



SONGS IN THE NIGHT

HOW GOD
TRANSFORMS OUR
PAIN TO PRAISE

MICHAEL A. MILTON

Praise for *Songs in the Night*

Songs in the Night is a practical, pastoral, warm, and extremely readable book that can be of immense help to readers. Its brief fourteen chapters are challenging and God-exalting, with ample testimony to God's amazing saving, keeping, and restoring grace. This is a book you must buy and pray over as you read it.

—**D. Eryl Davies**, Head of Research, Wales Evangelical School of Theology

When you pick up a book and consider whether you want to read it, it helps to know whether the author knows what he or she is talking about, especially if the subject is suffering. Reading Mike's book won me immediately. You can tell that Mike has been a pastor and someone who has suffered personally. Pastors and sufferers can never be content with a theoretical answer to suffering. You must wisely develop a practical theology of suffering. *Songs in the Night* is just that. The main reason is because it is deeply rooted in Scripture and focused clearly on our suffering and triumphant Redeemer, Jesus.

—**Tim Lane**, President, The Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation

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MICHAEL A. MILTON



P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Milton, Michael A. (Michael Anthony), 1958-

Songs in the night : how God transforms our pain to praise / Michael A. Milton.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59638-221-3 (pbk.)

1. Suffering--Religious aspects--Christianity--Sermons. 2. Suffering--Biblical teaching. 3. Sermons, American. I. Title.

BT732.7.M545 2011

248.8'6--dc23

2011031840

In memory of my mentor and friend,
Dr. D. James Kennedy,

And always to my wife,
Mae,

And to the Savior
who ever lives to intercede for His own

*“Where is God my Maker,
who gives songs in the night?”
(Job 35:10)*

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PREFACE

What does a Roman Catholic priest, wrestling with alcoholism and his own depravity, have to do with an evangelical Anglican in an eighteenth-century English village, trying to work out the glory of God in the grit of daily parish life? Or with a Presbyterian minister as he wrestles with serving a seminary and making sense of God's grace in the midst of his own shortcomings and the challenges of seeking to preach the gospel faithfully in the presence of others in their own struggles? The answer: our humanity and God's redemptive work in the midst of it.

When I read Brennan Manning's line years ago, "to whisper a doxology in the darkness," I knew I would write a collection of messages on this—more on the theme of the phrase than on the phrase itself, though you can see that I have kept the phrase as one of my chapter titles. This theme, which I called "songs in the night,"¹ has often been my theme in preaching since I heard Dr. James M. Baird tell us seminary students, paraphrasing Joseph Parker, "Boys, always preach to broken hearts and you will never lack for a congregation." I took Jim Baird at his word, and he was right. I have always assumed that the flock before me was wrestling with the same demons that I have had to deal with: sickness in my life or in the lives of my loved

ones, spiritual depression, disabilities, painful memories, strained relationships (often in the body of Christ), and yet, in the midst of it all, a crying of the soul for eternity, for a new heavens and a new earth. Yet I have also assumed that a supernatural faith comes from Jesus Christ and works through the very things that seek to attack us, transforming our pain into praise. This is what Paul was writing about in “the great Eighth”:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35–39)

“In all these things,” Paul writes. And I have named those things, from our common experiences, and sought to minister the balm of the gospel I found here. “We are more than conquerors.” That is not a Stoic affirmation of our own strength, or a detached, holier-than-thou, super-spiritual statement of a faith that doesn’t match the reality of suffering. It is rather a song in the night. Those assumptions and that core faith in the truth of the gospel, the ruling motif of the cross and the empty tomb, form both the contents and the progression of chapters in this book. Each chapter concludes with

questions for reflection—each still dealing with this core theme, this “musical note” of calming redemption in the terrifying night.

I have often heard people sing songs in the night in the most unusual places: funeral homes, hospitals, prisons, and oncology wards. I have heard them sung by a young officer after receiving the news that he was passed over for promotion and would be ousted from the military. I have heard this song, familiar but strange, sung in all of its paradoxical power by families gathered around their sweet, elderly mother as she was dying before their very eyes. I have heard this song as Haitian refugees sang the doxology with almost ethereal joy, after having lost everything in the horrible earthquake including, for some of them, their own children. How do we sing songs in the night?

