# Why This "Thorn"?

**2 Corinthians 12:1-10**
7/2/08

Introduction – vv.1-6:

- ***Why "thorns" in the flesh? Why does God allow physical afflictions in the life of the believer?***

*God allows "thorns"*

**I. To keep His servants <u>HUMBLE</u>**
so that they do not become <u>conceited</u> over their <u>gifts</u> and <u>spiritual privileges</u> (v.7)

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Introduction – vv.1-6:

Because the Corinthians involved themselves with bragging and gladly embraced braggers, Paul did a little bit of his own sanctified "boasting" in chapter 11. He simply showed himself to be a real, genuine minister of Christ as evidenced by what he was willing to endure for Christ (cp. 11:22-30).

**v. 1**
**"Not expedient for me . . . to glory" –** Paul saw no personal benefit in boasting. There was absolutely nothing for him to gain by bragging about himself.

Now, however, Paul is about to brag on God! He would show by personal example what God revealed to him and what God did for him to keep him from boasting about himself.

As an apostle, Paul had the privilege of being the recipient of **"visions and revelations"** from the Lord.

He saw things ("visions") and was enlightened to previously veiled truth ("revelations") that would give him—on a human level—grounds for a bit of spiritual pride.

**v. 2**
**"I knew a man" -** Who is Paul referring to? Evidently to himself, for he himself was the recipient of an "abundance of…revelations" (v. 7).

Why then does he speak in the third person? Perhaps a rhetorical device to gain a hearing and to show humility. He in a sense shows that he himself did not matter nearly as much as the Lord and the truth which was to him.

"Paul's use of the third person signals his discomfort and embarrassment in indulging in ecstatic biography, which he deems of little profit. The very fact that Paul had told no one about his rapture to paradise shows that he considered private experiences like this as unimportant to the gospel ministry." (Hughes, p. 210).

**"Fourteen years ago" -** If 2 Corinthians was written in 57 AD, then the event Paul reveals here would have occurred about 43 AD.

Paul did not know for sure whether his spirit actually left his body for a time and travelled to Paradise or whether he experienced Paradise while his spirit was still in his body.

There is one time in Paul's life where he was stoned at Lystra and was perceived to be dead (Acts 14:19), but the Lord delivered him (2 Tim. 3:11) and "he rose up" (Acts 14:20) and continued his public ministry. Many believe that it was during this time that he received the glorious visions and revelations talked about here.

**"The third heaven" -** identified as "Paradise" (v. 4); a reference to the abode of God (the same place Jesus took the repentant thief who died on the cross next to him – Luke 23:43).

The Bible describes three heavens:

1) Sky (the atmosphere around planet earth) (the first heaven)

2) Space (out space where the various stars and galaxies exist) (the second heaven)

3) Heaven (the place where God dwells) (the third heaven)

**v. 3**
**"I knew such a man" -** the experience was so surreal that Paul viewed it as if he were someone else experiencing what felt like an "out of body experience."

**v. 4**
**"Caught up" -** *harpage* from *harpazo* – to seize and carry off by force; to snatch away. The same word is used of the ascension of Christ (Rev. 12:5) and of the Rapture of the saints (1 Thes. 4:17).

**"Heard unspeakable words" -** inexpressible words; unspoken words because of their sacredness. Words that were so holy and sacred that no language could express the full meaning.

**"Not lawful for a man to utter" –** Paul heard many things that God did not permit him to repeat; he heard words that man is not allowed to tell. Some things we will have to wait till we get to heaven to fully know.

***Deuteronomy 29:29***
The secret *things belong* unto the LORD our God: but those *things which are* revealed *belong* unto us and to our children for ever, that *we* may do all the words of this law.

**v. 5**
Such a privileged man could be proudly spoken about, but Paul chose not to brag about anything concerning himself except about that which would bring God glory – His great working through Paul's **"infirmities"** (weaknesses or areas of his life that were without strength).

"Most people, had they been granted an ecstasy like Paul's wherein they actually had been raptured to paradise (to God, to his Son, to the Holy Spirit, to the souls of the departed, to the discourse of Heaven), would scarcely be able to contain themselves. Today they would write a best-seller – *My Rapture: A Personal Account of My Trip to Heaven and Back*. Seminars on "5 Steps to Your Own Rapture" would be sold out." (p. 211, Hughes).

**v. 6**
Even if Paul was to boast, he would not be a fool, because he would only tell the truth (without exaggeration or embellishment). Pride, in fact, is the opposite of truth. Humility is truth, the truth about yourself and who you really are.

