

Acceptance of Our Thorns

Passages taken from Pablo Martinez's book

"A Thorn in the Flesh"

*God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.¹*

"I feel like a millionaire who has lost ten pounds". These words, spoken by a Spanish journalist in an interview after becoming tetraplegic owing to a traffic accident, made a deep impact on me and raised questions in my mind.

How can a person going through such adverse circumstances react so courageously and have such a positive attitude? We all know people who struggle in the midst of life's storms, beaten by crashing waves, who yet remain capable of delighting in the smallest details and maintaining a tough spirit and positive attitude. Their example inspires us and their determination is contagious.

On the other hand, why do some people always look dissatisfied and seem to live 'drenched in a permanent complaint'? This was the case for the Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran, who even wrote a book with a very eloquent title: *Syllogisms of Bitterness*.² In one of his thoughts he says: "The secret of my adaptation to life? I have changed from one type of despair to another as often as I have changed my shirt."³

How does one explain the difference between these **two reactions**? What's the secret? Can we do something to achieve a minimum level of 'happiness' in the midst of the pain caused by chronic suffering? Can we avoid bitterness when touched by the thorns of life? The answer to these questions introduces us to the climax of our study.

As I did some research on the subject, mostly through direct contact with my patients, I realized that there are **two words** that hold the key to helping a person grieved by a thorn: **ACCEPTANCE** and **GRACE**. These words are in fact closely related, because, ultimately, acceptance can be achieved only by the grace of God. This is what we will call the supernatural ingredient of acceptance. It depends on faith and comes from God. However, there are also certain aspects that depend on us, the natural resources of acceptance, which are biological, psychological or environmental in nature. All of them help us decisively as we travel the long road that leads to overcoming the trauma of the thorn.

However, it must be said that even in the course of learning these human or natural aspects, we do not depend solely on ourselves; we are not alone. Nor is the outcome the exclusive result of our efforts. In fact, it is through these human resources that the grace of God starts to manifest itself in a concrete, practical way. We therefore cannot assume the arrogance of modern humanistic schools of psychology, which essentially say: "Everything is in your hands. Your happiness depends on you. If you put your mind to it, you can triumph over any circumstance. You choose your own destiny in life."

No, we are not little gods. We cannot, and nor do we want to, occupy the centre of our life because that place belongs to God alone. For us, as believers, the ability to overcome the thorn depends not only, nor even primarily, on the best use of our inner resources – "the force that is in me" - but rather on the supernatural strength that comes from God, a strength that is able to transform our weaknesses into strengths. Therefore the ultimate merit when we reach a reasonable level of acceptance lies not in our own effort but in the grace of Jesus Christ. Here we can apply the phrase of Jesus: "[render] to Caesar what is of Caesar and to God what is of God". Psychology teaches us to take advantage of these inner resources; we do our part as much as possible, but grace is the essential requisite for victory over our weaknesses.

1. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO ACCEPT?

Before we consider the ingredients of acceptance, we must clarify some concepts. There are many people who react negatively to the very mention of the word accept. Mostly the reason is that they have wrong ideas about its meaning and implications. Let's examine some of the most frequent misunderstandings.

1.1 To accept does not mean to resign oneself the stoic fatalist version

For many people, acceptance is the conclusion they reach when "you can't do anything else". You've tried everything and you've reached the end of the road. So, "there's no alternative other than to accept". This is an unconditional surrender following a hard-fought battle. This idea is much closer to stoicism than to biblical teaching. As we shall see, Paul is very distant from Seneca, the main Stoic philosopher, who extolled the self-sufficiency of the individual in a manner that approached fatalism. **Fatalism** is born of the conviction that we can do nothing to fight against our own destiny.

Obviously, a Christian cannot agree with this position. We are not responsible for *what we have received*, but we are **responsible for what we do with what we have received**. One of the worst attitudes in the fight against the thorn is a fatalistic resignation that generates as much passivity as it does bitterness. There is a close connection between the bitterness of the person distressed by the thorn and their willingness to fight and win through. The person who is passive and doesn't lift a finger to fight has a high probability of becoming bitter and making the lives of those around them equally bitter.

1.2 To accept does not mean to put up a shield: the Eastern or Buddhist version

There are others for whom accepting means something like 'disconnecting', achieving a mental state of relaxation that approaches impassiveness: "I don't let anything get the better of me, nor do I let anything affect me." This idea is quite popular today because people are overwhelmed by so many kinds of thorn that they need this shell or shield in order to live more 'happily'. They are obsessed by allowing 'things to affect me as little as possible'. It's curious to see the number of people, including top-level executives, who practise *Tai Chi* in the park early in the morning as if it were a secular 'devotional time'. Or maybe not so secular, because the common denominator of this 'shield philosophy' originates in Transcendental Meditation and other Eastern religions, particularly Buddhism. To accept does not mean to achieve a sort of *nirvana*, a supreme state that is above good and evil and in which pain disappears. In this sense acceptance becomes a kind of technique learned through systematic training. It is something like mental gymnastics.

What a contrast with the biblical idea of acceptance, a **process of inner transformation** born out of **personal communion with the God** of all grace! Far from being a cold, impersonal technique, it is an ongoing relationship with Christ for continual renewal of strength.