This is the power of the cross. And my prayer is that this book will help you learn how to sing the doxology in the darkness, the songs in the night. That is not an acquired skill; it is a supernatural act of faith that is a gift from God. It does not come naturally. But it can come to each of us. As we draw near to God, he will draw near to us (James 4:8). My prayer is that as you read each chapter, reflect on each question, and consider each Scripture, you will draw near to God. Look to the Lord Jesus Christ, his life lived for you and his death providing atonement for you, when by grace you trust in him alone for eternal life. In him you will find the one who cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” as he hung from the cross erected by the very people he created. You will see that the cross is the place where the fallen

world, personal crises, physical challenges, painful memories, and broken relationships are transformed into a future hope of redemption, healing, and reconciliation. In that place you will cry out with alcoholics, prostitutes, preachers and seminary presidents, cancer patients, caregivers, moms and dads, college students, and struggling teens, with me and millions of others who long for God in the midst of “all these things” and give voice to the gift of faith with you. That is a doxology in the darkness, which is simply, poignantly, and powerfully the gospel at work in the world today.

Let me leave with you these words from *Morning and Evening* on Deuteronomy 5:24 by Charles Haddon Spurgeon, a preacher who through his preaching and writing ministry helps us today with our doxology in the darkness:

He whose life is one even and smooth path, will see but little of the glory of the Lord, for he has few occasions of self-emptying, and hence, but little fitness for being filled with the revelation of God. They who navigate little streams and shallow creeks, know but little of the God of tempests; but they who do business in great waters, these see his wonders in the deep. Among the huge Atlantic-waves of bereavement, poverty, temptation, and reproach, we learn the power of Jehovah, because we feel the littleness of man.

Thank God, then, if you have been led along a rough road: it is this which has given you your experience of God’s greatness and loving-kindness. Your troubles have enriched you with a wealth of knowledge to

PREFACE

be gained by no other means. Your trials have been the cleft of the rock in which Jehovah has set you, as he did his servant Moses, that you might behold his glory as it passed by. Praise God that you have not been left to the darkness and ignorance that continued prosperity might have involved, but that, in the great fight of affliction, you have been shaped for the outshinings of his glory in his wonderful dealings with you.

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“I may be tempted often enough to dim down the light of faith and play for the safety of a dumb conventional religion. But, thank heaven, there is a Voice that won’t ever let me forget—You are Christ’s man, and that is the one great fact. Let the world deride or pity. I will glory in His Name!”¹

As this book was being put together, friends from all over would not let me forget that this was not just another conventional religious book. As the chapters came together, there was a voice, and I believe it was the voice of the Lord, speaking through many people and congregations who were saying, “These messages must be given to the Church, for there are so many hurting people!” They were also saying, “Help us to discover his glory in the midst of these trials!”

I listened to his voice through congregations where I have recently had the privilege of preaching: First Presbyterian Church of Chattanooga, Tennessee; First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi; Christ Covenant Church (PCA) in Matthews, North Carolina; First Presbyterian Church of Hattiesburg, Mississippi; New Presbyterian Church of Pompano Beach, Florida; Potomac Hills Presbyterian Church outside

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

of Washington, D.C.; Parish Presbyterian Church of Franklin, Tennessee; the Cedar Falls Bible Conference; and the students of Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte and Orlando, as I preached in the chapels there.

I preached these messages and then edited them before chaplains, mission conferences, and spiritual retreats. There were many who contributed to this book by their witness of faith in Christ Jesus. So many churches, so many pastors, so many saints. I have heard the voice of the Lord through you, encouraging me to go on.

I am thankful for the work of Miss Helen Holbrook, for her editing and work in “stitching” together the messages into chapters. She generally did this while preparing for the next preaching trip, or helping put together the next report, or handling my travel arrangements or expense account! Thank you, Helen. I am deeply grateful to Mrs. Teresa Gillis, who wrote all of the “Questions for Reflection” following the chapters. I found that her questions caused me to return to the chapters myself and to answer her questions in my own life. As I was elected to become chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary during the time of preparing this book, I was greatly aided by my assistant Wendy Simmons. In this, too, I heard the Lord’s voice in this book.

I want to thank Reverend Ken McMullen, my trusted colleague, brother in the ministry, and gifted librarian at RTS, as well as a number of our diligent RTS Charlotte students, who, with Wendy, put up a gallant, last-minute effort to search out and insert several missing citations in the manuscript. In an age

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

of “the digital revolution,” to know that my assistant, seminary students and faculty still take time to rummage through the “parchments” is to keep the ancient Celtic candles of fifth century Irish monastics burning brightly! You give us hope! Thank you all.

