

My mom is a great cook, especially when it comes to baking. Nothing can hold a candle to her blackberry pie; to me, it's the dish that embodies summer and it is a part of my childhood that I'll never forget. To get the berries for this pie, my dad and I go on an annual blackberry picking expedition at our farmhouse in the country, once July rolls around and the grass is tall, the bugs out in full force. Despite the humid heat, we wear jeans and long sleeves for protection. The bushes we pick from are not cultivated; instead they are scattered wildly throughout the fields and up the hillsides, making us hike for them. Once we find a bush that looks promising, we cautiously navigate through the briars to find the hidden blackberries. It's a painful process- the amount of sweat and scratches that go into producing a small harvest of berries is quite disproportionate. But the reward is so sweet; never in my life have I tasted blackberries as good as the ones that my dad and I pick every summer. But the best part is yet to come- after we've returned home, handed the berries over to Mom, and picked all the remaining thorns from our hands, we sit down to enjoy the delicious pie.

I know, I know- I couldn't have picked a more literal analogy for a Sunday on which we're talking about thorns, right? To me, though, the idea of blackberry picking perfectly illustrates the idea of thorns in our daily lives. I realized recently that although the blackberries we pick each summer taste great, there is nothing biologically different about them. And while my mom is an awesome chef, there is nothing magical she does to the blackberry pie. What really makes it all so delicious is the struggle involved, the effort that goes into finding each berry hidden under tangled branches. The bush's thorns serve as a deterrent to those who aren't willing to work for their fruit. We've all heard the phrase: "no pain, no gain", and while this does sound a little harsh, there is truth to it; when we encounter difficult times in our lives, we can appreciate the good times so much better. Blackberries taste infinitely better when you've endured the scratches in order to pick them opposed to when they're simply eaten from a clear plastic Safeway carton.

Unfortunately, life is not always as simple as picking berries and making pies. In real life, the "thorns" we encounter are much more serious: they can be illnesses, rough patches in a marriage or friendship, problems at work, problems at school, financial troubles, diets you can't stick to, waking up early, inclement weather, being separated

from family, college applications, college rejections, babies that won't sleep, and a billion other things. While these thorns may sometimes seem like a punishment from God, they are really gift- they help us appreciate the good parts of our lives by making us work a little harder for them.

Last school year, when I was a junior, I had really painful stomach problems for a couple of months. As a result, I never felt like eating, I always felt tired, and I was constantly frustrated. I went with my mom from doctor to doctor to try to figure out what was wrong with me and none could give a clear answer, except for assurance that it would probably pass with time. Eventually I became angry with God and kept questioning, "why me? I'm not a bad person, I don't need to be punished." I would always complain to God, to my parents, and even to myself, saying: it's not fair, I'm supposed to be young and healthy and full of energy. I became so tangled up in thorns of anger and self pity and fear, but instead of trying to overcome them and "march against it" as Isaiah suggested in the Bible, I resorted to wrath. Inexplicably, it finally hit me during spring break that year when I realized that there was no point being frustrated or searching for someone to blame. As soon as I became at peace with this, my stomach problems started to disappear. A year later, I feel healthier than I ever have and I've learned so much from the experience. Now I can savor feeling healthy, whereas before being sick I never appreciated feeling well. After having trouble eating for a while, I now appreciate every meal. I also appreciate my parents much more- after seeing them go to great lengths to make me happy as well as put up with me in my worse moments, I have immense gratitude and admiration for them.

In hindsight, I definitely did not treat this particular thorn in my life like Isaiah suggested to- for so long I did *not* courageously march against it and I did not learn from the experience until afterwards. However, I still believe it was part of God's plan for me and in no way a punishment- I would never want to relive the experience, but it taught me things that I never would have learned otherwise. I know that it's much easier said than done, but if we can try to view the rough spots in our lives as challenges from God that make us stronger people and make our lives richer, then we will be happier in so many ways. Try to embrace your own thorns...without the bad there would be no good. Life may never be as easy as pie, but it sure can be tasty..