

What is Paul thorn in the flesh?

Our reference passage is found in 2 Cor. 12:7-10.

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. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 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. 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.

Tradition says that the thorn sent to Paul was a sickness which God refused to heal, to keep him humble. Let's do a bible study, asking questions and applying rules of bible interpretations, in order to really understand this passage and answer this taunting question "did God truly send or allow a sickness on Paul to teach him, and refused to heal him to keep him humble?"

Who sent the thorn to Paul?

A messenger of Satan – the thorn comes from Satan, not God!

Why did Satan send a thorn to Paul?

2 Cor. 12:7 Lest I should be exalted above measure (in some translation = filled with pride, proud).

Exalted above measure = Greek – Huper-airo

Huper = extremely above and beyond.

Airo = exalted, raised, lifted up, proud.

Would Satan want to stop Paul from becoming prideful? Satan on the contrary is the one who would want Paul to fall into pride...

Proverb 16:18 Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall (also 1 Timothy 3:6).

Is the passage in question speaking of pride? Does Paul have a problem with pride?

Ephesians 3:8 Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints.

1 Corinthians 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles, that am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

Acts 20:19 serving the Lord with all humility of mind, many tear, & temptations happening to me through the plots of the Jews

Does this sound like pride? NO, not at all.

If he is not talking about pride, then what is he talking about?

In the Bible, we find that there is also a godly type of exaltation.

Proverb 14:34 Righteousness exalts a nation

Luke 14:11 For whosoever exalts himself shall be abased; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted.

Why did Satan try to stop Paul from being exalted?

2 Corinthians 12:7 Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations,

These great revelations were causing Paul to be exalted and gain great influence among the people.

- ❖ We see that God Himself was exalting Paul by confirming the Word with signs and wonders.
Acts 19:11-12
- ❖ Whole cities were coming to hear Paul preach. Acts 13:42-44
- ❖ All Asia heard the Gospel. Acts 19:9-10

This is why the devil sent a messenger, an evil spirit to stop Paul from gaining influence and preaching the gospel. This is the type of exaltation that the devil has tried to stop in Paul's life.

What did that thorn (an evil messenger) do?

2 Corinthians 12:7 That thorn, that evil messenger, was sent to buffet him.

Buffet = Greek- kolaphizo - to strike with the fist, give one blow after another (like a boxer in order to knock a person out).

Was this buffeting a sickness?

2 Corinthians 12:9-10 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in persecutions, in distresses...

Infirmity = Grk ASTHENEIA = weakness, lack of ability & strength, sometimes it refers to sickness.

Most of the time it refers to weakness.

Romans 8:26 Likewise the Spirit also helps our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.

The same word is used in 2 Corinthians 12:10

2 Cor 12:10 for when I am weak (astheneo) then I am strong.

Look at the context – Paul defines his sufferings

- ❖ In chapters before
2 Corinthians 11:23-33; 2 Corinthians 6:4-10
- ❖ He reveals his sufferings to Timothy
2 Timothy 3:10-12 Paul defines his sufferings = persecution, afflictions that happened to him at Antioch, Iconium, Lystra.
- ❖ In the book of Acts... so sickness here!
Acts 13:49-50; Acts 14:1-5,19. Everywhere he went in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, a group of people was stirring strife and persecution. No sickness there!

Paul is talking about those who persecuted him.

Acts 20:3; Acts 17:5,13

But who really motivated these people to persecute Paul?

2 Corinthians 12:7... there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me...

Messenger = Grk Angelos = angel, spirit, demon.

Revelation 12:4, 7, 9 During his rebellion, Satan deceived some of the angels and they followed him.

This thorn was a messenger from Satan, a spirit or demon that came from Satan to influence the unbelievers to persecute Paul.

Why would the unbelievers in each city feel compelled to persecute Paul and follow him in each city, unless they were stirred and under a demonic influence? Jesus said that the devil is a murderer.

What about Paul's infirmity in the flesh?

Galatians 4:13 You know that through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel to you before, and you did not despise my temptation in my flesh, nor did you spurn it. But you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What then was your blessedness? For I bear you record that, if you were able, plucking out your eyes, you would have given them to me.

Paul had just left the region (Antioch, Iconium, Lystra & Derbe) where he had been repeatedly persecuted and stoned. Some will quote this passage to prove that Paul was sick of an eye infirmity and would not get healed because of God's refusal to do so. How would you look like if you had been beaten, stoned, left for dead? Wouldn't there be marks on your body & face?

Maybe your eyes swollen and shut down, bruises, limping, with no doubt some physical injuries.

→ Plucking out your eyes.... an expression equal to "you would have cut your right arm for me", meaning that you would have done anything you could, to help.

The rest of the Bible confirms this - What is a thorn in the flesh in other biblical passages?

According to rules of interpretation, we must find the word thorn in other passages of the bible... only 3 other times.

Numbers 33:55 But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall be that those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell.

Same in Joshua 23:13 – Judges 2:3

If you study each passage, a thorn made reference to a group of people that would always harass, create problems and inflict pain to Israel.

→ Remember that Paul was a Jewish scholar and used old testament illustrations as a frame of reference.

But Why did God refuse to take it away?

2 Corinthians 12:8 Paul asked God 3 times to take this away from him but God said “my grace is sufficient for you”

- ❖ We have been redeemed from sickness but we have not been redeemed from persecutions.
2 Timothy 3:12 Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.
Mar 10:30 But he shall receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions.
- ❖ God will turn this as a testimony for His glory and for people' salvation because God also loves the persecutors.
Luke 21:12,13 But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake. And it shall turn to you for a testimony.
Philippians 1:12 But I want you to know brethren that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the Gospel.
This is why Paul learned to rejoice!

What was God's Solution?

God's grace gives us the power to rise above the buffetings of Satan, the tribulations and persecutions.

GRACE = God's divine ability to do what we could not do in the natural.

His grace, His power, His ability is enough...

We can see the Grace of God (His divine help, power and ability) at work in Paul's life:

Acts 14:19 Paul was left for dead, but God's grace & power caused him to get back up and go preach...

2 Timothy 4:14-18 Paul speaks of people who persecuted him, opposing the works of God. He says that Jesus stood by him and strengthened him and delivered him out of the mouth of lions.

It is amazing to discover through the historians' accounts such as Josephus, that at the time, some of the methods of punishments and torture, were tying someone's torso, hands and arms behind. The torso would lay tied up on the ground, but the legs were also tied up and raised up by a rope, while people would beat the legs, the feet with rods of iron, attempting to break every bone in the person's legs... and the purpose was to stop the person to ever stand up and walk anywhere. But yet Paul, no matter how many beatings he received, was able by the grace of God to get back up and walk in every city.

Paul himself confirms why he suffered all these things:

2 Timothy 1:8-12 Because of the Gospel Paul suffered all these things.

2 Timothy 2:1-3; 8-13 Paul suffered persecutions for the sake of the elects that they may obtain salvation.

Paul learnt the important lesson and at the end of his life he declared while in a roman prison:

Philippians 3:13 He could do all things, through Christ who strengthened him....

No doubt... God's grace was always sufficient for Paul.

No matter what you are going through... There is a grace available for you and it is always sufficient and enough !