

Series: Divine Healing Series

Title: Session 9 – What About Paul’s Thorn?

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Answer Objections to Healing

9. What About Paul’s Thorn?

- The objection – Paul’s thorn in 2 Corinthians 12:7 was a sickness.
- Answer – However as we will see, Paul’s thorn wasn’t a sickness in his body. Here is the whole context of that biblical passage:

2 Corinthians 12:2–10 (NASB95)

²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven.

³And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—

⁴was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

⁵On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard **to my weaknesses**.

⁶For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me.

⁷Because 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!

⁸Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.

⁹And 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.

¹⁰Therefore 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**.

- a. First of all, when Paul talks about his thorn in the flesh, he refers to it as a weakness and not as a sickness (v. 5, 9, 10). Actually, verse 10 concludes and seems to describe in more details what Paul’s thorn was: weaknesses, insults, distresses, persecutions, difficulties for Christ’s sake. If it was a bodily sickness, he could have called it that way: “...I will not boast, except in regard to **my sicknesses**” (v.5), “...power is perfected in **sickness**....I will rather boast about **my sicknesses**...” (v.9), “...Therefore I am well content with **sicknesses, with insults**,....for Christ’s sake; for when I am **sick**, then I am **strong**.” (v. 10). If the thorn had been a bodily sickness, Paul could have mentioned at least once that sickness. This is how any human being would talk about a sickness or a disease they have in their body, which bothers them.
- b. Moreover, when Apostle Paul used this phrase “thorn in the flesh”, everybody in his audience seems to have understood what he was referring to, without asking any questions. Whenever we see a term in the New Testament (like “thorn”), we should search it in the Old Testament as well, and find out where was it mentioned the first time and in what contexts was that term used, because the characters of the New Testament were accustomed with the Old Testament and its terminology. Even though, Paul was speaking here mostly to Gentiles (the church in Corinth), there were also some Jews in that church too. One example is Aquila and Priscilla, two exiled Jews from Rome, in whose home Paul stayed while ministering in Corinth (Acts 18). Plus, the church in Corinth surely must have had some Old Testament background since Paul used frequently references to

Old Testament (“...our fathers were all under the cloud and they all passed through the sea...” – 1 Cor. 10:1 – references Moses’ story).

- Now coming back to the Old Testament references of the word “thorn”, many times when the word “thorn” was used in the Old Testament, it referred to people (and not to sickness), usually to the Canaanites (or the “ites” nations):

Numbers 33:55 (NKJV)

⁵⁵But 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.

- Here the context is before Joshua entered the promised land with the people of Israel
- Notice that the thorns were present in the promised land of Canaan, so there was an opposition for the people of Israel and the necessity of a fight for possessing the land.
- The thorns in the passage above were the Canaanites.

Joshua 23:13 (NKJV)

¹³know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations from before you. But they shall be snares and traps to you, and scourges on your sides and **thorns in your eyes**, until you perish from this good land which the LORD your God has given you.

Judges 2:3 (NKJV)

³Therefore I also said, ‘I will not drive them out before you; but they shall be **thorns in your side**, and their gods shall be a snare to you.’ ”

- c. One of the usual interpretations of Paul’s thorn is that it was a remaining of his blindness from the road to Damascus, a kind of residual – a sickness called ophthalmia (also called ophthalmitis). Now let us see if that was the case indeed:

Acts 9:15–19 (NKJV)

¹⁵But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.

¹⁶For I will show him **how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.**”

¹⁷And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you came, has sent me **that you may receive your sight** and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

¹⁸Immediately there **fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight** at once; and he arose and was baptized.

¹⁹So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

- Jesus did not tell Ananias that Paul will suffer of blindness for His name’s sake. Moreover, as seen in verse 18, Paul was completely healed of his blindness. It was not partial healing or with residual remains.
- If that was true and Paul continued to have residuals coming from his eyes, check how strange the following passage would sound (my additions in italics):

Acts 19:11–12 (NKJV)

¹¹Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul [**even though he was so blind that he could not**

see where to put his hands on],

¹²so that even handkerchiefs or aprons [*filled with Paul's eyes residuals*] were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them.

