

THE IDENTITY OF PAUL'S THORN

By Denver Cheddie

2 Cor 12:7 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.

In 2 Cor. 12:7, Paul said that he was given a “thorn in his flesh”, a messenger of Satan to buffet or torment him. Many scholars, without giving the matter much serious thought, just conclude that the thorn in his flesh was a physical sickness. They do this mainly to “prove” that even the great apostle had a sickness that could not be healed and thus demonstrate that God does not always heal. It is a Biblical fact that God does not always heal, but is that what 2 Cor. 12:7 teaches?

The following are some facts about Paul’s thorn:

1. Paul did not receive a physical thorn in his flesh therefore the expression is figurative.
2. It was something God allowed in order to keep Paul from becoming conceited (vs. 7).
3. It was permanent since God was not willing to take it away from Paul (vs. 8, 9).
4. It started “14 years ago” (vs. 2). In Gal 1:15 – 2:21, Paul gives a brief summary of his life after being saved. It can be divided into 3 time periods.
 - i. The first 3 years after being saved, after which he visited Jerusalem and spoke with Peter.

- ii. The next 14 years, after which he visited Jerusalem again, and this time had his ministry to the Gentiles confirmed.
- iii. The rest of his life, during which he fulfilled his ministry to the Gentiles.

Paul wrote his epistles to the Corinthians and Galatians very early in period iii). The "14 years ago" most likely date back to early in period ii).

Some people confuse the "thorn in his flesh" of 2 Cor. 12:7 with the "infirmity in his flesh" of Gal. 4:13. They point out that the same word for infirmity (***astheneia***) which is used in Gal. 4:13 is also used interchangeably with the "thorn in his flesh" in 2 Cor. 12:7, 9. Since this word means sickness, then the thorn also refers to an illness. However, closer home in 2 Cor. 11:30 the same word, ***astheneia*** is used figuratively to summarize all the trials Paul faced in the ministry (11:23-27). So the word ***astheneia*** does not necessarily mean sickness in 2 Cor. 12:7. Also in Gal. 4:13, the idea is that Paul's "infirmity" was something in the past when he first preached to the Galatians. It gives the impression that the "infirmity" of Gal 4:13 was temporary. The thorn of 2 Cor. 12:7 was permanent. It is highly unlikely they are the same thing.

The thorn is better understood in the context of 2 Corinthians. Throughout the epistle Paul alludes to the troubles he faced (1:8-10; 4:8-12; 11:23-28). In the immediate context, Paul is defending his apostleship by calling attention to his fatherly love for the Corinthians and his ceaseless sufferings for the cause of Christ (chapter 11). In chapter 12, he indicates that he

could start talking about his visions, revelations and miracles, but would rather glory in his infirmities. 12:9 is a re-statement of 11:30, where infirmities refer to his sufferings. Thus in 12:9, the word infirmity could only mean the same thing – suffering. The “thorn in his flesh” would then have the same meaning – suffering. This is what God revealed to Paul that he would always face (Acts 20:23 cf. 9:16), and this is what Paul always faced wherever he went – trials, hardships, persecutions and sufferings.

The Greek word for thorn, ***skolop*** is used in the Septuagint (Greek version of the OT) in Num. 33:55. Here the giants were thorns in the sides of the Israelites. Similarly Paul’s thorn in the flesh was a reference to the nagging trials that faced him everywhere he went, and characterized his life ever since being saved.

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