

Chapter 8:

The Deadly Competition of Thorns

Introduction

We now look at the effect of thorns in a heart that desires growth. Throughout the Bible, thorns have a negative connotation, yet it is thought-provoking to note how thorns played a significant and sequential role in the unfolding drama of redemption.

1. First, thorns and thistles were not part of God's original creation (Genesis 3: 18). They came about as a consequence of sin when God punished Adam for his disobedience. God cursed the ground with thorns. Thorns are intruders.
2. Then in Exodus 3: 2 God appears to Moses from the midst of a thorny bush. The thorny bush was burning, but the bush was not consumed. This incident is referred to by both Jesus and Stephen in Luke 20: 37 and Acts 7: 30, respectively. Thorns are the consequence of sin. God promised deliverance and redemption from the midst of a *burning thorn bush*. I find it thought-provoking that God, who cursed the ground with thorns, now reappears in the midst of thorns, promising deliverance!
3. Then God chose Acacia wood (Exodus 26: 26), from a small tree or bush whose branches are covered with long thorns, to build the tabernacle. The prepared thorn wood would be overlaid with gold (Exodus 26: 29). God took a cursed element of the fall and gave it beauty by His grace.
4. The place where Israel encamped last before entering the Promised Land was called Abel-Shittim, which means "Field of Thorns" (Numbers 25: 1; Joshua 2: 1). Isn't it fascinating that the children of Israel passed from the curse of thorns to the blessing of promise?
5. However, the role of thorns in the history of our redemption reaches its dramatic climax when Jesus is crucified wearing a crown of sharp and penetrating thorns. The "thorns and thistles" now become Jesus' crown as He conquers the curse of sin and death forever. Our sin that caused thorns to mar God's creation now pierced Christ's brow. He bore our thorns on the cross.

This sequence is worthy of a lengthy period of meditation. Thorns represent a grave problem from which we need redemption. They are aggressive and greedy competitors to the life of God in our hearts.

Let's Read:

"And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it and it yielded no crop" (Mark 4: 7, NKJV).

"Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desire for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful" (Mark 4: 18, NKJV).

We know from the text (Mark 4: 7, 18) that this heart was soft and had the right depth of soil to receive God's seed. It showed much promise as God's seed began to grow. However, it could not ripen because its life was choked by cohabiting and competitive thorns. We need to be aware that to leave thorns unchallenged in our hearts has devastating spiritual consequences. Jesus calls the deadly thorns: "The cares of this world, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things". All three vie with God's seed for first place in our hearts. If we value our relationship with Jesus above all other, we need to be astute and alert to what God says has the power and influence to ruin it. This third soil allows Satan to use thorns as a predator, and thorns win!

Thorns appear and grow as a result of spiritual laziness, foolishness and indifference. Natural thorns are known to insidiously feed their insatiable appetites. Spiritually, they aggressively and greedily compete with God's seed for the *same* light, air, space, water and nutrients. Over time, if thorns go unchecked and are not removed, they will grow extensively,

overshadowing and overwhelming everything God has attentively planted and nurtured in our hearts. They are life sappers! Proverbs 24: 30–34 tells us that it was thorns and weeds that caused poverty and ruin.

The Most Dangerous of All

This kind of soil is the most dangerous of all and the one that has blinded and trapped many Christians today. Satan is successfully duping us into believing thorns carry no real danger. Whereas the heart with the second kind of soil was captive to sin, this heart is not necessarily doing anything it would consider sinful or harmful. This heart lives what it considers to be a healthy and balanced lifestyle – not too spiritual and not too worldly. It is proud of its ability to identify with nonbelievers, even emulating their ways to achieve a relationship. These believers enjoy all life offers: a good social life, materialism, an expansive entertainment and hi-tech market, beautiful sights, wonderful places to visit, and a meaningful church experience to finish off the week. Life may feel complete, but they are not only foolish in constantly placing themselves in danger of the sinful contamination of the world, but they lack wise judgment as to the power of thorns.

We are a generation enticed and lured by money, entertainment, and pleasure, and it is exactly these activities that compete with the seed of the kingdom of God in our hearts. Acting like thorns, Jesus says the “cares of this world, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things” (Mark 4: 18, NKJV, emphasis added) will slowly choke the life and vitality of the Word from our lives, rendering us spiritually powerless. The presence of thorns increasingly blunts our spiritual cutting edge, surrendering and relinquishing a “reverential fear of the Lord”. This is what God says is the “fear of the Lord”:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments. His praise endures forever” (Psalm 111: 10 NKJV).