1.3 To accept does not imply agreement with the thorn: the masochistic version

No one asks us to be friends with the cause of our suffering. **The thorn must not be seen as an enemy, but neither should it be seen as a friend**. This would bring us close to a masochistic attitude, also far removed from the biblical perspective. The Lord does not ask us to 'be happy in all situations'. Paul was certainly very emphatic in saying: 'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!' (Philippians 4:4). But being joyful is not the same as being happy. The joy of the Lord is not so much a feeling as a profound attitude of serenity and peace born out of our communion with God. Hence the great paradox of the second beatitude: 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted' (Matthew 5:4). I can be mourning the death of a loved one and have – retain – the joy that is born from considering the blessings that are mine in the Lord and which nothing and no one can take away, as Paul himself exclaims triumphantly in Romans 8:35-39. To laugh during moments of sadness is therefore not an expression of joy. God wants his children to be realists, not masochists! **We are called to give thanks to God in all situations, but not for all situations.**

Neither friend nor foe: an ALLY. To accept means to stop seeing the thorn as an enemy, as a paralysing obstacle, and to discover an ally in it. An enemy inhibits, blocks, hinders. An ally, on the other hand, helps and aids the capacity to fight. Here we are at the heart of our topic. Once we are able to understand this point, we will have advanced a long way down the road toward acceptance. *To accept means coming to the serene conviction that God can use my life not only in spite of my thorn, but precisely through it.* When I see the thorn as an ally, defiance gives way to acceptance. In this manner, all the energy that I previously used in fighting against, I can now use in fighting for. Before, I was immersed in a wearying struggle, a battle that eroded all my defences; now I discover that my ally helps me to build a different life, a life that is equally full and has meaning.

2. THE INGREDIENTS OF GENUINE ACCEPTANCE

At the beginning of this chapter I pointed out that each of us faces adversity differently. Up to a certain point, these different ways of reacting form a reliable X-ray not only of our character, but also of our philosophy of life and even of our Christian maturity. In a sense, we could paraphrase the proverb ‘A man is known by the company he keeps’ and affirm: ‘A person is known by how they react to adversity.’ I am referring specifically to medium - and long -term reactions, not to the initial surprise and shock that form part of the natural response. Thus, the experience of the thorn provides us with an excellent opportunity for discovering new facets of our character and for delving into our lives in ways that we would never have done had it not been for the experience of the thorn. Chronic suffering can be enormously energizing, from both the emotional and the spiritual viewpoint, as we will see in the next chapters. For the time being, though, let's return to the key question.

Why do people react so differently and even so paradoxically when facing the thorn? The answer introduces us to a **cardinal principle**: *to be happy or unhappy depends not so much on our circumstances as on our attitude in the face of those circumstances.* The ancient Greek philosopher Epictetus is supposed to have said, ‘It is not the facts and events that upset man, but the view he takes of them.’ However, we need to be cautious here; there are situations of chronic suffering where thorns hammer the soul until it is pierced by them, thus making headway towards acceptance difficult, sometimes very difficult indeed. We must be careful not to fall into triumphalism or into stoicism because then we will be more irritating to others than consoling. But undoubtedly the key to any adverse event lies more in the heart than in the thorn, and in the long run our attitude can be more influential and decisive than the thorn's demoralizing and devastating force. No one is destined to succumb to adversity.

Acceptance is a process of **inner transformation** that develops on three levels of a person. In fact, they are interdependent facets constituting a cluster, each implying a certain apprenticeship that is taking place simultaneously on three levels:

- learning to see differently
- learning to think differently
- learning to live differently.

2.1 LEARNING TO SEE DIFFERENTLY: CONTENTMENT

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances (Philippians 4:11).

The first ingredient of acceptance has to do with my way of looking at the thorn, and then from the thorn, i.e. the perspective that opens up following the initial shock. The person afflicted by an adverse event undoubtedly no longer sees the landscape of their life as they did before: many things have changed; sometimes, ‘everything seems so different’. It is equally certain, however, that I need to discover rays of light in the darkness of this new landscape. These are unknown aspects that are opening up before my eyes and helping me to fight better or make my burden more bearable.

How can we gain a different view? The key step is to learn CONTENTMENT. In order to study this concept in depth, let's focus on Philippians 4:11-13, where the **apostle Paul** presents a brilliant exposition of contentment. I have chosen this text **for two reasons**: firstly, because the significance of the Pauline expression ‘I have learned to be content’ is quite close to the modern concept of acceptance,

and, secondly, because Paul is writing with a high degree of moral authority, the authority of someone himself overwhelmed with numerous burdens. In fact, he wrote this text in prison in Rome while facing the very real threat of death.

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:11-13).

2.1.1 The nature of contentment

What did Paul mean when he affirmed, 'I have learned to be content'? The Greek word he used - *autarkeia* - sheds much light on this: it implies not depending on, being above, the circumstances. Its emphasis lies in **autonomy**, in not being bound by events or problems. Or, to put it in negative terms, if a minimum level of contentment is not achieved, our spirit or mood is going to depend entirely on our circumstances, both good and bad, and life then becomes an emotional roller coaster with abrupt changes from euphoria to the deepest darkness. It is like a car with worn-out **shock absorbers**. The tiniest bump becomes a terrific jolt. Many people travel through life without any 'shock absorbers' because they have not learned what contentment means. The secret of contentment, therefore, lies in achieving a certain degree of 'independence' from significant events and not being trapped by them.

How do we achieve this? **What must we learn to see differently?** Our learning occurs on **two levels**: on the one hand, *horizontally*, where we must have a **correct understanding of the thorn**; and also *vertically*, where we need a **correct understanding of God** in the midst of the suffering. Let's examine these two levels in three specific proposals:

a) *Seeing the thorn from the proper perspective*

This involves finding the correct distance between what is happening to us and how it affects us. *The key word here is **distance***, because distance is what gives us a more **objective and global view**.