I am grateful to the great team at P&R Publishing. Marvin Padgett, Ian Thompson, and Aaron Gottier have helped me remember the vision of this book, the audience for this book, and the excellence that is our goal.

I am thankful to the countless people who responded to these messages at the Communion table, at the front door, through e-mail or Facebook, on the phone, or in my office. Each of you was used of the Lord to become his voice to me in the preparation of this book.

I would be negligent if I did not say how encouraged I have been by my predecessor at Reformed Theological Seminary, Dr. Ric Cannada, and by my chief of staff and the chief operating officer of RTS, the Rev. Steve Wallace, who always encouraged me to go forward to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ. Indeed, I am associated with an extraordinary team at Reformed Theological Seminary. The Executive Committee, the Board of Trustees, faculty, presidents, and staff of all of our campuses have helped me. Much of this was written while I was serving RTS Charlotte, where I was president. My colleagues there always supported and encouraged me in my work of writing and preaching. Thanks to the cabinet members: Rod Culbertson, Charlie Dunn, Steve Halvorson, Stephane Jeanrenaud, and Mike Kruger for running the shop while I preach the Word and write and carry on the work of the seminary presidency through communication. RTS

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Orlando, where I was interim president during most of the time, also helped me in many ways, particularly the Rev. Lyn Perez, who wears so many hats. Thanks also to Cristi Mansfield, Ceci Helm, Dawn Kilgore, Mark Futato, and so many others who provided administrative assistance as I wrote this work and also sought to serve the seminary in Orlando.

As I wind my way through the days of life and ministry, I want to thank all of our children and their children. To be your father and your “Poppy” is a great blessing and you will never know how your love encourages me to offer ministry to others. Thank you, children.

The Lord gave me a darkness to sing through as I was completing this work. I grew very ill with a mysterious malady having to do with neurological issues, heart rate, and what became a perfect storm of fatigue, virus and other things afflicting me. I learned again (for we all need to keep learning the lessons of faith, don't we?) that one can sing songs in the night in the midst of a frail body. God brought healing during this time and I am better now than I have been in over a year. There were no lasting consequences of the sickness. Yet it grew so severe that I was forced to take medical leave. I thank the Board for giving me that time and for my colleagues who all stepped up to encourage and pray for me. I learned that songs in the night are really sung best by a chorus of the church and not as a solo. I want to thank Dr. David Robertson of Vanderbilt Medical Center and Drs. David Framm, Chester Alexander, and Steven Putnum in Charlotte. Thanks also to the very kind and helpful nursing staff of the Vanderbilt Autonomic Dysfunction Center—

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

some of whose songs in the night I was able to learn as well as I was blessed by the care of Gina and the other wonderful professionals there.

I know afresh what “in sickness and in health” means because of my blessed Mae, who more than any single person nursed me to health. I did not deserve to be healed. I do not know why I was healed and others are not. I hope I would have praised the name of the Great Physician either way. I do give him my life again in this new season of thankfulness.

My wife and son listened to or read through every one of these messages before anyone else ever heard them or read them. Their presence is always a means of the Lord that will not allow my work to “be tempted to dim down the light of faith” in my life and ministry. I want to take this opportunity to say something special to both of them. Thank you, John Michael. You are growing to be a man now. Soon you will depart for college. Soon, very soon, you will begin to find God’s answers in reality to God’s impressions in your dreams. You will never know the joy you bring, which is always stoking the furnace of faith in my life. Thank you, Mae. My beloved bride, Mae, I honor you now as the best life-companion a man could ever desire. It is easy for me to say, “My wife is the heroine in the story of my life.” You are. You encourage me to preach and to write, and your own faith nudges me forward to take a stand to say with the Scottish preacher, James Stewart, “Let the world deride or pity. I will glory in His Name!”

PART 1

PAIN AND PRAISE IN A
FALLEN WORLD

A THEOLOGY OF THORNS

Psalm 90:1, 14–15; Matthew 6:13;
2 Corinthians 12:1, 7–10

If none of God's saints were poor and tried, we should not know half so well the consolations of divine grace. When we find the wanderer who has not where to lay his head, who yet can say, "Still will I trust in the Lord"; when we see the pauper starving on bread and water, who still glories in Jesus; when we see the bereaved widow overwhelmed in affliction, and yet having faith in Christ, oh! what honour it reflects on the gospel.