“In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence, and His children will have a place of refuge. The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death” (Proverbs 14: 26–27 NKJV).

“The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate” (Proverbs 8: 13–14 NKJV).

No doubt God gave us many things for our enjoyment, but when they occupy, control, and sap the major part of our attention, time, and resources, relegating our relationship with God and the commands of His Word to the dregs of our life, there is something critically wrong. We are in spiritual danger.

The Divided Heart

A heart that nurtures both thorns and God’s seed is a divided heart. This divided heart may happily attend church services, listen carefully to messages, have all the right spiritual terminology, raise its hands sincerely in worship, give an offering, pray, and exhibit all the outward signs of a vibrant Christian life. However, scratch the surface of priorities and you will find that it holds tight to “the best of both worlds”. Those with divided hearts may not have any easily identifiable or evident sinful patterns in their lives, but their spiritually dull and sleepy hearts have little desire for the deeper things of God that require sacrifice and whole-hearted consecration. Their hearts are divided between the kingdom of God and worldly pleasure. It is a sinful division. A Sunday-morning service suffices as their “God-time” and they feel little or no compulsion or need for personal Bible study, sharing spiritual time with other believers, or spending devoted time in prayer. They will often tell you they want to, but they are just too busy with their job, home, hobbies, travel, etc. Spiritual growth may flourish for a while, but soon it wanes into mediocrity. They grow, but their growth is stunted; they may produce fruit, but it is nothing edible – just small, sour, bitter, and underdeveloped fruit, the fruit of thorns. You see, it is the “what else” that occupies our hearts that is deadly, choking spiritual growth. What a warning this is to those who think they can happily and successfully oscillate between two

kingdoms: the kingdom of God and Satan's kingdom. Such thought completely underestimates the competitive superiority of thorns.

Let's be brutally honest. We are consumed with cares, riches, and the pleasures of life. We spend most of our money on ourselves, and we use our time in the pursuit of personal happiness. *We* are the selfish focus of our lives. We spend more time in front of the TV, or on getting fit, or going on holiday, or on the Internet, or watching movies, or reading magazines than we do in the presence of Jesus or in His Word. None of these activities may be regarded as "sinful", so we feel they are not harmful. But in reality, if you take what Jesus says seriously, these activities are already performing Satan's strategy of distraction, creating spiritual lethargy, insidiously choking our spiritual growth, and stunting possible development. The believer is being robbed of the kingdom of God.

Let Israel Be Our Object Lesson

The history of the children of Israel teaches us the same lesson. She (Israel) was constantly weakened and defeated in falling prey to the ways and pleasures of the surrounding and resident nations, compromising her relationship with God. Her heart was divided between what God had laid down as loving, protective, and godly boundaries and what she thought she could sneak in as innocuous extra thrills and entertainment. Israel was deceived and shipwrecked in her own thinking. Her disobedience and the resulting "thorns" choked out the life of God. She did not believe in the competitive superiority of thorns! Just as God warned Israel, we are warned in the parable of the sower:

"But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall be that those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell. Moreover it shall be that I will do to you as I thought to do to them" (Numbers 33: 55–56 NKJV).

Do you remember David's heart-wrenching cry after he played around with thorns? "Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth; give me *an undivided heart*, that I may fear your name" (Psalm 86: 11 NIV, emphasis added).

The thorny and divided heart will never know the beauty of union with Christ until it has completely dealt with the mixed and destructive forces that occupy it. Thorns overrun, take possession, choke the "opposition" and steal all the available resources. Spiritual growth may not be completely choked immediately—this is why we excuse thorns—but growth will be slowed down to the point that fruit never ripens. The spiritual parallel is evident. Thorns multiply profusely and we ignore that to our peril. Their seeds will also root and grow; therefore they must be uprooted entirely.

Killing a Thorn Tree

Wikipedia says, "Thorn trees can be killed using one of two approaches. *The first* and more historical approach is to use *slash and burn*. To start, the bark must be cut into around the bottom of the tree. The cut should go all the way around the tree and be at least two inches from bottom of cut to top. This is a slow process as you must ensure the bark is not able to heal and that the wound continues to stay open. After a year or two, the tree will begin to die and rot. It is better in most cases to burn the tree close to where it is felled so as not to scatter the thorns and promote growth elsewhere. Thorns can flatten tires even on the thickest tractor tires. *The second* approach is to *saw down the tree, leaving about a foot stump*. Douse the stump with a brush-killing spray. Crossbow [brand] spray works very well. Perhaps both approaches could be combined" (www.Wikipedia.com, emphasis added). Thorns are aggressive, not passive, making certain that a choice must be made for either thorns or the seed of God. The decision is ours!

