

# Paul's Thorn

By Tom Brown



And to keep me from being puffed up and too much elated by the exceeding greatness (preeminence) of these revelations, there was given me a thorn (a splinter) in the flesh, **a messenger of Satan**, to rack and buffet and harass me, to keep me from being excessively exalted. Three times I called upon the Lord and besought [Him] about this and begged that it might depart from me; But He said to me, My grace (My favor and loving-kindness and mercy) is enough for you [sufficient against any danger and enables you to bear the trouble manfully; for My strength and power are made perfect (fulfilled and completed) and show themselves most effective in your weakness. Therefore, I will all the more gladly glory in my

weaknesses and infirmities, that the strength and power of Christ (the Messiah) may rest (yes, may pitch a tent over and dwell) upon me! So for the sake of Christ, I am well pleased and take pleasure in infirmities, insults, hardships, persecutions, perplexities and distresses; for when I am weak [in human strength], then am I [truly] strong (able, powerful in divine strength). *2 Corinthians 12:7-10, AMP*

Whenever I teach along the lines of test and trials, and show that God does not test us with problems, inevitably people want to know about Paul's thorn. To them, Paul's thorn is proof that God sometimes allows us to get sick in order to teach us.

There is not a thorn that has stuck more people than Paul's thorn. Through this passage, people have developed a weak, passive gospel where they are suppose to suffer sickness for the glory of God.

I have debated with theologians about divine healing and have asked them, "Show me one example in the Gospels where Jesus refused to heal a person who had faith."

Nearly every time I ask this question, they reply, "Paul is the example." I have to remind them that I asked for an example in the Gospels. When I clarify the question, they simply shrug their shoulders, "I don't know of any example in the Gospels where Jesus did not heal someone who came to Him in faith."

The fact that people have to depart from the Gospels and use Paul's thorn as an example of Jesus denying someone health is proof how weak their arguments against divine healing really are. The Gospels clearly reveal that Jesus healed everyone who asked Him, yet people will cling to this one passage as proof that Jesus has denied them their healing on the grounds that they have a thorn in the flesh.

## **Three Errors**

The accustomed interpretation in traditional Christianity concerning this passage is as follows: Paul was prideful because of the great revelations God gave him. To keep Paul humble God sent a demon to make him sick. Paul asked God to heal him, but the Lord said no. The lesson: God sometimes sends demons to make us sick in order to keep us humble.

Satan is cunning. He can distort any Scripture to keep people bound. This passage is a case in point.

There are three major errors concerning this traditional interpretation: first, that God personally sent the demon, second, that the demon made Paul sick, and third, that God refused to heal Paul from this sickness.

## **Exalted Beyond Measure**

Paul gives the reason why this messenger of Satan was given to him. "Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of revelations." I find it inconsistent that people claim to have Paul's thorn but they don't claim to have his abundance of revelations. So before you claim to have a thorn, make sure you have an abundance of revelations.

Paul says, "there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me." Since Paul uses the word given people assume that God gave it. But notice that the thorn in the flesh is a messenger of Satan. Messengers are sent from their leaders. This messenger was sent by his leader, Satan. God did not send him.

What did this messenger of Satan do? Many think that this messenger was a demon who made Paul sick. They assume this demon made him sick because in the gospels we find demons causing sicknesses. But this is not the only thing that demons do. They also cause persecutions. This is what this evil spirit caused. Let me prove this to you.

## **Let the Bible Interpret Itself**

The first rule of Bible interpretation is this: if at all possible, let the Bible interpret itself. In other words, before you give a meaning to a passage, ask yourself if there are any other Scriptures related to this. If there are, then let those passages interpret the passage you're reading. This is especially true concerning Paul's thorn.

To understand what problem the messenger of Satan caused, you have to understand the term "thorn in the flesh." This term is found frequently in the Old Testament. Paul was very familiar with the Old Testament, so he undoubtedly used this term in the same way that it is used in the Old Covenant.

It's amazing to me that people speculate as to the meaning of Paul's thorn. Most theologians will say, "We can't be sure what this thorn was, but it was probably a sickness, perhaps an eye disease."

When I hear this kind of speculation I wonder if these so-called experts have bothered to look up the word thorn in their concordance. If they had, then they would know for sure what Paul's thorn really was.

So what was this thorn? You have the answer if you know how the word thorn was used in the Old Testament. Once you know, then you know the meaning of Paul's thorn.

There are three main passages in the Old Testament that relate to Paul's thorn in the flesh. The first one is Numbers 33:55:

*"But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live."*

So here, the thorns represent Israel's enemies—those who caused trouble for Israel. The second passage which refers to thorns is Judges 2:3:

*"Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you."*

The thorns were the Canaanites. The Canaanites were Israel's persecutors. Again we see that the thorns referred to people who hated Israel. The third passage about thorns is Joshua 23:12-13:

*"But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations...then you may be sure that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the Lord your God has given you."*

This passage makes it plain that the nations were going to be thorns in Israel's eyes.

Put these three passages together and you discover what the thorns represent. The thorns consistently represent Israel's enemies. They were Israel's persecutors. Not once does the Bible use this term thorn to represent physical sicknesses.

