the pain. God taught him to accept the thorn as part of his life.

The temptation is to get absorbed by thinking that life is about ourselves, to think about self, to talk to me about how miserable I am, over and over and over and over. And, to forget that we are called to serve Christ, wherever we are and in whatever conditions we are in. That is the lesson that Paul had to be taught by God!

My first take home question: Given the thorn in my life, am I thinking enough about God's will for my life? In my present situation, do I properly balance thoughts about self with thoughts about Christ and his mission for me?

This question is prompted by Paul saying that he was content to accept suffering "for the sake of Christ." We probably would say to serve Christ.

When our suffering has no meaning, we hurt and resent it. We hate the suffering. When we recognize value in the suffering, then we can endure it without permitting our minds to dwell on it compulsively. When I see the young parents of new-borns in the narthex or Stone Hall, I often ask, "Are you getting any sleep?" I get the reaction, "Ohhhh, I wish!" Or, I am given a beaming smile, and mother exclaims, "The baby slept six-and-a half hours last night!" Why do parents get up at 2:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m. and maybe more often for baby? Because the parents' suffering has meaning they love the baby! But, when suffering has not positive value, it wears us down and we are tempted to be resentful toward God, toward life, toward people. The Apostle saw no value in his thorn. It hurt and it got in the way of his evangelism.

He prayed three times for God to take it away. Have you any pains like that in your lives? They don't go away and don't help.

But, God used Paul's pain and frustration to teach Paul a spiritual lesson!

God had given Paul revelations about Jesus Christ, who as Savior loved us so much that he died for us, who was raised to reign in glory with God, and who promised us an eternal home in his glory. What a revelation! God had spoken to Paul! God had called him! Paul was special! It went to vanity. Have you had any experience with zealous religious people? God has given them the message. They are going to give it to us! Overbearing and obnoxious! I remember such an encounter about one-o'clock on a warm Sunday after worship. This was at Hamilton Presbyterian Church in a suburb of Pittsburgh. All but one family had gone home. I was in the parking lot with them. Up drives a van. Out comes a man of maybe thirty. I never had seen him. He asked to speak with the pastor, demanded really. Cautiously I identified myself. Just the tone of his voice made me wonder what was coming. He charged into his message. With aggressive tone he informed me that God had called him to save preachers! "You preachers are leading people to hell!" He had the message, and he was going to save me! And, he was going to rescue my congregation!

Apparently the Apostle was tempted toward that elitism. He admitted, "even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh... ." God had to remind Paul that the revelations were not about him. The revelations were not for him. The revelations were about Jesus Christ. The revelations were for Jesus Christ and for the people who did not know Christ. Paul's evangelistic mission was not for Paul. Paul's power as an evangelist was not his talent. His power was God working through him. All was for "the sake of Jesus Christ"!

Helpful question # 2: Given the thorn in my life, is God teaching me something?

Helpful question # 3: Given the thorn in my life, is God working through my weakness?

Have you discovered that God can use you even with your thorn, maybe because of the thorn?

Maybe you are a people-pleaser. You are motivated to help people because by helping you get attention and acceptance. Makes you feel important. Your motivation is selfish you know it secretly but God uses your helpfulness to bless you and those whom you help.

Maybe you have money. You give away money because it makes you feel important. You know in your heart that your motivation is not that noble, but God uses the gifts to educate children or to spread the Gospel.

Some of you are working so hard that you have no time or energy left for teaching Sunday School or going on a mission trip or serving as a deacon. Your mission has been to contribute money and prayer support for those with the time and energy to do it. That is serving Christ. Some of you have served the Lord for eighty years or more, and your bodies or minds just won't do much now. You still may offer a listening ear and flash a smile that encourages those who serve you. That is serving Christ. You teens may be thinking, "I'll serve Christ when I grow up." Last month when you were honest on tests but might have received a higher grade had you cheated, you served Christ. Whatever our situation, whatever our condition, we are called to serve Christ. Christ and his mission for us is to be our focus, and our thorn is just to be a thorn!

Our temptation is to focus upon ourselves, and we seek ways to feel better, or we drift into resentment. Research for improvement. Use your brain. That is appropriate. It is legitimate. Research. Try to remove the thorn. Along with your research, in times good and times painful, highlight your relationship with God and do God's will for your life, and God will give you power to handle the thorn and your mission. That was Paul's experience.

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Thorns insist upon our attention, and get it. However, never allow your life to be only about the thorn!

Life is about serving Christ! Never diminish your life to the level of it being about thorns or resentments. You are called to serve the Lord Jesus Christ, Our Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts, Sovereign of Sovereigns, The Timeless One who has gone to prepare a place for us. This is the Good News that transcends any thorn, the relationship that outlasts our time on earth, the eternal message for spiritual growth, the call to be useful in God's work. Ultimately when the thorn can no longer hurt you, when the thorn no longer provokes loss and resentment, your life is God. Your salvation is Jesus Christ. Never forget that Christ is the solid foundation upon which to build your life.