Make up Your Mind

To be born-again is to change citizenship. Once we belonged to the kingdom of darkness, but now we belong to the kingdom of God. Once we walked in disobedience, but now we walk in obedience to God and His Word by the power of the Holy Spirit. Once we did what we liked

when we liked, but now we are led by the Holy Spirit. We may once have spent our money how we liked, but now it is God who governs our finances. Everything we have is His!

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon [money, riches, and worldly goods]” (Matthew 6: 24 NKJV).

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it – lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, “This man began to build and was not able to finish”. Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14: 26–33 NKJV).

God’s call to be His disciple is both individually radical and mutually submissive within the body of Christ. His terms and conditions of discipleship include all of our heart, mind, and soul. In welcoming God’s seed into our hearts, we haven’t entered into some kind of informal and all-inclusive club where we can negotiate our special terms within a chummy arrangement. God is not our “mate”. We have entered into a sober and committed bond, a new covenant with an Almighty and Sovereign God. It is God our Father who longs to deliver His people from the evil destruction of thorns, and He will faithfully do this by fire! It is the refiner’s fire that purifies our heart (Matthew 7: 15–20; Malachi 3: 2; 1 Corinthians 3: 11–15). Review Part II introduction, “Evolving in the Presence of Fire”.

The Cares of This World

Read Mark 4: 18

“... they are the ones who hear the word and the cares of this world choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful”.

The “cares of this world” are thorns and act like thorns. They overwhelm confidence and trust in God and will lead us into unbelief. Instead of meditating on God’s ability to provide what we need and protect us from evil, we spend hours worrying about providing for and protecting ourselves. “Cares and worries” can be divided into three categories: provision, protection, and purpose. Because God has covenanted to provide all three we can confidently look up to our covenant partner and quit worrying!

The part of you that worries is the same part that meditates on God’s ability and faithfulness, which is why you need to choose either one or the other. *Worry* chokes the life out of *faith*! As the days get darker and more difficult, so Satan will seek to overwhelm our hearts with the cares of this world.

“And which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? If you then are not able to do the least, why are you anxious for the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. If then God so clothes the grass, which today is in the field and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will He clothe you, O you of little faith? And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. *But seek the kingdom of God* and all these things shall be added to you. Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where neither thief approaches nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12: 25–34 NKJV, emphasis added).

The Consequences of Allowing the ‘Cares of This World’ to Rule Our Heart:

- Cares choke spiritual ambition and paralyse spiritual aspiration.
- Cares create fear, and fear creates worry; cares, fear, and worry choke faith. Truly knowing God frees us from the prison of worry. If we only realised *Who* now takes care of us, providing, protecting, comforting, and consoling us in all our ways, we would relax.
- Cares and worries tend to trap us in the present; they rob us of time and energy and potentially of our health.
- Cares and worries rob us of future hope. Their paralyzing effect imprisons us in the pressures that engulf us, and very soon, despair and depression set in.
- Cares and worries also cause us to become so preoccupied and obsessed with what is in our mind that we are blind to what really needs our attention.

What Are Cares?

Some say life is about worry. Consider the following examples:

- Household bills, debt, and unemployment
- Students worry about school
- Graduates worry about getting jobs and paying off their loan debt
- Parents worry about their children’s education and future
- Some people worry about their visa (immigration) status
- Others worry about buying cars and houses
- Older people worry about their health
- People worry about the effects of growing crime
- People worry about what someone else thinks or is saying
- Parents worry about their children’s marriages
- Children worry about their aging parents
- Spouses worry about what the other will do if the spouse dies

Worry or Faith?

