

Maturity comes at a price!

Tom Riley

When my friend John Mark was watching his 16-year-old son die a premature death, it was all he could handle. He had already lost his wife (early in their marriage) while they were working at Potter Orphans Home in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Now, as John Mark continued to teach his graduate level courses at Lipscomb University, he wrestled with God about the pain of loss.

He told me that people remind him of all the good that God can do with his pain:

- “You’ll be stronger in faith.”
- “You’ll be a better pastor.”
- “You’ll be able to minister to so many people in their pain.”
- “You’ll mature in Christ.”

And on and on the list went from well-intentioned friends. He said to me, “Here’s what I feel like telling them. Let’s stack all of these benefits up on one side of the scale, and my son on the other side. You can have all of that. YOU be stronger. YOU be better at ministering. YOU be a better teacher or pastor. YOU mature in Christ. I WANT MY SON!”

One day I asked John Mark what Scripture he went to for encouragement. His answer: Psalm 13.

“How long will you forget me, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you refuse to accept me? How long must I wonder if you have forgotten me? How long must I feel this sadness in my heart? How long will my enemy win against me? Lord, my God, look at me! Answer my question! Let me know the answer or I will die! If that happens, my enemy will say ‘I beat him!’ My enemy would be happy if he defeated me. Lord, I trusted in your love to help me. You saved me and made me happy! I sing a happy song to the Lord because he has done good things for me.” (English Version for the Deaf)

He pointed out to me that the Psalm starts out with agony and arguing with a God whose shoulders are big enough to bear the brunt. And it comes full circle back to praise. Finally.

As we continue our series on *Maturity in Christ* (with this lesson dealing with the fact that *Maturity Comes at a Price!*), I’m reminded of Job’s miserable comforters who came with all kinds of advice and rebukes. They would have done a better job of comforting if they had kept their mouths shut. So, in studying this, perhaps this is not what you’ll share with people when they are in distress.

Perhaps, just perhaps, it's more for each of us to internalize, to soak in, and to draw closer to our God who loves us more than we can imagine.

Seventeen years of my ministry with my wife, Anne, was spent in the Sonoran Desert of Arizona in the USA. A beautiful place! But thorns are everywhere! There are the huge Saguaro cacti. Majestic with arms lifted. There is the long-fingered Ocotillo—reaching up with orange blossoms on the tips like fingernail polish. And the Prickly Pear. But, then there's my favorite: the Cholla. It's also called the Teddy Bear Cholla, because it looks so cuddly. Or the Jumping Cholla, because it will snag you if you get too close.

At one point we started a group called the Canyon Hikers. We would take to the trails about once a month. How fun! It was on one such hike at Elephant Mountain near Cave Creek, that I was trekking with my friend Garth Nash. As we walked, Garth stopped ... right beside a Cholla. And said, "Watch this." He reached out and pinched a thorn and pulled. A sheath came off of the thorn. When I asked the purpose of the sheath on the thorns of the Cholla, he responded, "I have no idea. It's just one of those beautiful extras in God's creation."

The account of the creation of thorns is in Genesis 3—in the event that we call the Fall of Humanity. In disobedience Adam and Eve had eaten of the forbidden fruit. It's here that God cursed the serpent with what is the first Bible reference to the redemptive work of Jesus. It speaks of the enmity between the serpent and the seed of woman and that the serpent would bite the seed of woman on the heel while the seed of woman would crush the serpent's head. Read Gen. 3:14-15. The curse for Eve was that she would have the pain of childbirth. Then, there was the curse on Adam for not listening to God. The ground would produce thorns and mankind would work hard to produce anything from it. It would be by the sweat of his brow. Read Gen. 3:16-19.

Here was the beginning of sin and death, the beginning of pain and suffering, the first hint at the road to the cross where the "seed of woman" (Jesus) would crush the head of the serpent, and the beginning of thorns on the earth.

As the seed of woman dealt the serpent the crushing blow to the head, what did he wear on his head? Thorns—the emblem and mark of the Fall—shaped into a wreath (a crown), and in fact it was the Victor's crown.

