**THINGS THAT MATTER MOST - DEVOTIONAL PAPERS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**11. THE THORN REMAINS by JOHN H. JOWETT**

THE Apostle Paul was afflicted with some bodily infirmity, some extremely painful disease whose symptoms were marked by frequent recurrence. Many suggestions have been made as to the nature of the disease. Bishop Lightfoot inclines to the opinion that it was epilepsy. Others have fixed upon ophthalmia; Ramsay has recently advanced the theory of malarial fever. It does not very much matter for our immediate purpose what was the particular form of the infirmity. Whatever it was, it appeared to cripple the Apostle; his sacred purpose seemed to be hampered and partially defeated. Even the healthiest of bodies would have been all too slow and sluggish for his burningly passionate soul; but a damaged body was an obtrusive impediment to his great crusade. He prayed about it as only Paul could pray; he prayed that it might depart from him. He offered the prayer twice, thrice, and repeatedly. And then there was given to him that mystic revelation, that enlightenment of conscience, that dawning of interpretation, so often given to the soul that waits on God; he was given the wider vision, the larger understanding, in which similar problems find their solution. "My grace is sufficient for thee, for My power is made perfect in weakness." And this being interpreted seems to say, "Thy apparent weakness may be a channel of strength. The seemingly ungracious thing may be a means of grace. The very infirmity of the organ may confirm the authority of the message. God may become more visible through thy frailty. God may dawn upon the world through thy gloom. My grace is sufficient for thee; through thy seeming weakness My power shall be perfected." And so these were the results of the Apostle's prayers; first, the thorn remained, the bodily pain continued as his guest; second, the prayer was answered in an accession of grace which converted a crown of thorns into a crown of glory.

So this seems to be the principle of the interpretation given to the Apostle Paul. The apparent weakness may become the very occasion of power. The seeming handicap may redound to the glory of the Lord. The combatants seem to be one man with a thorn versus the tremendous resistance of Asia, and the supercilious cynicism and indifference of Athens, Corinth, and Rome. But the realities are these: one man with a thorn plus the grace of God, and the very thorn becomes a medium of power, and through the obtrusive weakness God's strength is more perfectly revealed. When Paul had fully grasped the significance of this enlightenment his impatience was changed into quietness, his irritableness into confidence, and his complaint into sacred jubilation. "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the strength of Christ may spread a tabernacle over me." "I take pleasure in weaknesses ... for when I am weak then am I strong."

So here is the vivid lesson shining across the Apostle's consecrated life; he prayed, and yet the thorn remained, but grace was given whereby the very infirmity became the servant of his strength and a minister to the glory of God.

Now let us bring that principle into our own life, and let us see its applications to our own conditions and needs. We too have our thorns in the flesh, things that seem to hinder our work, apparent obstructions to the progress of the Kingdom of God. If these could be taken away, with what blessed freedom we could run in the way of God's commandments! We pray that the hindrance might be taken away from us. And yet it remains, and the meaning of the apparently unanswered prayer is this, that God wishes to give grace in order that these seemingly adverse circumstances may be converted into our slaves, and made to minister to our own highest interests, to the welfare of others, and to the glory of God.

Take the matter of physical frailty. Perhaps that is our trouble. Just the lack of lusty robustness. Our reserves of strength are very scanty. We are hampered by the bodily clog, and the interests of the Kingdom suffer. We pray for the restoration of health, but the thorn remains. But the prayer is not unanswered. God comes to us in an accession of grace which converts the very sword into a ploughshare, into an implement of moral and spiritual culture. Frances Ridley Havergal was very frail, frail as the most delicate porcelain. She prayed for greater strength, but the thorn remained. But who will say that her prayer was unanswered? Think of the tender songs that were sung from her frail tent! Her very weaknesses endowed her with delicacies of intuition, discernments in sacred explorations, sympathies with the travail of her Lord, which have made her the precious guide and teacher of tens of thousands of the children of God. Her power was made perfect in weakness. Or take Mrs. Browning. Physically she was frail as an autumn leaf. "Once I wished not to live, but the faculty of life seems to have sprung up in me again from under the crushing feet of heavy grief." She prayed once, twice, thrice, and the thorn remained. But grace was given, and she gave us "Aurora Leigh" and "The Cry of the Children." "I cannot lament having learned in suffering what I taught in song." Her husband declared that she was "always smilingly happy with a face like a girl's." And when I take down Mrs. Browning's poems I think of her frail and wan face, and those large, serene eyes, and the calm and lofty brow, and I say "His power was made perfect in her weakness."

Or take another apparent infirmity, the affliction we call nervousness. Some people are like a bundle of exposed nerves. They are endowed with exquisiteness of feeling which makes every jar a discord, a catastrophe. They experience vividness and intensity of emotion. They are slim and sprightly, and the crack of the whip almost excites a mental and moral convulsion. They pray for its removal. They ask for a temperament a little more numb to all the pangs of outrageous fortune. But the thorn remains. The prayer is answered in a better way. By the grace of Christ their very sensitiveness is made the minister of strength and fruitful service. God's power is made perfect in weakness. Robertson of Brighton was extremely sensitive. He was easily jarred. His whole being was as full of feeling as the eye. An ugly colour "brought on nervous irritations." "A gloomy day afflicted him like a misfortune." He prayed for the removal of the infirmity, and the thorn remained. But his prayer was answered. His very weakness was made the vehicle of strength. His sensitiveness gave him his sense of awe and triumph in the presence of nature. It gave him his almost instinctive sense of the characters of men. It gave him his superlatively fine apprehension of the secrets of the Most High. His nervous temperament remained, but God gave him a sufficiency of grace, and through his apparent infirmity God's power was made perfect.

And so it is with many other infirmities that one might name. It is true of temptation. It is true of the disposition that is haunted by painful questionings. They may become to us the ministers of God's holy grace. If the thorn were removed one of the helpers of our health and progress would be gone. The thorn on the rose-bush is the purposed friend and not the enemy of the rose. The flower is all the more surely perfected because the thorn remains. And so it is with the thorns of the soul. By the very retention of the thorn faith is nourished, and ordered power, and the faculty to apprehend the glory of God when He is pleased to reveal it. And thus are we led to the all-sufficiency of the grace of the Father in the Heaven.