Two illustrations will help. **If I am lost in a forest**, the best way to find the way out is **to seek a higher spot** from which I will be able to view the situation from a different perspective. The deeper I go into the forest, the harder it will be to find the way out. What is the equivalent to going deeper into a forest and searching unsuccessfully for the exit? *Introspection*. Introspection is, in simple terms, like salt in cooking: a small amount is advisable because it helps us to listen to our inner voice and develop our ability to reflect. Ultimately this facilitates the assimilation of the thorn, something highly desirable. But to poke and dig around all the time inside ourselves leads us into a maze of sensations and distressing feelings. **From an excess of introspection usually come endless 'whys'.**

This ability **to 'climb up'** to the highest point is what is expressed by the word *surmount* (from Old French *surmonter*: to rise above, go beyond; *sur* 'beyond' + *monter* 'to go up'). When I leave the forest and look for a higher point, I am surmounting. To surmount a problem is not so much to solve it as to be able to look upon it 'from on high'. This new perspective is the first step in experiencing peace and calm in the middle of the storm.

The other illustration takes us to a museum. **If I want to see a painting correctly, I must find the right distance**: if I am too close I will be able to see small isolated fragments quite well, but unable to see the whole picture, and therefore unable to understand the content. Something similar can happen with the experience of the thorn: when the person is engulfed by the problem they are unable to understand anything because they are able to see only small fragments of the situation, thereby missing the whole.

b) *Seeing what is essential over what is circumstantial*

The second dimension is the result of the previous one. When I am able to climb up to a vantage point and view the thorn from a correct distance, my eyes open to a **panoramic view** of life in its entirety. The horizon is wider, and the past and the future take on a different meaning because I am no longer enclosed in a present that is oppressive to the point of crushing me. I discover that the landscape is much more varied and richer than it seemed. Above all, this helps me to rediscover true values and what is essential. I see that the thorn can take away major parts of my life, but the part that remains is

still greater. This gives the freedom to react like that tetraplegic journalist and say, ‘Yes, I have lost something, but I’m still a millionaire.’

c) Glimpsing God beyond the thorn

The third reality that I discover in contentment, as I acquire this new and broader vision, is the **presence of a God** who at first seemed distant, sometimes so distant that I could even mistake him for a ghost, as once happened to the disciples. When on that dark, stormy night on the Sea of Galilee Jesus came to them, walking on the water, they thought he was a phantom. Jesus was with them, and was on their side, but anxiety prevented them from perceiving reality. So great was their anguish, so prolonged their suffering, after rowing all night in adverse conditions, that their ability to perceive and interpret reality correctly was blunted. And this is often what happens in the early stages of suffering from a thorn. But little by little **I learn to see that God is not as far away** as I thought, **nor a mysterious ghost**. Rather, he is the suffering Jesus who comes walking towards me, speaking words of encouragement and taking me firmly by the hand so that I don’t sink.

Not mistaking God for a ghost and being able **to hear his voice in the midst of the thorn** is probably the most difficult aspect of acceptance. Being able to see God beyond the thorn produces a trust that is serene and deep. If God is not a distant ghost but the nearby Christ who has suffered much more than I have, then I can learn that nothing occurs in my life without his knowledge and control. If he sees and knows my situation, then I should look at it from the divine point of view as much as is possible. This will enable me to move from a narrow field of vision to a broader horizon, a new ‘landscape’, as seen from God’s perspective, gradually freeing me from bitterness, resentment and feelings of injustice and barrenness. It goes even further: acceptance implies believing that God can bring forth good from any situation, transforming it for his glory.

This ability to see God beyond the thorn is brilliantly summarized in the words of the **patriarch Joseph**, when he exclaimed before his brothers: *You intended to harm me, but God meant it for good* (Genesis 50:20). **Contentment is inseparable from confidence in a personal God** who directs each step of my life with meaning and purpose.

2.1.2 Contentment is a long course, not a quick lesson

If contentment means looking at life from a divine perspective, **it is going to take time**. As we live in an instant society, where you can get almost everything without having to wait, some people expect to learn contentment quickly. This is a mistake. **‘God’s University’ doesn’t hold accelerated courses**. Eventually God will give you **‘new glasses’** so that you may be able to see the thorn differently, but, as in all learning, the process will be extended, with ups and downs and failures on the part of the learner. There is no doubt **that it took a long time for Paul to learn** to live with contentment. He himself uses two different verbs in this passage that refer to the **learning process**: *I have learned* (v. 11) and *I am instructed* - or *initiated* - (v. 12). In both instances the idea is that his learning was not the result of a specific and unique experience, something fast and miraculous; rather, it was a long process **requiring many ‘classes’** in repeated personal encounters with the Lord.

But what is the key to being able to see differently and thus react like the apostle? This takes us to the second subject that we must pass in the difficult course of acceptance: learning to think differently.

2.2 LEARNING TO THINK DIFFERENTLY: AS YOU THINK, SO YOU FEEL

... *We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ* (2 Corinthians 10:5b).

“Little by little, I felt much better. I wondered why, since the circumstances were the same. Nothing had changed. Then, as if my eyes had been suddenly opened, I realized that it was me who had changed.” These words, from a young man who lost an arm in a road accident, remind us of a basic principle: we cannot always change the circumstances, but we can indeed always change *our attitude* towards these circumstances. But how?

In order to ‘see’ differently we need to learn to *think* differently. As we saw earlier, these two occur simultaneously, not consecutively. The vital principle here is: how we feel depends to a

great extent on how we think. The important thing is not what's happening to us but how we interpret what is happening to us. In other words, **you cannot control the events of your life, but you can decide how much they affect you.** Once we are able to understand and accept this, we can start to master our emotions much better than we had imagined. It is important that I explain in detail why this is vital for the process of accepting the thorn.

