

# Satan's Messenger to the Faithful Christian

By David Lee Burris





There is no gathering the rose without being  
pricked by the thorns.

(Panchatantra)

## 2<sup>nd</sup> reading: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

- That I, Paul, might not become too elated, **a thorn in the flesh was given to me**, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. 8 Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, 9 but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. 10 Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

The focus is on **"a thorn in the flesh."**

# Thorn in the Flesh

Mark Dunagan

## Thorn in the Flesh

The faithful apostle Paul prayed fervently to the Lord on three occasions and his request was *not granted!* Why? Well let's take a further look:

*“Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me – to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness’. Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake, for when I am weak, then I am strong”* ([2 Corinthians 12:7-10](#)).

### What The Thorn Was Not

- The thorn in the flesh was not a sinful activity on Paul’s part. I say this because when a Christian keeps on engaging in a sin that is not something to boast about. When I am continuing in a sin the power of Christ does not rest upon me, in fact, when I do this the gospel looks really weak. When I am sinning I am not being perfected, I am being corrupted. When God’s professed people persist in any sin such discredits the gospel ([2 Samuel 12:14](#) “However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme”; [1 Timothy 5:14](#) “and give the enemy no occasion for reproach”; [1 John 3:10](#) “By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God”).
- The thorn in the flesh did not arise because Paul was making foolish or sinful choices. Rather this thorn showed up to keep Paul humble.
- The thorn in the flesh was not a flaw or problem that Paul could change about himself or his circumstances, for Paul had drastically changed and had completely dedicated himself to following God ([Galatians 2:20](#)).
- The thorn in the flesh was something that Paul could not remove or change. Something he had no control over. Fleeing or forsaking it was not an option.
- In light of this some have suggested that Paul suffered from some sort of chronic illness. Maybe, but the book of Acts does not give the impression that Paul was a sickly individual. In fact, in light of all his travels he seems to have been very hearty. Others suggest that this thorn in the flesh applies to various or a specific opponent that made his life very difficult, in particular in the quest of spreading the gospel.

- Actually in the context we have a list of the type of things that would fall in the thorn category: “I am well content with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake” ([2 Corinthians 12:10](#)). *For when I am weak*. Again we are not talking about a moral weakness, rather we are talking about things that Paul had no control over, such as persecution which brings its own hardships, and challenges.

It seems to us that Paul is thinking graphically of a body helplessly impaled. He sees himself as it were transfixed, painfully held down and humiliated” (*Hughes p. 447*). “Is the sharp, piercing pain that is produced when a thorn is driven deeply into the flesh” (*Lenski p. 1300*).

### **A Messenger of Satan**

Whatever the particular thorn was, it was inflicted by Satan and permitted or allowed by God, yet it was not more than Paul could handle ([1 Corinthians 10:13](#)). Compare with the example of Job ([Job 2:1ff](#)). “The present tense of the verb ‘to buffet me’ seems to imply that the trouble was ongoing. We should be glad that the particular thorn isn’t mentioned. By leaving the precise nature of this thorn unrevealed, God is telling us that one specific ailment or temptation should not get all the sympathy or focus.

### **I Besought the Lord Three Times**

Knowing the character of Paul it seems obvious that his motivation in praying for its removal was not selfish. Paul was always concerned about one overriding thing, the spread of the gospel. It would appear that Paul believed that he could do more for the kingdom if this thorn were removed. Paul certainly felt that he had good reasons why this thorn in the flesh should be removed, and he was definitely not afraid to suffer for the sake of Christ ([2 Corinthians 11:23-33](#)).

### **My Grace is Sufficient For Thee**

“The tense of the verb indicates that the reply was a continuous answer, one to be accepted for Paul’s whole life” (*Erdman p. 124*). “My grace is enough for thee” (Knox). “My grace is all you need” (NEB). “Paul is here told that he is to remember that he is the unworthy object of God’s unceasing favor” (*Tasker p. 178*). God is saying to Paul that the “thorn in the flesh” was not too much to bear, in fact, such a problem had already been tempered by God’s grace ([1 Corinthians 10:13](#)).

### **My Power is Perfected In Weakness**

“My strength finds its full scope in thy weakness” (Knox). “Power comes to its full strength in weakness” (NEB). The weakness under consideration here is not unfaithfulness, that is, spiritual weakness. Neither is this an automatic given. We must cooperate with God for His power to be perfected in our state of need. As with other areas of growth, we must “let” this process happen ([James 1:2-4](#)). “This brief explanation showed Paul why the Lord gave him the thorn in the flesh. It was done lest he lift himself up unduly and thus become a tool that was unfit for the Lord. The verb shows that the thorn was a gift to Paul, a blessing to him” (*Lenski 1305-1306*).

- When I allow a trial to humble me and face up to the truth that I cannot handle life all by myself, then I am actually stronger and will be more effective than when I considered myself rather self-sufficient.
- The same is true when I come out of a trial with full confidence in God’s wisdom and His love ([Habakkuk 3:16-19](#)).

- Or when I am going through hardship and yet I am continually grateful for my blessings ([Romans 1:14](#); [Luke 6:35](#); [Acts 14:17](#)).
- When others see us experiencing trials, yet still hopeful, optimistic, grateful and cheerful. They realize that we have access to a power that is not of this world.

### **I Am Well Content With Weaknesses**

“More than ever, then” (Knox). “He will glory in them rather than complain of them” (*Erdman p. 125*). “This is not the cry of a fanatic rejoicing in pain” (*Tasker p. 179*). Paul is well content to live with the thorn because not only is it helping him stay close to God, but God is being glorified in the process.

### **Remember Gideon?**

There were Israelites who came to help Gideon in his mission to defeat God’s enemies. Yet God said, “*The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, ‘My own power has delivered me’*” ([Judges 7:2](#)). So, God proceeds to whittle down the Israelite army from 32,000 to 300 ([Judges 7:7](#)). With this 300 God would deliver Israel because He wanted the message clearly sent, that this deliverance was clearly due to God’s power. In like manner God often does the same thing in the lives of individual believers.

- When people see you overcoming horrible circumstances that simply destroyed and ruined countless others, it is clear you have chosen rely upon and access a power that is Divine.
- When people see you forsaking and simply walking away from sins that have entrapped and resulted in billions of addicted and messed up lives, people are seeing that you are cooperating with the power of God.

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## NOTE B. ON THE THORN IN THE FLESH: BAD TEMPER?

The interpretations of 2 Corinthians 12:7 are so numerous that it demands more space than an ordinary note. The 'thorn in the flesh' of which the Apostle speaks has been supposed to be every possible infirmity or temptation to which man is liable. We can but remark on the most probable suggestions that have been offered.

1. It is to be remarked that the word translated 'thorn' in the A. V. has also the meaning 'stake.' The latter is more common in Classical Greek, the former seems to be more usual in the Alexandrian Greek of the LXX. It is obvious that the latter word suggests the idea of a more grievous affliction than the former, speaking as it does of an actual impalement of the body by a stake thrust through it, while the former gives the idea rather of irritation and annoyance, of a visitation painful indeed, but not serious in its nature. It is obvious that our view of the nature of the affliction must depend largely upon which of these two translations we decide to adopt. The Vulgate, as well as the ancient Latin translator of Irenaeus, who is supposed to have done his work at the beginning of the third century, translates by *stimulus*, a prick or goad, but Tertullian renders by *sudes*, 'stake.'

2. We find from the New Testament as well as the Old, that Satan was supposed to be permitted to exercise considerable power over the bodies of men. Not only was he called the 'prince,' or 'ruler' of this world, but we find him, in the book of Job, inflicting, with God's permission, the most grievous calamities on Job and his family<sup>2</sup>. We also find our Lord Himself giving His sanction to the view that all temporal evil, including pain and disease, has Satan for its author, in the case of the woman whom 'Satan had bound'. A similar idea meets us in Rev. 9:2–10.

3. This power, however, was sometimes permitted to be exercised for the amendment of the offender, as we find from 1 Cor. 5:5 and 1 Tim. 1:20. Tertullian enlarges much on the remedial aspect of Satan's visitations as evidenced by these three passages. Not that it was imagined that Satan could in any way be intentionally an instrument of good, but since all evil, physical as well as moral, was attributed to his agency, as the enemy of mankind, **the physical evil was sometimes permitted to exist, that the graver moral evil might be prevented.** In the present instance the object of the punishment is distinctly specified. **It was lest the Apostle might be uplifted with pride, in consequence of the many signal tokens of God's favor he had received.**

4. We now proceed to consider the nature of the temptation. The first point to remark is that the words 'in the flesh' cannot be restricted to the idea of bodily suffering. The word 'flesh,' as used by St Paul, refers to man's nature as a whole, and not to the bodily organization alone. It may therefore fitly be interpreted of that "infection of nature" which, we are told<sup>6</sup>, "doth remain, yea, even in them that are regenerated." An infirmity of that kind is far more likely to have proved a serious trouble to the Apostle than any mere physical ailment, and it is probable that a solution of the difficulty may be looked for in that direction rather than any other. We will, however, review the interpretations which have found most favor with interpreters, and having placed the evidence before him, will leave the student to decide for himself.

*a.* The idea of temptations in the flesh of the nature of suggestions to impurity, which has found great favor with Roman Catholic writers, need only be noticed to be rejected. There is not the slightest hint in any of St Paul's writings that he ever experienced such temptations. There is one passage in which he appears to assert the contrary. The idea finds no support in early tradition. The idea the Apostle refers to struggles with such sins in the seventh chapter of the Romans can only arise from the contracted notion of the word 'flesh,' which has just been shewn to be incorrect. In fact, this interpretation is entirely the growth of an age which, by the exaggerated regard paid in it to celibacy, brought such struggles into special prominence, and made them almost the sole test of saintliness.