—Charles Haddon Spurgeon¹

When we read of God's grace, we learn that what God has required, he has provided. We derive from that definition of Augustine's, not only a theology of salvation, but also a theology of the person of God. God is sovereign and God is

good. But there are times in our life when the definition of God and our expectations of him clash with a life-shaking reality. I have witnessed that clash of faith and life in a young couple when they suffered the miscarriage of a child. I have held the hands of dying men in the prime of life, while their wives and children looked on, waiting for me, somehow, someway to make sense of God's grace in this. It can happen in a lab report, in a phone call at 2 a.m., or in the sound of a gunshot on a school campus. In a split second, the grace and goodness and even the sovereignty of God seem splintered into a million pieces. And sometimes we hear the catchall phrase, "Well, we live in a fallen world." Our heads believe it, but our hearts want more. Where is God's grace in such times? How do we make sense of God's grace in a fallen world?

Our Lord taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matt. 6:13; Luke 11:4). In this short verse, our prayer is for divine deliverance, recognizing that the entrapment of sin and Satan would lead us to a great fall. Our prayer is that God will do whatever it takes to deliver us. That is the force of this petition in the Lord's Prayer.

I want to focus on one common, but sometimes misunderstood way in which God delivers us from evil. It is the way that God delivered Paul. We learn from the oldest psalm in the Bible that it was this paradoxical power of God that Moses prayed for as well:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.

.....
Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
and for as many years as we have seen evil. (Ps.
90:1, 14–15)

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. . . . So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:1, 7–10)

I grew up in the tall, piney woods of Southeastern Louisiana. I was orphaned as a boy, and my Aunt Eva, who adopted me, was a loving woman of God, as well as a good blackberry pie maker. She knew how to get the blackberries she needed without getting all scarred up by the thorns that held those big, fat, tasty berries. How did she do it? She would just tell a bunch of us barefoot boys that whoever got the most blackberries would win the contest and get the biggest piece of pie. She would dispense those big plastic ice-cream buckets and Mark Harrell, Berlin and Ed Coxe, and I would go out to pick blackberries. I ran through the pasture to get to the back, where the blackberry bushes grew wild, wanting to be the first and thus assure my victory.

But, alas, I always lost because I ate most of the berries before I got back. But here is the thing: we had to wear long-sleeved shirts in the summer in order to protect our arms from the big thorns on the blackberry bushes. To get to the best berries, we sometimes had to endure the sharpest thorns.

Similarly, for some of us to be delivered from evil, to get the best berries of life, to grow as Christ wants us to grow in him, we may have to encounter the sharpest of thorns in life.

In fact, 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 is about a thorn. It is the most famous thorn in the history of the world. It afflicted one of the greatest men who ever lived, and it delivered him from evil. Paul had been given the privilege of seeing heaven and then coming back to earth. Paul admitted that what happened to him next was designed to deliver him from pride. Paul was given a thorn. It was an answer to the last petition of the Lord's Prayer.

The Bible here teaches us a theology of thorns. That is, in the Bible we see that we can find God in the thorns of life, in the trials, the afflictions, and yes, even in the unutterable, inconceivable tragedies and injustices of life.

This is taught by Paul as he makes a tremendous admonition out of his own thorny situation. Indeed, the writing of Paul moves to a veritable crescendo that climaxes with this confession: "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

That kind of talk is powerful. It is his life belief. It is something he will stake his life and ministry upon. It is the rock-solid, unmovable faith that transforms his pain to praise.

Eight Articles of Our Confession

As the believer looks into 2 Corinthians 12:7–10, he may be comforted. This confession of Paul’s can be our confession. There are *eight* confessions we can make about thorns from this text that will change the way we view suffering and affliction in this life. They may even bring us to the place of making sense of God’s grace in this fallen world.

Let’s look at the articles of this confession, as derived from this passage.

1. Thorns are common to God’s people.

We are not told what kind of thorn Paul has. Is it a physical ailment? The Greek doesn’t give us an answer. Paul could be using the term “thorn” to describe an issue within his very soul. Or it could be a troublemaker. There have been at least twelve different explanations for what the thorn could have been. Scholars have made good inquiries, but in the end we are left with the conclusion of Simon Kistemaker: “Whether Paul’s afflictions happened to be external or internal, the outcome remains the same: our theories are mere guesses, for we do not know what ailed the Apostle.”²

That the nature of the thorn is hidden makes it accessible to all of us. His thorn is your thorn, whatever it is. Paul had a thorn, and you have thorns. They are physical. They are mental. They are spiritual. So let us not believe the notion that Christians are people who have it all together and are immune from things like depression and grief. And let us call the idea that physical ailments are punishments from God what they are: lies from hell. Thorns are common to all of us.

