

Paul's thorn

- its message for
today

Introduction

There are many speculations about the thorn in Paul's flesh.

It is said that we all have a thorn in the flesh to bear and put up with. However when we understand Paul, we will see that although Satan sends it for bad, it is God's intention for His glory to overcome.

When we read the whole section (verses 7-10), instead of focusing on verse 7 independently of the rest, we find that Paul, himself, defines the meaning of the thorn.

Taking the verses bit by bit we can more fully understand the meaning: (all references are to 2 Corinthians 12 unless stated otherwise).

We will find that this passage has great importance for us today - bringing challenging yet enlightening truth to bear.

Executive summary

- Chapter 1 Paul exalted
- Chapter 2 The thorn - the messenger of Satan.
- Chapter 3 Paul pleads with the Lord
- Chapter 4 Paul's new approach - I will boast
- Chapter 5 Paul takes pleasure in the thorn
- Chapter 6 Paul identifies the thorn
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Author's note including waging war through prophecy.

Chapter 1

Exalted above measure - verse 7 part.

'And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations'

Paul received abundant revelations. To him it was given to visit the third heaven, whether in body or Spirit he does not know; to hear things in this paradise (a place of future residence and happiness – described for us in Revelation 22) that he could not repeat. (Verse 1-4)

To Paul the 'mystery' in the New Covenant was revealed – that is, *'Christ in you the hope of glory.'* Colossians 1:27.

Paul has a very special place in the development of Christianity. He was used by the Holy Spirit to write down and explain the meaning and practice of the New Covenant.

Paul's obedience to the calling of God on his life, though it cost him dearly, set the scene for us to live by today in this period of time.

Luke writes this about him in Acts 9:10-19 - Ananias receives instruction from God in a vision. He is to go and lay hands on Saul (as he was then known) to restore his sight. Ananias hesitates because of Saul's reputation for harming the saints.

The Lord replies:
'Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before gentiles, kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.' 9:15-16

To Paul it was given to perform 'signs, wonders and mighty deeds.' (verse 12)

If anyone could 'get carried away with his own greatness,' it would be Paul - the coming verses show that instead Paul relies entirely on the Lord, putting no confidence in the flesh.

But Paul was a great threat to Satan's kingdom and influence.

Chapter 2

The thorn, the messenger of Satan - verse 7 part

'a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan, to buffet me lest I be exalted above measure.'

Let's emphasize - a messenger of Satan. This 'thorn' does not come from God!

Satan, of course, did not want to see Paul exalted, rather he wanted to see Paul and his ministry restricted as far as possible.

More understanding from the text:

The thorn - '*skolops*' literally a sharp pointed thing, like a stake or thorn pressing into the flesh.

Messenger - '*angellos*' - one who brings a message whether from God, from another human being or from Satan. Here clearly defined as coming from Satan.

To buffet - '*kolaphizo*' - literally to punch with closed fist.

The purpose of Satan's thorn seems to be to try to 'slow Paul down,' to somehow disable him, to make things very difficult for him.

Paul finds that Satan stirs up opposition at every step. Described as buffeting, it is like being frequently punched - or frequently prodded with a sharp stick or thorn.

It is entirely understandable that Paul would like it to stop!

So a 'suffering' Paul will call on the Lord for His intervention to stop this harassment and buffeting.

Often we do the same when faced with troubles. But we will see that the Lord has already accomplished all that is necessary for life and godliness.

'His divine power has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue.' 2 Peter 1:3

Chapter 3

I pleaded with the Lord three times - verse 8-9

'Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, " My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness. (lack of strength, feebleness, weakness.)'

Paul sought the Lord that this messenger from Satan might not be allowed to harass and buffet him, that it may depart.

However, the Lord God did not respond in the way Paul would have liked.

There is a very specific reason, which, when we understand, throws light onto God's response:

We find it in Ephesians 3:8-11

'To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.'

It is God's purpose at this time, that His strength and His power is demonstrated to the satanic realm through us, His born again believers. It will be His strength, not our strength - it will manifest with glory to God when we are weak.

There will be a demonstration of God's wisdom to principalities and powers – demonstrating that even a weak man, relying on the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the word of God, is greater than them. And it is enabled and effected through grace -

My grace is sufficient for you..... - verse 9

There is an abundance of grace available – more than you need, an abundance. It is available to all who come to the throne of grace.

'Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.' Hebrews 4:16

The purpose of all this grace is that you may reign in life -

'For if by one man's offence death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.' Romans 5:17

It has to be this way so that His strength is demonstrated through and by our reliance on Him.

This is one of the most important messages for today. We are expected to demonstrate God's wisdom by receiving an abundance of grace with which the wiles of our enemy, Satan, will be overcome and defeated. We will reign in life.