*b.* We have no tradition on which we can depend for the [flesh] nature of the affliction. The earliest writers, Clement, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, and others of that date, are silent concerning it. Irenaeus, contents himself with speaking of St Paul's infirmity as a proof that God does not despise the flesh of man, as the heretics supposed. The first writer who goes so far as to specify in regards to the nature of the complaint is Tertullian, in the passage cited above, who supposes it to be "a pain in the ear or head." He speaks of this, however, only as a matter of common report. Nearly every possible kind of pain or disease has been suggested as well as these. It seems hardly probable, however, that the Apostle should speak of ailments so slight in terms so strong. Other writers, therefore, have suggested that the Apostle was subject to epileptic fits. And if we are to suppose that the passage refers to bodily ailments at all, we must suppose something of this sort, or at least some kind of **bodily infirmity sufficiently serious to prove an actual hindrance to the Apostle in his work of evangelizing the world.**



Dean Stanley mentions several instances of great men, such as Alfred the Great & William III., struggling against severe physical infirmities while discharging the most onerous duties of public life, and it is by no means impossible that Paul's thorn in the flesh may have been of this kind. See also 1 Cor. 2:3, 2 Cor. 10:10, 11:30, Gal. 4:13, 14, 6:17.

c. There is one kind of bodily infirmity, however, which is made so much more probable than all others by certain passages in the Acts of the Apostles and in St. Paul's Epistles, that it deserves special consideration. **Many have thought that a defect of sight, consequent on the dazzling light which shone upon him at his conversion, resulting in a three days blindness, was the physical defect under which he labored, and have seen in such passages as Galatians 4:14, 15 & 6:11 (the latter passage being supposed to imply that Paul's defective vision obliged him to write with characters unusually large) a confirmation of this view.** This opinion is deserving of consideration, but when it is sought to confirm it by such passages as Acts 13:9, 23:1, it must be remembered that, the same word precisely is used of the council in Acts 6:15, of St. Stephen in Acts 7:55, and would seem to imply an intent and piercing gaze, the very opposite of that caused by defective vision. Such a gaze we might well suppose the Apostle to have possessed, capable of riveting the attention of his hearers, in spite of a weak voice, an unstudied manner, and considerable personal disadvantages.

d. It is very characteristic of Martin Luther, with his terrible mental struggles and temptations to suicide, that he should have imagined the direct suggestions of the enemy to blasphemous and unbelieving thoughts and acts. But it is hardly possible to suppose that one whose leading characteristic, both before and after his conversion, was an ardent and undoubting faith, should have been troubled with misgivings like these. Nor is there in any of St Paul's writings, whatever cares and anxieties (as in ch. 11 of this Epistle) he describes as weighing upon him, the slightest hint at even the most transient shadow of doubt concerning Him to the ministering of Whom he had devoted his whole life.

e. *Many of the Greek commentators suppose St Paul to be referring to the opponents of his Apostolic authority, supposing that there was one of these antagonists specially prominent. But this seems hardly reconcilable with the manner in which St Paul speaks of the visitation.*

f. Our last alternative must be some defect of character, calculated to interfere with St Paul's success as a minister of Jesus Christ. And the defect which falls in best with what we know of St Paul is an **infirmity of temper**. There seems little doubt that he gave way to an outbreak of this kind when before the Sanhedrim, though he set himself right at once by a prompt apology. A similar idea is suggested by St Paul's unwillingness to go to Corinth until the points in dispute between him and a considerable portion of the Corinthian Church were in a fair way of being settled. His conduct was precisely the reverse of that of a person who felt himself endowed with great tact, persuasiveness, and command of temper. Such a man would trust little to messages and letters, much to his own presence and personal influence. St Paul, on the contrary, feared to visit Corinth until there was a reasonable prospect of avoiding all altercation. In fact, he could not trust 'himself there. He 'feared that God would humble him among them<sup>3</sup>.' He desired above all things to avoid the necessity of 'using sharpness,' very possibly because he feared when once compelled to assume a tone of severity, his language might exceed the bounds of Christian love. The supposition falls in with what we know of the Apostle before his conversion. It is confirmed by his stern language to Elymas the sorcerer<sup>5</sup>, with which we may compare the much milder language used by St Peter on a far more awful occasion. The quarrel set between St Paul and St Barnabas makes the supposition infinitely more probable. The passage above cited from the Epistle to the Galatians may be interpreted of the deep personal affection which the Apostle felt he had inspired in spite of his occasional irritability of manner. The expression that he 'desired to be present with them and to change his voice<sup>7</sup>,' would seem to point in the same direction. And if we add to these considerations the fact, which the experience of God's saints in all ages has conclusively established, of the difficulty of subduing an infirmity of temper, as well as the pain, remorse, and humiliation such an infirmity is wont to cause to those who groan under it, we may be inclined to believe that not the least probable hypothesis concerning the 'thorn' or 'stake' in the flesh is that the loving heart of the Apostle bewailed as his sorest trial the misfortune that by impatience in word he had often wounded those for whom he would willingly have given his life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lias, J. J. (1897). [\*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, with Notes, Map and Introduction\*](#) (pp. 13–18). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## ***Paul's Thorn In the Flesh: Human Opposition?***

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12:7 - What Is the Thorn in the Flesh?**

Paul refers to “a thorn in my flesh” as a disciplinary measure to keep him from becoming too proud due to his experience in heaven. What exactly was this “thorn”? Was it some type of a disease, or was it something else?

The identification of this “thorn” has eluded scholars for centuries. At the end of the second century Tertullian identified it as a pain in the ear or head (*De Pudicitia* 13.17). In the early Byzantine period the great Chrysostom (*Homilies* 26) argued that it was opponents (based on the meaning of “Satan” as “adversary”). In the medieval period it was understood to be sexual temptation, while the reformers viewed it as a spiritual temptation. Some modern commentators opt for a physical disease, especially a severe form of ophthalmia (based on Galatians 4:13–15) or malarial fever (so William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and Roman Citizen* [Baker Books, 1962], pp. 94–97). Others have pointed to nervous disorders (including epilepsy), agony over the Jewish rejection of the gospel, or a speech impediment.

There are some things that we can definitely say about the “thorn.” First, it was evil. It is described as a “messenger of Satan,” not as an angel messenger of God. This means that it comes from the Evil One with evil intent. Whether adversaries or disease, the “thorn” was evil (and in the Scripture both adversaries and disease come from evil). Second, *God was allowing this thing*. This is what appears to be indicated by “there was given me.” It is certainly what is intended in the next verse, when Paul prays three times for the removal of the problem & gets a “no” in reply.

Third, the “thorn” caused some type of weakness. In fact, after coming to accept that God would not remove it, Paul says, “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). In this weakness Paul knew that God’s strength could be shown.

None of the suggestions made above is entirely without merit, but in my view Chrysostom was probably right in general. First, in the Old Testament adversaries are sometimes referred to as “thorns in your sides” (Numbers 33:55; Judges 2:3; compare Ezekial 2:6; 28:24; Micah 7:4) or “thorns in your eyes” (Joshua 23:13). There is no metaphorical use of “thorn” in the Old Testament for illness or temptation. Most of the other uses of “thorn” in the Old Testament are images drawn from farming or the awareness that briars and thorns grew among the rubble of cities which were destroyed. Second, the term “messenger” (Greek *angelos*) in Paul’s writings always refers to a person. Third, in 2 Corinthians 10–13 the basic topic is Paul’s opponents. The whole section refers to those interlopers who are oppressing his beloved Corinthian church and at the same time criticizing Paul for not having had the courage to be equally oppressive. Fourth, Paul parallels this “thorn” with a “weakness” in which he will glory. While the term “weakness” (Greek *astheneia*) can refer to illness (Galatians 4:13; 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 5:23), in its seven occurrences in the Corinthian letters (and in both its occurrences in Romans) it refers to moral, spiritual or social weakness. In 2 Corinthians 11:30 it refers to Paul’s shame at having to flee from Damascus rather than face his enemies (in a culture in which an honorable death was better than fearful flight). Another weakness-strength contrast comes in 2 Corinthians 13:3–4 in which Jesus was weak in his crucifixion, unable to withstand his adversaries, but was raised in strength; So, the Apostle Paul who was socially weak when present in Corinth will return with Christ’s power, for Christ will defeat his adversaries.

Furthermore, in 2 Corinthians 12:10 he lists weakness in a list which includes “insults, hardships, persecutions, difficulties,” but no terms for illness. Thus, the evidence from both the Old Testament background & the actual use of the term in Paul points to the “thorn” as being the opponents who dogged Paul’s tracks throughout his mission, confusing churches every time he left one church to plant another. If Paul was tempted to feel proud, how proud would he feel when even his strongest churches and best converts proved to be subvertable by newcomers?

This is not to say that Paul never became ill. In fact, in Galatians 4:13–15 he is probably referring to illness, an unknown illness that brought him to preach in the Galatian region, perhaps because of its climate or perhaps because he could go no further. What we are talking about is not whether Paul ever became ill, but what is the exact interpretation of this one passage.

What is clear is that even something sent by Satan himself can be used by God. Paul apparently did not impress people. He frequently speaks of himself as weak and his speech as unrefined. Yet people who met him were forced to contrast that weakness with the evident power of the Spirit working through Paul. It was clear that the power he exhibited was not Paul’s power. Something greater was at work in him. Weakness and poor speech does not glorify God; he puts no value on it. Yet when it becomes an occasion for contrasting us with him, he can use it for his glory. In Paul’s case the results spoke for themselves. Paul by himself could not have accomplished what he did; he himself was satisfied that the results of his ministry showed the hand of God, even if he wished that the process of so displaying God were more comfortable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kaiser, W. C., Jr., Davids, P. H., Bruce, F. F., & Brauch, M. T. (1996). [\*Hard sayings of the Bible\*](#) (pp. 627–629). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

## **Chapter Context Would Suggest Otherwise**

### 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 (NIV)

<sup>2</sup> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know--God knows. <sup>3</sup> And I know that this man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows-- <sup>4</sup> was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.

