

Difficult and Hard to Understand Passages

What was the Apostle Paul's 'thorn in the flesh?'

II Corinthians 12:7-9

⁷ Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!

⁸ Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me.

⁹ And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

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Let's consider a couple of questions to get started:

1. Is it even possible to determine what the 'thorn in the flesh' was?

Answer: Biblical theologians and expositors have been pondering the answer to this query for centuries. But there are at least a few clues in the NT! We'll explore those!

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2. More importantly however, is the 'thorn in the flesh' what this passage is even about? What can we learn from the great apostle's suffering about handling the dark times in our lives?

Answer: Here is found the most important aspect of this passage which the apostle included in his letter to the Corinthian church. We will find no more profound answer anywhere as we ponder the times in our lives when we are most troubled. ***Not by what Paul said, but rather by God's response!***

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Let's take a look at the semantics of the 'thorn' piece:

1. Paul, despite the nobility of his character and his zeal for the cause of Christ, was still only a man!
2. Like Paul, each of us possess a level of pride and arrogance which constantly do battle with our efforts to mature and be more like our savior throughout our lives.
3. So great was the the agony which Paul endured that on three occasions he petitioned the Lord to remove the 'thorn.'

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4. Here is a very abbreviated list of the conjectures which have been put forth over the centuries regarding what the "thorn" might be:

- a. Uncontrollable temper
- b. Fleshly desire
- c. Epilepsy
- d. Sharpness of tongue
- e. Mental depression
- f. A false apostle in the Corinthian church – due to the reference to the "messenger of Satan"

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5. While it is impossible to know the exact nature of the 'thorn', there are also found numerous passages found in the pages of the NT which lead many to believe the ailment may have been related to vision.

This school of thought leads to further speculation as to whether this might have resulted from the 'flash of light' which Saul encountered on the road to Damascus?

Regardless, he had serious and acute physical ailments. Let's take a look at a few of these clues in the scriptures:

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II Corinthians 10:10

10 For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible."

II Corinthians 11:23

23 Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death.

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II Timothy 4:9-11

⁹ Make every effort to come to me soon;

¹⁰ for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens *has gone* to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.

¹¹ Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service.

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Acts 23:1-5

¹ Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day."

² The high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth.

³ Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?"

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Acts 23:1-5 (cont.)

⁴ But the bystanders said, "Do you revile God's high priest?"

⁵ And Paul said, "I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE.'"

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Acts 13:8-11

⁸ But Elymas the magician was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

⁹ But Saul, who was also *known as* Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him,

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Acts 13:8-11 (cont.)

¹⁰ and said, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?"

¹¹ Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time." And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand.

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Galatians 6:11

¹¹ See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.

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Galatians 4:13-15

13 but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time;

14 and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus *Himself*.

15 Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me.

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So, can we come to a firm conclusion? Probably not. In the end, all is only conjecture and speculation.

But, the true power and glory of this passage is far more important to Christians by the response of God to Paul's pleadings, rather than what the ailment was!

II Corinthians 12:9a

⁹ And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."

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But the Apostle Paul's response in the next verse also provides a tremendous lesson each of us can apply to our own lives as we face adversity and trials!

II Corinthians 12:10

10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

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Let's consider some other passages on facing difficult trials and adversity in our lives:

II Corinthians 4:8-9

⁸ *we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing;

⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

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Philippians 4:12-13

12 I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.

13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

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I Peter 5:10

¹⁰ After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen *and* establish you.

James 1:2-4

² Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials,

³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

⁴ And let endurance have *its* perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

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Psalms 34:19

¹⁹ Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
But the LORD delivers him out of them all.

Philippians 4:6-7

⁶ Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

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Our conclusions:

1. The Apostle Paul, despite his nobility of character and his zeal for the cause of Christ, was still only a man!
2. He had an infirmity so great he pleaded with God on three occasions to remove it.

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Our conclusions:

3. Although we have no way of truly know what his 'thorn in the flesh' actually was, we must assume he agonized over it to the point of having considerable trepidation!

4. But's God's response to the great apostle is the true story found in this passage!

"My Grace is sufficient"

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Our conclusions:

5. Each of us have our own trials; our own thorn in the flesh: loss of loved ones, difficulties in relationships, stress from work, chronic diseases, children who need us, financial challenges, and the list goes on and on and on!

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Our conclusions:

6. But God's response to the Apostle Paul, and to each of us, is timeless. It matures our faith and gives us confidence in the hope which our God has promised!

"My Grace is sufficient"