

Common Erroneous Teachings about Paul's "Thorn in the Flesh"

1. Inaccurate Translation

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 NASB

*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.*

2. Automatically assuming (perhaps due to preconceived beliefs) that this thorn was given by God.

The text reads, "a thorn in the flesh was given to me". If it was given to Paul by God, why didn't Paul say, "**God** gave me a thorn in the flesh"? (More on this later.)

3. Inaccurate View of How God Builds Godly Character

FALSE: "Suffering also is a tool God uses for building godly character ([Rom. 5:1-5](#)). Certainly Paul was a man of rich Christian character because he permitted God to mold and make him in the painful experiences of his life."¹

Truth: Trials happen to ALL HUMAN BEINGS; however, for those who believe in Jesus, instead of these trials crushing us, God turns them for our good and they actually make us better (not bitter).

Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. (One good thing compared with another good thing.)³ And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance;⁴ and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope;⁵ and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Truth: We are transformed not by God sending us trials, but by seeing Jesus. (More on this later.)

4. Ignorance of the Fact that We are Dead to and Free from Sin

FALSE: Paul's thorn in the flesh was given to him to keep him from sinning. Exciting spiritual experiences—like going to heaven and back—have a way of inflating the human ego; and pride leads to a multitude of temptations to sin."²

TRUTH: God doesn't use torture to set us free from sinning!!! He could have done that without going to the cross. He took care of sin on the cross, setting us free from it and making us dead to it. (Romans 6)

Romans 6:14

¹ Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament, Volume 1

²² Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament, Volume 1.

For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

Romans 6:2

How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

5. **A Perverted View of God's Sovereignty and Character**

FALSE, FALSE, AND ABSOLUTELY FALSE (Commentary within parenthesis is ours): *“God permitted Satan to afflict Paul, just as He permitted Satan to afflict Job (see Job 1-2). While we do not fully understand the origin of evil in this universe” (YES, WE DO ACTUALLY), “or all the purposes God had in mind when He permitted evil to come” (THAT IS MAKING A HUGE LEAP TO SAY HE “PERMITTED” EVIL TO COME. Evil came when Satan exalted HIMSELF), “we do know that God controls evil” (NO HE DOES NOT!!!) “and can use it even for His own glory” (God DOES NOT use evil for good. He TURNS evil that happens to us for our GOOD. The source of evil is not His doing or His allowing. It is the free will of individuals.) “Satan cannot work against a believer without the permission of God.” (This is also not true in the New Covenant. God has DEFEATED Satan thoroughly FOR US THROUGH THE BLOOD OF HIS SON. HE DOES NOT THEN TURN ABOUT AND REARM SATAN AGAINST US. If He wants to do something, He doesn't need Satan. He can do it by Himself!!!!) “Everything that the enemy did to Job and Paul was permitted by the will of God.” (No, what happened to Paul God turned to good.)³*

Hebrews 2:14-15

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil,¹⁵ and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

6. **The RIDICULOUS notion that Satan is used by God to keep us humble. Why would Satan want to promote our humility when he himself is full of pride and when we being prideful would be to his advantage???** It is irrational to think Satan and God are partners for our good. It is disgusting.

FALSE: *“There is something worse than sickness, and that is sin; and the worst sin of all is pride. The healthy person who is rebelling against God is in worse shape than the suffering person who is submitting to God and enjoying God's grace. It is a paradox—and an evidence of the sovereignty of God—that God used Satan, the proudest of all beings, to help keep Paul humble.”⁴ (When you see the word “paradox”, take note. If something doesn't make sense, if two thoughts/ideas are so conflicting, one should consider that perhaps one of the ideas is actually FALSE. Seriously? This would mean that Satan is in cooperative partnership with God for our good. This is blasphemous!)*

7. **Making ASSUMPTIONS about a Text That Are In No Way Indicted In The Text: The assumption is that Paul had the sin of pride in his life. This is NOT STATED here or anywhere else in Scripture after his conversion.**

³ Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament, Volume 1.

⁴ Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament, Volume 1.

*"In His grace, God forgives our sins; but in His government, He must permit us to reap what we sow."*⁵

*"Of this sin he who lives nearest to God may be in most special danger; and he who is most eminent in piety should feel that he also occupies a position where the enemy will approach him in a sly and subtle manner, and where he is in peculiar danger of a fall."*⁶

8. Illogical Conclusions Based on False Assumption.

*"There are times when God permits Satan to afflict us so that God might accomplish a great purpose in our lives."*⁷ (Again...seriously. God and Satan are partners in bringing about greater ministry in our lives and helping us find our highest purpose! NOOOO!)