When Paul understood this, his whole attitude to the difficulties being brought by the messenger of Satan, changed dramatically.

Now Paul was seeing that the Lord has a much greater purpose.

Or course, the Lord could just stop Satan - but that was not His purpose.

The Lord God wants His manifest wisdom to be demonstrated to the principalities and powers by the church - that is the born again believers.

So Paul's attitude is going to change!

(The Lord is well able to demonstrate His power to Satan anytime.)

Chapter 4

I will boast of my infirmities (weaknesses) 12:9

'Therefore most gladly I will rather boast of my infirmities (feebleness), that the power of Christ may rest on me.'

2 Corinthians 12:9

Most gladly – not just tolerate.

Compare James 1:2 *'count it all joy when you fall into various trials;'*

And 1 Peter 4:12 *'Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you.'*

Do not be surprised – this is the way it is – learn to count it all joy just like Paul.

Paul has a complete change of response to the buffeting of Satan's thorn.

Now it becomes boasting of his feebleness because in that state the power of God rests on him. Satan's efforts just bring about more and more glory to God!

Why would Paul boast of his own weakness – so that the power of Jesus Christ would *'kataskenoo epi'* upon me. Translated 'rest' the literal language says, 'to pitch its tent upon me.'

(Rather like the shekinah glory present in the holy of holies in the tent of meeting (tabernacle) in the Old Testament – Exodus 30:34.)

Perhaps Paul was now mindful of Jesus reaction when He was facing the crucifixion.

'Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me.' In His humanity Jesus did not want to be crucified – He knew what was coming. But He also knew He had come to fulfil the will of the Father. When He is being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Peter draws his sword, Jesus says, *'Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given Me.'* (John 18:11)

So to complete the first quotation, *'nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will,'* Mark 14:36. Jesus saw the greater picture – immense glory to God was going to come through His sacrifice, painful though it would be.

Paul longs for the power of God to be demonstrated – and indeed we know from verse 12 that it was – in abundance.

'Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds.' (See also Romans 15:18-19 and Acts 15:12 and Acts 19:11-12)

We cannot imagine that Paul just gave in to the wiles and opposition of the enemy. For Paul is the one who teaches us of the immense power available within us. Ephesians 1:18-23.

Paul and others say, resist the devil, overcome him in the power of the Spirit and by the rhema word. This will bring glory to God and demonstrate His manifold wisdom to the powers and principalities.

Chapter 5

Take pleasure - verse 10

'Therefore I take pleasure'

So now we understand that Paul actually takes pleasure in (thinks good of) the buffeting of the thorn given by Satan to harass him - it provided more and more opportunity for God's power to be seen through grace.

This is not just 'put up with,' it is much more than that. It is seeing every obstacle as an opportunity for God's glory to be demonstrated to the principalities and powers.

Paul is certain of the grace of God. He knows how to appropriate it - by recognising his own feebleness and coming to the throne of grace.

He now takes pleasure, yes pleasure, in this irritating thorn -because of the opportunities it provides for more and more manifestation of the power of God in him and through him.

How very different from the typical response of us today!
- Very challenging!

We are going to need a complete change in our thinking!

Now we need to start to understand that God's grace is sufficient in every situation. That does not mean putting up with satan's thorns. When we face something from our enemy then it is time to resist and take authority over his works and watch him flee.

Discernment is needed – not every obstacle in life comes from Satan.

Nevertheless God's grace is sufficient to meet every need – time to come to the throne of grace in every situation, natural or demonic – the Lord God will have a strategy for you.

A problem is our humanity. We are so sure we can solve problems that we try every way in our own strength. Then eventually turning to the Lord. Why not accept His invitation to the throne of grace first rather than last!

So we find Paul taking pleasure in the thorn and its outworking - so how does he define this thorn?

Chapter 6

The thorn defined - verse 10

Paul now defines for us the meaning of the thorn, the messenger of Satan, which manifested in various ways to buffet him.

'in infirmities (weakness and feebleness), in reproaches (insults), in needs (necessity), in persecutions, in distresses (lit: crowding in to a narrow space), for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong (powerful).'

In this context **infirmities** should not be looked upon as sicknesses, rather as weakness of the flesh when set against obstacles.

Paul knows that recognising his own weakness is an essential prerequisite for the manifestation of God's power.

Each of the manifestations of the messenger of Satan carries emphasis in the text:

Reproaches is intense insults.

Needs is dire needs.

Persecutions is strong opposition.

Distresses is strong pressure crowding in.

Paul lists many elements of the things he suffered in chapter 11 when he describes his position as a minister of Christ.