- Later on, Paul healed all the people that came to him in Acts 28:7-9:

Acts 28:7-9 (NKJV)

⁷In that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days.

⁸And it happened that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and **he laid his hands on him and healed him.**

⁹So when this was done, **the rest of those on the island who had diseases also came and were healed.**

- Furthermore, let us see what things did Paul suffer of for Jesus' name sake:
- Acts 9:23 – The Jews determined to kill Paul right after his conversion
 - Acts 9:26-29 – He was hindered in joining the Christians from Jerusalem
 - Acts 13:6-12 – He was opposed by Satan through Elymas the magician
 - Acts 13:44-49 – He was opposed by Jews and the mob.
 - Acts 13:50 – He was expelled out of Antioch and Pisidia
 - Acts 14:1-5 – He was mobbed and expelled from Iconium
 - Acts 14:19-20 – He fled to Lystra and Derbe where he was stoned and left for dead. Whenever people were stoned, they would not survive. They were stoned to death. If they did live, people thought they were innocent and stoned unjustly. Paul did die (since he was left for dead). If you were stoned, you would have tremendous marks on your body. You would be cut, bruised, bleeding. You can imagine how Paul would have looked like immediately after the stoning. He could have had broken arms, hair mixed with blood, broken bones, cuts, gushes, he would have been a mess. Soon after Lystra and Derbe, Paul went to Galatia and preached to them in the “infirmity of the flesh” (or bodily illness – Galatians 4:13-14)
 - Acts 19:8 – He was disputing continually with false brethren
 - Acts 16:12-40 – He was beaten and jailed at Philippi
 - Acts 17:1-10 – He was mobbed and expelled from Thessalonica
 - Acts 17:10-14 – He was mobbed and expelled from Berea
 - Acts 18:1-23 – He was mobbed at Corinth
 - Acts 19:23 – He was mobbed in Asia
 - Acts 20:3 – There was a plot against him by the Jews.
- Now, let us allow Paul to tell us about his hardships and how he got approved by God:

2 Corinthians 6:1-10 (NKJV)

¹We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

²For He says: “In an acceptable time I have heard you, And in the day of salvation I have helped you.”

Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

³We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed.

⁴But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: **in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses,**

⁵in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings;

⁶by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love,

⁷by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left,

⁸by honor and **dishonor, by evil report** and good report; **as deceivers,** and yet true;

⁹*as unknown*, and yet well known; *as dying*, and behold we live; *as chastened*, and yet not killed;
¹⁰*as sorrowful*, yet always rejoicing; *as poor*, yet making many rich; *as having nothing*, and yet possessing all things.

2 Corinthians 11:23–28 (NKJV)

²³Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: *in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often.*

²⁴From the Jews *five times I received forty stripes minus one.*

²⁵*Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep;*

²⁶*in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;*

²⁷*in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—*

²⁸besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.

1 Corinthians 4:9–13 (NKJV)

⁹For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.

¹⁰We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but ***we are dishonored!***

¹¹To the present hour ***we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless.***

¹²And ***we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure;***

¹³***being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.***

- Here are listed all the places where Paul mentioned all his sufferings for the gospel. Among all these, he has NEVER mentioned at least once sickness. If he had an eyes disease he would have said something like the following: "I've gone through this and that, not to mention this eye disease I can't get rid of...".

