

Here's the back story on Paul. Paul is the guy who wrote most of the New Testament. Before he came to see who Jesus was, he was a very faithful Jew ... a remarkable follower of the Jewish law. He was brilliant, mentally and spiritually ... but he had issues. He thought nothing of it when it came to persecuting people who didn't think like him. There's a story in the book of Acts about Paul standing on the sidelines watching while some of the earliest followers of Jesus were stoned to death. Then ... in one amazing, miraculous moment, Paul got it. He saw how God was using Jesus to restore the world to himself. So in the same way he was a great Jew, Paul became a great follower of Jesus. And this is what he says to the Corinthians when he writes to them about that transformation. He says (2 Corinthians 11:21b-29) - *Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. 22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. 23 Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. 27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. 28 Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (That touches me so deeply ... that Paul's concern for the church is bigger than his own survival instinct. He aches to see people transformed) 29 Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?*

Do you know what he's saying here? He's saying that Jesus is not an app. He didn't come just to be one more button we can push in an already overloaded life. Jesus came to transform us ... to change not just our Sunday morning schedule but our character ... so that we begin to ache with love for God's people.

That's who Paul became. He was transformed from someone who was deeply threatened by anything that threatened his place as a leader ... into someone who bore the pain of *every* sin, *every* weakness. He was transformed from one who could watch a guy get stoned to death because they weren't on his team ... into someone who would go to prison for the sake of seeing an outsider feel the love of Jesus. That's the back story on Paul. **He was a good guy and a faithful follower of the Lord** ... who finally got it ... that God is interested in the total transformation of our hearts.

That's what we're after this week and next week. I want to look with you at the habits that stand between us and transformation. Because the point of this life is not just tolerable recovery, but transformation. That's what Jesus offers. I guess I've had that a lot on my mind lately as I've been thinking about how to pray into God's will. Can we pray just for one thing to get fixed without allowing God to touch three other things that are causing that thing? Can I pray for God to help me with finances without allowing him to deal with my electronic addiction? Can I pray for him to heal my back pain without allowing him to address my eating issues or my stress factor? You know what I mean?

If you're dealing with an issue like that, be encouraged. **Even the most faithful ones have thorns.** We've just heard Paul gush about how radically he has followed Jesus. And then Paul comes to this conclusion. He says that maybe ... just to keep him humble ... God has allowed

him to have a few issues. He says (2 Corinthians 12:7b-8) - ... *In order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.* Paul calls that thorn a messenger of Satan, so we know it isn't from God ... but we also know God is using it to change Paul. It sounds like God is using it to make Paul deal with some pride issues in his life. What we don't know is what that thorn is. Paul never gets specific. People have written whole books on what that thorn might be. Some people think maybe it was a problem with his eye sight or maybe it was epilepsy. I've heard people argue that he was short, bald and ugly (for a speaker in his culture, that would have been a real issue). Steve and I are thinking of writing a whole book on the idea that maybe it was actually ... a thorn ...

What if God left that question blank so that whatever Paul's thorn was, we could relate? Because as long as we don't have a name for it, it's possible that it's *our* thorn. It's *our* hurt or habit or hang-up ... and it means that just like Paul maybe we're good people, too, with a lot going for us. And that one issue isn't the last word over our lives.

I just love the Israelites in the Old Testament, because they remind me that you can have a lot of thorns and still be God's beloved. After the Israelites were delivered from slavery in Egypt, God sent them out into the desert in the direction of his promises. At some point after they left, the king of Egypt realized he'd just lost his whole work force ... so he went after them. And when the people ... who had just witnessed the very power of God releasing them from slavery in amazing, miraculous ways ... saw Pharaoh's army coming (Exodus 14:10-12 – NLT)- ... *(they) panicked ... (and) they cried out to the LORD, 11 and they said to Moses, "Why did you bring us out here to die in the wilderness? Weren't there enough graves for us in Egypt? What have you done to us? Why did you make us leave Egypt? 12 Didn't we tell you this would*

*happen while we were still in Egypt? We said, 'Leave us alone! Let us be slaves to the Egyptians. It's better to be a slave in Egypt than a corpse in the wilderness!'"*

And that wasn't the only time they exploded with that kind of frustration. They'd get out there in that desert place ... ***between tolerable and transformation*** ... and they'd panic. The fear of the unknown would overtake them and they'd get angry with Moses and God. "Did you bring us out into this desert so you could kill us?" And God's response was, "Yes! *Yes* ... I brought you out here into the desert so I could put to death *anything* in you that keeps you from my *best* for you. Absolutely, I brought you out here for that reason ... to kill the old man so the new man can live." We know that's God's heart because Jesus said so. Jesus told us that unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it's useless. It can not bear fruit.

Maybe you remember seeing this story in the news a few years ago ... about a lady who got pulled over by the cops for reckless driving. True story. As they were walking toward her car, she pulled off. Now, she was 66 years young at the time ... not the type you'd expect to be involved in a police chase. But that's what happened. They chased her through two counties, and it only ended after the State police put a spike strip in the road in front her and flattened three of her tires. The strangest part about the fifteen-mile chase was that this woman never exceeded the speed limit. Once, she even stopped for a traffic signal. It was bizarre. The whole time she was running from the law, she was determined not to break it.

