

A friend of mine once told me his philosophy. He said, “Life is difficult. But once you believe that and accept it, life gets a little easier.”

He wasn’t just babbling—he was trying to help me, because I was going through a very bad patch at the time.

I came to see that he was right, God bless him. I came to see that looking at things realistically was very helpful. I had been in the “moan and groan” viewpoint. And there is always the attitude of brushing things off and ignoring them. But being realistic was the most helpful.

I thought about what my friend had told me when I was reading what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, in the Scripture we read. We used The Message version of the Bible, to make it more understandable, and we can go a little further into it still.

The first part of the passage is Paul, referring to himself in the third person, and talking about an intense spiritual experience he had had.

Apparently, there was some kind of competition (I know that sounds silly!), in the earliest Christian churches, about whose spiritual experience was best. I guess Paul just wanted to get his out on the table and move on.

A competition about such things does sound silly and childish, doesn’t it? But it still happens, at least according to F. Belton Joyner, Jr. In his book, Being Methodist in the Bible Belt, he writes:

“There is a danger in an emphasis on experience. Some persons become so thrilled by what God has done in their lives that they expect others to have exactly the same experience of God (Old-time Bible Belt revivals often expected all persons to answer an altar call as the chief evidence that God was at work in their lives. Those faithful who could not name the hour and place of this experience would be considered second-rate Christians)”

Elsewhere in the book, he says something to the effect that you got extra points if you did remember the exact time and place.

Well, phooey! We need to get past that sort of thing! And yet, we’re human, we’re competitive. We all want to be the best.

So, once in a while, we need to get some correction on that. For Paul it came in the form of a “handicap.” In the older version of the Bible, the phrase “thorn in the flesh” is used, and it is understood that that is a figure of speech, not a literal thorn. Although a thorn inserted in the body *would* make a person sit up and take notice!

No one has been able to track down what this “thorn” or handicap was—a physical ailment, temptation, religious persecution? I heard some years back that someone came up with a far-fetched theory (and I apologize in advance!) that Paul’s thorn in the flesh was his mother-in-law! Humph! I happen to be a mother-in-law myself. But anyway, that won’t work, because Paul wasn’t married. You can’t have a mother-in-law if you are not married.

Paul calls this problem, whatever it was, a gift from God. He also calls it devilish. It was “unrelenting.”

But the main thing was its purpose—to keep him from being too proud. It was so he “wouldn’t get a big head” or be “walking around high and mighty.” (quoted from The Message.)

Now, I don’t think we could say that all suffering is good for us, or even given to us for our own good. Some is, some isn’t.

I do think that with God’s help, goodness can come out of suffering, and that suffering can benefit us. It’s just that we have to cooperate with it. We have to hope and believe and trust in God to get us through the difficulties.

It’s very admirable of Paul to have developed gratitude for his problem. Personally, I have a very hard time being grateful for problems. Still, later on, sometimes years later, I can recognize that in going through a bad time, I was made stronger, or better, or given a much better circumstance than the one I was holding onto so tightly. Anyone else with that experience?

These words from Paul are also inspiring because they teach us how to have a better outlook on life. Paul was the first, and probably the best missionary the Church ever had.

He was very successful. Thanks to his efforts, Christianity spread throughout the Mediterranean area wonderfully well. And after he was gone, it continued to spread through the whole world.

However, it wasn’t easy for him. He went through all sorts of hardships—including shipwreck, public disgrace, hunger, poverty, and imprisonment. Then add this “thorn in the flesh.”

But, he kept on going—faithful to God, determined to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Also, with this “thorn in the flesh,” which he experienced himself, Paul was able to relate the sufferings of Jesus Christ.

That is important for all Christians, whether missionaries or not. We need to remember about Jesus’ unjust condemnation to death, and about his crucifixion.

Our Christian salvation didn’t come cheap and easy for our Lord Jesus. He suffered agonies for our sakes. The miracle of Jesus’ Resurrection from the dead, what he’s smiling about in the picture I showed to the kids, means so much because of the agony he underwent beforehand.

We all need to keep that in mind, and be grateful, and never take it for granted. Maybe we should be like the children who cry when they first hear the Scriptures read about Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. It reminds me of an anthem we had in choir about the angels covering their eyes with their golden wings because they couldn’t bear to watch Jesus suffer.

We all need a nudge from God, from time to time. Paul wasn’t the only one. Sometimes it will be a thorn in the flesh, or a handicap, or a heart-breaking situation.

If we open ourselves to it the right way, God will use such things to get our attention, and help us remember how dearly our salvation and forgiveness and eternal were bought, and how blessed we are in so many ways.

With God in our lives and our hearts, every handicap, every limitation, every problem, can be transformed and mastered, or used in some good way.

We can't always see the big picture. We certainly can't see everything from God's point of view.

But we can rely on God's goodness and love. After all, God loved us so much that "he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Amen.

(By Reverend Sally J. DeMasters)