

## What is Paul's "thorn in the flesh"?

In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Paul speaks of "a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me." Has Paul been demonized? What is this thorn that Paul speaks of?

1. Various commentators understand Paul's thorn as a metaphor for a physical ailment or disease such as pain in the head, speech impediment or eye problems. Given Paul's training under the illustrious rabbi Gamaliel, he would have extensive knowledge of the Old Testament. How did the Old and New Testament use the term "thorn"? Study Numbers 33:55; Joshua 23:13; Judges 2:3; Ezekiel 2:6; 28:24; Micah 7:4; Luke 6:44 and Hebrew 6:8.

Both the Old and New Testament appear to use the term "thorn" in the figurative sense to symbolize human beings who are adversaries to God's people. Other terms used in conjunction with "thorns" (such as "trouble, snare, trap, scorpions, rebellious, etc.) portray an image of an enemy who is harmful and injurious in both a physical and spiritual sense.

While the Greek term for "thorn" literally meant "a sharp spine of a plant," there aren't any instances where the term "thorn" was used to symbolize a physical ailment, disease or temptation.

2. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, should the "messenger of Satan" be taken figuratively or literally?

When Paul has used the term "messenger" throughout his epistles, he has always referred to a person. This understanding would be consistent with the context of 2 Corinthians 10, 11, 12 and 13 where he is speaking of opponents of the Corinthian church.

The phrase "messenger of Satan" should be taken literally, because Paul is referring to humans who personally oppose him within the context of those who seek to distort the message of Christ. And the "thorn" afflicting Paul does not appear to be limited to his current missionary journey to Corinth.

3. What purpose did the "thorn" serve?

In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul indicates that he was blessed to be the recipient of many revelations from Jesus Christ, which was an honor that could bring about personal pride and glory. However, God provided Paul human opponents with the intent of causing some kind of "weakness" in Paul, which resulted in his attitude of humility and humbleness.

The "weakness" that Paul writes about is not entirely clear; however, it apparently refers to difficulties caused by other people namely, persecution and insults (2 Cor 11:30-33; 2 Cor 12:10; 2 Cor 13:3-4). Not only did this cause personal pain and suffering for Paul, but the public challenge of his integrity and religious authority made his ministry more difficult.

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### 4. What was Paul's response to "a thorn in the flesh"? What was the Lord's response to Paul?

Paul did not like the "thorn in the flesh" and sought to get rid of it (2 Cor 12:8). While he pleaded with the Lord to remove it three times, the Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."

In response to Paul's desire, the Lord only gave Paul what he needed. The power of the Lord is more effective and experienced best when one is more dependent on Him; the will of God is not brought about by human effort.

Paul's comments indicated his understanding of God's intent in allowing the presence of opponents to his ministry. While it discouraged his spiritual well being, Paul never complained. Instead he changed his outlook and reveled in it when he understood how it deepened his faith and dependence in God.

Paul's testimony served as a wonderful example to the Corinthian church on how a Christian can respond to adversity.

#### References:

1. Kaiser WC, Davids PH, Bruce FF, Brauch MT, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, Chicago, IL: Inter-Varsity Press (1996).

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