2.2.1 Planting the right seeds, watering the right plants

First, let's take a look at the psychological mechanism. **Thoughts come to us before emotions** and are basically what make us feel good or bad, fortunate or unfortunate. My feelings are greatly determined by how I think. **My personality is like a garden in which I am constantly planting seeds - my thoughts.** The seeds I sow will determine what plants will grow. If it's an encouraging thought, it will make me feel good. **If I sow discouraging or pessimistic ideas, I will reap anxiety or depressive feelings.** Even without realizing it, I am continually sending messages to my brain that will greatly influence my state of mind, my quality of life and even my health. You might object, 'But, what about the seeds that I did not plant, which just happened to grow in my garden?' Even in these likely cases, there is something you can do: you can water them or just let them go dry and wither. In other words, you cannot choose what plants (thoughts) grow in your garden, but you can certainly choose which ones you water. Martin Luther, leading light of the Reformation, used another illustration: 'You cannot stop birds flying over your head, but you can indeed prevent them from making their nests in your hair.'

Therefore, if our thoughts are largely responsible for our emotions, the consequence is obvious: **to be happy or miserable depends, to a great extent, on how we react to adversity.** So here we find the main reason why people react differently when facing the same incident: they interpret it differently. Consider this case: *'I can't take it any longer; it's making me bitter and, besides, it's going to last for ever.'* These words, spoken by a middle-aged man with diabetes, which affected his eyesight and prevented him from carrying out his regular activities, reflect his negative feelings towards the thorn. I remember another man in a very similar situation, who interpreted his significant limitations as a great opportunity to do certain things in life that he could never have done otherwise: enjoying his grandchildren, developing a helping or counselling ministry by phone, and enriching his relationship with God by praying. The former interpreted his situation as a source of frustration and felt irritated. The latter discovered in his thorn an open door to unexpected opportunities.

Notice that these two men counted on the same powerful tool, their brain, which could work in their favour as an ally, or against them as an enemy. Choosing one or the other will have a decisive influence on my acceptance (or otherwise) of the thorn. Therefore, **a key part of the acceptance process lies in a decision that I make**, not in the adverse event that is 'pummelling' me. In the same way that love implies feelings but ultimately is an act of the will, so it is with acceptance. Therefore, the more we **learn to control our thoughts**, the more we will control our emotions. As a contemporary psychologist says, 'Attitude is the paint-brush with which the mind colours our life.'⁴

2.2.2 'I am not supposed to feel like this': cognitive therapy in the Bible

This basic principle, i.e. what we feel depends to a great extent on what we think, has produced in psychology what is known as *cognitive therapy*. This consists of substituting negative or distorted thoughts, called false beliefs, with **positive thoughts**, which are adapted to reality and generate positive emotions. This process of '**relearning how to think**' is similar to the process of studying a foreign language: it must be practised, it requires will power, and it is not instantaneous. For us, as believers, it is very interesting to discover that cognitive therapy is not an invention of modern psychology but was already taught by the apostle Paul to his readers twenty centuries ago! Two passages stand out in this regard, in 2 Corinthians and in Philippians.

a) *Let's look, first of all, at the text in 2 Corinthians*

... *We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5b).*

Cognitive therapy, according to this text, has **two main features**:

- ***It requires effort.*** The idea of ‘taking captive’ implies a prior fight or battle. One must **fight negative thoughts**, disarm them and make them prisoners or captives. This excludes a passive attitude. We have to make the effort, and this is where the will plays a key role. One of the best allies of pessimism or negative thinking is laziness, the lack of effort that is a breeding ground for the self-pity and bitterness already described.
- ***Its goal is greater obedience to Christ.*** The step that comes after dominating and taking captive my negative thoughts is to take them to Christ. Here, the cognitive therapy practised by a Christian is radically different from the humanistic approach. The thought control does not seek only, or primarily, my personal benefit, but has a very specific goal: Christ and obedience to his will. To achieve mental peace is legitimate, as we will see in the next section, but this peace that ‘surpasses all understanding’ is not the goal, but rather one of the beneficial effects. There is an ethical dimension that implies change, growth into Christ-likeness, a hallmark of any Christian approach to therapy: **holiness comes before happiness**, the purpose of the disciple’s life being primarily to please and obey God, not to feel better with every passing day. For the Christian, the practice of cognitive therapy is ultimately focused on God and not on man. This emphasis delivers us from the contemporary hedonism that establishes that my happiness is the highest goal of all.

b) *The passage in Philippians*

The passage in Philippians, which is a summary of cognitive therapy, is a priceless pearl for bringing peace to a believer. It is nearly impossible to come to accept any thorn fully without learning and practising the message contained in this key passage.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things (Philippians 4:8).

Here also two main ideas related to cognitive learning spring from the text:

- ***The eight qualities in the above list have a clear moral connotation.*** They affect not only my frame of mind or my feelings, but also my behaviour, as we have also seen in the text of Corinthians. The benefit is not only psychological - mental relaxation, an antianxiety effect - but also ethical. In the measure that I cultivate, ‘think about’, this list of virtues, it will affect not only my mind but also **my behaviour and relationships**. Once more, we see how much the biblical cognitive therapy is removed from the self-centred and hedonistic approach of the popular self-help trend.
- ***The verb ‘to think’ - logizomai - does not so much mean ‘to have in mind’ or ‘to remember’ as it does, above all, to reflect, ponder or weigh the true value of something before applying it to life.*** Its positive effect is therefore not fleeting, a brief period of ‘transcendental meditation’ that helps me to relax; rather, it affects my life in a deep and lasting way; it’s **a habit that shapes my conduct**.