But Paul refrained from boasting so that no one would have too big a view of him. He didn't want people to have an over-inflated view of him or to think he was bigger than what they saw him do or say.

You see, Paul wanted people to have a big view of God and an accurate view of himself.

- ***Why "thorns" in the flesh? Why does God allow physical afflictions in the life of the believer?***

Before we see the specific reasons given by Paul in 2 Cor. 12:7-10, there are some general reasons given to us in God's Word as to why God would allow physical affliction or sickness in the lives of His people.

1) Sickness is a natural result of the fall of man into s in. It is part of the curse God placed upon Adam and his descendents. All sickness is due to the principle of sin, but not all sickness is due to personal sin. Sin inevitably leads to death (Rom. 6:23), and along the pathway to death there will be ailments due to aging.

2) Sickness is often allowed to give God the opportunity to glorify Himself. Example: the man born blind –

***John 9:2-3***
And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.

Example: Lazarus of Bethany –

***John 11:4***
When Jesus heard *that*, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.

3) Sickness may be due to God's desire to chasten or discipline His erring children

This connection is made in:
-- ***James 5:14-15 -*** Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.
***--1 Cor. 11:30*** – inappropriate partaking of the Lord's supper results in people becoming "weak and sickly" and even dying
***--Psalm 32:3-4***
When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. [4] For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. Selah.

4) Sickness may be God's way of purifying one's faith and producing patience or some other virtue in one's life

***Job 23:10***
But he knoweth the way that I take: *when* he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.

***James 1:2-3***
My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing *this*, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.

*God allows "thorns"*

**I. To keep His servants <u>HUMBLE</u>**
so that they do not become <u>conceited</u> over their <u>gifts</u> and <u>spiritual privileges</u> (v.7)

To ensure that Paul would not view himself or be viewed as greater than he actually was, God did something to keep him humble. He gave him a "thorn" in the flesh.

Because of the overflowing abundance of direct revelations from God, Paul may have encountered the human temptation of spiritual pride. To prevent this from occurring to Paul's ruin, God in love gave him a physical affliction.

I believe that Paul's "thorn" was a <u>recurrent</u> <u>physical</u> ailment.

--<u>Recurrent</u> because it had now been 14 years since he received his visions and revelations.

--<u>Physical</u> because it is said to be in his **"<u>flesh</u>"**

--Ailment – apparently something that affected his ability to <u>function</u> and which might negatively affect his visible <u>appearance</u>.

While several suggestions have been offered as what exactly his problem was, Paul chose to leave it unstated so that all of us could apply the "thorn in the flesh" principle to our own situations and circumstances. However, if I was to make a guess as to what his problem was, I would say it was a form of ophthalmia or eye trouble (SEE: Gal. 4:12-15).

"This turned the argument of Paul's critics on its head because Paul's loathsome thorn (the very thing his critics loathed in him and saw as evidence that God was not with him) was actually proof of the transcending superiority of his experience when raptured into the presence of God. What a stunning rebuke to the super-apostles who worshiped health and well-being and who viewed affliction and weakness as the absence of God's blessing." (Hughes, p. 212).

**"The messenger of Satan" -** a demonic spirit (lit. an angel of Satan) would be allowed to continually afflict (lit. "beat or buffet") Paul. As God allowed Satan to afflict Job, so God allowed a demon to afflict Paul.

Can God use even demons to accomplish His purpose? Yes. He did this so as to accomplish a good purpose in Paul. So that Paul would not exalt himself and thereby be ruined by pride.

Pride is really selfishness on display of itself.

The middle letter in the word pride is "I"!

Humorous illustration of the pride of self-achievement: "A woodpecker was pecking away at the trunk of a tree when all of a sudden lightning struck it. Looking back to where the now toppled tree had stood, the proud bird exclaimed, "Look what I did!" (Knights Illustrations, p. 299).

--"I got an 'A' on the test - what did you get?"
--"I ran the 50-yard dash in __ seconds - what did you run it in?"
--"I received an award in ___ - did you receive any?"
--"I led __ people to the Lord this year - how many did you lead?"
--"My church is running __ in attendance - how is yours doing?"

Many preachers have said -- if not openly, then in their hearts -- "Is this not the church that I have built?" "Are these not the souls that I have won?"

Scholar: "Is this not the knowledge that I have acquired?"

Musician: "Is this not the talent that I alone possess?"

