

PAUL'S THORN



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‘Paul’s Thorn’
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PAUL'S THORN

As I start to write this booklet, I do so knowing that I will get different reactions. Some people will absolutely agree and some will completely disagree, while others will be interested to look at the subject of Paul's thorn afresh. I ask that, as you read, you will be willing to consider what may be a new way of looking at it for you personally.

Let's start by reading the passage in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 where Paul talks about his thorn in the flesh — *'By reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations, that I should not be exalted excessively, a thorn in the flesh was given to me: a messenger of Satan to torment me, that I should not be exalted excessively. ⁸Concerning this thing, I*

begged the Lord three times that it might depart from me.⁹He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Most gladly therefore I will rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest on me.’

Now let’s look at this passage in some detail.

1. Excessive Exaltation

2 Corinthians 12:7 - *‘By reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations, that I should not be exalted excessively ...’*

First, let’s look at why Paul was given a thorn in the flesh. He says it was so he should not be exalted excessively as a result of the exceeding great revelations God had given

him. But who was trying to exalt him excessively? It is often thought that it was other people, so God gave Paul the thorn to keep him humble. But God wants to exalt us. 1 Peter 5:6 tells us to – *‘Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time,’* God doesn’t do things to keep us humble – he tells us to be humble so that He can exalt us. Satan gave Paul the thorn – he can’t bear to see Christians being exalted.

2. A Messenger of Satan

2 Corinthians 12:7 – *‘... a thorn in the flesh was given to me: a messenger of Satan to torment me, that I should not be exalted excessively.’*

The thorn was a messenger of Satan, not of God. God didn’t give Paul this thorn – Satan

did. It is Satan who wanted Paul limited and kept down. God wanted him free so he could continue to preach the Gospel unhindered.

But what was the thorn? The Greek word translated 'messenger' here, occurs 188 times in the Bible and every single time it refers to an angel or a person, never to a condition, medical or otherwise. Yet many Christians think Paul is talking about sickness here. Paul may well have had times of sickness in his life – he was human. But he wasn't referring to ill health when he wrote about the thorn. As of today, every time I have read or heard a reference to a thorn in the flesh or in the side, be it in the Bible or secular writing, it has referred to a person or people, never to sickness or a medical condition. The thorn was a person or people coming against Paul to try and stop his work for God.

3. We're Not Saved from Persecution

2 Corinthians 12:8-9 – *‘Concerning this thing, I begged the Lord three times that it might depart from me. ⁹He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

It is clear that it was Satan who gave Paul this thorn and that it refers to a person or people who were a thorn in his side or, as we would say today, ‘a pain in the neck’. These people were persecuting him to try and stop him from spreading the Gospel. God has not said that we won’t be persecuted for our faith – in fact He tells us that we will be. Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:12 – *‘all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.’* If you are born-again, you are open to persecution. (To read more about being born-again, go to the end of this booklet.)

God created everyone with free will and He will never override that. This means that other people are always able to choose to persecute us, to try and stop us from sharing our faith.

But God assured Paul that He would help him in these difficult times and situations. It is easy to feel quite powerless in the face of continued opposition, but we have the same answer God gave Paul – to rely on His grace, His unconditional love and gifts, rather than any strength or ability of our own, because then He will sustain us in our weakness by His power.

4. Paul's Weaknesses

2 Corinthians 12:9 – *‘Most gladly therefore I will rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest on me.’*

So what were Paul's weaknesses and did they include sicknesses etc? In the previous chapter, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 11:30 – *'If I must boast, I will boast of the things that concern my weakness.'* And just before this, he had listed those weaknesses in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 – *'... in labours more abundantly, in prisons more abundantly, in stripes above measure, and in deaths often. ²⁴Five times I received forty stripes minus one from the Jews. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I suffered shipwreck. I have been a night and a day in the deep. ²⁶I have been in travels often, perils of rivers, perils of robbers, perils from my countrymen, perils from the Gentiles, perils in the city, perils in the wilderness, perils in the sea, perils amongst false brothers; ²⁷in labour and travail, in watchings often, in hunger and*

*thirst, in fastings often, and in cold and nakedness.*²⁸*Besides those things that are outside, there is that which presses on me daily: anxiety for all the assemblies.'* So when the Corinthians read this letter, they would have known exactly what Paul meant when he talked about his weaknesses – all the hardship and persecution he endured.

In all this list there is no mention of any sickness or medical condition or disability, but the list does include many ways in which Paul was persecuted and his life put in danger. We are told in the Bible that there were people, mainly Jews, who were intent on opposing his work for Christ and those people were doing Satan's work, not God's. They were a messenger of Satan.

Paul does mention a physical problem once in Galatians 4:13 – *'because of weakness in*

the flesh I preached the Good News to you the first time.' Notice it was temporary and was probably the result of the stoning he had received in Lystra.

Paul called all his hardship and persecution 'weaknesses' because it was intended to weaken him so he would stop spreading the Gospel. Let's look at this list in more detail.

- *in labours more abundantly* (Paul worked harder than those he was writing to),
- *in prisons more abundantly* (Paul was imprisoned at least 3 times: in Philippi in Acts 16:17; under house arrest in Jerusalem in Acts 23; in Rome in 2 Timothy 2:8-9),
- *in stripes above measure* (He was flogged countless times eg Acts 16:23),
- *and in deaths often* (He was often in danger of being killed).