2.2.3 Disarming the negative thoughts: cognitive therapy applied to the thorn

We have already seen the vital necessity of changing paralysing negative attitudes and substituting them for others that will be a source of strength and hope. Let’s identify, first of all, the most **frequent negative thought patterns**. A person afflicted by a thorn tends to believe the following wrong ideas:

- ***‘It’s my fault.’*** A personal cause is sought for the adversity. To blame oneself is a natural reaction in bereavement, which eventually disappears. If the guilt becomes persistent, it means **stagnation** in the process of acceptance.
- ***‘It’s never going to change.’*** The thorn is going to be permanent. There is no light in the future; everything seems dark. The world has come to **an end**.
- ***‘It’s going to ruin my whole life.’*** The effects are global, permeating every area. I’m unable to do anything. Life is over for me. There is **no hope** for the future.

This classical triad of negative thoughts - a **personal, global and permanent** interpretation - is the best way to destroy our self-esteem and bring about feelings of defeat and powerlessness. They generate reactions like *'What am I going to do now? How am I going to manage to pull myself through this?'*, which are equally negative and debilitating. A **vicious circle** is established, ending up in a crippling situation which needs to be changed into a more positive interpretation of reality.

2.2.4 Positive thought patterns and habits

What should we do then? How can we fight against these wrong attitudes? Let's remember the golden rule of cognitive therapy: **as we think, so we are**; it is not our circumstances but rather our attitudes that make us happy or miserable. This is why **we need to learn how to ask reinforcing questions** that produce positive answers and ultimately feelings of hope. In my experience of counselling I have found **four questions very helpful**. I am thinking not only about people suffering with a thorn but also about those wanting to help them.

- ***Can I do something to change or improve my situation?*** Is there some remedy that will help alleviate it? If so, however small the first step may be, let me take it now. Tiny changes can produce major effects. **We must not be too ambitious** – 'everything or nothing' - in order to begin to take action.
- ***What is, or could be, good about this situation?*** We can discover surprisingly positive aspects in a number of difficult situations. But we must bear in mind that these aspects must be sought out actively; rarely are they to be found by chance. Personally it greatly helps me to remember the situation of gold miners: gold nuggets are always found in mud; there's no gold without sludge. **One has to dig through the sludge and grime of the mud in order to find the gold.**
- ***What can I learn - about myself and about others?*** What does God want to teach me regarding his will for my life? The **instructive value of suffering** is something accepted not only by believers but also by those who understand the secrets of the human soul: teachers, psychoanalysts and authors, among others.
- ***Is there something for which, or someone for whom, you can be thankful?*** Look for reasons to be thankful to God or to others. Normally, circumstances in which we are suffering are an **excellent opportunity for expressing love and solidarity**. One of humanity's worst natural catastrophes in the past centuries, the 2004 tsunami which claimed 250,000 lives, produced one of the greatest manifestations of solidarity ever known in history.

The answer of these questions often does not appear immediately. **Time is needed to discover rays of light in the darkness around us**, as Albert Schweitzer pointed out in the quotation at the beginning of this book: *'...You get to discover, one by one, thousands of stars where hitherto only darkness could be seen.'*

In order to complete the process of looking at these positive habits, we need to mention two **unhealthy attitudes** that should be avoided:

- ***Avoid 'terriblizing'.*** This word, which doesn't appear in the dictionary, refers to always **imagining the very worst scenario**, that which is most terrible. I interpret my thorn as an earthquake that has left no stone unturned in my life. As we saw earlier, one of the most helpful exercises in cognitive therapy consists of correctly evaluating the 'damage' inflicted by the traumatic experience, its consequences, and also my resources. It's a matter of properly establishing the dimensions of the problem.

Two very favourable consequences result from seeing the problem in its true proportions. On the one hand, the **reduction of the negative emotional reaction** (anxiety, bereavement, etc.), which always arises from the traumatic shock, and, on the other, being enabled to **develop possible exits and battle strategies** much more objectively and wisely. Therefore, the correct interpretation of the nature and consequences of the thorn is essential to fight and not be paralysed by self-pity. It's possible that the shock of the thorn may have affected noble parts of the structure of your life or of your family, but it has not caved in completely. What you have before you are not ruins, but a life filled with immense possibilities.

- **Avoid chronic moaning and wailing.** A frequent pattern seen in distorted thoughts involves focusing the attention on *what I do not have, what I cannot do, what I am lacking*, instead of **focusing on all that I still have**. To bemoan what I no longer have prevents me from enjoying what is still within my reach, which, in the case of most thorns, remains greater than that which has been lost.

When a patient has lost the mobility of an arm or a leg, owing to a stroke or an accident, one of the first lessons in rehabilitation is to get them **to see how much they can still do** with the other arm or leg, and how other functions, such as the sense organs or the brain, are still working perfectly. When patients come to see me because they are suffering from a thorn, I always recommend a simple practical exercise: make a list with two columns: on the right, the things that they still have and can still do; on the left, the things they have lost, their limitations. The result of this exercise is as surprising as it is illuminating.

So far we have considered the healthy results of practising cognitive therapy from a true biblical perspective. One word of caution, however, is needed. Sometimes this kind of self-help is not enough and some form of **professional counselling** will be necessary. This is true when there is no progress whatsoever and the process becomes chronic, with some complications. Therefore, seeking appropriate professional help will be the best solution in certain situations.