9. Making RIDICULOUS Things Up to Fit Our Opinion: The passage about Paul's thorn in the flesh DOES NOT SAY it was a sickness. (More on this later).

FALSE:

*"Countless explanations concerning the nature of his thorn in the flesh have been offered. They range from incessant temptation, dogged opponents, chronic maladies (such as ophthalmia, malaria, migraine headaches, and epilepsy), to a disability in speech."*⁸

*The most plausible theory is that it was disfiguring and acute ophthalmia. Suffice it to say that it was some bodily infirmity which acted as a balance to Paul's mind, drawing his thoughts and attention to his earthly state, lest they should dwell too constantly in meditation upon the things which had been revealed to him.*⁹

*And the usually very judicious Doddridge supposes that the view which he had of the glories of heavenly objects so affected his nerves as to produce a paralytic disorder, and particularly a stammering in his speech, and perhaps also a ridiculous distortion of the countenance.*¹⁰ (ROTFLOL)

*Many of the Latin Fathers supposed that some unruly and ungovernable lust was intended. Chrysostom and Jerome suppose that he meant the headache; Tertullian, an earache; and Rosenmuller supposes that it was the gout in the head, (kopfgicht,) and that it was a periodical disorder such as affected him when he was with the Galatians, [Galatians 4:13](#). But all conjecture here is vain; and the numerous strange and ridiculous opinions of commentators is a melancholy attestation of their inclination to fanciful conjecture, where it is impossible, in the nature of the case, to ascertain the truth.*¹¹

⁵ Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament, Volume 1.

⁶ Notes on the New Testament Explanatory and Practical

⁷ Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament, Volume 1

⁸ The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty

⁹ Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans.

¹⁰ Notes on the New Testament Explanatory and Practical

¹¹ Notes on the New Testament Explanatory and Practical

So to sum it up, many if not most Bible commentators and teachers teach outright or imply that because Paul received such powerful revelations, he was subject to pride and conceit. Therefore God had to humble Paul by using satan (as God's servant) to afflict Paul with any necessary evil/sickness to keep Paul from the sin of pride. This is simply NOT TRUE.

Dissecting Paul's Thorn

- **Distorted and False Translation (and there are others):**

2 Corinthians 12:7 NASB

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!

- **More Accurate Translation:**

2 Corinthians 12:7 NKJV

And lest I should be exalted (literally: may be being lifted up; something that is happening TO Paul, not BY Paul)¹² above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted (literally: may be being lifted up)¹² above measure.

10. Paul did have an abundance of revelations.

2 Corinthians 12:1-4

It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. ³ And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— ⁴ how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. ⁵ Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. ⁶ For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me.

“Paul is saying: ‘I want you to look at what I am, not what I was. The man I want you to take into account is not the one who experienced an astonishing revelation then but the one you see now, in all his weakness, so no-one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say,’ (verse 6). In this passage Paul is responding to the new missionaries who are pointing, apparently, to ecstatic experiences as a demonstration of their claims over the Corinthians as against the place of Paul. By his reply Paul rejects accreditation by ecstasy. The simple fact is that Christ

¹² Greek Interlinear Bible

commissioned Paul to be their apostle, and the demonstration of that did not lie in the display of ecstatic power, but in the reality of weakness as lived out before the Corinthians.”¹³

11. “And lest I should be exalted above measure”

•Commentators and translators have inserted their ideas into this statement, the NASB says, “to keep me from exalting myself”, the NIV says “Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited,” but Paul did not personalize it by using personal pronouns. The personal pronouns, me and myself were added because the translators assumed Paul was talking about himself being held down by God so that he would not become conceited or exalt himself. So to whom is Paul saying that he should not be “exalted above measure”? There are two possibilities, 1) Exalted in his own eyes, i.e. become conceited, or 2) Exalted before others.

12. “A thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me”

•Most commentators speculate that this thorn is some terrible sickness or disfiguring ailment given to Paul by God to humble him. They will define the words “thorn” and “flesh” to prove that it was something physically affecting Paul.

•Another way of looking at “thorn in the flesh” is simply that Paul was quoting the Old Testament or using the expression as it was used in the OT, in which case it could be figurative. This passage describes enemies of the Israelites who if not driven out would be a constant “thorn in the side”, i.e. “thorn in the flesh” to them.

Numbers 33:55

But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall come about that those whom you let remain of them will become as pricks in your eyes and as thorns in your sides, and they will trouble you in the land in which you live.