## Barnes' Notes on the Bible

I knew a man in Christ - I was acquainted with a Christian; the phrase "in Christ" meaning nothing more than that he was united to Christ or was a Christian; see [Romans 16:7](#). The reason why Paul did not speak of this directly as a vision which he had himself seen was probably that he was accused of boasting, and he had admitted that it did not become him to glory. But though it did not become him to boast directly, yet he could tell them of a man concerning whom there would be no impropriety evidently in boasting. It is not uncommon, moreover, for a man to speak of himself in the third person. Thus, Caesar in his Commentaries uniformly speaks of himself. And so John in his Gospel speaks of himself, [John 13:23-24](#); [John 19:26](#); [John 21:20](#). John did it on account of his modesty, because he would not appear to put himself forward, and because the mention of his own name as connected with the friendship of the Saviour in the remarkable manner in which he enjoyed it, might have savored of pride. For a similar reason Paul may have been unwilling to mention his own name here; and he may have abstained from referring to this occurrence elsewhere, because it might savor of pride, and might also excite the envy or ill-will of others. Those who have been most favored with spiritual enjoyments will not be the most ready to proclaim it. They will cherish the remembrance in order to excite gratitude in their own hearts and support them in trial; they will not emblazon it abroad as if they were more the favorites of heaven than others are.

That this refers to Paul himself is evident for the following reasons:

- (1) His argument required that he should mention something that had occurred to himself. Anything that had occurred to another would not have been pertinent.
- (2) he applies it directly to himself [2 Corinthians 12:7](#), when he says that God took effectual measures that he should not be unduly exalted in view of the abundant revelations bestowed on him.

About fourteen years ago - On what occasion or where this occurred, or why he concealed the remarkable fact so long, and why there is no other allusion to it, is unknown; and conjecture is useless. If this Epistle was written, as is commonly supposed, about the year 58 a.d., then this occurrence must have happened about the year 44 ad. This was several years after his conversion, and of course this does not refer to the trance mentioned in [Acts 9:9](#), at the time when he was converted. Dr. Benson supposes that **this vision was made to him when he was praying in the temple after his return to Jerusalem, when he was directed to go from Jerusalem to the Gentiles [Acts 22:17](#), and that it was intended to support him in the trials which he was about to endure.** There can belittle danger of error in supposing that its object was to support him in those remarkable trials, and that God designed to impart to him such views of heaven and its glory, and of the certainty that he would soon be admitted there, as to support him in his sufferings, and make him willing to bear all that should be laid upon him. God often gives to his people some clear and elevated spiritual comforts before they enter into trials as well as while in them; he prepares them for them before they come. This vision Paul had kept secret for fourteen years. He had doubtless often thought of it; and the remembrance of that glorious hour was doubtless one of the reasons why he bore trials so patiently and was willing to endure so much. But before this he had had no occasion to mention it. He had other proofs in abundance that he was called to the work of an apostle; and to mention this would savor of pride and ostentation. It was only when he was compelled to refer to the evidences of his apostolic mission that he refers to it here.

Whether in the body, I cannot tell - That is, I do not pretend to explain it. I do not know how it occurred. With the fact he was acquainted; but how it was brought about he did not know. Whether the body was caught up to heaven; whether the soul was for a time separated from the body; or whether the scene passed before the mind in a vision, so that he seemed to have been caught up to heaven, he does not pretend to know.

The evident idea is, that at the time he was in a state of insensibility in regard to surrounding objects, and was unconscious of what was occurring, as if he had been dead. Where Paul confesses his own ignorance of what occurred to himself it would be vain for us to inquire; and the question how this was done is immaterial. No one can doubt that God had power if he chose to transport the body to heaven; or that he had power for a time to separate the soul from the body; or that he had power to represent to the mind so clearly the view of the heavenly world that he would appear to see it; see [Acts 7:56](#). It is clear only that he lost all consciousness of anything about him at that time, and that he saw only the things in heaven. It may be added here, however, that Paul evidently supposed that his soul might be taken to heaven without the body, and that it might have separate consciousness and a separate existence. He was not, therefore, a materialist, and he did not believe that the existence and consciousness of the soul was dependent on the body.

God knoweth - With the mode in which it was done God only could be acquainted. Paul did not attempt to explain that. That was to him of comparatively little consequence, and he did not lose his time in a vain attempt to explain it. How happy would it be if all theologians were as ready to be satisfied with the knowledge of a fact, and to leave the mode of explaining it with God, as this prince of theologians was. Many a man would have busied himself with a vain speculation about the way in which it was done; Paul was contented with the fact that it had occurred.

Such an one caught up - The word which is used here ( $\alpha\rho\tau\acute{\alpha}\zeta\omega$  harpazō) means, to seize upon, to snatch away, as wolves do their prey ([John 12:10](#)); or to seize with avidity or eagerness [Matthew 11:12](#); or to carry away, to hurry off by force or involuntarily; see [John 6:15](#); [Acts 7:39](#); [Acts 23:10](#). In the case before us there is implied the idea that Paul was conveyed by a foreign force; or that he was suddenly seized and snatched up to heaven. The word expresses the suddenness and the rapidity with which it was done. Probably it was instantaneous, so that he appeared at once to be in heaven. Of the mode in which it was done Paul has given no explanations; and conjecture would be useless.

To the third heaven - The Jews sometimes speak of seven heavens, and Muhammed has borrowed this idea from the Jews. But the Bible speaks of but three heavens, and among the Jews in the apostolic ages also the heavens were divided into three:

(1) The aerial, including the clouds and the atmosphere, the heavens above us, until we come to the stars.

(2) the starry heavens, the heavens in which the sun, moon, and stars appear to be situated.

(3) the heavens beyond the stars. That heaven was supposed to be the residence of God, of angels, and of holy spirits. It was this upper heaven, the dwelling-place of God, to which Paul was taken, and whose wonders he was permitted to behold - this region where God dwelt; where Christ was seated at the right hand of the Father, and where the spirits of the just were assembled. The fanciful opinions of the Jews about seven heavens may be seen detailed in Schoettgen or in Wetstein, by whom the principal passages from the Jewish writings relating to the subject have been collected. As their opinions throw no light on this passage, it is unnecessary to detail them here.



## **Eye Defect Or Disease To Keep Him Humble After Eyeing The Heavens**

“There is one kind of bodily infirmity, however, which is made so much more probable than all others by certain passages in the Acts of the Apostles and in St Paul’s Epistles, that it deserves special consideration. Many have thought that a defect of sight, consequent on the dazzling light which shone upon him at his conversion, resulting in a three days blindness, was the physical defect under which he labored, and have seen in such passages as Gal. 4:14, 15 and 6:11 (the latter passage being supposed to imply that St Paul’s defective vision obliged him to write with characters unusually large) a confirmation of this view. This opinion is deserving of consideration, but when it is sought to confirm it by such passages as Acts 13:9, 23:1, it must be remembered that, the same word precisely is used of the council in Acts 6:15, of St Stephen in Acts 7:55, and would seem to imply an intent and piercing gaze, the very opposite of that caused by defective vision. Such a gaze we might well suppose the Apostle to have possessed, capable of riveting the attention of his hearers, in spite of a weak voice, an unstudied manner, and considerable personal disadvantages.” (SOURCE)

# **Burleson Church of Christ**

There are (at least) two points of considerable interest in this great chapter.

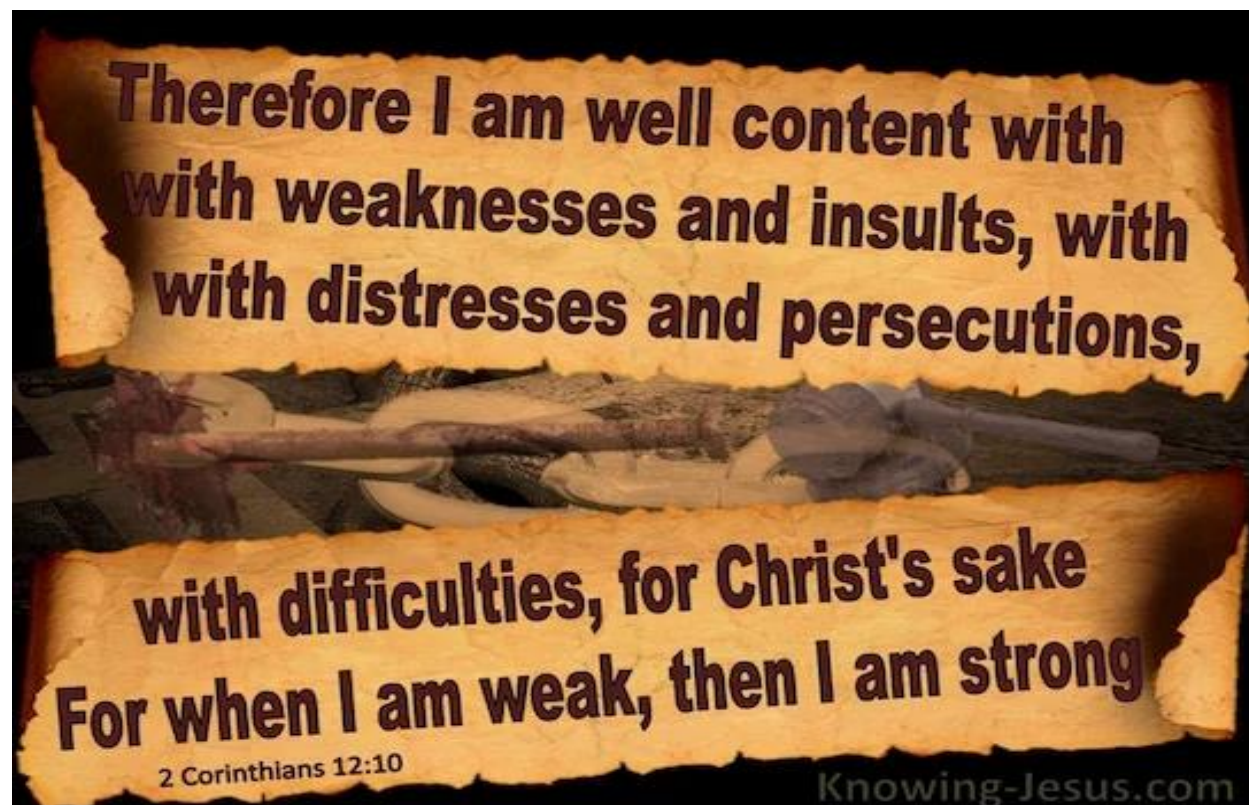
First, “What is the third heaven of verse 2?” The general view is that the Jews knew of three heavens as revealed to them in Scripture. The first is the atmosphere or sky wherein the clouds dwell and the birds fly (Genesis 1 :20; **2 Sam 21:10**). The second was the realm beyond the first wherein dwell all the celestial bodies (**Gen 1:14ff**; **Deut 10:22**). These two heavens are joined and spoken of as “the heavens” in **Genesis 2:1** and **Psalms 19:1-6**. The third heaven was the dwelling place of God (**Gen 24:7**). So, it’s believed that Paul was somehow made privy to the glories of heaven. Given Paul’s own time frame (“fourteen years ago” – v 2) and the generally accepted date of writing (AD 57), scholars place Paul in Antioch during the earliest days of his time as a Christian. I have heard some speculate or ask if Paul was caught up to heaven at the time of being stoned and, being thought dead, was dragged out of Lystra (cf **Acts 14:19-20**). If the historians are correct, this would be later than the time of this vision.

