

PAUL'S THORN IN THE FLESH

August 5, 2018

The following question was submitted to me, "What is the 'thorn in the flesh' that Paul mentions in 2 Cor. 12:7? The verse reads, *"And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure."* (2 Corinthians 12:7 KJV).

The context is in regards to Paul referring to "a man he knew" that had what seems to be an out-of-body experience. The man went into the "third heaven" (12:2), also called "paradise" (12:4), and heard things of which he was not given permission to speak. The man of whom Paul speaks is himself.

Paul is speaking in the third person, he does not want to be mistaken as seeking glory (12:1). However, false teachers are trying to discredit Paul in various ways, one of which is by claiming visions and revelations from God. Paul has defended his apostleship throughout this letter and here cautiously makes known that he has also received visions and revelations, though he will not utter them for the sake of glory or even to defend his apostleship. It is a shame that Paul must resort to defending himself. These brethren should be vouching for Paul, but instead they question his apostleship against the claims of false teachers (12:11).

We may know that Paul is speaking of himself in third-person, because the verse in question (12:7), has Paul speaking of this thorn in the flesh, being a means of preventing his becoming prideful, or too highly esteemed *"through the abundance of revelations."*

The time, Paul noted, in which this happened was fourteen plus years ago (12:2), which is a time that correlates to Paul's visit to Lystra, during his first missionary journey, where he was stoned and left for dead. Paul repeats the phrase for emphasis, *"whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth."* Paul did not know whether what he had experience was a vision or whether he was truly there, but it is altogether possible this was something he experienced as he was on the verge of death.

What we know about Paul's "thorn in the flesh" is very little. It served a purpose to benefit Paul, yet it hindered him, and he attributes it to a messenger of Satan. He asked that it be taken away three times, but the Lord responded, *"My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."* Paul used this thorn in the flesh sent from Satan and designed to hinder him, instead to bolster his resolve. This seems to be the main idea we should gain from the text, that Paul learned to take pleasure in infirmities and hinderances for they caused him to suffer as Christ, remain humble, and grow stronger in faith.

Bible scholars have offered many suggestions as to what the "thorn in the flesh" was. Tertullian said that the "thorn in the flesh" was headaches, Klaners said that it was epilepsy, John Knox thought that Paul had mental problems, McGarvey thought it was a problem with the eyes, Macknight says that it was the false teachers, Alexander said it was a fever from Malta, Coffman says it was the opposition of the Judaizers, others have suggested it was something along the lines of what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or some reoccurring temptation.

Paul did have some manner of bodily infirmity that was visible when he preached to the Galatians (Gal. 4:13-15). Some take his statement in verse fifteen (*"for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me"*) to be evidence that his infirmity was related to the eyes. Though this might be compelling as an answer, truth is we cannot be sure if this is that which he calls a "thorn in the flesh."

We will probably never know this side of heaven, with any degree of certainty, what Paul's thorn in the flesh was. However, we can know that the answer given to his prayer was "no," despite his strong faith. The troubles

of this life at times we simply must endure. No amount of faith or righteousness qualifies us for immunity to the infirmities of life. We must learn how to turn Satan's attempts to weaken us into strength. Let us strive to reach the mindset: that His grace is sufficient for us.