None of the suggestions made above is entirely without merit, but in my view Chrysostom was probably right in general. First, in the Old Testament adversaries are sometimes referred to as “thorns in your sides” (Numbers 33:55; Judges 2:3; compare Ezekiel 2:6; Ezekiel 28:24; Micah 7:4) or “thorns in your eyes” (Joshua 23:13). There is no metaphorical use of “thorn” in the Old Testament for illness or temptation. Most of the other uses of “thorn” in the Old Testament are images drawn from farming or the awareness that briars and thorns grew among the rubble of cities which were destroyed. Second, the term “messenger” (Greek angelos) in Paul’s writings always refers to a person. Third, in 2 Cor. 10-13 the basic topic is Paul’s opponents. The whole section refers to the interlopers who are oppressing his beloved Corinthian church and at the same time criticizing Paul for not having had the courage to be equally oppressive. Fourth, Paul parallels this “thorn” with a “weakness” in which he will glory.¹⁴

While the term “weakness” (Greek astheneia) can refer to illness (Galatians 4:13; 1 Tim. 5:23), in its seven occurrences in the Corinthian letters (and in both its

¹³ Barnett, P. (1988). *The message of 2 Corinthians: power in weakness* (p. 177). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

¹⁴ Hard Sayings of the Bible

occurrences in Romans) it refers to moral, spiritual or social weakness. In 2 Cor. 11:30 it refers to Paul's shame at having to flee from Damascus rather than face his enemies (in a culture in which an honorable death was better than fearful flight). Another weakness-strength contrast comes in 2 Cor. 13:3-4 in which Jesus was weak in his crucifixion, unable to withstand his adversaries, but was raised in strength; so Paul who was socially weak when present in Corinth will return with Christ's power, for Christ will defeat his adversaries. Furthermore, in 2 Cor. 12:10 he lists weakness in a list which includes "insults, hardships, persecutions, difficulties," but no terms for illness. Thus I conclude that the evidence from both the Old Testament background and the actual use of the term in Paul points to the "thorn" as being the opponents who dogged Paul's tracks throughout his mission, confusing churches every time he left one church to plant another.¹⁵

13. Who gave the "thorn" to Paul?

- Most commentaries and contemporary teachers in the church today assume that the "thorn" was given to Paul by God. (We disagree with this view.)
- Another view (with which we agree) is that the "thorn" was given by satan.
 - In the Greek the "thorn" is called a "messenger satan", translated by Bible translators "messenger of satan" or "messenger from satan".
- Paul himself identifies the giver of the "thorn", "a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan".
- **Consider this: if the thorn was given to Paul by God, why didn't Paul simply say, "God gave me a thorn in the flesh,"?**

There are some things that we can definitely say about the "thorn." First, it was evil. It is described as a "messenger of Satan," not as an angel of God. This means that it comes from the Evil One with evil intent.¹⁶

14. What was the purpose of the "thorn"?

- Most commentators and teachers say it was to humble Paul. It is important to note that there is no evidence that Paul was in the least bit prideful. He humbled himself by working to support himself instead of insisting on financial support. He identified himself as Christ's bondservant. He warned Timothy not to put a novice in the position of an overseer so that they wouldn't fall under the sin of pride, he referred to the visions he had as being the experience of "such a man", and there is no record of Paul being arrogant in the book of Acts.
- Another view (the one with which we agree) is that the "thorn", the messenger of satan, had as its expressed purpose to keep Paul as an apostle and his teachings of the "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24) from being exalted through constant persecutions mentioned by Paul. (Notice this scripture is in immediate context of the passage we are examining.)

2 Corinthians 11:12-13, 23-25

But what I am doing I will continue to do, so that I may cut off opportunity from those

¹⁵ Hard Sayings of the Bible

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who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the matter about which they are boasting.¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ...²³Are 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. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes.²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.

2 Corinthians 12:10

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.

•**The persecutions were designed to “weaken” and humiliate Paul in the eyes of the “church” by the false apostles who were teaching heresies. Paul’s revelations were so great that with at least the one he received 14 years earlier, Paul didn’t even want to speak of himself in the first person about it. This was opposed to the false apostles who were apparently using visions and revelations to control and manipulate the church. Because the revelations given to Paul were so powerful and life changing, (Rom. 1:16), the Jews, the false apostles, the Judiazers, and satan himself, were attempting to stop Paul through persecution by weakening him in the eyes of the church. In other words, they wanted to make sure that Paul was not exalted, and that they themselves were exalted.**

2 Corinthians 11:3-5, 12-15, 18-20

But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. ⁴For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this beautifully. ⁵For I consider myself not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles. Vs. 12-15 ¹²But what I am doing I will continue to do, so that I may cut off opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the matter about which they are boasting. ¹³For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their deeds. Vs. 18-20 ¹⁸Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also. ¹⁹For you, being so wise, tolerate the foolish gladly. ²⁰For you tolerate it if anyone enslaves you, anyone devours you, anyone takes advantage of you, anyone exalts himself, anyone hits you in the face.