'in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness' verses 23-27

These things may seem to be natural, human. But then how else does Satan buffet us - he uses things which appear to be natural and human - he inspires opposition both from 'natural causes' like storms for example, and by exciting human opposition. Paul was beaten, stoned, lashed, imprisoned, shipwrecked, in danger from robbers from false brethren from his own countrymen.

(Paul also lists some things which are normal so far as our flesh is concerned - weariness, toil, sleeplessness, hunger and thirst. So discernment is needed!)

God's grace was always sufficient - not just to put up with things, but to overcome with demonstrations of God's power.

Paul recognizes that there is a spiritual battle. Our enemy will try to 'slow us down' by buffeting us - not to the same degree as Paul, but nevertheless Paul urges us to be fully aware as we are not immune.

Chapter 7

Peter

'Beloved do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed you may also be glad with exceeding joy.' 1 Peter 4:12

Peter's message - expect a fiery trial!

Of course – our enemy will see to that! Satan will want to reduce or eliminate the witness of as many of the born again believers as he can. Paul warned of fiery darts, now Peter sees it as a fiery trial, a testing. Do not be surprised.

' Be sober, be vigilant; for your adversary, the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.' 1 Peter 5:8-9

Don't give in - resist. Exercise the spiritual power within you. *He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world!* (1 John 4:4)

Partake of the sufferings of Christ.

Peter says, rejoice! we are partaking of the sufferings of Christ – so let's see what he means –

How did Jesus Christ suffer whilst on earth?

- 1) **Persecution from men.** We must expect people to persecute / oppose us. The Kingdom of Light is anathema to the kingdom of darkness. Men prefer darkness. Paul wrote this to the Corinthians - *'For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death leading to death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life.'*
2 Corinthians 3:15-16
- 2) **Temptation from Satan.** Satan's history of bringing temptation goes right back to the beginning in the Garden of Eden. Why would we think it would be any different now! Surely you can do this that - God won't know!
- 3) **Crucifixion of His flesh - self denial of the highest order.** Although Jesus would have preferred not to go to the cross, nevertheless, He chose the Father's will over and above His own. (recorded for us by Matthew in chapter 26 verse 39) We can prefer others above ourselves - that is the nature of love.

So, don't be surprised - instead we can look upon these things in the same way that the Apostle Paul did. Every one is an opportunity for glory to come to our Father; both by our response and by the works of power and gifts of the Spirit that He does, and will, bestow on us. How else will His manifest wisdom be demonstrated to the principalities and powers?

Chapter 8

James

'My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.' 1:2

In difficulties Paul says take pleasure, Peter says rejoice and James says count it all joy. The message is consistent.

James emphasizes the fact that our faith will be tested and that the testing will come from our own strong desires or lusts.

Desire will draw us away and entice us – if we let it. Then desire conceives sin; and sin, when full grown, brings forth death. This is a natural progression. Satan will, of course, get in on the act – bring temptation upon temptation trying to hurry us down this road to destruction.

Don't blame God it is not His doing.

'Do not say 'I am tempted (or tested) by God, for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.' Verse 13

James urges us to submit to God by being holy in all our ways because God gives more grace. And - *therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.* 4:7

Note: *piezazo, peiramos* can be translated as either test, try, tempt, or trial. Our faith suffers a trial (verse 2), suffers temptation (verse 12, 13 and 14) and is put to the proof (verse 3 *dokimion* a proof, a crucible translated testing.)

It is all the same message - a putting to the test of our faith, rather like Satan did with Jesus in the wilderness - will we really believe and follow the right path and resist our enemy as well.

Chapter 9

Take up the whole armour of God. Ephesians 6

With the urging and confirmation of Peter and James we can take Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians in chapter 6. Take up the whole armour of God – they were not immune from the wiles of Satan - neither are we!

It's no good thinking we are immune, that God is preventing Satan from attacking us. He is not. See 1 Peter 5:8-9 and John 10:10 and Acts 20:29.

... because He wants His power to be demonstrated to the principalities and powers through His grace working in our weakness.

'Behold I give you authority to trample on serpents, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you.' Luke 10:19.

Jesus gave this delegated authority to His disciples - because the indwelling Holy Spirit was not given to man until after His resurrection. (John 20:22) At this that power was delegated.

How much more there is for us in the New Covenant -

'He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.'
1 John 4:4

The power of God is now within us.

So it is His intention, for us now, that we take up the full armour, that we resist the devil, that we move in the inherent power of He who is greater within us.

(This is not to exclude the fact that, by grace, God might, on occasion, intervene by inspiring human intervention or by sending an angel into a situation.)

So get prepared:

Put on the whole armour of God so that you will be able to stand and keep standing.