Some of the greatest men and women of Christ have been afflicted. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, for most of his adult life, fought what Winston Churchill called “the black dog”—depression. Often it became so severe that his deacons would order him to the south of France, in Mentone, to seek recovery.³ And it was there that he left this world.

I will give you a more personal example. Years ago I was the pastoral intern to D. James Kennedy. And I will always remember that he lived with pain. His pain at times was so intense that it would keep him bedridden. An elder would be called to lift him out of his bed, so he could go to work in the morning. I am thankful that the thorns in my life are not absent from God, that God is involved with my life and even in my suffering and pain.

2. Thorns are a gift of God to you.

This is what we read: “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh.”

We don’t think of afflictions as gifts. If you are a Christian, God may give you an affliction to lead you out of temptation. The beauty of the gift of suffering and affliction is where it takes you. I once gave my wife the gift of a rose, thorns and all. It was only when it bloomed that the true beauty of the rose could be seen. So it is with the gift of the thorn. Mother Teresa was once asked about how God could allow suffering. This woman, who suffered from a “dark night of the soul” in much of her spiritual life, as we learn from the letters that came out posthumously in the book *Come Be My Light*, said this:

Today, the world is an “open-pit Calvary.” Mental and physical suffering is everywhere. Pain and suffering will come into your life, but remember: pain, distress and suffering are only the kiss of Jesus—signs that you have come so close to Him that He can kiss you. Accept them as gifts—all for Jesus. You are really reliving the Passion of Christ; from now on accept Jesus just as He enters into your life. Battered, divided, full of pains and wounds.⁴

We learn of God’s deep working in a little Albanian nun—even in his “abandonments,” as the Puritans called it—who gave her life away to suffering people.⁵ For the things that have come to you to hurt you, in the hands of a loving God, become the things that bring you nearer to Jesus. In this way the thorn saves you, leading you away from temptation and to Jesus.

3. Thorns may be a direct satanic attack against you.

Paul wrote that the gift of God was delivered through a messenger of Satan. The Greek word translated “messenger” here is the word for “angel.” This gift was meant for good by God, but meant for evil by Satan. This answers the question: can Satan hurt a believer? The answer is twofold. Yes, the thorn hurts. Otherwise, Paul would not have prayed three times for God to take it away. But the other answer is that the attack of Satan, just like at the cross, cannot finally hurt the believer. Jesus said that we should not fear the one who can destroy the body, but rather we should fear the one who can destroy the soul. Satan cannot touch the soul of a believer, and even his fiery darts, of which Paul speaks in Ephesians 6, if they are not deflected, are redirected to be a blessing. This is what

is meant when Paul writes, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Rom. 8:37). “All these things” to which he referred were hurtful things like persecution. Through those things, Paul is saying, we become conquerors, not through our accomplishments, but through Christ’s provisions in our sufferings.

One of the greatest hymns of the church of Jesus is Martin Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” This hymn, based on Psalm 46 and often called “The Battle Hymn of the Reformation,” was written at a time when Luther’s life was being threatened and he was forced to seek refuge from his enemies. One line powerfully illustrates this teaching that thorns are agents of Satan:

And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! his doom is sure;
One little word shall fell him.⁶

Satan’s attacks are really against Jesus. We are “in Christ” (a phrase used seventy-five times in the New Testament, almost always by Paul). And so the attacks cannot finally destroy us, no matter how diabolical their intent, sinister their plan, or powerful their blow. This world is not a world of equals. Satan is a defeated foe. His attacks are the last-ditch efforts of a fallen angel destined for eternal defeat and everlasting destruction. “Little children, you are from God and

have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). So fear not, child of God. The thorn of the devil has been crushed at Calvary by that one little word: Jesus.

4. Thorns can produce a sense of God's abandonment.

I will not dwell on this, but let us admit that the thorn caused Paul to enter into a time of intense prayer. And his prayer was not answered. We are told that he prayed three times for an answer.

I often talk with people who are living between the first and second prayers of life. These are the places where children are still in the struggles of adolescence. These are the places of mothers praying for wayward sons, but there is no response. These are the days when the young father's disease has not been healed.

