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## RETHINKING PAUL'S THORN IN THE FLESH

“... a thorn in the flesh was given to me ...”

~ 2 Corinthians 12:7

**Sharpening the Focus:** For generations, Bible commentators have offered multiple theories about the identity of Paul's thorn in the flesh. The most popular theories range from various and sundry illnesses (malaria, epilepsy, ophthalmia, etc.), to haunting guilt for persecuting the church, to a sexual addiction Paul never overcame.

I've never found any of these common theories persuasive or satisfactory. To my mind, if we take the text, just as it is written, and compare it with other texts using similar language, then step back to take a fresh look at the New Testament narrative in its chronological sequence, an entirely different picture emerges—one I personally find compelling.

Let's first look carefully at the text: **Editor: the biblical texts in the box should be indented flush like they are in the main text. I cannot do this without it moving the quote outside the box.**

*By reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations, that I should not be exalted excessively, a thorn in the flesh was given to me: a messenger of Satan to torment me, that I should not be exalted excessively. Concerning this thing, I begged the Lord three times that it might depart from me. He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Most gladly*

*therefore I will rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest on me. Therefore I take pleasure in weaknesses, in injuries, in necessities, in persecutions, and in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then am I strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)*

Paul plainly identifies the thorn.<sup>1</sup> It was a “messenger of satan” with the malicious purpose to torment Paul. The word “torment” means “to strike with the fist, to rain blows upon, to treat with violence.” It’s often translated as “harass.” When Paul asks the Lord to remove the thorn, the Savior responds, “My power is perfected in weakness” (v.9). Paul immediately says that he would rather “boast in his weaknesses” so Christ’s power may dwell in him (v. 9).

What’s telling here is that Paul’s entire discussion in Chapter 11 (just before he mentions the thorn in the flesh) is about his “weaknesses.” The context of 2 Corinthians 11:16ff. are the false apostles who caused him great trouble. He then gives a robust list of hardships that he endured for the gospel:

- imprisonment
- flogging
- being exposed to death
- forty lashes (five times)
- beaten with rods (three times)
- being stoned
- being shipwrecked (three times)
- spending a night and day in the open sea

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<sup>1</sup> Barnett argues that the Greek word *skolops* translated “thorn” is used for a stake, thorn, or spike. It, therefore, seems to connote violence. However, when used in the LXX (Septuagint), it means only “splinter” or “thorn.” Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 569. See also F.F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 248.

- being in danger of rivers
- being in danger of bandits
- being in danger of his fellow Jews
- being in danger from Gentiles
- being in danger in the city and country
- being in danger at sea
- being in danger from false believers
- going without sleep
- going without food
- being cold and naked
- the daily pressure of his concern for the ekklesias he raised up<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, he describes all the above as “weaknesses,” never once mentioning being sick or ill (see 11:30). The word “weakness” in 11:30 is the same Greek word that’s used for “weaknesses” in 12:5 and 12:9-10. In 12:10, in addition to “weaknesses,” he mentions “insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties.”<sup>3</sup> He never mentions sickness or illness, which is odd if the thorn were a physical sickness of some kind. (The Greek word *angelos*—translated “messenger” in 12:7—tends to be used for personal beings, not impersonal instruments, like sickness, psychological problems, eye trouble, etc.<sup>4</sup>)

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<sup>2</sup> Paul’s list in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28 reads like a parody of the famous inscription of Augustus in which the emperor cataloged the glories of his reign (*Acts of Augustus*, 1:4). In 2 Corinthians 11, however, Paul lists his sufferings and losses. Clinton Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, 3:250.

<sup>3</sup> Barnett observes that in 2 Corinthians 11 through 12, Paul presents himself as a man of weakness, meaning, he is a “man of suffering” just like his Lord (Isaiah 53:3, NIV). Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 566.

<sup>4</sup> Some have tried to argue that Paul had an eye disease, based on the phrase “pluck your eyes out” in Galatians 4:15. But this is not a reference to Paul having eye trouble. Rather, it was a

Paul begins his argument in chapter 11 by talking about the “false apostles” and “deceitful workers” who transform themselves as angels of light. He goes on to say that even satan disguises himself as an angel of light (11:14). Interestingly, the Greek word for “angel” in 11:14 is the same word for “messenger” in 12:7 (which Paul refers to as a “thorn”).

Editor: Indent biblical quote.

*For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as Christ's apostles. And no wonder, for even Satan masquerades as an angel of light. It is no great thing therefore if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works. (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)*

Paul tells us that these “false apostles” are “servants” of satan. That is, they are messengers of the devil, doing his bidding. They masquerade themselves as messengers of light just as satan does. They traffic in slander, innuendo, misrepresentation, and defamation (see Acts 13:45; 2 Corinthians 6:8; 1 Timothy 6:4, NLT). They also bring persecution by stirring up the people, whether fellow Jews or Gentiles (as in Acts 17; 2 Corinthians 12:10). Right after Paul mentions his thorn in the flesh (12:7), he says that he is not inferior to the best apostles and he worked the signs of a real apostle in their midst.

*. . . for I am in no way inferior to the very best apostles, though I am nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were worked among you in all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty works. (2 Corinthians 12:11-12)*

Consequently, if we view 2 Corinthians 11 and 12 as a discussion about the weaknesses in which Paul boasts, we begin to make better sense of what his thorn was all about. In the Old Testament, the term “thorn” is used as a metaphor for a person or group that persecutes God’s people:

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familiar figure of speech similar to someone saying, “You’d give your left arm for someone.” N.T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 123; It was a graphic idiom for going to the extreme to benefit another person. Richard Longenecker, *Galatians*, 193; Craig Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, NCBC (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 240, n. 273. It was also a familiar expression for affection in antiquity. Personal correspondence with Craig Keener, 5/1/16.