There is a second explanation that I was heretofore unfamiliar. Adam Clark cites Schoettgen, whom Clarke claimed “exhausted the subject,” that this expression meant no more than Paul being brought to the highest levels of inspiration, being “favoured with the nearest intimacy with God, and the highest revelations relative to His will.” It is worth noting that the text in no way indicates that Paul was eyewitness to anything, but only permitted to hear things that he was not permitted to repeat.

Second, “What was Paul’s thorn in the flesh?” Once again, the text isn’t specific, noting only that it was “a messenger from Satan” to keep him humble because of the abundance of divine revelations. Many have speculated this thorn was some type of eye malady. Paul spoke of the Galatians’ willingness to pluck out their own eyes to give to him (**Gal 4:15**). Moreover, Paul spoke of writing to them with large letters (6:11). Much of Paul’s writing wasn’t done in his own hand, being instead dictated to an amanuensis (e.g., Tertius – **Romans 16:22**). Paul was careful to note the things written in his own hand (cf **1 Cor 16:21**; **Col 4:18**), the salutation serving as the sign or proof in every epistle (**2 Thes 3:17**). But such is only conjecture.

## How About Paul's Thorn?

- Farrar and others said that Paul had acute eye problems.
- They claim he suffered a severe form of ophthalmia (inflammation of the eyeball) based upon Paul's comments:
  - **(Galatians 4:13-15)**
  - **(Galatians 6:11)**
- This eye condition was possibly brought on initially by the blinding vision on the Damascus road if you choose to follow that reasoning.

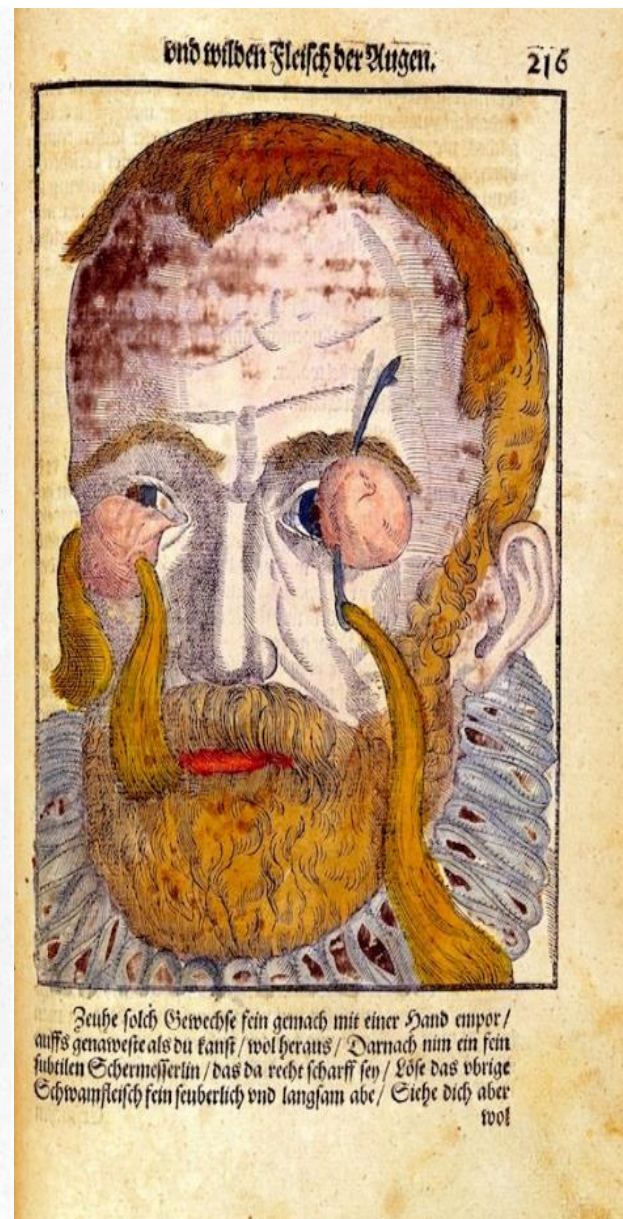
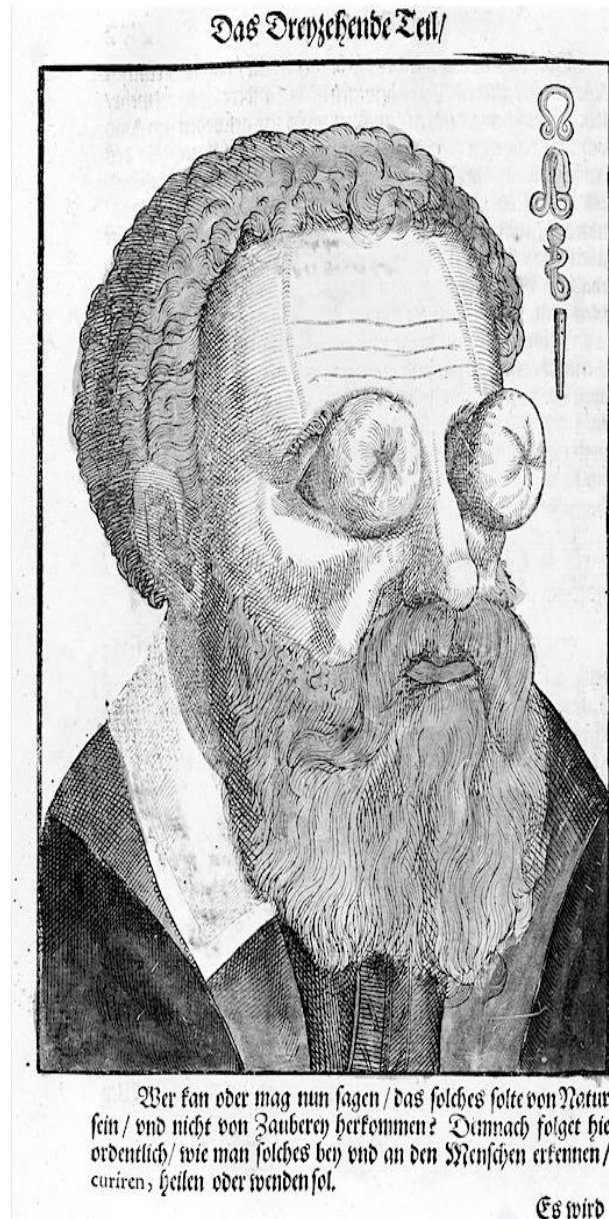


# ANOTHER POSSIBILITY @INSULTS



**EGYPTIAN MEDICAL PAPYRI REFERENCE RARE & REPULSIVE ANCIENT VISION DISORDER EXHIBITING MUCOSAL DISCHARGE FROM THE EYES THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN A SOURCE OF EVERYDAY RIDICULE**

# Eye Disorders Medieval Peoples Considered The "Curse Of Satan"



## **Book Context: Audience Application**

### **The Christian's Sufficiency**

**Kenneth L. Chumbley**

**"There was given to me a thorn in the flesh."**

**Of the various experiences which are common to the human predicament, perhaps none is more universal or dreaded than that of pain. We are born inflicting pain. At times we must live in pain. Death frequently occurs amidst pain. And the gnawing agony of mental pain often augments the presence of physical pain. Furthermore, suffering is indiscriminate. There is no social, racial, or economic class which is exempt from its ravages. It has the potential to strike anyone, anywhere, at anytime.**

**Man's reactions to suffering have spanned the spectrum of all possible moods of the human personality. For many, suffering has been a stumbling-block, leading to a weakened faith or even no faith, due to their inability to reconcile the presence of pain with the goodness of God. Others, however, have courageously drunk the cup of suffering and have emerged with their faith intact. Whatever the reaction, the question most generally asked by all in regard to suffering is "Why?" It's not that we wonder, "Why do the wicked suffer?" for we seem able to appreciate the justness of their pain. Our question is, "Why do the righteous suffer?" This is the great dilemma!**

**In his search for an answer, man has quite naturally focused great interest and study on those sections of the Bible which address, or touch upon, the subject of suffering. 2 Cor. 12:1–10 is one such section—a passage from Paul on the problem of pain.**

**From an analytical standpoint, 2 Cor. 12:1–10 can best be summarized as a defense, an *apologia* in the finest classical sense of the term. Though Paul had come under personal attack from some in the Corinthian church, his arguments were not motivated by an urge for self-exoneration or self-vindication. Rather, his aim was to defend the truth, i.e., to demonstrate and vindicate the ways of God. J. Sidlow Baxter once wrote that truth "often becomes best defined when it is being defended." In the section before us, this "definition by defense" method of argument is effectively used by Paul to showcase some salient truths.**

Contextually, 2 Cor. 12:1–10 is positioned within an extended argument wherein Paul defends his apostleship against criticisms preferred against him by some at Corinth. Textually, the passage defends that which is thought by many to be indefensible; namely, the cross. **This cross is not the cross of Christ but the cross of Christians, which the Lord referred to in Luke 14:27, “Whosoever doth not bear his own cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.”** Ultimately, the text defends the Lord against blasphemous charges that are often heard during times of human tragedy.

