

A Thorn in the Flesh

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[Scripture quotations taken from the NASB](#)

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul wrote:

Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given 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)

In the verses preceding the passage above, we learn that Paul was “caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak” (verse 4). He did not want to speak of the man who had received these revelations in the first person, because some might think that he was boasting (verses 5-6). However, it becomes clear in verse 7-10 that Paul was in fact the man who had received these revelations. And then we learn that because of these great revelations, Paul was given “a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment” him, to keep him from exalting himself.

Now this is a curious thing: a messenger of Satan sent to one of God’s servants to keep him from exalting himself. It is easy to understand that Satan wanted to see Paul exalt himself, because he knows that God hates the sin of pride (Proverbs 6:16-17, 21:4 others). So then, it follows that this torment was not Satan’s idea, but it was God who sent this “thorn in the flesh”, this messenger of

Satan, for the purpose of preventing Paul from exalting himself because of the great revelations that had been given to him.

When we consider Paul's thorn in the flesh and why God sent it into his life, we can begin to understand how he could write that "all things" work together for the good of those who love God, those who are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). Even the activity of Satan and the afflictions that our sovereign God may allow to touch our lives will be made to work together for our eternal good and glory together with Christ.

We might wonder why Paul, of all people, would need this "thorn in the flesh", this "messenger of Satan" to torment him, to keep him from exalting himself. After all, if anyone seemed to be thoroughly dedicated to doing God's work, surely it was the Apostle Paul.

The answer to this question can be found in Romans 7:14-25, as Paul revealed his own struggle against sin. He revealed his struggle to encourage all believers when we experience the same struggles in our lives, as we most certainly will. Even though we have been set free from sin, and we are no longer slaves to sin as unbelievers are (Romans 6:6, 22), we will all, as Paul did, experience this ongoing struggle against temptation and sin during our lives here on this earth.

We can consider the struggle against temptation and sin as a share in some of the same kinds of sufferings that Jesus endured. The Bible tells us that He was in all points tempted as we are, and yet He was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus never failed in His obedience to His Father, but at times we do. Such struggles with temptation and sin are a part of the fiery trials that Peter wrote about, and he exhorted us not to consider them as though something strange were happening to us (1 Peter 4:12-13). These sufferings are a part of God's will and plan for every believer.

Man's pride and his inclination to boast in order to exalt himself above others because of the things that he may possess, is sin. Whether he boasts about his material possessions, position in life, talents, abilities, or even his own spiritual understanding and insights, all such boasting is sin, and sin is a hindrance to a believer bearing fruit to the glory of God.

Jesus taught us in John 12:24-26 that spiritual fruit bearing comes about *only* through the "death" of the "grain of wheat". That grain of wheat is symbolic of our lives and all that we want for ourselves during our lives in this world.

One aspect of the “death” of the grain of wheat is our own refusal to take part in sin, even though we may see it as a path to obtain the gratification that we want for ourselves. Another aspect of the “death” of the grain of wheat will be manifested when God takes or withholds things that we want to have or keep or experience for ourselves in this life, as a part of His plan for each of us individually. Through these “deaths” or losses in our lives, we will become in some measure as Jesus was, a man of sorrows who was familiar with grief (Isaiah 53:3). And through these deaths we will take up our cross and follow Jesus (Matthew 16:24, Luke 14:27, Matthew 26:36-46), sharing in His sufferings, so that we may also receive a share in His eternal glory (Romans 8:17).

God had chosen Paul for a very special place of service in His kingdom, as one of only twelve apostles. With Paul’s assignment as an apostle of Jesus Christ, he would be required to drink from the cup of suffering that Jesus drank in a measure greater than most believers will experience. He would be required to be baptized with the baptism of Jesus’ sufferings in a measure greater than most believers (Mark 10:35-40).

Shortly after Paul was brought to faith in Christ on the Damascus Road, it was revealed to him the things that had been appointed for him to do in God’s service (Acts 22:10). God had determined that the work He had appointed for Paul, and the eternal reward he would realize because of this work, would not be deterred by any temptation he might experience to exalt himself because of the great revelations that had been given to him. Therefore, God chose to send this “thorn in the flesh”, this messenger of Satan, to afflict Paul, to keep him from exalting himself. And in his condition of weakness, he would be forced to rely not on his own strength, but on the power of Christ dwelling in him to do the things that he could not accomplish in his own strength. (Consider 2 Corinthians 4:7-12, John 3:30.)

Paul pleaded with the Lord three times that this thorn in the flesh, this painful physical ailment, would be taken from him, but the answer he received was this: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9). With this answer to his prayer, Paul now understood that Christ’s power working in his life was made perfect through his own weakness. And therefore, he was well content with whatever weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, and difficulties that God allowed to touch his life.

It was revealed to Paul that when he was weak and lacking in his own strength, the power of Christ would dwell within him, making him strong. And the same is true for all of us as believers in Christ. God comforted Paul with this understanding so that he could comfort us with the same comfort that he had received from God (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

Seeing that even the apostle Paul was made to endure a “thorn in the flesh” to keep him from exalting himself so the work God had assigned for him would not be hindered, we also could expect that such things might be a condition of our own lives as well, as God works to fulfill His plan and purpose for each of us. Through such experiences of weakness, the power of Christ will dwell within us, as it did with Paul, and God will demonstrate that His grace is sufficient for our every weakness and need.