- 1) **Truth** 'Holy Spirit lead me into all truth.' Pray frequently! See the scripture as God breathed and apply it correctly.
- 2) **Righteousness.** Know you have received the free gift of righteousness so act accordingly – be righteous in all your ways.
- 3) **Walk this way** - have your feet shod with the gospel of peace. This is 'be made ready and walk.'
- 4) **Trust** – take the shield of faith. Place your trust in holding up the truth – it will extinguish the fiery darts.
- 5) **Renew your mind** – the helmet of salvation. Think only on the power and grace of God. Don't harbour negative thoughts. Be absolutely certain to forgive everyone who comes against you for any and every reason.

This describes the position a Christian should grow into. A certainty of his or her position in Christ and a determined application of the full gospel. A certain knowledge of 'Christ within the hope of glory.'

Then – take the **sword of the Spirit** which is the word of God. Jesus teaches us that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. (Matthew 4:4)

The word (rhema) of God is that phrase or saying that God is speaking to me and to you. So Paul is saying, when we are standing against the wiles of the devil, take the word (rhema) that God speaks to you as a dagger (not a big sword in the text). Use that dagger, it is all that is needed, to defeat the enemy.

This is spiritual power. When God speaks nothing is impossible.

Faith that moves mountains comes by hearing the word (rhema) that God brings, whether by a quickened scripture, an audible voice, a still small voice or by any other means.

This is what is meant by coming to the throne of grace to receive what is needed – take what the Lord God says and apply it and reign in life.

Satan cannot touch me?

Do not fall into the trap of thinking Satan is bound by God and cannot touch you – that is nowhere born out by scripture - rather the opposite!

Paul would not teach about the armour of God if Satan was prevented from coming against us with his wiles. (See also Luke 12:4-5)

There is one verse in scripture which needs more explanation

'We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself and the wicked one does not touch him.' 1 John 5:18

To understand this verse we need to know what John is teaching when he says *'whoever is born of God.'*

So going back to verse 9 of chapter 3 we have, *'whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.'*

(Very clearly we are all capable of and do sin – that is we miss the mark. John makes this clear in chapter 1 verse 8. *'If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves.'*)

So when John says, *'whoever is born of God,'* he is referring to that part of us which is brought back to life when we are born again – that is our human spirit, for it is obvious that our body and soul are not born again - we don't climb back into our mother's womb! The Holy Spirit takes up residence within and our human spirit is now incapable of sin – unlike our soul and body! (refer John 3 where Jesus speaks with Nicodemus.)

It is our human spirit indwelt by the Holy Spirit which the wicked one does not (cannot) touch. Thus, even if we loose earthly battles with the enemy, our eternal salvation is totally secure and guaranteed. (Ephesians 1:13, 4:30 and 2 Corinthians 1:22 and 5:5)

Chapter 10

For us today - life in the New covenant

The deepest of deep love

Comprehend the love of God - Paul, writing to the Ephesians said it like this:

'That He may would grant you to, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height - to know the love of Christ, which passes all knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.' (Chapter 3 16-19)

This wonderful love of God is within - in our human spirit - no wonder the scripture urges us to live and walk by the spirit and not the flesh. (See Romans 8:12-14)

The greatest of great power

Again Paul to the Ephesians:

'that the eyes of your understanding be enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power towards us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come.'
(Chapter 1:18-21)

This is our objective.

Learn to revel in the wonderful love of God. Know His inherent goodness towards us so that we have great confidence in coming to the throne of grace in times of need rather than struggling in our own strength.

Learn to understand the enormous power of God that is unleashed through the Holy Spirit. Understand our position in Christ far above all other power. Unleash the power and authority of God against the works of the enemy – thus demonstrating God's manifold wisdom in the church.

Enjoy

Author's note

Not everything we face is the work of the enemy. Somethings are just natural and some opposition is just human.

What is needed is discernment – and then the right resistance, appropriate for the situation.

It is my hope that all our brethren become more and more like Paul. We all suffer opposition. We can all change our attitude. We can all enjoy the Lord's great purpose by recognizing the wiles of the devil and by taking the God given authority over the devil's works.

Then more and more God's manifold wisdom will be demonstrated to the principalities and powers.

Waging war through prophecy.

'This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare.' 1 Timothy 1:18

Many of us have received prophetic words which have not (yet) come to pass. Any that are not of God must fall by the wayside. The devil may (or will) try to frustrate anything that threatens his area of influence – his position in this world.

It is a good time to remind ourselves of what has been prophesied over us individually. Then to seek the Lord that anything not of him may fall away. Then to take authority over the enemy that he will not in any way shape or form affect, delay, divert those things which the Lord has spoken through prophecy - so that we may walk in all He has called us to and be very fruitful.

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