2.2.5 The basement and the attic of life: David, an example to be copied

We all have in our minds something like two ‘rooms’: a cellar and an attic. In the cellar, the lowest floor, there is only darkness, dampness and the odd mouse or two. It’s not pleasant to remain there. The attic, on the other hand, is the place that receives the most sunlight in the entire house; it is well ventilated and we enjoy being there. It is in the cellar of our mind that we find all the problems, sadness and worry. It is real; it exists - we all have a cellar. But, thank God, we also have an attic, where we find the reasons for our happiness, for gratitude, for the good things of life, for the big and small things that excite us. Why is it that so many people insist on going down to the cellar so often and staying there for such a long time? Is it so difficult to go up to the attic and fill our mind with light, fresh air and gratitude?

In Psalm 103 we have an extraordinary example of **how to go up to the attic of life** and review, one by one, the blessings of God. We must remember that David suffered the oppressive experience of a thorn in the form of another person, Saul, who haunted him for years, trying to kill him. David had many reasons to complain to the Lord and bemoan his situation, as in fact he does in some of his psalms. Nevertheless, how illuminating and stimulating are his words here:

*Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits -
who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion,
who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.
(Psalm 103:1-5)*

Observe how the Psalmist, in a spontaneous exercise of cognitive therapy, has a dialogue with himself and **sends his mind stimulating and strengthening messages**: ‘Praise the LORD, O my soul’ and ‘forget not all his benefits’. In fact, if we take our illustration further, it always requires much less effort to go down than to go up. That’s why David begins this prayer of Psalm 103 by making an effort to go up to the attic of his life and discover the innumerable reasons for praise and gratitude to God.

How we all need **to learn from David**, both those who live in anguish from a thorn and also those who do not. To go up to the attic of our mind, and avoid settling down in the cellar as much as possible, is the best way to be able to exclaim, ‘Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits’. This is an essential step on the road to acceptance.

2.3 LEARNING TO LIVE DIFFERENTLY: ADAPTATION

I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed (Philippians 4:12).

This **third stage** is the consequence of the first two ‘lessons’ in the course of acceptance. There is a logical order in the process: once you have learned to see and think differently about the thorn, you are naturally **prepared to live in a different way**, to make all the changes necessary to allow you to adapt to the new situation. For this reason, the degree of adaptation will be a good test to measure your progress in the process of acceptance.

Let’s return now to **Paul’s experience** to understand how adaptation works in practice. In the passage in Philippians 4, which is our text for the entire topic of acceptance, the apostle, after his solemn declaration in verse 11, ‘I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances’, mentions specific situations in which he has had to learn (v. 12). Although Paul is alluding here, above all, to his material situation, we know that his life was **an excellent example of adaptation** to one or several thorns.

Let’s look in greater detail at **three of the ‘lessons’** that Paul had to learn, each containing a key prerequisite for the process of adaptation:

- Willingness to change: flexibility and resilience
- Willingness to learn new ‘languages’ (skills): perseverance and humility
- Willingness to adapt to the loss of autonomy: trust

2.3.1 Willingness to change: FLEXIBILITY and RESILIENCE

Walking along a beach in a nature reserve on the Balearic island of Menorca, I noticed how the bushes and trees were heavily bent in one direction. The strong north wind buffeting that part of the island had shaped a landscape in a curious and highly symbolic way. It was spectacular to see the thick trunks of pines bent as if they were rubber toys. Why is it that some trees break when struck by a hurricane, while others adapt to the aggressive force of the wind and bend? The key word is **flexibility**. The more inflexible a tree, or indeed any other object, the greater the danger of it’s breaking under pressure or strong impacts. On the other hand, the more flexible a tree is, the better it will adapt to severe pressure without breaking.

When facing a thorn, people are just like trees: we have the ability to adapt, enabling us to **resist and reorganize** our lives. This ‘elastic’ ability is known today as **resilience**: the ability to recover following a trauma experience. An understanding of the original usage of the word shows us the richness of its meaning. The term is applied in two main areas: in *metallurgy*, it refers to a material’s ability to return to its initial condition after suffering a sharp blow. In *physics*, the word alludes to the resistance of materials to pressure and to regaining their original structure. The French psychiatrist and ethologist Boris Cyrulnik was a pioneer in the introduction of this idea in the field of *psychology*. He applied it to children who have been victims of major childhood traumas (for example, survivors of Nazi concentration camps). In his thought-provoking works,⁶ Cyrulnik shows how an unhappy childhood does not necessarily determine the outcome of a person’s life. His concepts are also valid for adults, particularly his emphasis on love as the supreme therapeutic force.

A resilient person is like the trees on the island of Menorca: when buffeted by strong winds, they adapt. There are certainly some personal factors, especially relating to our temperament and our genetic makeup, which will make this process easier for some than for others. But, even allowing for the fact that we are all very different from one another, the **basic potential for resilience and adaptation** is within every human being.

Inseparable from the idea of flexibility is the **willingness to change**. Change is an inescapable part of life. In fact, our survival as a race depends to a great extent on our ability to change and **adapt to new circumstances**. Nevertheless, in most people change produces anxiety, because it sends us into unknown situations. In psychology this is called ‘boarding’ or ‘start-up anxiety’, a phenomenon that, to a greater or lesser degree, affects everyone and is therefore quite normal. Flexibility is the tool that helps us to assimilate the changes entailed by every thorn. Inasmuch as it diminishes the stress of change, it becomes an essential instrument in living with the new situation, and thus enables us to fight better.

Lack of flexibility, on the other hand, causes us to remain anchored in the past, yearning for what we once were or had and lamenting, like the Spanish poet J. Manrique, ‘that any time past was better’. A rigid or inflexible person does not know how to adapt to the present, fears for the future and takes refuge in the past. Such an attitude is a great hindrance to adaptation.