Historically, much of what has been written on this passage has not been in exposition of its great apologetic principles but, rather, in speculation concerning the identity of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” (12:7). This obsession with diagnosis has greatly distracted from the value of the text. In contrast, **our determined purpose is not simply to see the “thorn” but, most importantly, to see the “truth” behind the thorn; to see that which the apostle came to see;** to understand that which turned him from petition to praise, from agony to ecstasy; and to appreciate that which caused him to conclude, “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses” (12:9). In short, Paul’s *apologia* on the problem of pain becomes, in fact, the Gospel of Pain according to Paul.

## The Thorn: Its Context

“I must needs glory, though it is not expedient ...”

C.S. Lewis’s observation that one cannot easily join at eleven o’clock a conversation which began at eight o’clock should remind us of the importance of looking at the original circumstances in which a statement is set. Thus, to study the statements of our text in their proper perspective, we must take a backward glance into the preceding context.

As Paul drew to a close his second letter to the Corinthians, he was forced to address an issue which threatened to undo the “simplicity and purity” of the church. The danger facing Corinth was that of “false apostles, deceitful workers,” and ministers of Satan who “fashioned themselves into apostles of Christ ... and ministers of righteousness” (11:13–15). While the greater part of the Corinthian brethren readily acknowledged Paul’s authority as an “apostle of Christ Jesus,” there existed within the church a coterie of critics who controverted his position and sought to undermine his influence. Their tactic, in part, was to **attack by innuendo**. While intimating that Paul was capricious (1:12, 17), carnally motivated (10:2) and cowardly (10:10), they were quick to commend themselves (10:12).

Such blatant charges against an apostle of the Lord could not go unanswered. Paul knew full well that if his integrity was called in question, it would drastically affect the impact of the gospel. Though he had already affirmed his uprightness in handling the word of God (4:2), he now found it necessary to go into much greater detail in order to parry the thrusts of these unprincipled men.

The main body of Paul's counter-attack has as its backdrop the claim "that I am not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles" (11:5 and 12:11). And, lest anyone should doubt this assertion, he fills the section with an unparalleled listing of the hazards he had endured for the sake of Christ's name (Acts 9:16). Striking a note of fine sarcasm (11:16–21), Paul argues the proof of his apostleship from the standpoint of pedigree (11:22), persecution (11:23–25a), peril (11:25b–27), and pressure (11:28–33). Farrar writes that this section is "the most marvellous fragment ever written of any biography: a fragment beside which the imperilled lives of the most suffering saints shrink into insignificance, and which shows us how fractional at the best is our knowledge of the details of St. Paul's life."<sup>5</sup> In answering the challenge of the gainsayers, the apostle turns to **paradox** as he argues not from the basis of carnal strength (cf. 1 Cor. 2:1–5) but from the basis of courageous weakness (11:30) and cites arrests, beatings, and impoverishments, those things which caused him to bear in his body "the marks of the Lord Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). In short, the branded body of Paul, which not one of his critics could deny, was a proof of his apostleship.

But Paul is not yet finished; there is still one other experience he will introduce as evidence. It is an event so extraordinary, so singular, that this is the only reference he makes to it in all of his writings. For he reminds the Corinthians that not only he had been a servant in peril but also he had been, fourteen years previously, a stranger in paradise.

## The Thorn: Its Cause

"And by reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations ..."

There may be times in defending truth when even the inexpedient becomes expedient. For Paul such a time had arrived; it was now time to "come to visions and revelations of the Lord." Hence he declares in 2 Corinthians 12:2–4,

I know a man in Christ, fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I know not; or whether out of the body, I know not; God knoweth), such a one caught up even to the third heaven. And I know such a man (whether in the body, or apart from the body, I know not; God knoweth), how that he was caught up into Paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.



In these verses (which are in the form of the **completive parallel**), the apostle affirms three things: 1) that he had been conveyed to Paradise; 2) that the exact means of conveyance was unknown to him; and 3) that he could not disclose what he had seen.

It is commonly thought that these visions occurred sometime near the start of his preaching trips. When Paul left Ananias he knew that he was saved, that he was a servant of the Lord of glory, and that he must suffer for the Lord's name (Acts 9). Undoubtedly, these visions and revelations were granted him partly, at least, for his own comfort and encouragement and, perhaps, to strengthen him for what lay ahead.

There are several things in these verses which arouse the attention. One of these is the **grammatical change in person**. In chapter eleven, Paul referred to himself in the first person (e.g. "thrice was I beaten with rods"), but in 12:2–4 he switches to the third person (e.g., "he was caught up into Paradise"), and, then, in 12:6 he reverts back to the first person. Though it was not unusual for inspired men to write of themselves in the third person (cf. Moses in Num. 12:3 and John in John 13:23–25), **there seems to be a special reason** for such in this case. Toward the close of chapter eleven, Paul had stated the principle which formed the ground of his apostolic defense and glory, "If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things that concern my weakness" (11:30). While visions of Paradise were an honor, of which none of his accusers could boast, visions of Paradise certainly did not classify as a "weakness." Thus, by writing in the third person he was able to state discreetly an important proof of his apostleship without placing undue boasting or glorying in it.

The etymology of "paradise" is especially interesting. Barclay has the following to say about it: "The word *Paradise* comes from a Persian word which means a *walled-garden*. When a Persian king wished to confer a very special honor on someone who was specially dear to him he made him a *companion of the garden*, and gave him the right to walk in the royal gardens with him in close and intimate companionship." Clearly, in being granted these visions and revelations, Paul had been conferred with a privilege of the very highest sort.

The details of Paul's experience must ever remain a closed book—at least in this life. He describes what he heard as "unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter." **Basically, there are only two ways in which a word may be "unspeakable."** It may be that it *cannot* be expressed, i.e. it is beyond the power of human ability; or, it may be that it *must not* be expressed, its publication is unauthorized. *This latter sense appears to be the one intended by Paul.*

The words he heard in Paradise were “unspeakable” because they were “unlawful” to speak. He had not been granted the authority to reveal what had been revealed to him.

Concerning the “why” of this restriction, consider the significance of the “lest” clause in verse six: “For If I should desire to glory, I shall not be foolish; for I shall speak the truth: but I forbear, **lest any man should account of me above that which he seeth me to be**, or heareth from me.”

The church at Corinth had previously been plagued by the existence of embryonic sects, one of which claimed to be “of Paul” (1 Cor. 1:12). To correct such carnality, Paul had written that they needed to learn not to “think of men above that which is written” (1 Cor. 4:6). Now, following the mention of his visions and revelations, he expresses the old concern that someone might think of him above what was proper. Thus, to avoid this error, “lest” this happen, he forbore speaking further of his visions. By so doing (or, rather, not doing so), any attempt to exalt Paul improperly would be checked, and a potential stumbling-block would not be placed in the Corinthians’ path.

Not only did the “exceeding greatness of the revelations” pose a possible threat to the Corinthians but also they presented a very real threat to Paul himself. Even things which are good and beneficial can have dangerous side effects. “And by reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations, that I should not be exalted overmuch, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, that I should not be exalted overmuch” (2 Cor. 12:7).

Twice, for emphasis, Paul tells us that he faced the same problem in regard to his visions that the Corinthians faced; namely, of being “exalted overmuch,” i.e., becoming self-righteous. Though human life is always paradoxical, the sharpness of this paradox is astonishing. That which had caused such great pleasure for Paul had become the cause of great pain. **Lest any man should think too highly of Paul he was silent (12:4, 6); but, lest Paul should think too highly of Paul, he was given a thorn.**

## The Thorn: Its Character

**“A messenger of Satan to buffet me ...”**

The identification of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” has been conjectured and debated for ages. Diagnosis has ranged from spiritual to psychological and on to physical infirmity. Luther and Calvin thought it to be spiritual temptation.

Catholic scholars, like Augustine and Aquinas, labeled it carnal temptation. Chrysostom and Erasmus identified it as human opposition. And those who believe the thorn to be a physical malady have advanced eye trouble, headaches, earaches, malaria, epilepsy, demonic nervous disorders, head gout, and various other physical problems.

**Double Application.** All these views possess a common denominator, i.e., they limit the “thorn” to only one aspect or category of suffering. It seems to me, however, that the context of 2 Cor. 12:7 points to a much broader interpretation. Since verse 23 of chapter eleven, with only a brief exception (12:1–4), Paul has been enumerating his “weaknesses” for Christ’s sake. Within this discussion, he explains that a “thorn in the flesh” had been given him, and that three times he had appealed to the Lord for its removal (12:7–8). The answer he received to this appeal profoundly affected his attitude (12:9). Though he had prayed for the removal of a *thorn*, he ends up glorying in his *weaknesses*. Based upon his request (12:8) and reaction (12:10), is it not reasonable to conclude that the *thorn*, which caused him such pain, is to be equated with the *weaknesses*, *injuries*, etc. which he came to take pleasure in? My conviction is just that, I believe the “thorn” represents the composite of Paul’s suffering. It was not one thing in particular but everything in general. This conclusion seems further strengthened by the significance of the word translated “thorn.” Paul did not use a word which indicates a measly sticker but one which indicates a massive stake.