Paul’s thorn in the flesh was persecution that came from the devil, to make people think twice about accepting the Gospel, because of the persecution that accompanied it. Andrew Wommack’s Living Commentary

This is not speaking of Paul having a pride problem that God had to deal with through affliction. This is speaking about Paul being so respected and honored in the sight of people that Satan had to do something to make him and his Gospel less attractive. He did that through persecution.-Andrew Wommack’s Living Commentary.

The messenger of Satan—Another mode of expressing what he calls the thorn in the flesh; and he seems most plainly to refer to the false apostle at Corinth. The apostle himself was, as he styles himself to this Church, αποστολος Ιησου Χριστου, 2 Corinthians 1:1, the apostle of Jesus Christ. The person in question is styled here

αγγελος Σαταν, the apostle or angel of Satan. It is almost impossible to mistake the apostle's meaning and reference. Jesus Christ sent Paul to proclaim his truth, and found a Church at Corinth. Satan, the adversary of God's truth, sent a man to preach lies at the same place, and turn the Church of God into his own synagogue; and by his teaching lies and calumnies the apostle was severely buffeted. We need seek no other sense for these expressions.-Adam Clarke's Commentary

SOME ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

1. The Proper New Covenant View of Satan is that He is a defeated foe who will seek to thwart the advancement of the gospel through human beings not submitted to Christ, and that when he works against us, God will turn it for good.

Romans 8:26

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. ²⁷ Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸ **And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.** ²⁹ For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. ³⁰ Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

God's Everlasting Love

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? **If God is for us, who can be against us?** ³² He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? ³³ **Who shall bring a charge against God's elect?** It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. ³⁵ **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?**

³⁶ As it is written:

*"For Your sake we are killed all day long;
We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."*

³⁷ **Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. 38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, 39 nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

2. If revelations cause pride (which we debate wholly), then why does Paul pray for the church to get revelation **without warning them about being prideful about it?** Revelation about what Jesus accomplished on the cross, doesn't produce pride because how could we ever boast of a gift or boast because we know of the gift. How could we do anything but fall on our knees and worship?

Ephesians 1:17

That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.

3. True revelation from God leads us to Jesus, the more we see Jesus the less we have pride in ourselves because we are transformed into His image. Is His image prideful? No it isn't.

2 Corinthians 3:17

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. ¹⁸ But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

4. As we behold Jesus we are changed into His likeness (NOT lifted up with pride, which needs to be broken out of us by God through sickness). If pride has to be rooted out by tribulation and pain and or sickness, than that says the cross was not sufficient or complete enough to do the job. If we think God needs to use satan to humble us, then we are saying that the dunamis of the Gospel is insufficient AND THAT CHRIST DIED IN VAIN.

5. What is God's answer to Paul?

2 Corinthians 12:9

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

In response to Paul's thrice-repeated prayer, the Lord answered; and the Greek perfect tense indicates that Paul still heard him saying: My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness (verse 9). Here is the ultimate revelation, which stands for all time. Paul no longer prays for the removal of the 'thorn'. That lies in the past. The 'thorn' is with him still; the Lord's answer rings in his ears still. The grace of God is not only for the beginning of the Christian life; it is for the beginning, the middle and the end. ¹⁷

Thayer Definition: Sufficient

- 1) to be possessed of unfailing strength
- 1a) to be strong, to suffice, to be enough
- 1a1) to defend, ward off
- 1b) to be satisfied, to be contented

Strong's, "through the idea of raising a barrier"

6. Paul asked God three times that this constant persecution would be removed (just as Jesus asked three times that His upcoming suffering would be removed). Why didn't God remove the thorn/persecution?

- Persecution is a part of Christian life until the Lord returns.

2 Timothy 3:11-12

Persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all the Lord rescued me! ¹² Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Notice that it says those who desire to live GODLY will be persecuted, not the proud.

¹⁷ Barnett, P. (1988). *The message of 2 Corinthians: power in weakness* (p. 178). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.