*But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those you let remain of them will be like pricks in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will harass you in the land in which you dwell. (Numbers 33:55; see also Joshua 23:13 and Judges 2:3)*

In this context, God's enemies are called "thorns" in Israel's sides (flesh) that "vex" and torment them. These "thorns" were human beings motivated by God's enemy. When we read the New Testament as a narrative, taking it in its chronological sequence, we discover something interesting. Everywhere Paul planted a church, a group of detractors opposed his ministry and made a calculated effort to discredit his apostolic authority and assail his character in the eyes of the Christians for whom he cared.

In Galatians, Paul indicates that this group of detractors was headed up by one man in particular. Paul refers to the detractors saying: "Only there are *some* who trouble you and want to pervert the Good News of Christ" (Galatians 1:7). "I wish that *those* who disturb you would cut *themselves* off" (Galatians 5:12).

He refers to the one man heading them up saying: "But *he* who troubles you will bear his judgment, whoever *he* is" (Galatians 5:10).<sup>5</sup> At the end of the letter, Paul says something else worth noting:

*From now on, let no one cause me any trouble, for I bear the marks of the Lord Jesus branded on my body. (Galatians 6:17)*

You can almost hear a prayer behind this statement in which Paul is asking the Lord to remove this person who is troubling him and the churches.

Putting all this together, an important picture emerges. Paul's thorn was likely a man (inspired by satan) obsessed with discrediting Paul and his ministry, just as the religious leaders in Jerusalem were obsessed with destroying Jesus and His ministry. This man followed Paul wherever he traveled, beginning in Galatia (Acts 14ff.). He was from the church in Jerusalem, most likely a Pharisee who converted

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<sup>5</sup> Also compare what Paul says about the "one" person in 2 Corinthians 11:4, NASB with Galatians 1:9, NASB. The wording is almost identical.

(Acts 15:5).<sup>6</sup> And he made it his mission to subvert Paul's gospel and undermine Paul's work.

This "messenger" or "servant" of satan was in league with a group of others who followed him (Galatians 1:7; 5:12). They followed in Paul's footsteps to the churches in Galatia, Thessalonica, and then to Corinth. (I will later argue that he is the ringleader of the "super-apostles" that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 11-12.)<sup>7</sup> Paul responds to their accusations in Galatians 1:10-24; 2:1-18; 1 Thessalonians 2:3-6; 2 Corinthians 10-12. On three occasions, Paul asked the Lord to remove this person from his life. He was a torment, frustration, and harassment to Paul and his work. But the Lord answered and said that His grace was sufficient.

The Lord didn't remove the thorn. He instead enabled Paul to bear with it. Near the end of his life, Paul would reflect on the persecutions he endured in Galatia saying,

*You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. (2 Timothy 3:10-11, NIV)*

The persecutions and afflictions still came, but they didn't stop Paul from moving forward. By God's grace, Paul *endured* them all, for God's grace was sufficient. While this text probably isn't referring specifically to Paul's "thorn," the principle involved is the same. The men who visited Galatia and Corinth with their "gospel" seemed to have been fellow Hebrews from the Jerusalem church (although operating without its approval and misrepresenting the assembly—see 2 Corinthians 11:22 and Galatians chapter 1 through chapter 2). That is, these men were recognized Christians—in name at least.

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<sup>6</sup> I believe this man was Paul's peer in gifting, intelligence, zeal, and uncommon devotion to his cause.

<sup>7</sup> Witherington agrees that the opponents in Corinth were headed up by a "ringleader" and argues the point from the Greek. Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 447.

To my mind, this interpretation fits the evidence better than the alternatives. And it's one that is confirmed by the experience of many servants of God. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor writes,

*The nature of the thorn in the flesh has intrigued commentators from the early patristic period to the present day. But a common-sense look at what Paul actually did in the course of his lifetime excludes any bodily or psychiatric disease ... The only hypothesis for which a serious case can be made is that by the thorn in the flesh Paul meant opposition to his ministry from within the Jesus movement. His mention of "a messenger of Satan" implies an external, personal source of affliction, and previously he had identified as 'servants of Satan' (2 Cor. 11:14-15) his Antiochean adversaries in Corinth ...*<sup>8</sup>

Barnett is in agreement saying, "More plausibly, Paul's *skolops* [thorn] is the rise of the Judaizing, anti-Paul movement, such as was then all too obvious in Corinth."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: His Story*, 191. Murphy-O'Connor identifies the "Antiochean adversaries" as the Judaizers who visited Antioch, Galatia, and Corinth. Likewise, Paul Barnett argues that "the Jewish counter-mission" followed Paul to most of the assemblies he raised up. Paul Barnett, *Paul: Missionary of Jesus*, chap. 9. Barnett writes, "A significant source of Paul's missionary sufferings was the counter-mission of the Jerusalem-based Jewish Christians who sought to impose circumcision on the Gentile believers" (191).

<sup>9</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 570. In addition, after reading my thesis on Paul's thorn, Barnett remarked, "There is the reasonable possibility Paul was referring to the Jewish counter-missionaries. Your case is well worth arguing." Personal correspondence with Barnett, 1/14/24.