[Paul said, "I am what I am by the grace of God."]

Man with his fallen depraved nature will do anything but give glory to God.

The unsaved are too proud to trust God's strength for salvation. Even Christians try to live the Christian life by our own power and plan (we try to do God's work, man's way!).

We are often confident in our muscle, talent, ability, knowledge, etc.

Example of Lucifer: "Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness" (Ezek. 28:17).

Because of the pride of self-strength, many young pastors start off with a bang and end up being shot down without a ministry. This is why God warns the pastor not to be "a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil" (I Tim. 3:6).

Pride keeps us from:

1. Admitting wrong, error (apologizing)
2. Seeking help from God (prayer) and others
3. Learning from others (accepting constructive criticism)

A sign of pride is prayerlessness - You are saying I can handle my own life.

God can't use a person who is confident that he is sufficient in his own strength!
"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against powers and principalities and rulers of darkness in high places."

Some people take pride in their humility!
"A man was so humble, he wrong a book about it, called: Humility and How I Attained It

"Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory."

**Sinful pride always results in ruin**

Prov. 11:2 - "When pride cometh, then cometh shame"

Prov. 13:10 - "Only by pride cometh contention"

Prov. 15:25 - "The Lord will destroy the house of the proud"

Prov. 16:18 - "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall"

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**II. To keep His servants <u>DEPENDANT</u>**

So that they rely upon <u>Christ's power and strength</u> and not their own (v.8-10)

**v. 8**

**"I besought the Lord" –** Paul didn't merely make a simple request, he literally pleaded or implored God to remove it; and he did so three times before he stopped.

"Significantly, Paul's three prayers parallel Jesus' threefold prayer to the Father in Gethsemane that the cup of suffering be removed, and which also culminated in assurance that the prayer had been answered, even though the cup, as with the thorn, was not taken away (cf. Mark 14:32-41)." (Hughes, p. 213).

**v. 9**

Paul may have continued beseeching God to remove his "thorn" beyond the three requests, but God gives Paul an answer that would satisfy him.

**"My grace is sufficient for thee" –** God says: "The grace I will give you, Paul, will be enough for you to bear the thorn and continue to serve Me."

God's grace is all we need! If he chooses to allow a trial in your life, it is so that you will cease relying on self or the world, and will rely exclusively on Him and His power.

**"My strength is made perfect in weakness" -** My dynamic ability is brought to completeness in your weakness.

Those who are strong in themselves are weak in God! This goes for every area of our lives (intelligence, spirituality, and abilities).

God wants us to be <u>co-dependent</u> upon Him!

David had this same testimony.

***Psalms 119:67***

Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.

***Psalms 119:71***

*It is* good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.

Rather than boasting about his strengths, Paul would rather glory in his weaknesses because it is in those areas of need that God displays His greatest work!

Whose power was resting on Paul? It was the **"Lord's"** (v. 9a) and it is **"Christ's."**

"I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

**v. 10**
If my weakness gives Christ the opportunity to show His strength, then my weaknesses are really good for me.

**"I take pleasure in" -** I delight in. Wow, what a new way of looking at problems for the believer! I can actually view my "thorns" as occasions for rejoicing, because I know that the Lord wants to display some of His glory through my weaknesses.

Paul, rather than fighting his "thorn" or being mad and angry at his throne, chose to accept it as God's will for his life and as God's means of keeping him reliant upon God for successful living and ministry.

What trials could Paul delight in?

1) **"Infirmities"** (areas of physical weakness – the emphasis in this context; God gives strength where there is a lack of strength)

2) **"Reproaches"** (insults – God defends the defenseless believer)

3) **"Necessities** (calamities or great times of crisis or need; God comes to the rescue)

4) **"Persecutions"** (when people oppress and hunt you down, God becomes your refuge and hiding place)

5) **"Distresses"** (difficulties not due to personal sin, but difficulties **"for Christ's sake"** – "He is a very present help in trouble)

**"When I am weak, then am I strong" –** When I am without strength then I am made strong. When I am unable, He is able. When I am powerless, then I am made powerful.

The theme of the entire epistle of 2 Corinthians is emphasized in this text "Strength in Weakness" (Compare also: 1:8,9; 4:7-12; 6:4-10)
***2 Corinthians 1:9***
But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead:
***2 Corinthians 4:7***
But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.

"Forbid it Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood."
(Isaac Watts)

HYMNS – “I Need Thee Every Hour”
“Rejoice in the Lord”