The apostle **Paul was a true master of this willingness to adapt**. His dramatic conversion was such a radical change that it affected even the deepest part of his identity, symbolized by a new name. Saul, the persecutor, came to be Paul, the persecuted. From a respectable social position, he came to be a pariah to his former Pharisee colleagues; from enjoying authority, he came to suffer beating and imprisonment. In a memorable passage, Philippians 3:7-8, Paul opens his heart to us to share in detail the enormous transformation that Christ brought into his life: *But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ...*

In the same way, in 2 Corinthians he describes his emotional state further, as: *Dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything* (2 Corinthians 6:9c-10 NIV). Amazing paradoxes that powerfully describe the depth of contentment! There is always a contrast between these two levels of reality: the outward appearance, usually related to feelings, and a deeper condition, usually related to convictions and certainties.

2.3.2 Willingness to learn new ‘languages’ or skills: PERSEVERANCE and HUMILITY

The **second essential device** to help us adapt to the unknown world of the thorn is to develop new skills - **ways of life that diminish the impact of the thorn**. This is somewhat like learning a language we have never spoken before. At times it is literally a new language, as with a person who becomes blind and must study Braille. At other times it is a manual or technical learning process: a physically disabled person learning to move about in a wheelchair. Sometimes it is a new relationship, different from all previous relationships, such as parents who must learn to communicate with a son or daughter who is mentally disabled. The list of examples is endless. **Almost every thorn requires a new language.**

Again the example of the apostle Paul is challenging. He was so aware of this need to adapt to people and circumstances for the sake of Christ that he even said: *I have become all things to all men...* (1 Corinthians 9:22). He had previously mentioned five situations of adaptation (vv. 19-22), taking it for granted that no powerful witness for Christ can be possible without this strong willingness to ‘become all things to all men’.

The common characteristic in the learning of all these languages is that they make us feel **like children again**. We have to learn how to walk, talk, read and even mix with each other in completely unfamiliar ways. That’s why the fundamental requirement here is double: **humility and perseverance**. At first, the obstacle seems insurmountable. That’s normal. Children taking their first steps will fall umpteen times before becoming agile enough to walk with confidence. Adults learning a foreign language feel as limited in their vocabulary as children babbling their first words. It doesn’t matter if you feel as if you have returned to infancy. You are starting a new stage in your life in which you are chronologically a child. That’s why, far from discouraging you, it should be a source of hope: infancy is naturally followed by adulthood. If you face this learning period with the humility and perseverance of a child, you will soon discover that what at first seemed a problem becomes an opportunity, the opportunity to ‘speak’ new languages that enrich you and open up new and unexpected perspectives of personal growth.

2.3.3 Willingness to adapt to the loss of autonomy: TRUST

One of the most painful consequences of some thorns is not being able to manage on one’s own. To have **to depend on others is probably the most difficult adjustment** in the entire process. Personal autonomy is a precious gift that we take for granted until we lose it. Elderly people know this feeling quite well. The words of the Lord Jesus to Peter are so very true: *I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go* (John 21:18).

Nevertheless, we must **learn to ask for help**. This may seem obvious. Do we really need to learn something so elementary? Yes, certainly, when this question comes from a powerless person who wants to but cannot. It is quite a different matter when a person can but does not want to. In fact, the thorn generates a degree of inability that forces us to ask for help. And this type of forced dependency is difficult for all of us because it awakens in us **feelings of shame and humiliation**. To need something from others **hurts our self-esteem**. Deep down we all have a sense of pride that makes us feel bad when we need to depend on the favour of others. We think that it is only the **'poor'**, in whatever sense, who must ask for help. This is a mistake that arises from an unbiblical feeling of self-sufficiency. There is no reason why we should feel ashamed or humiliated by asking for help when we need it. Deep down, this is the core of the gospel: *This poor man called, and the LORD heard him* (Psalm 34:6).

The key requirement here is trust. We are not referring here **to trust in God**, already described in the previous chapter as the basic equipment for the journey. In the struggle against the thorn it is also important to learn **to trust others**. Of course, we do not mean that you should trust just anyone or everyone. It is a matter of establishing a special and solid bond with a few very significant people who become a kind of extension of yourself in a rich, meaningful relationship that was unthinkable without the thorn. In fact, the mysterious strength of this bond is bilateral: caregivers also come to feel this intense sense of love and mutual belonging. I will never forget the impact of seeing the relationship of a young couple, good friends of mine, with their son, who suffered from severe infantile cerebral palsy. What rich non-verbal communication, what affection in their kisses and gentle caresses, and in every word that the child did not seem to understand with his head but did with his heart!

David's relationship with Jonathan is an example of this. Constantly on the run from Saul, in a life-or-death struggle, David established such a strong bond of trust with his bosom friend Jonathan that he came to say in that beautiful elegy: *Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women* (2 Samuel 1:26). And in another passage we read: *After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself ... And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself* (1 Samuel 18:1,3). Humanly speaking, many times David's life depended on the help and information that Jonathan gave him. Jonathan was instrumental in helping him escape and adapt to so many years of desert experience. Rarely does God abandon us to face the thorn by ourselves. He usually provides a 'Jonathan' who helps us decisively in our battle. What a great privilege!

Paul also had to make this discovery. Sometimes it was the problem with his eyes that forced him to depend on others, for example when writing his epistles, such as the one to the Galatians: *See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand* (Galatians 6:11). At other times it was his **imprisonment**, the maximum expression of loss of autonomy and freedom; this was the case with the letter to the Philippians, written from the prison in Rome. These situations caused him to be **dependent on certain chosen helpers**, people he trusted, such as **Timothy** and others with whom he came to have an extraordinary relationship. Outstanding was the feeling Paul had towards **Epaphroditus**, richly described in Philippians 2:25-30.