Somehow that seems to fit. We're not breaking any laws, but in so many ways we run from God. We refuse let go of habits that stand between us and His best. It's like leaving Egypt physically, but ***not*** spiritually ... free, but dragging a shackle in the sand. And we wonder why

things feel worse when they should have gotten better. It is because our bodies are out of Egypt but our hearts and minds are still enslaved. Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies ...

Paul tells the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 5:16a and 17) - ... *we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view* ... (in other words, we're not looking for what can happen in the natural ... we're looking for the kind of transformation that can only happen in the supernatural)  
*17 This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!* God has called us to total transformation. That's the offer. So what habits are *you* hanging onto ... that are keeping you in that desert place ***between tolerable and transformation?***

I got an email last week from someone who noticed that we're offering a smoking cessation class, beginning today. She talked about a long-time struggle with her own habit and writes, "The problem is that when I smoke a little, I want to smoke a lot. So even when I would quit 'for good' I always wanted them. The thing is, I was a leader in the church and I should have been able to talk to someone about it but I felt like it was something I had to lay at the cross myself or He wouldn't be able to take it from me. I remember standing in church a couple of years ago and saying to God, 'Lord, this is my shackle. That I want this, even now after I've quit ... (it) is binding me. I know I've 'quit' on my own strength, but it keeps calling to me. So please, please God, can you take this shackle off my foot so I'll be really, truly free from it?'" And of course it doesn't always happen this way ... Paul said he pleaded with God three times over his thorn ... but that day, for that person, it *happened*. She writes, "... you know He really did it. I mean it's really, finally gone. I AM NOT a smoker. And I never will be again ... Maybe people need to know that no matter how much you pray about something or ask others to pray for you about it, there is a surrender that HAS to happen before he can take it away from us. We have to be willing to let Him HAVE it once and for all."

Until a seed falls to the ground and dies ...

Now, I need to say this ... and probably I need to say it more than once so you can hear it. If today is not your day to quit ... whatever it is you need to quit ... ***there is no condemnation.*** Most of these habits we cling to ... they are not salvation issues. But I have to tell you ... I've prayed with enough people and have dealt with enough of my own thorns to know that those thorns ... even the little ones ... can be the difference between tolerable and transformation. And maybe for you ... because of your health or your relationships or whatever ... smoking would be a good thing to lay down. And if so, I don't want to give you time to think about it. If you're ready, we can help you step out of that shackle today ... because you'll have a group to walk with. That group starts today at 12:15 in the room behind the coffee area.

Or maybe ... even if you smoke ... that's not your biggest issue. I have to tell you ... I am really excited ... Our Celebrate Recovery team is designing a whole new approach to recovery that begins September 10<sup>th</sup>. Mark your calendar. September 10<sup>th</sup>. Rather than having generic groups that cover the whole range of issues, this year we've asked people with a history and a passion for an area of need to facilitate need-specific groups. So this fall, Celebrate Recovery will meet on Fridays at 7:00 p.m. with eight new groups ... anger management, sexual abuse recovery, alcohol and drug recovery, porn recovery, depression management, healing from codependency, a group for teens, and also for parents of kids with addictions. Isn't that exciting? Maybe one of those things is your thorn. If so, I hope you're encouraged, because God is setting you up to heal. To move from tolerable recovery to transformation.

I know how hard it can be. I have been right there on the edge of an issue ... challenged by God to admit something about myself that I didn't want to admit. Maybe you've admitted it,

but you don't see how transformation will ever happen for you. But listen ... **when we leave room for the power of God, great things happen.** That's what Paul experienced. God told him (2 Corinthians 12:9-10 ... read this with me) – *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 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.*

There is no condemnation for anyone who is in Christ Jesus. Paul says it as clearly as it can be said. God does not condemn us for the thorns. We know what God does with thorns. He makes them into crowns. He uses them to prove his power ... to show that no matter how long you've been dealing with it, you can be delivered ... no matter how bad it is, how far gone you are, how ridiculous your habit ... God's grace is sufficient to cover it, to heal it and to make it into a display of His greatness. A crown!

The ushers are going to pass a basket of thorns and I'd like to ask you to take one and hold it while we talk about some steps that might help you begin the process of dealing with a habit you really need to leave behind. What thing have you dragged out into the desert, that's keeping you from going joyfully with God? What's your thorn? Can you name it? I want to give you three steps toward freedom from the thorns:

1. **Give your thorn to God.** I come back to that word we got from that email. She writes, “Maybe people need to know that no matter how much you pray about something or ask others to pray for you about it, there is a surrender that HAS to happen before he can take it away from

us. We have to be willing to let Him HAVE it once and for all.” This is what the cross is for. It’s where we nail those sins down, so they can’t keep following us. Give your thorns to God.

**2. Confess your thorn to someone, so that Christ’s power may rest on you.** This is what we learn from James. He teach us to (James 5:16) - *Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.* Confession helps us hear our own voices admitting our own weaknesses. And it means we don’t have to carry the load alone. I’m going to ask some of our Celebrate Recovery and prayer leaders to step to the cross now and also to the back of the room to be available for you if you are ready to confess your thorn. Be encouraged! Remember ... there is no condemnation! *The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.*

**3. Delight in your thorn! Allow God to turn your weakness into strength.** The best news of all is that in Christ, we become a whole new kind of person. The old is gone. So our thorns are no longer a shame, but a crown ... part of our story of God’s power to transform. So praise God that I used to drink like a fool ... so I can now tell you that God’s grace is greater than my sin! And greater than yours.