The word translated “thorn” is *skolops*. Interestingly, it is one of the two words in the Greek New Testament which can be translated by the English “cross.” The common Greek word for “cross” is *stauros*. It originally meant an “upright stake” but eventually came to signify the instrument by which the capital punishment of crucifixion was carried out. While *skolops* was used interchangeably by some writers with *stauros*, it primarily referred to a “pointed stake” upon which victims were impaled. Paul didn’t use *skolops* to describe literally the instrument of his suffering; he used it to stress figuratively the intensity of his suffering. The perils he underwent had not simply pricked him, but they had pierced him through and through.

Paul immediately changes his metaphor so that the thorn becomes a fist. He was being “buffeted,” i.e., he was on the receiving end of a fist fight. Blow after blow flailed against him. The question, then, which presses on us is—Who? Who was the impaler, the striker, the author of Paul’s anguish?

And by reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations, that I should not be exalted overmuch, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, that I should not be exalted overmuch.

These words are, at once, **an indictment and an implication**. That is, they enable us to view the thorn from two, totally diverse perspectives. They show that both Heaven and Hell had a “stake” in Paul’s stake.

The indictment is that Satan was the *source* of suffering; the stake was *his* messenger. When was the last time you heard anyone blame Satan for anything? It’s not uncommon to hear God’s name cursed as the cause of terrible pain and suffering. It’s not uncommon to hear God indicted as an unloving, uncaring slayer of the innocent. But it is uncommon to hear the name of Satan cursed and reviled as that of a heinous fiend. But, if any cursing needed to be done, it was not God whom Paul accused. In the stake given him he saw the hand of the adversary, not the Advocate.

The implication is that looming over the lurking of the devil was the chastening hand of Almighty God. This appears clearly in the twice repeated phrase, “that I should not be exalted overmuch.” **Though Satan had authored the thorn, God had authorized it.** Thorns have a way of bursting bubbles, and pain can have preventive qualities. It is just as C. S. Lewis wrote, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains.” **Lest Paul have any leanings towards self-exaltation due to the surpassing greatness of his visions of Paradise, the surpassing baseness of the thorn would counter the temptation to pride. God was shouting at Paul to beware of the danger.**

There is one final inference which we need to see. In Paul’s suffering (and, I suspect, in all suffering) both Satan and God have a “stake,” a vested interest. Satan’s aim, naturally, was to discourage Paul, to cause him to throw in the towel, thus to make shipwreck of his faith. **God’s purpose, however, was to save Paul, i.e., to save him from a self-righteousness which would have destroyed saving righteousness.** To the Corinthians, Satan appeared as an “angel of light” (11:14) in order to work darkness. To Paul, he appeared as an angel of agony in order to work despair. But it backfired! God used Satan’s messenger to deliver His own message. And this should not surprise us. **The Bible is replete with instances of God’s overruling Satan’s designs. Paul’s thorn in the flesh is a splendid example.**

## The Thorn: Its Consequences

“When I am weak, then am I strong.”

In Job, the great Old Testament book on human suffering, God answers the patriarch's questions with the following questions: "Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me" (38:3). But, in this great New Testament paragraph on human suffering, God answers Paul's prayers with the principle, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my power is made perfect in weakness" (12:9).

From the very start of Paul's apostolic defense, his argument has been "weak" (11:30, 12:5). He builds a powerful case on perilous evidence. And, now, as he draws his argument to a close, he reveals to us what the Lord had revealed to him, the principle which infused his weaknesses with power: power enough to keep on despite weariness, pain, opposition, and slander; power enough to keep the inner man perpetually fresh even while the outer man grew old with decay (4:16).

In our final two verses are brought together three thoughts which are a response, a reaction, and a reminder respectively.

1. *The Christian's Sufficiency is the Grace of God.* In John 6, the Lord asked Philip, "Whence are we to buy bread that these may eat?" (6:15). Philip's answer was, "Two hundred shillings' worth of bread is not sufficient for them" (6:7). But Philip was wrong; his estimate was way too high. For, with just five loaves and two fishes, the Lord proceeded to feed and fill about 5000 men. In the only miracle recorded by all four evangelists (excepting the resurrection), the Lord shows that **His sufficiency can overcome any deficiency, and that His grace is enough for any need.**

In his comments on 2 Cor. 12:9 in *The Great Texts of the Bible*, James Hastings points out that there are two ways to lighten a burden. You can diminish the actual weight, or you can increase the strength of the one who bears the weight. God always chooses the latter. Through the grace, He so abundantly sheds upon His saints, they are empowered to withstand resolutely the most extreme buffetings. **God does not spare us from things! He strengthens us so that we may conquer things.** "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us" (Rom, 8:37). The ancient promise of God to Asher, "As thy days, so shall thy strength be" (Deut. 33:25), yet holds true.

"My power is made perfect in weakness," responds the Lord. In other words, the Lord has greater need of our inability than our ability. Our strength is His rival; our weakness, His servant.

When selecting the men who would preach the gospel to every creature, Christ did not choose the oratorically brilliant or the philosophically astute. Rather, He placed the gospel treasure in common mason jars “that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves” (4:7). The apostles found the sufficiency for their “stakes” (see John 15:20, *et al.*) in the favor of the Risen Lord. May this blest assurance control; namely, that whatever my lot, “Thou hast taught me to say, ‘It is well, it is well with my soul.’ ”

**2. The Answer Completely Satisfied Paul.** God’s response brought this reaction, “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” What a different spirit this is from the one which wallows in self-pity over the beatings of life! **It is a matter of revelation that Christianity is a black and blue religion (cf. 1 Cor. 9:27).** But the astonishing thing is that the beatings of life—the momentary, light afflictions—work for us, not against us (4:17). If the cause of Christ is in fact our highest cause, can we not rightly and genuinely glory in that which advances the cause even if it involves impaling upon a stake? Chesterton would remind us that “the Christian martyrdoms were more than demonstrations, they were **advertisements.**” Through the suffering of saints the cause of Christ moved ahead (Acts 8:1–4). Further, **Paul indicates that is to be a permanent experience: “For we who live are always delivered unto death for Jesus’ sake, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor. 4:10).**

I think there are two compelling reasons for the Lord’s answer so completely satisfying Paul. One, he had come to the point where he could **distinguish between the permanent and the perishable.** There is nothing that belongs to a man on an earthly level which cannot be taken from him by storm, decay, or death, and that includes our possessions, our family, and our health. But the **things subject to loss through suffering are perishable things,** which are neither destined to last nor intended to do so. **The only indestructible things a man has are those which are laid up in heaven (Matt. 6:19–20). These are the permanent things. The thorns of this life cannot touch them!** Paul knew that, in all his trials, he lost nothing essential to his eternal inheritance.

Two, Paul knew that the weaknesses of life did not prevent the power of Christ from “resting” upon him. The word for “rest” literally means to tabernacle, to pitch a tent over (cf. John 1:14). **Perhaps, the greatest paradox of this entire text is that, like Job, Paul was not tormented because he was the worst of men but because he was the best. Far from being evidence of sin and disfavor, the thorn gave evidence of the highest favor.**

**General Application.** Under the canopy of the Lord's protection, we truly can find "rest" unto our souls and are able to say with all good courage, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear: what shall man do unto me" (Hebrews 13:6).

3. Lastly, we are made to remember *The Nature of a Cross*. We tend to think of "bearing our cross" only in its noble and heroic sense (and it certainly is a noble and heroic endeavor) while we forget the fact that 1900 years ago the cross represented humiliation and hurt of the most excruciating kind. Paul's words call us back to the true nature of the cross. They force us to look at its weakness and injury and distress and to be reminded that even though the way of the cross leads home, it is a way of pain and peril.

Have no illusions about the nature of the cross you're called to bear. But remember that the greatest challenge ever issued man is to "take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). To deny or to fail in that challenge is to consign yourself to eternal perdition. Two alternatives, and two only, confront every man. We either can admit our weakness and in humility turn to the Lord for *life* through His strength or can die in our own strength. The consequences are clear: "Therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live" (Deut. 30:19).

Maybe if we were stronger in carrying our cross and braver in bearing our thorn, we might be sent with far less help to defend far more desperate posts in the great battle.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Chumbley, K. L. (1984). [The Christian's Sufficiency](#). In M. D. Curry (Ed.), *Ministering Obedience to Christ: Studies in Second Corinthians* (pp. 159–169). Temple Terrace, FL: Florida College Bookstore.



**Preventative Discipline.** Whatever the Apostle Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was, it does appear to have been given for preventative purposes. Paul said, "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of revelations, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure" (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 12:7).

Paul states both at the beginning and the end of this passage the purpose for this "thorn in the flesh," "lest I should be exalted above measure." Thus, this was given Paul as **preventive discipline.**

J.T. Smith



## ***"a messenger of Satan"***

- Whatever the "thorn", it was something with evil intent.
- Yet it is evident that God allowed it to remain!
- This leads us to ask...

## **WHY ARE "THORNS" GIVEN?**



## **LEST WE BE "*EXALTED ABOVE MEASURE*" (2 Corinthians 12:7 )**

Paul had been blessed to receive many revelations...

- On the road to Damascus - **Acts 9:3-6**
- He received revelations in Jerusalem, at Troas, in Corinth and on way to Rome
- Probably nothing could compare with the vision of Paradise (**2 Corinthians 12:1 -6**)
- It would have been quite easy for Paul to be filled with pride over these revelations.
- It would have been just as easy for the church to exalt him too highly.
- What position do we see ourselves in the church?

## TO "BUFFET" US (2 Corinthians 12:7)

- "Buffet" means, "to strike with the fist"; thus to strive against, contend

### **(1 Corinthians 9:27)**

- This buffeting is something brought upon by Satan .
- This external "buffeting" is allowed to remain, to keep us humble

## THERE IS A PRACTICAL LESSON RELATED TO HUMILITY...

- Humility is a necessary trait for God's people

### **(Luke 18:13-14)**

### **(1 Peter 5:5-6)**

- Sometimes it is useful to have "outside help" to keep us humble!