John of the Cross wrote about this time in his classic book, *The Dark Night of the Soul*.⁷ There he admitted the darkness of the time when you cry out to God and you hear nothing. But he also said that in those darkest times he could see the light of Christ the best. The stars seem more brilliant to us when the night is the darkest.

If you are in this place, do not despair. Christ has not left you. His seeming absence is intended to lead you further to his wounded side. He knows the abandonment of God on Calvary, and he will not leave you there. In his light, we shall see light.

And in this place, you are not only being led to God, but, like Paul, led away from pride or from another temptation that could destroy you. Thank God even for the silence. It too has attracted you, if even in mystery and sadness, to seek him all the more.

5. Thorns produce prayer that leads to the voice of Jesus in your life.

At the end of the silence came the voice of Jesus. Jesus' third day in the tomb brought resurrection, and the third prayer for deliverance brought renewed life to Paul. Persistence in prayer brings his voice. And the thorn is the way to him.

I recently visited a dear woman of God, who was going through chemotherapy. Her doctor was my friend, and I was his pastor. He told me, as we strolled through this chemo treatment area, that he often heard stories of God's grace and power in his practice. As he said that, we paused for him to speak to one of his patients. This lady was in her fifties or maybe early sixties, and was receiving what the doctor told me was one of her last required treatments. He introduced us and bragged, with understandable joy and a Christian physician's pride, that she was a model of faith in the midst of her treatments. She looked up from her bed, smiled at me, and said, "Pastor, I tell you, I just bless God for this cancer." I was taken aback. She continued, "You see, preacher, if I had not gotten this cancer, then I would have never met this fine Christian doctor and all of these wonderful people here at his office. But more importantly, I would have missed the joy of Jesus in my life. I have known his love and presence more in this cancer than at any other time in my life. Yes sir, preacher, I bless God for this cancer." What could I say? I just stood and smiled and held the hand of a Christian heroine, as she had heard the voice of grace calling her near, as a result of her thorn.

And what did the voice of grace tell her? What does the voice tell us? That is our sixth confession in the theology of thorns.

6. Thorns lead to a new understanding of God's grace in your life.

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Cor. 12:9)

Paul then moves to praise God for this thorn, for it has caused him to be totally dependent on Christ. The weakness caused by his pain becomes the opening for the power of Jesus Christ.

Once I talked to a man named Willie about a thorn that he had. Willie had been in prison most of his adult life. But one day he heard that Jesus died for sinners, loved sinners, and welcomed them. The power of the gospel moved Willie to turn from his sin-filled life of drugs, alcohol, and stealing, that had put him in prison, and Willie was saved. But of course he was still in jail. And he was lonely for Christian fellowship. Well, one of the elders at our church, Colonel Roger Ingvalson, a man who had been held at the infamous “Hanoi Hilton” during the Vietnam War, who knew the loneliness of a prison like few other men I know,⁸ arranged to visit Willie. In 1980 Willie was released from prison and was blessed to get a job. Willie became involved with a local church. He loved his pastor. He loved the people. He loved giving his life to building up others in that church. His pastor was smart enough to see that power of love in Willie. He took a chance—kind of like Jesus took a chance, as it were, with his ragtag disciples. The pastor asked Willie to become a deacon. But, Willie thought, how could he, a former convict, do this? Then the pastor asked Willie to be the treasurer. Willie told me, “Can you imagine a thief being in control of the treasury?” But the power of Willie was

his background. The power of that deacon was that he was a former convict. The power of that treasurer was that he was once a thief. Jesus gets a lot of glory in Willie's life.

Someone said, "A Christian never falls asleep in the fire or in the water, but grows drowsy in the sunshine."⁹ The fire and the water become places where we come to know God's grace in ways that are impossible if we always live in the sunshine.

The thorns that deliver you also cause you to glory in the grace of God in Jesus Christ and bring Jesus much glory and your soul much good.

7. Thorns lead to a new contentment in your life over the other hardships you may face.

Paul moves from confession to contentment, for he says, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities."

Let's look back on the journey of Paul in this brief testimony. He has moved from visions of heaven to temptation, to pride, to the gift of a thorn albeit from a messenger of Satan that leads to a life of prayer to Christ in his pain to a fresh understanding of grace. And now we see contentment.

When Paul tells Pastor Timothy, "Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment" (1 Tim. 6:6), he is speaking from personal experience of God's grace working contentment out of a thorn.

One of the greatest books ever written on contentment is by the old Puritan master, Jeremiah Burroughs.

