

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
February 16, 2025  
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church  
Blessings are Cursed; Curses are Blessed

2 Corinthians 12:7b-10 (EHV)

*I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, so that I would not become arrogant. <sup>8</sup>Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that he would take it away from me. <sup>9</sup>And he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me. <sup>10</sup>That is why I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For whenever I am weak, then am I strong.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Is cancer good or bad? Is it a blessing or a curse? This is not a trick question. Cancer is bad, evil, part of living in a world under the curse of sin. We can say the same about war, violence, heart disease, cataracts, aches and pains, and every kind of physical, emotional, or mental disability or disease. Bad, evil, and the result of living in a world under the curse of sin.

Now, consider another question, which is not a trick question either. Is the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, good or evil? The answer is that God is good.

As Christians, we know what is evil in this world and we know that God is good. The problem comes in reconciling these two truths of the Bible. Some in visible Christianity reconcile these by saying that a good God will not allow his children to suffer the many evils in the world. They will claim that if you believe in the Lord strongly enough, you will be healed and protected from everything bad in this world because God is good. On the opposite end of the spectrum are the atheists who see the evil in the world as evidence that a good and powerful God does not exist.

The apostle Paul gives us our epiphany moment today as he reveals the reason the good Lord did not take away the evil Paul was suffering. Our God can turn curses into blessings for his people.

*I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me, so that I would not become arrogant.*

Paul was defending himself against some who claimed to be apostles in Corinth. They were belittling Paul and claiming more authority than Paul to teach the people. Paul does and had every right to tell the people about his rightful claim to be an apostle. Jesus himself appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus. The risen Christ directly called Paul to go to the Gentiles with the gospel. Paul performed miracles in the name of Jesus, even raising a young man back to life. Paul is likely talking about himself in the first part of chapter 12 when he describes a man who was taken into the third heaven to see the glories of heaven that cannot be described by human language. Paul had much to boast about on his resume as a Christian and apostle.

But now he turns to his thorn in the flesh. Some speculate it was something to do with his eyesight or a speech impediment or a chronic disease. Whatever it was, it was something bad that continually affected Paul's life. It tormented him and like all evil, has its origin in Satan. After the sixth day of creation, the Lord God declared that everything was very good. But sometime soon after that day, Satan rebelled against God. And soon after that, Adam and Eve joined Satan's rebellion by eating from the tree which God had forbidden. Evil was in the world. The curse of sin fell upon the world. Death, disease, hatred, violence and every other evil began and will continue until the day Christ returns in glory.

The thorn in Paul's flesh that tormented him was bad and evil from Satan himself. But then we get the reason for which the good God would allow his apostle to the Gentiles to suffer this evil. "So that I would not become arrogant." The good God reveals to Paul the good reason why he

allowed Paul to have a thorn in his flesh and Paul believed his good God. I'm guessing that you, like me and every other believer in history, has some trouble with seeing how something evil in our lives can be used by the good God for our good. We get frustrated with God when he doesn't take away the physical or emotional pain in our lives. We wonder if God is truly good or if he really knows what is happening to us. We may even begin to blame God for making us suffer as if God wants to bring us harm. Instead of these sinful thoughts, let us apply Paul's answer from God to our own situations in which we suffer.

Our good God does not want us to become arrogant. It can happen when everything is going well. We are tempted to think that our abilities, efforts and goodness have achieved a good life. We can begin to think that we didn't really need God to get to the good place we are in life. And then Satan pushes further on this thought so that we even begin to think that our eternal future is secure because we've done so well with our finances and family and been so good on earth. The arrogance of thinking we don't need God for this life can lead to the eternally destructive arrogance of thinking we don't need God for eternal life either. Our good God will not allow his children to become so arrogant without a reminder that we need him in everything.

He uses our thorns in the flesh, our pain and suffering, to keep us dependent on him alone. Remember that this is God's big plan for sinners. He desires the salvation of sinners. He provided the payment of sins through the death of his Son, Jesus Christ. The punishment for sin has been completely paid. Our good God brought us to faith in Christ and desires to keep us in the one, true faith until he brings us to our heavenly home where there will be no evil, no curse of sin, only the blessings of our very good God. Allowing us to go arrogantly away from faith and trust in Christ alone is not part of God's big plan for our eternity. So, we can thank God for the thorns in our flesh that keep us humbly trusting in him.

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We often pray for people in our lives who are suffering the evils of this world. This is good and we are to keep doing this. Paul even prayed for his thorn in the flesh to be removed. But as we pray to our good Lord, we trust his will to be done. For Paul, the answer was not what Paul prayed. Instead, the thorn in the flesh would remain. The answer from God was "My grace is sufficient for you." So also for us. Whatever you are suffering, God's grace is sufficient. For you are saved by God's grace. He did not spare his own Son for us. He will provide all that we need to get us through this life into the eternal home he has prepared. Our gracious God will give us the patience to endure and, in his timing, will take us from this world of sorrow to himself in heaven.

His grace turns the curse of sin in this world into blessings for us as he keeps us close to him through faith in Christ. A thorn in the flesh can be used by our good God for our eternal good. But a thorn in our flesh may also be used by God for the good of others in our lives.

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The apostle Paul was a wonderful witness for Christ. He boldly preached the gospel in many places and to all kinds of people. Yet, he boasts in his weaknesses. For he is not strong. Christ is strong. Just as the children's song says: "They are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me..." (CW 584). Paul becomes a better witness for Christ when his weaknesses are known. Then people are directed to the Savior and not to the messenger. People are directed to the good God in whom someone trusts even when being tormented by a thorn in the flesh.

Last Sunday, a young lady joined our congregation with her parents. She is in a wheelchair and

will likely never walk. She doesn't talk and probably never will. She doesn't feed herself and will need people to help her every day of her life with basic things most of us do without thinking twice. This eleven-year-old and her parents are facing more of the results of this sinful world than many of us ever will. And Rosa is a baptized child of God. Therefore, we know God's good promises to her: that her sins are all washed away, that Christ has delivered her from death and from the devil, and that she is an heir of eternal salvation. She is a powerful witness for the Savior even when she can't say a word. Her parents are powerful witnesses for Christ as they display their Spirit-worked faith in Christ as their loved one is afflicted by a thorn in the flesh.

Dear Christian, you are a strong witness, a strong believer, when you are weak. We can fall into the idea that we always have to appear strong to be a good witness for Christ in the world. We always have to have all the answers. We always have to do the right thing. We can never have doubts or fears or show any weakness. Paul tells us the very opposite. It is only when you are weak that you can be strong. For the weak depend on Christ for everything. Instead of trying to appear so strong that nothing ever bothers you in life, be like Job. He suffered great evils in life and confessed, "I know that my Redeemer lives" (Job 19:25). Instead of trying hard to be seen as one who never doubts, be like the man who brought his son to Jesus to have him drive out an evil spirit. When Jesus told him that everything was possible for the one who believes, the father did not claim to believe with all his heart. He honestly said, "I do believe. Help me with my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). And Jesus clearly does not think highly of those who claim to be doing everything right in life like the Pharisee praying in the temple. Instead, Jesus holds up the humble tax collector as an example of the one who is justified by God. For the tax collector knew his weaknesses and pleaded, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13).

So, run to your Savior when afflicted by the evil of this world. Your good Lord can use what is evil to bless you with faith now and to keep you in the one faith until he blesses you forever in heaven. And as you run to your Savior every day because of your weaknesses, you are a strong witness for others who may also be led to trust the good Lord God to do what is eternally good for them too. Our good God turns curses into blessings.

Amen.