**"My grace is sufficient for you"**  
2 Corinthians 12:9



- The Lord gives us what we "need" but not necessarily what we "want"!

**"My strength is made perfect in weakness"**

- It is in times of weakness and hardship that the Lord's strength can be experienced most completely!
- For in such times we really come to depend upon the Lord, and not upon our own strength or wisdom!

Could it be that you are seeing your infirmities in the wrong light?

- If it weren't for your thorns how many times would you think to consider prayer at all?



What do we glean from all of this?



- In time of infirmity, pray!
- But don't be surprised if the answer to your prayers are:  
**"My grace is sufficient for you "**
- **"My strength is made perfect in weakness"**



The Lord may choose not to remove your thorn either...

- Instead, He may choose to give you the strength to endure it
- If so, then rejoice that power of Christ rests upon you!
- Think about the Lord's statement as it relates to the problem of SIN, and the SALVATION He offers ("My grace is sufficient for you")...

***(Titus 3:4-8)***



Trying To Do It By Yourself!



## Do You Remember Gideon?

There were Israelites who came to help Gideon in his mission to defeat God's enemies. Yet God said, *"The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, 'My own power has delivered me'"* (Judges 7:2). So, God proceeds to whittle down the Israelite army from 32,000 to 300 (Judges 7:7). With this 300 God would deliver Israel because He wanted the message clearly sent, that this deliverance was clearly due to God's power. In like manner God often does the same thing in the lives of individual believers.

- When people see you overcoming horrible circumstances that simply destroyed and ruined countless others, it is clear you have chosen rely upon and access a power that is Divine.
- When people see you forsaking and simply walking away from sins that have entrapped and resulted in billions of addicted and messed up lives, people are seeing that you are cooperating with the power of God.

# The Thorns of Life



## The Thorns of Life by Don Ruhl

### Persuasion:

#### 1. Thorns are the result of Adam's sin.

Our world was originally created without thorns.

A. Genesis 3:18 reveals part of the curse that God put on the earth for Adam's sin:

**Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field.**

1. Imagine holding roses before the fall of Adam, and picking blackberries.
2. Adam sinned by eating from a tree of which God had said not to eat, so part of the curse is in connection with agriculture.

- B. Adam thought that he could do well by eating something which the earth produces, so now the earth brings forth something that irritates to us.
- C. The curse corresponds to the sin.

## 2. Thorns in nature.

Oddly enough thorns do now serve a purpose.

A. Plants are protected from intruders in one form or another by thorns.

1. Thorns can be used as security around your home, if you plant them beneath and next to windows.
2. Thorns in Bible lands: 56 times in the Bible you will find the words “thorn,” “thorns,” “thornbushes,” “bramble,” and “thistle.”

B. “Probably there is no country on earth where so many plants of this sort exist. As many as 200 different species of thorny plants are found there besides many others which are ‘clothed with scabrous, strigose or stinging hairs, and another multitude with prickly fruits’”

(*Peloubet’s Bible Dictionary*, edited by F. N. Peloubet, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Universal Book and Bible House, 1947, p. 689).

1. May be this is why the Bible is rich in either referring to literal thorns or using them in symbolic ways.
2. Thorns or thistles have helped the Scottish.
3. “The prickly purple thistle is the national emblem of Scotland. In the 13th century, when Alexander III was king of Scotland, King Haakon of Norway landed an army on the shores of that kingdom and attempted to conquer it. According to tradition, in the night attack on the Scottish camp at Largs, a barefoot Norseman stepped on a thistle and cried out in pain. The Scots were alerted, and the attack failed. Haakon’s successor then surrendered the Hebrides to Scotland. In 1687 a knighthood order, the Order of the Thistle, was established by the English King James II and dedicated to St. Andrew. It became inactive in the Revolution of 1688 but was revived in 1703 by Queen Anne” (*Compton’s Encyclopedia*, America Online).

4. "A great army, many years ago, invaded Scotland. They crept on stealthily over the border, and prepared to make a night attack on the Scottish forces. There lay the camp, all silently in the starlight, never dreaming that danger was so near. The Danes, to make their advance more noiseless, came forward barefooted. But as they neared the sleeping Scots one unlucky Dane brought his broad foot down squarely on a bristling thistle. A roar of pain was the consequence, which rang like a trumpet blast throughout the sleeping camp. In a moment each soldier had grasped his weapon, and the Danes were thoroughly routed. The thistle was from that time adopted as the national emblem of Scotland. God has His uses for even the simplest and humblest of us" (Walter Baxendale, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations*, no. 7070).

Likewise, there are some ways in which we can be benefited by the thorns of life. It really depends on where you are spiritually on whether thorns are a help or a hindrance to you.

### 3. Spiritual thorns:

- A. We experience thorns in the spirit, which can be the result of sin, just like with Adam, or they can serve to keep us in the straight and narrow.
- B. Thorns are reminders of where not to go.  
Proverbs 22:5 says that thorns are in the way of the perverse:

**Thorns and snares are in the way of the perverse;  
He who guards his soul will be far from them.**

- C. If you start to walk down the path of the perverse, then God promises that there will be thorns in the way.

Maybe Psalm 119:67, 71 discusses this very thing, though the word thorn is not used, yet "affliction" is and it conveys the same thought:



**67 Before I was afflicted I went astray,  
But now I keep Your word. ...  
71 It is good for me that I have been afflicted,  
That I may learn Your statutes.**

You can see the psalmist walking down a path, and he starts to veer and he runs into thorn bushes. So, he gets back on the path that God wants the psalmist to be on.

Along these same lines I wonder if Isaiah 32:13 reveals why some people suffer in the spirit:

**On the land of my people will come up thorns and briers,  
yes, on all the happy homes in the joyous city;**

D. Matthew 13:7 thorns choke the word and it brings forth no fruit:

**And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them.** The thorns of life can remind us the source of our blessings.

**E. Second Corinthians 12:7–10 reveals that Paul was given a thorn in the flesh to remind him that he was made sufficient by the grace of God, and that through Paul's weakness God strength was perfected:**

**7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

**As we have all experienced at some time or another a thorn stuck in the flesh is irritating, and for the moment keeps you from doing what you need to be doing.**

**How about a thorn that could not be removed?**

- 1. It would be a constant irritant.**
- 2. It would also remind you that you need help to accomplish many things.**
- 3. This is how it was for Paul.**
- 4. His thorn was a constant irritant.**
- 5. It also reminded him that things he accomplished he did so because the grace of God was at work.**

**F. Ezekiel 2:6 wicked people are constantly referred to as thorns in the Bible:**

**And you, son of man, do not be afraid of them nor be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns are with you and you dwell among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words or dismayed by their looks, though they are a rebellious house.**

**Second Samuel 23:6–7**

**6 But the sons of rebellion shall all be as thorns thrust away, because they cannot be taken with hands. 7 But the man who touches them must be armed with iron and the shaft of a spear, and they shall be utterly burned with fire in their place.**

**They make themselves undesirable to God.**

**He cannot take them and make them into something beautiful, so they are burned.**

Hebrews 6:4–8 makes a comparison between Christians who fall away, and the earth bearing thorns for the gardener who takes the thorns and burns them:

**4 For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. 7 For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; 8 but if it bears thorns and briars, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.**

#### **4. The crown of thorns.**

A. It is truly amazing how God often uses the consequences of man's sins for man's good.

1. For example, I have already shown you that we have thorns on the earth as the result of Adam's sin, yet thorns often fulfill good purposes today.

A. Thorns are in our gardens because of Adam's sin, but Jesus saved us from sin when He wore a crown of thorns.

1. John 19:1–5ff gives this remarkable account of Jesus shortly before His crucifixion:

**1 So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him. 2 And the soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. 3 Then they said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck Him with their hands. 4 Pilate then went out again, and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him." 5 Then Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. And Pilate said to them, "Behold the Man!"**

## **My Brethren Strengthen Me**

Ron Halbrook  
West Columbia, Texas

During the last Passover Supper Jesus shared with his disciples before his death, he taught them to show toward each other the unselfish love he had shown toward them (Jn. 13:34-35). Jesus knew that the faith and love of Peter would falter but not totally collapse as would happen with Judas. Jesus said to Peter,

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren (Lk. 22:31-32).

Peter was not ready to risk his life for his Lord and for the good of his brethren, but he would learn Such unselfish love from the death of Jesus. When he learns it, he will repent and change. Then he must strengthen and establish his brethren in this love. Just as Jesus patiently blessed and helped Peter, Peter must bless and help his brethren.

The most helpful man is he who has himself been tempted, who has passed, not without scars, through the right of faith. It is the sympathy of the soul that has come through great tribulation that has the delicate touch, the magnetic force, the faculty of establishing the brethren (The Gospel According to St. Luke, Vol. 2, in The Pulpit Commentary, p. 211).

We too want to learn the meaning of the unselfish love of Christ. We need to know how our brethren strengthen us and how each of us can strengthen others. Let us consider four simple points: (1) The family of Jesus cares and shares; (2) God comforted Paul through his brethren; (3) When do I need strength from my brethren?; (4) How can I strengthen my brethren?

### **The Family Of Jesus Cares And Shares**

The disciples of Jesus Christ are his spiritual family (Matt. 12:46-50).

We enter this family and become his disciples when we hear the gospel, believe it with all of the heart, repent of our sins, confess the name of Jesus, and are baptized in water for the remission of our sins (Matt. 28:19-20).

We have the unchanging assurance of this family relationship in the certain testimony of truth (Rom. 8:16-17). Jesus himself is our elder brother and ample as we learn to share his love and strength.