He was a member of the Westminster Assembly that produced the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. He defines contentment in his book *Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* like this: “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”¹⁰

And he also taught how it comes: “A Christian comes to contentment, not so much by way of addition, as by way of subtraction. . . . He can bring his desires down to his possessions, and so he attains his contentment.” He further says, “A gracious heart is contented by the melting of his will and desires into God’s will and desires . . . not by having his own desires satisfied.”¹¹ Oh, that God would work contentment in me! Then the thorn will have delivered me from pride and sin into peace with God.

Finally, let us see the end of this entire thorny journey.

8. Thorns can lead to victory.

Very powerfully and unforgettably, the apostle Paul declares: “For when I am weak, then I am strong.”¹² Weakness in the world leads to defeat. Paradoxically, weakness in Christ leads to victory. By weakness, Paul means that the thorn has worked in him dependence upon Christ alone. And in Christ there is always victory.

This is what Moses prayed before God in Psalm 90:14–15: that God would make his people glad for the sufferings they had endured. What a seemingly strange prayer! Yet Moses knew that victory for Israel would come when they embraced the thing that had afflicted them even their own sin and all that came to them from an evil Pharaoh and surrender to a loving Lord.

We need to lay our burdens down at that place called Calvary, where God was nailed to a tree outside of a city called holy, and there was sacrificed by the very people he had fashioned in the womb. There, where God's sovereignty and his goodness met, where affliction and passion mingled in the blood of the Savior of the world, is where you are invited to unburden your heart and mind of your troubles.

One of the scenes from my childhood that I could never understand until much later in my life was the scene of poor people singing, "O victory in Jesus, my Savior forever, He sought me and bought me with His redeeming love."¹³ I mean, these people seemed to me to be on the losing end! They had few possessions, no education, and little to no hope of ever escaping from the trap of poverty. But they had Jesus Christ. They had the wisdom of God. They had eternal life. And so they lived and died in that simple faith. I have never known stronger people. Though they were weak, yet they were strong.

He loved me 'ere I knew Him,
And all my life is due Him,
He plunged me to victory
Beneath the cleansing flood.

Conclusion

We must not leave it to a cute little theology of suffering to lead us out of temptation. No. This is hard. Pain is not good in itself. But in the providential hand of a good God, the pain and the thorns are our crosses leading us to new life in Jesus.

Each Palm Sunday we remember the happy crowd as they waved palms at Jesus' climatic entrance into Jerusalem. But within a matter of a few painful days, for Jesus, a crown of thorns replaced the waving palms. And nails. But palms and thorns alike led, not only to Calvary and to the grave, but also to the resurrection. And this, too, is the life of the believer: from thorns to grace.

This is now the ruling motif for the follower of Jesus. The things that seek to destroy us, because of the cross of Christ, have become the things that lead us to him. Whatever the affliction is, right now, that has splintered your understanding of God's sovereignty and his goodness, that thing, when surrendered to God at the foot of the cross, becomes the paradoxical power of Christ that turns your pain to praise.

I want to read the testimony of someone who was delivered by a thorn:

I was raised in a warm, Christian home by loving parents. My sister and I were encouraged to worship and grow at church, and excel in our schoolwork, music, and sports. We were both competitive gymnasts. My mother never fed us fried foods, and we rarely had desserts—and limited sweets. So, at the age of 29—you can imagine the shock we all had when I was diagnosed with diabetes. Even my doctor was surprised when he came back with the news after running the blood tests. After learning that I had the disease, and becoming insulin dependent, I began a two-year period of denial. I talked myself into thinking that the disease wasn't real, that it would go away soon, that there was no way I really had it that bad. My prayers were laced with denial, and I just knew that surely the physicians made an error in my diagnosis.

Finally, God, by his Spirit, opened my eyes through his Word in 2 Corinthians 12 to the reality that it was not going anywhere, the disease that God allowed to enter my body for a purpose that I was yet to grasp. I finally accepted the fact that I had diabetes, and that it was here to stay unless God chose to remove it. It was a part of me. Then, over time, God opened my eyes more through his Word and Spirit to begin to see the blessing through the struggle, and I learned total dependence on him for every need, depending on his strength not my own for the disciplines of this life he gave to me. And most amazingly, I learned to actually thank him for the privilege of sharing in the sufferings of Christ, my sympathetic High Priest. I finally grasped what it meant: that *all things* (good, bad, painful, joyful, struggle, trial, and joy) work together for the *good* for those that are called (I am called) according to his purpose.

