

Title: Debunking Paul's Thorn

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Introduction

- The purpose of this essay is to prove that Paul's thorn in 2 Corinthians 12:7 was not a sickness in his body. Here is the whole context of that biblical passage:

2 Corinthians 12:2-10 (NASB)

² I 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.

³ And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—⁴ was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

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

⁶ For 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.

⁷ 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** (KJV – buffet; ESV – harass; NIV – torment) me—to keep me from exalting myself!

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

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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**.

Biblical Proofs

1. 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.

2. 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 (NASB)

⁵⁵ But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall come about that those whom you let remain of them will become as **pricks in your eyes** and as **thorns in your sides**, and they will trouble you in the land in which you live.

- 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 (NASB)

¹³ know with certainty that the Lord your God will not continue to drive these nations out from before you; but they will be a snare and a trap to you, and a whip on your sides and **thorns in your eyes**, until you perish from off this good land which the Lord your God has given you.

Judges 2:3 (NASB)

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

3. 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 is the case indeed:

Acts 9:15-19 (NASB)

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

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

¹⁷ So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me **so that you may regain your sight** and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

¹⁸ And immediately there **fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight**, and he got up and was baptized;

¹⁹ and he took food and was strengthened.

- 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 (NASB)

¹¹ God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul [*even though he was so blind that he could not see where to put his hands on*],
¹² so that handkerchiefs or aprons [*filled with Paul's eyes residuals*] were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.

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

Acts 28:7-9 (NASB)

⁷ Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously three days.
⁸ And it happened that the father of Publius was lying in bed afflicted with recurrent fever and dysentery; and Paul went in to see him and after he had prayed, *he laid his hands on him and healed him.*
⁹ After this had happened, *the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured.*

- 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 (NASB)

¹ And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain—
² for He says, “At the acceptable time I listened to you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.” Behold, now is “the acceptable time,” behold, now is “the day of salvation”—
³ giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited,
⁴ but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, **in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses,**
⁵ **in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger,**
⁶ in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love,
⁷ in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left,
⁸ by glory and **dishonor, by evil report** and good report; **regarded as deceivers** and yet true;
⁹ **as unknown** yet well-known, **as dying** yet behold, we live; **as punished** yet not put to death,
¹⁰ **as sorrowful** yet always rejoicing, **as poor** yet making many rich, **as having nothing** yet possessing all things.

2 Corinthians 11:23-28 (NASB)

²³ Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; **in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death.**
²⁴ **Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes.**
²⁵ **Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.**
²⁶ **I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren;**
²⁷ **I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.**
²⁸ Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.

1 Corinthians 4:9-13 (NASB)

⁹ For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.
¹⁰ We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor.
¹¹ To this present hour **we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless;**
¹² **and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure;**
¹³ **when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even 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...”.

4. 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 one, 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 (NASB)

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

³⁰but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, **along with persecutions**; and in the age to come, eternal life.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. A physical sickness usually does not torment, buffet, or harass. The sickness just comes and stays.

8. 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.

9. 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).