We can learn how much we need each other from two accounts in the life of Christ. In the trial of sickness and in the valley of the shadow of death, the disciples of Christ looked to Jesus for strength and comfort. Lazarus, the dear friend of Jesus, got sick and died. When Jesus saw the tomb and the sorrow of his friends, he wept. "Then said the Jews, Behold, how he loved him!" (Jn. 11:35-36) Having Jesus there meant something His love was tender and true. When Jesus went to pray in Gethsemane in the shadow of death, he wanted his disciples near to him. In his deep sorrow, he drew Peter, James, and John close to him and said, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here and watch" (Mk. 14:26-42). Having his disciples there meant something.

The law and example of Christ teach us to care for one another and to share our burdens and our strength with one another (Gal. 6:2). When one member of the body of Christ suffers, "all the members suffer with it" rather than ignoring it. When one member rejoices in good fortune, "all the members rejoice with it" rather than experiencing envy and strife (1 Cor. 12:25-26).

### **God Comforted Paul Through His Brethren**

Much can be learned about drawing upon the strength of our brethren from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul explains that he was "pressed out of measure, above strength, in so much that we despaired even of life." Paul had sacrificed to preach Christ and was constantly put into the jaws of persecution and death.

In view of his first severe letter to Corinth, he staggered under a weight of anxious concern for the state of the Corinthian church. He struggled under the added weight of the problems which followed him while preaching in Asia. How did Paul come through these trials? What did he learn from them?

Paul learned that God comforts us as we pass through trials so that we can comfort others (vv. 3-5). He also learned that no matter how much we suffer for the cause of Christ, Christ provides to us great comfort and consolation (v. 5). The prayers and financial support of the Corinthians, as an expression of their love and fellowship in the gospel, had lifted his spirits (vv. 8-11). We learn from Paul to rejoice and glory in one another as we see mutual growth, faithfulness, and brotherly love. We rejoice in view of the day of Christ and the final redemption of our souls (v. 14).

Paul had been so concerned for the state of the Corinthians that he could not preach while at Troas because Titus had not returned to him bringing news from Corinth. The crisis at Corinth was more urgent to Paul than the open door at Troas (2:12-13). Though Paul's first letter had been severe because of their sins, he suffered much affliction, anguish of heart, and many tears in the depth of his love for them (2:4).

"Nevertheless, God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus" (7:6). Titus had been refreshed & comforted by the evidence of godly sorrow among the Corinthians. Therefore, Paul was greatly refreshed and comforted both by the news from Corinth and by the encouragement they had given to Titus (7:5-7,13,14). When we rebuke sin in the lives of those we love, at times they do not realize the depth of our love and the anguish of our spirit on their behalf. When they then repent and correct their lives, they may not realize what great strength and encouragement they give to others as well.

My brethren strengthen me when they serve the Lord in a faithful way and do what is right! That is the point developed by Paul in the passages noted above. In 6:11-13, Paul continues to appeal for the Corinthians to do what is right on the basis that love begets love. He had loved them enough to teach them the truth and to maintain his concern for their souls. They ought to love him enough to keep their hearts open to truth and to Paul as he continued to teach them the truth. Their hearts had partly been closed because of the influence of false teachers (6:14-18).

Paul had suffered much to bring them the truth. His life was a series of exposures to death. But it was all easier to bear if he could see fruit in them, share in their love, and share the hope of heaven with them (6:4-10; 4:8-14). Paul mourned with great sorrow when he found his brethren sinning, but was glad with great joy when they were doing right (12:21).

**Paul discusses a thorn in the flesh which limited or hindered him in his gospel labors (12:7-10). Christians today who suffer many things in the flesh (from economic reverses to family problems to disease) may feel discouraged because their condition hinders them from accomplishing all that they aspire to do for the Lord. Paul learned that the grace and strength of Christ is partly given through his brethren. Those who loved him in the faith, labored with him, prayed for and with him, and encouraged him are mentioned time and again in his letters. Paul knew no other brother who was so dear and who cared so much for him and his labors than the young preacher Timothy. Epaphroditus, a messenger from the church at Philippi, was a joy to Paul and a relief to his sorrows (Phil. 2:19-30).**

### **When Do I Need Strength From My Brethren?**

1. We may become physically, emotionally, and spiritually tired. Jesus recognized this weakness in our physical constitution when he said, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41). We need brethren who will help us with the load we bear in the midst of our weakness. We do not need flattery, but genuine commendation can lift our spirits. We need those who will exhort, encourage, and listen. Even Jesus needed those who would watch and wait with him, although he did know they themselves could endure only so much because of the limitations of the flesh.

2. Sorrow, disappointments, tragedies, and setbacks of many kinds will fall upon us during this life. Some of these affect us physically, some spiritually, and often we are affected in both ways. Let us remember how the presence of Jesus with Mary and Martha in John 11 meant so much to them. He went first to share their sorrow, then to lift and strengthen their faith. We are the family of Jesus and we need to love our brethren in the same way that he showed love. It is foolish and hurtful for us to withdraw into a shell when we need the presence, love, and strength of our brethren.

3. When facing difficult decisions in life, we all need advice and wisdom from others. Every stage of life presents us with important decisions. These decisions may involve educations, dating, marriage, children, vocations, entertainment, where to live, etc. Remember Lot at a time when he needed advice, he thought only of ambition and the results were sad indeed. A spirit of arrogance and independence which shuts the door to the advice of others is self-destructive. "Without counsel purposes are disappointed; but in the multitude of counsellors they are established" (Prov. 15:22). No one else can make our decisions for us, but others can help us to find the strength and understanding necessary to make good decisions.

4. We need the strength which our brethren can give when we will face the devices of Satan during temptation. Jesus told Simon, "Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat" (Lk. 22:31). Because of what happened to him in his own life, Peter was well qualified to say, "Your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter. 5:8). My brethren can help me to be stronger in the face of temptation and help me to see the way of escape.

5. When we stumble and fall in sin, we need the love and strength of our brethren to lift us up. Jesus told Peter, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (Luke 22:32). Jesus not only saw that Peter would fall, but also that he would repent and change. A major reason for Peter's change was the knowledge of the love and concern Christ had shown to him. Brethren who love and care about us can help us to repent and change. We must never be offended when brethren approach us in love to point out weakness, sin, and dangers to our soul!

### **How Can I Strengthen My Brethren?**

1. Teach them the truth. We must learn all the truth we can and teach it to others with the confidence it will encourage, edify, and strengthen them unto the salvation of their souls. This is why the Apostle Paul spoke of "wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and . . . the doctrine which is according to godliness." Error and compromise weaken and destroy our brethren. Paul warned about "questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of corrupt minds (1 Tim. 6:3-5).



2. Set the best possible example. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). We need to follow the example of Christ as closely as we can. We must put our footprints into his footprints as nearly as possible. We must stand as close to the Lord, to the truth, and to the standard of righteousness as we can. All who are watching us and being influenced by us will be led to walk on safe and sure ground in this way. Our example will not have the same influence for good if we constantly see how close we can get without crossing the line into sin, error, and worldliness. We must see how far away from all such we can get! You may think you can keep your balance standing on the edge of the ledge, but are you sure the brethren who follow you will not fall over the cliff?

3. Our spirit and attitude should reflect the beauty of Jesus. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). Remember the song, "Let the Beauty of Jesus Be Seen in Me." Our brethren grow stronger when they see in us a childlike trust in God, long patience, an unselfish spirit, sincerity, reverence, delight in the law of the Lord, and determined opposition to all sin and error. Brethren are discouraged rather than encouraged when they see in us a disposition of complaint, murmuring, bitterness, envy, strife, personal ambition, and compromise with sin and error for personal advantage.

4. Strength is shared by hospitality and visiting with each other. The New Testament is full of admonitions for us to be busy in this good work (Heb. 13:2; Jas. 1:27; 1 Pet. 4:9). When Christians can be together on an informal basis, when they visit in order to share with one another, and when they show interest in each others' souls, their spiritual strength will abound. We need to open our homes rather than to isolate ourselves behind closed doors and walls. We need to go into the homes of others rather than to ignore them. Unity and love abound when brethren visit "from house to house (and) eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart" (Acts 2:46).

5. Pray for each other. Knowing of the trials that Peter was about to face and knowing Peter's weakness, Jesus prayed for him that his faith might not fail (Lk. 22:32). We ought to pray often for each other. Paul often mentioned in his letters the prayers he offered up to God, both giving thanks for his brethren and making intercession on behalf of their needs.

6. Warn, rebuke, and discipline. Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to "warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men" (1 Thessalonians 5:14). In the next letter Paul urged that the time had come to "withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us" (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15).

7. Forgive and comfort those who repent. Paul said that if we fail to do this we cause the erring Christian to be "swallowed up with overmuch sorrow" so that "Satan should get an advantage of us" (2 Cor. 2:7-11). When we show a forgiving spirit to those who genuinely repent, we increase their resolve and determination to do what is right and to overcome the devices of Satan.

8. Be faithful in worship. "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is" (Heb. 11:24-25). Willful absence from the services shows our lack of love not only for God but also for our brethren. We strengthen and encourage one another as we pray, sing, study God's word, and on the first day of the week give of our means and share at the Lord's table together.

Even in our own time of need, we can see and meet the needs of others for comfort, strength & edification. Jesus needed Peter's encouragement, but he considered Peter's need at the same time (Lk. 22:31-32). While hanging on the cross, Jesus thought of the needs of others (Lk. 23:34,43; Jn. 19:26-27). In the process of giving strength, we grow in the unselfish love of Christ himself & so find the strength we need in helping others!

Have you come into the family of Jesus, found his forgiveness, received his strength, and shared the blessings of the gospel with those you can help? Do not languish and despair in the family of Satan any longer! He can give you only doubt, disappointment, and eternal damnation. "And now why tarriest thou? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). If Satan has sifted you as an erring child of God, "repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee" (Acts 8:22). As we serve the Lord, he will give us strength. according to our need. He gives that strength in many ways. One way is this: My brethren strengthen me! – *Guardian of Truth Magazine*