- d. In v.7 of 2 Corinthians 12, Paul says that the messenger of Satan was sent "lest he would be exalted above measure by the abundance of revelations." Usually this portion is understood in the following way: that God sent a messenger of Satan to Paul to keep him humble, and keep him from getting into pride. However, the passage doesn't say God sent the messenger of Satan on Paul, because God is never tempted to do evil. Instead it says that a thorn in the flesh was given to him, a messenger of Satan. The thorn was given to Paul by Satan himself, not by God. Now, would Satan send a messenger (a demon) to Paul to keep him from getting proud?? Come on, that is Satan's favorite sin. That indicates to us that the phrase "lest I be exalted above measure" means something else other than pride. "Be exalted" is a passive verb in Greek. It means that Paul wasn't exalting himself, but that someone or something was exalting him, propelling him. Paul was referring to something else. When you receive a lot of revelation into God's things, you begin moving more and more into supernatural, you start leaving in a different plane of life, victorious all the time, helping people, doing a lot of damage to the kingdom of darkness. Satan tried to slow Paul down from being propelled to a higher plane of life, because of the revelations. He was trying to minimize the damage in his own kingdom. The more Paul knew, the more blessings he had, but they also came with more persecution, which he was able to handle. God allowed these persecutions because they would come through people with free wills, whom God loved.

Mark 10:29–30 (NKJV)

²⁹So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's,

³⁰who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, **with persecutions**—and in the age to come, eternal life.

- e. According to Galatians 4:14, Paul considered himself a messenger/an angel from God. That means the messenger from Satan that he mentioned as his thorn was indeed an angel from Satan or a person, not a sickness. In light of all the above, it seems that this angel from Satan was generating persecutions and opposition to the gospel wherever Paul went.
- f. We are NEVER told in Scripture (at least in the New Testament) to ask God for healing or implore Him to give us healing. We are not told to pray for healing, but just lay the hands and heal people. We are told in James to call for the elders. How come then Paul himself would ask and implore the Lord for healing in 2 Corinthians 12:8? (“Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.”) That means what Paul was imploring the Lord about was not a physical sickness.
- g. A physical sickness usually does not torment, buffet, or harass from time to time. The sickness just comes and stays.
- h. Paul received this thorn because of the amount of revelation he received. Now, anybody claiming Paul’s thorn should be able to demonstrate also his/her revelations. Paul wrote about 2/3 of the New Testament. Whenever somebody is ready to write 2/3 of New Testament with revelation that we do not already have, and that does not violate any other Scripture, and then call it Scripture, then that person is ready to claim Paul’s thorn and to identify with Paul.
- i. In all New Testament, there seems to be a distinction between the sufferings caused by sickness and disease, and the sufferings caused by persecutions for Christ name’s sake. We are told in various places in the New Testament (i.e. Matthew 5:11) that it is good and it is a blessing to suffer persecution for the name of Jesus. However, we are never told to accept and endure sickness. Jesus Himself healed all sick people that he met, and fought against physical sickness and disease all His life. At the end of His life, He suffered persecution, beatings, and ultimately death to save us. Yet, He was never sick in His body. God paid through Jesus’ sacrifice too costly of a price that He would play around with sickness on people to teach them something. Moreover, He would not reveal clearly in Scripture His will related to sickness (that we have been healed by His stripes – 1 Peter 2:24), so that afterwards from time to time to have some kind of hidden sovereign will with our lives that involved sickness, and contradicted bluntly His already revealed will. God is completely able to accomplish any will with people directly through His Spirit, without using the devil’s tools, like sickness (which is an effect and result of sin entering into the world).

10. Timothy’s Stomach Infirmities

- The Objection – Timothy’s stomach pain that even Paul couldn’t heal, is an evidence that sometimes sickness is in the will of God for Christians.
- Answer – Let’s analyze the exact passage from 1 Timothy 5:23

1 Timothy 5:23 (NKJV)

²³No longer drink only water, but use a little wine **for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities.**