There's another mention of thorns in the Bible. It is the thorn in the flesh that the Apostle Paul experienced. In defending his apostleship to the believers at Corinth, Paul reminded them of his elite credentials (Cf., 2 Cor. 11:21-22). Then, he relates some of his challenges as one who has served God more than others who might criticize him. He has worked harder, been in prison more often, been hurt more in beatings, been near death many times, beaten five times the 40 minus 1 of the Jewish punishment, beaten with rods three times, once almost stoned to death, three times shipwrecked, and the list goes on! (Cf., 2 Cor. 11:23-33).

But his primary boast was in his weakness. Because that is where God's strength could be seen most clearly. Here's 2 Cor. 12:1-10 in the *English Version for the Deaf*:

I must continue to boast. It won't help, but I will talk now about visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who was taken up to the third heaven. This happened 14 years ago. I don't know if the man was in his body or out of his body. But God knows. And I

know that this man was taken up to paradise. I don't know if he was in his body or away from his body. But he heard things which he is not able to explain. He heard things that no man is allowed to tell. I will boast about a man like that. But I will not boast about myself. I will boast only about my weaknesses. But if I wanted to boast about myself, I would not be a fool. I would not be a fool, because I would be telling the truth. But I won't boast about myself, Why? Because I don't want people to think more of me than what they see me do or hear me say.

But I must not become too proud of the wonderful things that were shown to me. So a painful problem [thorn] was given to me. That problem is an angel from Satan (the devil). It is sent to beat me and keep me from being too proud. I begged the Lord three times to take this problem away from me. But the Lord said to me, "My grace is enough for you. When you are weak, then my power is made perfect in you." So I am very happy to boast about my weaknesses. Then Christ's power can live in me. So I am happy when I have weaknesses. I am happy when people say bad things to me. I am happy when I have hard times. I am happy when people treat me badly. And I am happy when I have problems. All these things are for Christ. And I am happy with these things, because when I am weak, then I am truly strong.

It might be easy to be distracted by wondering what the "thorn" was. What was Paul dealing with? Was it his eyesight? Was it some injury that maimed him for life? We don't really know, but it was enough to humble him and cause him to beg God for relief. Interestingly, Paul had seen Paradise and wasn't allowed to talk about it, but with the thorn he was allowed to share. It was with the thorn that Paul was made most acutely aware that God's grace is sufficient. It is enough for whatever we are dealing with. While we might like to know more about the beauty and life in Paradise, it's more important to know that God's grace is sufficient for anything we must deal with in life.

Get this:

1. All of us have thorns. All struggle with something(s). If you're struggling with something that seems overwhelming, know that you aren't the first to deal with it, and you won't be the last. It is common to all.
2. It's okay to ask God to remove the thorns. He might. He might not. It's not a lack of faith to ask.
3. Know that his grace is sufficient for you. He will see you through whatever you are dealing with. (Cf., Rom. 8:28-39)
4. By sharing your thorns with others, you are giving them a gift.

Darrell was a big, robust, devout Christian man who led in the community, at home, and in church. He was our worship leader at a church of about 1,000 members. His daughter is adorable, and his wife (Debbie) is a pistol. Once Debbie's car stalled in traffic, and she couldn't get it going. The car behind her kept honking and honking. So, she got out of her car, went to the car behind her and told the driver, "If you'll start my car, I'll sit here and honk your horn for you." They were something special. And Darrell led our congregational worship with Spirit-filled power.

Then, cancer hit him. It was in the brain. He had brain surgery on a Monday, and by the next Sunday he was back in front of the congregation praising God. Then, the treatments started. The doctors at M.D. Anderson in Houston put him on a new bio-therapy. One Sunday he walked to the podium, bumped the lectern with the bio-therapy machine that was attached to him, placed it on the lectern with: "I'd like to introduce you to Fred. He's my new friend. I thought about naming my bio-therapy device Sally, but Debbie didn't approve; so meet Fred. He'll be hanging out with me for a while." He put the congregation at ease.

A couple of weeks later, he walked in with no hair. As he started to lead us in worship, He asked, "Have you ever had a bad hair day? (pause) I woke up this morning with a full head of hair, stepped into the shower, and as I showered I noticed all of my hair swirling around the drain. Yeah, a bad hair day." He put us at ease, and we worshipped.

Some time later, he stepped up to lead worship and had a heart to heart with his church family. This would be the last time he would lead us. He rambled somewhat, but one thing he said I'll never forget: "I used to ask God to take away my cancer. Now, I just thank him for it. It's my gift. It draws me closer to him." And ... we worshipped.

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