I would not have grown in my relationship with him as I have if he had taken away my affliction like I wanted him to so many times. I can honestly look to my Abba, Father, in heaven and say, “Thank you for this thorn.” For without it, I wouldn’t depend on him for life, walk as closely with him through trial, or relate as well to the suffering of my Lord and Savior for my cleansing and salvation. Thank you for this thorn.¹⁴

This is the testimony of the director of music at the church where I was pastor before coming to Reformed Theological Seminary. I had always known there was something powerful in her music, but it was a while before I knew that the source of her strength was her weakness. I never knew it was a thorn.

In a similar way of thinking, there is a song that she sometimes sings by Twila Paris:

Thank You for this thorn embedded in my flesh,
I can feel the mystery, my spirit is made fresh.
You are sovereign still and forever wise.
I can see the miracle opening my eyes to a proud heart
so quick to judge, laying down crosses, and carrying grudges.
The veil has been torn, and I thank You for this thorn.
Thank You for this thorn, fellowship of pain; teaching
me to know You more, never to complain.
Thank You for this love planted in my side—faithful,
patient miracle, opening my eyes.
I never thought I'd say it without reservation, but I
am truly grateful for this piercing revelation
of a proud heart, so quick to judge, laying
down crosses and carrying grudges.
The veil has been torn, and I thank You for this thorn.
And if You choose to take it, I will praise You, and
thank You for the healing in Your name;
but if it must remain, I thank You for Your
rod, evidence of Father love for a child of
God.
I join You in the sorrow so much less than You have
borne, and I thank You, really I thank You,
Lord, I thank You, I thank you for this thorn.¹⁵

Can you say “Thank you for this thorn?” To offer God your weakness is to release the power of Jesus in your life. It is to rob the thorn of its power over you. That thorn may just be the answer to your prayer, “And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” Will you offer your thorn to God as a prayer, so that he returns it as a gift? Here is our assurance: the cross

of Jesus, the thorn of crucifixion in Christ, is the gift of eternal life for all who will believe.

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you experienced a season in your life where the grace, goodness, and sovereignty of God seemed to splinter into a million pieces? Have you supported and encouraged someone else who was walking through such a time? What were (or are) the circumstances?
2. None of us has seen heaven as Paul did and returned to tell about it, but what are some other things about which we can become proud today? Are you able to identify at all with his situation—having been given a “thorn” as a defense against pride? Ask God to illumine your thoughts.
3. Name some “thorns” that are common to God’s people today. Remember, they can be physical, mental, and/or spiritual. Which of the three categories do you think is the most difficult to endure and why?
4. Does the fact that God sees your situation make it easier or more difficult to endure pain and suffering? Explain your answer.
5. How can something that has come to hurt you be seen as a gift? For what good reason might such a gift be given?
6. Give an example from the Bible of a “fiery dart” from Satan, meant for evil, but redirected by God to be a blessing. Can you give another example—this time from your own life or that of someone you know? If so, stop and thank God.

7. Explain why attacks against believers are actually attacks against Jesus. If you are under attack right now, what is your honest reaction to that truth?
8. Have you experienced what John of the Cross called “the dark night of the soul,” where you cry out to God and hear nothing? If so, what effect did the silence have upon you? How might God use such an experience to good purpose in one’s life?
9. The lady undergoing chemotherapy said, “I bless God for this cancer.” Statements like this can reflect either a belief in the power of positive thinking or a deep, abiding faith in God. What would make the difference?
10. Willie’s background as a former convict imbued his service as a deacon and a treasurer with more power than it otherwise would have had. It also resulted in more glory for God. Can you identify a painful situation in your past that could be similarly used by God? If you haven’t done so already, would you consider praying about offering it to God for his glory and the good of others?
11. Jeremiah Burroughs said, “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.” Does the face of someone you know or have known come to mind as you read that? If you are able, consider telling that one and encouraging him or her in the faith. When you do, ask the secret of his or her contentment.
12. Can weakness be a source of strength? How? Explain the paradox of how weakness in this

world leads to defeat, while weakness in Christ leads to victory.

13. Is there something painful from your past that is still painfully present as you live life today? Are you closer to believing that surrendering the experience to God can turn your pain to praise? Ask God to help you identify what is standing in the way of that surrender.
14. Are you able to honestly thank God for your thorn? If you cannot—but you believe that “what God requires, God provides”—ask him now for the faith to thank him with integrity and assurance.