- When we read the passage, we can see very clearly that Paul is telling Timothy how to avoid getting sick so often, and how to relieve his symptoms. The goal of the advice is that Timothy is not sick anymore. If it was God's will for Timothy to be sick and suffer, then Paul was telling Timothy to go against the will of God when he gave him advice on how to feel better.
- If Paul actually believed that Timothy's frequent illnesses were God's will, then he should have been saying something like "This physical illness and suffering are from God. It is part of His mysterious plan, and He is using it to teach you something. So, don't do anything that would relieve your symptoms. Timothy, if you want God's will to happen, you need to be as sick and miserable as possible."
- Of course, that is ridiculous on many levels, and the hyperbole is intended. But it does make a point. If sickness is God's will for Timothy, then it would be wrong for Paul to provide medical advice. And from what we know of Paul's character, he would not be contradicting God's will like that. Since Paul is telling Timothy how to get better, then Paul must believe that it is God's will for Timothy to be healthy. And that means Paul would not have believed that God wanted Timothy to be sick. Jesus viewed sickness as an enemy (Acts 10:38), and so did his followers, including Paul.
- So, I believe that should settle the biggest part of the confusion that surrounds this verse. "Timothy's stomach pain" cannot be used to prove that sometimes sickness is God's will, because Paul is telling Timothy how to avoid being sick. Wholeness, health, and wellness is what Paul's advice is supposed to lead to, and we are on safe ground if we assume that Paul's advice in 1 Timothy lines up with God's will.
- But why is he advising him to "stop drinking only water," but to add some wine into his diet? Why is he not ministering healing to Timothy, or telling Timothy to believe for his own healing, etc?
- Maybe he was healed of his infirmities many times, but it re-occurred. If you live in an area with unclean water, and you drink that water, and you aren't used to it, you are likely to have frequent stomach problems. However, if you use wine or some other beverage with antiseptic qualities, you can decrease your chance of getting sick. This is what Paul was telling Timothy to do. That is why Paul is telling him to drink wine. That tells me that sometimes some good advice on how to avoid getting sick in the first place is appropriate. But It absolutely does not tell me that sometimes God wants people to be sick.
- Let me compare this to something that is more common today. What if someone is smoking 2 packs of cigarettes per day, and they have developed lung problems as a result. You could minister healing to them and see God heal all their lung problems. But if the person continues the behavior that caused the problem in the first place, the condition is likely to return even after they have been healed. Some practical advice, wisdom, and common sense is appropriate sometimes.
- This passage in 1 Timothy doesn't teach us that God wants Timothy to be sick. In fact, it means the opposite. The purpose of the passage was to get Timothy to be strong again, and to help him avoid being sick. This is offering practical wisdom on how to avoid a recurring problem that is hindering Timothy.

11. We Will Become Proud

- The Objection - Some might say that if you begin healing the sick regularly, people will crowd around you, and you will get very easily into pride, or you will make yourself god, or infringe God's authority and sovereignty in some way.
- Answer:
- First of all, pride manifests itself when you boast with your accomplishments based on your efforts. You did it. Self-righteousness goes hand in hand with pride. However, when you understand the grace of God and you put your faith in God's word, God's power and grace, there is no reason for pride. It's just confidence and faith in the word. It actually brings you to your knees, because all you are, all you do, and all you have is from God.
- Second, some might say: "Oh, pride was Lucifer's capital sin, he wanted to be like God and he was thrown out of heaven, so you shouldn't be too confident, you never know when you might upset God with your attitude." You can be bold, confident and humble in the same time. But, you know, if you think through carefully, God has indeed given us, Christians, what the devil longed for and aspired to. God made us, these little creatures, kings, lords, priests, and prophets. The Bible even mentions that He made us gods in John 10:34. Of course, that doesn't mean we receive worship. There are some differences, but nevertheless, we have the nature and the authority of a god on the earth. We are reigning in His name. So, you can be confident in your new identity and know your place in relation to God in the same time.
- Third, in the New Testament, healing the sick is no longer a one-man show like it used to be in different revivals. All believers are supposed to heal as a normal thing. When all believers do it and it becomes a normal thing, then there is no reason for anyone to be proud. That is why the body of Christ needs to be encouraged in doing it, and trained on how to do it.