

Paul's Thorn

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? 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.

"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. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong." (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

This thorn in the flesh that Paul mentioned has been used and misused by Christians to justify submitting to nearly any problem that comes along. Satan has twisted this passage of Scripture to deceive many, many people into believing that God would not heal Paul, so how can they expect to be healed? Let us examine this closely and find out exactly what Paul's thorn in the flesh was.

First of all, this "thorn" came because of the abundance of revelations Paul had received. Until a person has an abundance of revelations, similar to what Paul had, he is not going to have a "thorn." That would disqualify just about all of those who have been hiding behind Paul's thorn.

Then, verse 7 says it came lest Paul should be exalted above measure. Traditionally, that has been interpreted to say the thorn was to keep Paul humble. Therefore, God had to be the author of it, because only God would want Paul to be humble. But there is a godly

way of being exalted. First Peter 5:6 says, "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time." Those who submit (humble) themselves to God will be exalted by God. Paul was not speaking of exalting himself above measure through pride, but rather, the thorn came from Satan to keep Paul from being exalted by God in the eyes of the people. Many more people would have received what Paul preached if everything was always "rosy" for him. But there was this messenger of Satan who always buffeted Paul and scared away the faint-hearted from committing themselves to Jesus, whom Paul preached.

God magnified, or exalted, Joshua in the sight of his people (Josh. 3:7). He continued to do that with the people He used on into the new covenant (Acts 5:13). So, we see that the exalting spoken of is not a negative kind but a godly kind. That just further strengthens the fact that the thorn was not God's doing.

In verse 7, right after the thorn in the flesh is mentioned, there is a phrase set off by commas which says, "The messenger of Satan to buffet me." This is an explanation of what the thorn was. It was not a thing but rather a demonic messenger. The word used as "messenger" here is always translated as angel or messenger and refers to a created being. So, Paul's thorn was literally a demon sent from Satan to buffet him. The word "buffet" means to strike repeatedly as waves would buffet the shore.

How did this demonic force continually strike Paul? Traditionally it has been taught that it was with sickness, and the thing that made many accept that is the use of the words "weakness" and "infirmity" in verses 9 and 10. Infirmity definitely does mean sickness and is used that way in 1 Timothy 5:23, but that is not the only meaning of the word. The number two definition is any lack or inadequacy. For instance, Romans 8:26 says, "the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities." In this case, the context makes it clear that it is not speaking of sicknesses but rather not knowing what to pray for. Our finite minds are an infirmity, or an inadequacy.

If we look at the context of Paul's thorn in the flesh, we find that infirmity does not mean sickness in 2 Corinthians 12:9 and 10. In 2 Corinthians 11:30, Paul uses the exact terminology of "glorying in infirmities" that is used just a few verses later in speaking about this thorn. In the eleventh chapter he had just finished listing what those infirmities were. In verses 23-29, he lists such things as imprisonment, stripes, shipwrecks, and stonings; none of these speak of sickness. Verse 27 mentions weakness and painfulness, which some have tried to make mean sickness, but it is just as possible he could have been weary and suffered painfulness from such things as being stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19). All these things listed in 2 Corinthians 11 refer to persecutions as infirmities. So, in context, Paul's thorn was a demonic angel or messenger sent by Satan which continually stirred up persecution against him. This is also verified by three Old Testament references (Num. 33:55; Josh. 23:13 and Judg. 2:3), where people are spoken of as being "thorns in your sides" and "thorns in your eyes."

Paul asked the Lord to remove persecution from him, not sickness, and the Lord told him His grace was sufficient. We are not redeemed from persecution, and Paul later stated that

when he said in 2 Timothy 3:12, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." Most gladly, therefore, he gloried in persecutions, reproaches, necessities, and distresses that the power of Christ might rest upon him (2 Cor. 12:9). The word "glory" is an old English word which means to have dominion over or command. It is used in Exodus 8:9 where Moses told Pharaoh to glory over him, or command him, when to destroy the frogs. So when Paul spoke of glorying in these infirmities or persecutions, he was speaking of victory even in the midst of continual harassment.

In Acts 14:19, Paul was stoned and left for dead, but God raised him up, and the next day he walked at least twenty miles into the next town and started preaching again. The Lord did not stop the persecution, but God's strength was certainly made perfect in Paul's weakness (verse 9). Can you imagine what those that stoned him must have thought? They could see Paul's humanity in the cuts and bruises, but they could also see the supernatural strength of God flowing through him. "For when I am weak, then am I strong" (verse 10).

There are two other passages of Scripture that those who believe Paul's thorn in the flesh was sickness have tried to use to verify that. One is Galatians 4:13-15. Here Paul says that he preached the Gospel to these Galatians through an infirmity of the flesh, and in verse 15, he makes reference to these people being willing to poke out their own eyes and give them to him. From this, I have heard ministers preach that Paul's thorn was a rare, ancient disease which was characterized by runny, puffy eyes. But let us look at whom Paul was speaking to when he said this. He was writing to the people who lived in the region known as Galatia, which had as its major cities, Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium. The instance we mentioned earlier, where Paul was stoned and left for dead, happened in Lystra, a city of Galatia. The next day Paul walked to Derbe, another city of Galatia, and began preaching unto them. I'm sure he had runny, puffy eyes, along with multiple cuts and bruises, but they were not the result of some disease. They were the result of having just been stoned. He also says in verse 13 that his infirmity was "at the first," which leaves the impression it was only a temporary thing that he recovered from.

The next scripture used to say Paul's thorn was bad eyes is also in Galatians, chapter 6, verse 11. It says, "Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand." People have said Paul's eyes were so bad that he had to write in large letters, and this is what he was making reference to. That is only a supposition and not a very good one at that. It is a lot more credible to believe that he was simply referring to the long letter he had written to the Galatians.

The reason it is so important to realize that the thorn in the flesh was not something which Jesus died to redeem us from, such as sickness, is so that we won't submit ourselves to these things. James 4:7 says, "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." We have to resist, or actively fight against, the devil and the things he brings, to see them flee. Satan has used traditional teaching about Paul's thorn to bring many Christians to a place of submitting to him. But, praise God, you shall know the truth and the truth, shall set you free.