Go back to the passage in 2 Corinthians and you see that Paul's thorn represented his enemies who persecuted him. This is obviously what he had in mind, because he mentions clearly what the thorn did to him:

*So for the sake of Christ, I am well pleased and take pleasure in infirmities, insults, hardships, persecutions, perplexities and distresses; for when I am weak [in human strength], then am I [truly] strong (able, powerful in divine strength). (2 Corinthians 12:10) AMP*

It doesn't take a genius to figure out that Paul used the term thorn to represent persecutions (and all that went with it) that he endured for preaching the gospel. To suggest that Paul's thorn was an organic illness, such as Ophthalmia, (inflammation of the eye) is really stretching the meaning of this term. The Bible plainly tells us that the term thorn is used in reference to people who become enemies of God's family. This is what Paul meant by that term.

Even today, we have a similar term which means the same thing. We say that someone is a "pain in the neck." We don't actually mean that we have a physical pain. The term pain in the neck is a colloquial phrase which conveys that someone is giving us problems. The term thorn in the flesh does not mean an actual thorn or an actual fleshly problem. It simply means that people harassed Paul.

### **Loop Holes**

Why do theologians misinterpret Paul's thorn to mean sickness? The reason is clear: they are looking for loop holes in God's covenant of health. God makes it clear that Jesus bore our sickness and that He is the God Who heals us from all our diseases. The Gospels reveal Jesus as our complete healer. Yet, instead of accepting the clear teaching of the Bible regarding divine healing, people comb through the Scriptures, hoping to find exceptions to the covenant of health. Paul's thorn seems to be their supreme exception.

Do you realize that Paul's thorn is their major evidence that proves that God wants some people to have a demon afflicting them with disease? If this is the primary evidence, then their case is ruined.

Imagine that you are a jury, and the only evidence is the Bible. You listen to the evidence of divine healing. As a lawyer, I present you case by case examples of Jesus healing everyone who was afflicted by the devil. I show you God's covenant of health in the Old Testament, and how Jesus fulfilled the covenant of health through His sacrifice on the cross—that He took our infirmities on Himself and by His stripes we are healed.

After all this conclusive evidence, another lawyer—a theologian—tells you to forget all this evidence and accept only one piece of evidence that he has, and that is Paul's thorn.

I come back to rebut this evidence by pointing to the fact that the term thorn refers to Paul's persecutors.

After hearing all this evidence, what are you going to conclude about divine healing? You easily conclude that the theologian lawyer is grabbing for straws to maintain his traditional doctrine that divine healing does not belong to us. The clear evidence of Scripture is that healing is ours.

### **Four Kinds of Suffering**

This brings us to one last important point. Paul prayed that God would remove the persecutions from him. Yet God answered, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). It was God's will that Paul be made perfect through suffering persecutions.

Many complain about the message of health and prosperity. They charge that faith ministers deny the role of suffering in the Christian life. Well, I can't speak for others, but I believe that a Christian should suffer, but only suffer if it's God's will.

The problem with much of the teaching on suffering is that it assumes that all suffering is the same. Many do not differentiate between bad suffering and good suffering. The Bible mentions four kinds of suffering: general, sinful, demonic, and Christian.

General suffering is discomfort that everyone goes through. Sinful suffering is punishment for doing wrong. Demonic suffering is unusual misfortune which happens to people because of the work of demons. Christian suffering is adversity which comes only to Christians who are living godly—it's usually in the form of persecutions, criticism, prejudice—and is normally caused by fallen angels.

Some simply treat the subject of suffering as though all suffering were the same. For example: one believer may be thrown into prison for preaching the gospel and another may be in prison for stealing beer at a convenient store. Both are suffering, but it's clear that one is suffering for the cause of Christ and the other is suffering for his own sins. You can't say that both are suffering according to God's will. Peter writes:

*If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name... So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good" (1 Pet. 4:15-16, 19).*

This Scripture clearly shows the difference between Christian suffering and sinful suffering.

In another case, one lady experiences pain in child birth, and another dies giving birth. They both suffered. The lady who had pain experienced suffering which nearly every pregnant woman goes through. This is called general suffering. It is suffering which everyone goes through, whether they are a believer or not.

However, the woman who died experience unusual tragedy. When someone experiences something unusual, often this kind of suffering is demonic. Demonic suffering is caused by the devil himself through his agency of demons. There is no reason that a Christian woman should have to suffer death when she gives birth. Pain yes, death no.

Paul says, "But women will be kept safe through childbirth, if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety" (1 Tim. 2:15). God promises protection in child birth. He does not promise to exempt her from pain, though.

Some overly zealous charismatics have taught that women don't have to go through pain in delivery. They say that we are redeemed from the curse. And the curse is having pain in childbirth. "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children" (Genesis 3:16).

They reason that since this is a curse, and we are redeemed from the curse of the Law (see Galatians 3:13), women should not have to have pain in childbirth. The problem with their interpretation is that they confuse the curse in Genesis with the curse of the Law. God does not exempt us from the curse in Genesis; He exempts from the curse of the Law. The curse of the Law is mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 28, and nowhere does it mention pain in childbirth as a curse. It does mention miscarriage as a curse, but never pain.

You see, some suffering is normal and should not be considered sinful or demonic. It's just normal. For example, it's normal to get gray hair when you grow old. You don't rebuke gray hair, you simply dye it. It's normal to slow up a bit when you get older. The devil is not slowing you up; age is. However, that does not mean you should be in a wheel chair.

I find it humorous that Christians are fighting what is normal. On the other hand, I find it tragic that other Christians accept suffering which is not normal—like terminal and chronic illnesses. The Bible describes those illnesses as demonic, and believers need to fight those.

So it's clear that suffering can be God's will if it is Christian suffering. This is what Paul went through, and God made it clear that through this kind of suffering Paul would be made perfect and strong. We should embrace this kind of suffering, but reject demonic suffering.