- *Faith* is defined as trusting in God’s faithfulness. *Worry* comes from Satan, and simply put, it is not trusting in God’s faithfulness, and that is the sin of unbelief.
- *Faith* means to rest completely in God’s character, His ability and His faithfulness. *Worry* means to rely on self – we unsuccessfully try to carry the responsibility of solving life’s problems. *Worry* centres on “me”, having faith in “my” ability to provide.
- *Faith* combats *worry*! Knowing God, His character, nature, and ways is key to sustaining faith. Knowing God is becoming one with Him, like mixing two balls of clay until you cannot distinguish either; it’s not just rational knowledge.
- *Faith* is not galvanised by oft repeating, “I must have more faith”. We do not have the power to increase our faith. We need to understand that the focus should not be *our faith* but His faithfulness. To believe is to have faith in His faithfulness, His unchanging character. We do, however, have the responsibility towards God to:
 - Have a clean heart so the Word is free to root and grow.
 - Let the Word of God dwell in us richly and with all wisdom (Colossians 3: 16).
- *Faith* grows when the Word of God is active in our hearts (Romans 10: 17). *Worry* is magnified in the absence of the Word of God. For that very reason we need to have the Word of God profusely sown into our hearts. We can increase faith by reading the wonderful Bible stories that reveal God’s character.
- *Faith* is not static, it is engaging and active. *Faith* means we are more than an admiring spectator. *Faith* always moves toward its object. Peter would never have grown in faith by staying in the boat; he believed and stepped out onto the water, trusting Jesus. We must step out in faith, and Jesus’ faithfulness will step toward us!

- *Faith* is increased and multiplied as we specifically name and hand over each of our worries, choosing to trust God. It is faith-building to watch Him faithfully work out the answers to our needs.

Someone once said, “It is easy for fear or worry to replace faith because they have something in common: both challenge you to believe what you can’t see is about to happen”.

Remember what Jesus said: “Therefore I tell you, *do not worry about your life*, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6: 25, 33, NKJV, emphasis added).

“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. *Be anxious for nothing*, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4: 4–7, NKJV, emphasis added).

Jesus doesn’t ask us to pretend we have no worries; He knows life brings tremendous concerns. Jesus says active faith in God’s faithfulness, His righteousness, and His kingdom provides all the answers to our worries! Worry looks to self, faith looks to God.

A Selah Moment

Pause and think about that.

Prayer

“Lord, I do not want to be trapped in worry that chokes faith. I want to grow in faith and trust You to meet every need of my life. Help me. Lord, increase my faith as I let Your Word dwell in my heart richly and with all wisdom. Please lead me to passages of Scripture that reveal who You are; I want to know *You*. Please help me identify my preoccupations and help me take my eyes off myself and focus on You. Teach me more about Your covenant love. Amen”.

Questions to Consider and Answer

We are largely unaware of what causes us to worry. Only when we sit down and consider how we spent our week will light dawn. To come to terms with “the cares of this life” do this short exercise:

- Make a list of what you did during the last seven days, day by day. Use your diary to jog your memory!
 - Under each activity, list the sorts of things you had to think about. Use single words.
 - Then list any worries associated with each activity.

Identifying our worries does not help, until we go a step further and bring them to Jesus. To first seek His kingdom means seeking first His rule, His reign, and His sovereignty. In other words, rather than worrying, you intentionally place your faith in His faithfulness. The worry-thorns are killed by repenting of unbelief and nurturing active faith in God’s faithfulness.

- Using Matthew 6: 25, 33, fill in the blank spaces as prescribed and then read aloud the personalised version of the Scripture:

“Therefore I tell you, _____ [enter your name], do not worry about _____, _____, _____ [enter the worries from your list]. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”.
- Now turn every worry into a prayer: “Lord, I repent of unbelief that has trapped me in worry. Thank you, Lord, that Your faithfulness will meet _____ and _____ and _____” (enter each worry).

Life Group

Each of us has some of the thorns Jesus describes in the parable of the sower.

- Which “thorns” did you become aware of as you read Chapter 8?

- How are those thorns affecting you?
- Have you seen the “thorns” Jesus describes affect the life of someone you know? Please do not use names, just describe what you observed.
- Give feedback to the group about the exercise on worry.
 - Share what has been worrying you and how it has affected your faith. How have you been turning worry into faith in God’s faithfulness?
- Finish your time together in prayer. Be specific when presenting your needs to the Lord.
- Before you leave, discuss the idea of taking up a “thanksgiving offering” next time you meet. The study is about sowing and reaping, which can include financial sowing and reaping. If you choose to take up an offering, pray as a group about whom it should be given to as a blessing. Your offering may remove someone’s worry!

Scripture for Meditation

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7: 15–20 NKJV).