Try to discover your Jonathan or Epaphroditus as you struggle against the thorn. It can become one of the most enriching experiences in life.

3. CHRIST, THE SUPREME MODEL OF ACCEPTANCE

3.1 Christ facing the greatest of all thorns

There is a supreme example of acceptance: Christ, who faced the thorn of sin and death on the cross, **the greatest of all thorns**. Can there be an experience more physically and morally traumatic than this? On the cross, Christ endured one of the most sadistic forms of death from a physical point of view⁷ and, above all, the greatest injustice and moral pain suffered by anyone ever. It is not by accident that the word sting - similar to the thorn with its sharp painful effects - is used to describe death and sin: *Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law* (1 Corinthians 15:55-56). Jesus had to suffer the worst of all thorns - death and the weight of sin - precisely to free us from its mortal venom.

Our experiences of pain can be very difficult to bear, but they are put into perspective when contrasted with that thorn above all thorns, the cross. No human thorn can be greater than this: *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed* (Isaiah 53:5). This vivid prophetic passage introduces Jesus as an expert in suffering, with ‘a doctorate in thorns’: *He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering* (v. 3). All this because God ‘laid on him the iniquity of us all’ (v. 6b). A careful reading of this chapter gives us an impressive description of suffering **out of love**. And it is here that we start to glimpse the powerful rays of light that the gospel throws on the mystery of unjust suffering.

Personally I find it difficult to read this passage without being deeply moved. The powerful words and music of a hymn by Charles Wesley come to mind:

*And can it be that I should gain
an interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!*

3.2 Attitudes of Christ

On that night of deep anguish, as we contemplate the Lord Jesus in Gethsemane facing the thorn of his dreadful death, we are greatly challenged by his attitudes. In fact, to consider them will be a sort of summary of the steps mentioned so far, especially in Paul's experience.

- **‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me’** (Luke 22:42). Jesus **fights to eliminate the thorn**. As a man, Jesus has the same reaction as any of us: he tries to avoid going through that trauma; he seeks to change things. This is the legitimate and natural fighting phase that we have already considered.
- **‘With loud cries and tears.’** A **fervent prayer** to the Father. The author of Hebrews describes to us, in almost crude realism, the emotional intensity of Jesus' struggle in prayer with the Father: *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission* (Hebrews 5:7). From the gospel story we know that he was ‘sorrowful and deeply distressed’ (Matthew 26:37) and that ‘being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground’ (Luke 22:44). In Matthew we read: ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death’ (Matthew 26:38).
- **‘Yet not my will, but yours be done’** (Luke 22:42). A fully **obedient disposition**: ‘Yet not as I will, but as you will’ (Matthew 26:39). Jesus' subjection to the will of the Father was complete, from the very beginning of his life on earth. The song that appears in Philippians 2 describes it to us in these words: ... *He humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!* (Philippians 2:8).

The struggle to change things and fervent prayer to that end must always stay within the framework of **submission to God's will**, even though this may seem mysterious and dark. At first we are surprised by the affirmation that Jesus ‘was heard because of his reverent submission’ (Hebrews 5:7). In what sense was he heard? God did not save him from death. Jesus had to go through the bitter experience of the cross. From our human perspective, to be heard by the Father ought to imply an affirmative response to Jesus' petition; that is, freeing him from the cross. But we know this did not happen. God heard him in the sense that he sent an angel to strengthen Jesus (Luke 22:43). In the Luke narrative we see a very clear cause-and-effect relationship between Jesus' petition: ‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me’ (Luke 22:42) and the immediate response from the Father: ‘An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him’ (v. 43). This is an amazing lesson: **God does not always free us from the thorn, but he always gives us the resources needed to fight it.**

Christ suffered and admirably overcame the greatest of all thorns. As a result, ... *we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin* (Hebrews 4:5). **His victory** on the cross provides us with his **supernatural grace that strengthens us in our weakness**. This is why the author of Hebrews encourages us to *approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need* (4:16). Let us approach, then, to obtain this grace of Christ, the supernatural ingredient of acceptance.

Notes

1. The authorship of this so-called *Serenity Prayer* has been under discussion for a long time. Most evidence, however, points to Reinhold Niebuhr, the German theologian, as its author. This is how it was first acknowledged by the magazine *Alcoholics Anonymous Grapevine*, January 1950, pp. 6-7. The authorship of Niebuhr is also recognized in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 16th edn, edited by Justin Kaplan, 1992, p. 684.
2. Original title in French *Syllogismes de l'amertume*, Editions Gallimard, 1952.
3. Ibid., Spanish edition, Emil Cioran, *Silogismos de la amargura*, Editorial Laia, Barcelona, 1986, p.103.
4. Adam J. Jackson, *Secrets of Abundant Happiness*, p. 37.
5. For further reading on the importance of positive attitudes when you face rough times, I recommend Viktor Frankl's work. Although he does not write from a Christian viewpoint, this Jewish Austrian psychoanalyst, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, has produced a number of helpful books. For our subject, his *Man's Search for Meaning* is an excellent contribution.
6. To those readers interested in exploring this subject further, we recommend the books: *Les Vilains Petits Canards (The Ugly Ducklings)*, *The Whispering of Ghosts: Trauma and Resilience*, and *The Love that Heals*, by Boris Cyrulnik.
7. Death by crucifixion was slow, lasting 18-20 hours, and was considered the most heinous of all execution methods in the Roman Empire.

http://jameslau88.com/acceptance_of_our_thorns.html

Pablo Martinez, *A Thorn in the Flesh: Finding Strength and Hope Amid Suffering* (2007)

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