- *Five times I received forty stripes minus one from the Jews* (The law said no more than 40 lashes could be given, so the Jews did 39 in case they'd miscounted).
- *Three times I was beaten with rods* (This was a common form of public Roman punishment).
- *Once I was stoned* (Paul was pelted with stones in Lystra and left for dead – Acts 14:19).
- *Three times I suffered shipwreck. I have been a night and a day in the deep* (One shipwreck is recorded in Acts 27:14-44).
- *I have been in travels often* (Paul is describing the many ways he had been in danger while travelling to spread the Gospel), *perils of rivers, perils of robbers, perils from my countrymen, perils from the Gentiles, perils in the city, perils in the wilderness, perils in the sea, perils amongst false brothers;*

- *in labour and travail* (Hard work),
- *in watchings often* (Sleeplessness),
- in hunger and thirst,
- in fastings often (Going without food),
- *and in cold*
- *and nakedness.*
- *Besides those things that are outside, there is that which presses on me daily: anxiety for all the assemblies* (The pressure of Paul's concern for the churches he had founded).

Paul finishes talking about the thorn by saying that he is glad to glory in his weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest on him. He didn't want all this terrible persecution, but when it happened, he knew that God's grace would see him through and so God would be glorified. What an example!

Jesus' Healing Ministry

When Paul asked God to remove the thorn, God said that His grace was sufficient for him. But what did Jesus say to people when they came to Him asking for healing? Did He say, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”*? No – Jesus never refused to heal anyone who asked Him. He didn't say “I’m teaching you something through this” or “I will heal you but not yet” or “This sickness is making you a better person” or “You deserve this as punishment”.

But He did say in John 5:19 – *“Most certainly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father doing. For whatever things he does, these the Son also does likewise.”* Jesus healed everyone who asked because this is what He saw God

doing. And Hebrews 13:8 tells us that – *‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.’* So healing people was God’s will when Jesus was on earth and is still so today too.

Jesus' healing ministry shows us that God wants us well. Now we know not everyone is healed, so there must be reasons why people stay sick, but God saying “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*” is not one of them. We can’t explain a lack of healing by Paul’s thorn. But as we've seen from God’s Word, those words are always appropriate to encourage us when we suffer persecution. (To explore more about healing, read my booklet ‘God Wants You To Be Well’)

How to Handle Persecution

Remember that Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:12 – *‘all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.’* If we are living for Jesus and doing and saying what He wants, then it’s inevitable that we will be persecuted. In some countries people are still being tortured or put to death for their faith in Jesus today. But a roll of the eyes when we speak of our faith is persecution too and there’s a lot between those two extremes. So how can we handle it when it happens? Let’s look at what Paul said about being persecuted and bear in mind, as you read these verses, just what he went through.

In 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 Paul says – *‘We are pressed on every side, yet not crushed; perplexed, yet not to despair; ⁹pursued, yet*

not forsaken; struck down, yet not destroyed;’ Paul wasn’t saying this is just how it turned out. He and the people who travelled with him could have easily been crushed in their thoughts or emotions, have easily despaired, felt they were forsaken, or been destroyed mentally, emotionally, physically or even spiritually. But Paul had made his mind up beforehand that he was not going to allow persecution to get him down. He had built his way of thinking and whole approach to life on the firm foundation of Jesus, so that when persecution came, he was able to stand strong in Him and could refuse to let it beat him.

We can do the same if we are willing to. We can’t do it by our own will power, but we can do it by renewing our minds in God’s Word and putting our trust in Jesus. Paul says

in Philippians 4:13 – *‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.’*

In Luke 6:22-23 Jesus says – *‘Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude and mock you, and throw out your name as evil, for the Son of Man’s sake. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven, for their fathers did the same thing to the prophets.’* The more you renew your mind in the Word and put your trust in Jesus, the nearer you will get to rejoicing when persecution comes. Then you can have the same attitude as the disciples in Acts 5:41-42 – *‘They therefore departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for Jesus’ name. ⁴²Every day, in the temple and at home, they never stopped teaching and preaching Jesus, the Christ.’*

Abundant Life

Be assured that Paul's thorn is not sickness or any medical condition. God wants you well. That's good news indeed! Jesus says in John 10:10 – *"The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."* It is Satan who wants you to live a life which is limited by sickness. Jesus wants you to live an abundant life. This is what He came to give you.

Being Born-Again

When you accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour you become born-again. God becomes your Father and you His child, and you can start to enjoy your personal relationship with Him.

Romans 10:9 says – *‘If you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.’* Say this prayer out loud and believe it in your heart – “Jesus, I declare that You are Lord and that God raised You from the dead to live forevermore. Thank You for dying for me personally. I receive my forgiveness and my salvation now. Thank You Jesus, my Lord and Saviour.”

You are now born-again and Jesus has come to live in you. All your sins are forgiven, past, present and future, and you have a new perfect spirit. And after this life is over, you’ll live in love, peace and joy with your Father God for ever.

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Have you heard that Paul's thorn is an illness
that God wouldn't heal?

That is completely contrary to what the Bible tells us
about Jesus' attitude to healing.

Discover what the thorn really represented
and how understanding this can set you free
to be the person God wants you to be.



Katherine Hilditch has been teaching in local churches for many years. In 2013 she wrote her first booklet and since then has written many more. She created her website to make all the booklets freely available to everyone. They can be read online or printed out. Katherine's threefold purpose is to help people understand more about Jesus and all He has done and won for them, to encourage them to go deeper in their relationship with God and to provide material to help them share their faith with others. To read her story and find all the booklets go to –

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