

# A Messenger Of Satan

**Introduction.** In the end of 2 Corinthians, Paul is trying to establish his superiority over the false apostles who were endangering the Corinthians. His speaking of his vision in the first part of chapter 12 will not edify the church or gain anything for him personally, but the Corinthians will see that he was not outmatched by his rivals in an important area of their boasting. Although Paul recognized the honor involved in being the recipient of a vision, he wanted to dispel any idea that it added to his personal status or importance.

To humble him, he was given a "thorn in the flesh" which we will make the subject of our study today. There is a lot to learn about the Christian walk by examining it.

## I. ***What Was Paul's "Thorn In The Flesh"?***

- A. Several possibilities have been proposed:
  - 1. A pain in the ear or head (Tertullian).
  - 2. Unruly fleshly lusts (Medieval commentators).
  - 3. Stammering speech (MacKnight).
  - 4. Malarial fever (Ramsay).
  - 5. Acute eye problems (Farrar and others).
    - a) A severe form inflammation of the eyes (cf. Galatians 4:13-15; 6:11).
    - b) It is thought to have been caused by the blinding vision on the Damascus road.
  - 6. The persecutions he suffered as a Christian.
  - 7. The continual worry upon the churches.
- B. Whatever the "thorn", it was "a messenger of Satan." It had an evil intent (Job 2:5-6; Luke 13:16). Yet it is evident that God allowed it to remain!

## II. ***Why Was The "Thorn" Given?***

- A. Lest Paul be "exalted above measure" (2 Corinthians 12:7).
  - 1. Paul had been blessed to receive many revelations:
    - a) On the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-6).
    - b) In Troas (Acts 16:8-10).
    - c) In Corinth (Acts 18:9-11).
    - d) In Jerusalem (Acts 22:17-21).
    - e) In Jerusalem (Acts 23:11).
    - f) On his way to Rome (Acts 27:22-25).
    - g) The vision of paradise (2 Corinthians 12:1-6).
  - 2. It would have been easy for Paul to be filled with pride over these revelations, and for the church to exalt him too highly.

- a) There is no danger that more constantly attacks Christians, and even eminent Christians, than pride.
- b) There is no sin that is more subtle, insinuating, deceptive; none that lurks more constantly around the heart, and that finds a more ready entrance, than pride.
- B. To "buffet" him (2 Corinthians 12:7).
  - 1. The word "buffet" means "to strike with the fist"; thus to strive against, contend.
  - 2. Paul "buffeted" himself to keep his body under control (1 Corinthians 9:27), but this was produced by Satan to discourage and hinder, and allowed by God, to keep Paul humble. God could overrule for good, just like with Joseph (Genesis 50:20).
- C. There is a practical lesson related to humility.
  - 1. God's people are to be humble (John 13:14-16; James 4:10).
  - 2. Sometimes it is useful to have "outside help" to keep us humble (Galatians 2:11-14).

### III. ***Paul's Reaction To The "Thorn"***

- A. Being human, he wanted to get rid of it (2 Corinthians 12:8).
  - 1. He pleaded with the Lord three times to remove it.
  - 2. There are interesting similarities between Paul and Christ in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-43):
    - a) Both prayed three times.
    - b) Both did not receive the answer for which they prayed.
    - c) But they both received answers that were sufficient:
      - (1) An angel came to strengthen Christ.
      - (2) The Lord told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you" and "My strength is made perfect in weakness."
- B. This should remind us of certain principles of prayer.
  - 1. Persevering, earnest prayer has great value (Matthew 7:7; Luke 18:1-8).
  - 2. We are to pray specifically, as Paul did, yet God knows what is best for us, so the answer may not be what we wish. Accept the will of God (1 John 5:14-15).

### IV. ***Paul's Reaction To The Lord's Answer***

- A. Take a closer look at the Lord's answer (2 Corinthians 12:9).
  - 1. "My grace is sufficient for you."
    - a) The Lord would give Paul what he needed, but not necessarily what he wanted. Any good parent will teach their children the same lesson. God always answers the need, even though it seems that He is not answering the prayer.

- b) Divine favor always furnishes enough power to see His servants through their distresses (1 Kings 19:15-18). Elijah had his mind turned to a goal and the reassurance of God and others.
- 2. "My strength is made perfect in weakness."
  - a) It is in times of weakness and hardship that the Lord's care of us can be experienced in its fullest.
  - b) For in such times we really come to depend upon the Lord, and not upon our own strength or wisdom (Proverbs 3:5-6).
  - c) The same lesson is repeated in Moses' rod, Gideon's pitchers, David's sling, and, of course, the preaching of the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:26-31).
- B. Now consider Paul's reaction.
  - 1. "I will boast in my infirmities" (2 Corinthians 12:9).
    - a) Rather than bemoan his circumstances, he gloried in them. He endured them without despair or bitterness.
    - b) It is the way of the world to glorify human strength, beauty, fame, power, wealth, and independence, or to indulge the flesh as a compensation for weaknesses and sufferings. But the way of God is diametrically opposite.
  - 2. "I take pleasure in infirmities ... for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).
    - a) We can rejoice in hardships (Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4). The testing of our faith produces the development of character that pleases God (1 Peter 1:6-7).
    - b) It was not the most pleasant way to live, but it enabled others to see the power of Christ in Paul in a way that would not be possible if he did not have the "thorn". He was not bitter; he was content (2 Corinthians 4:7).

**Conclusion.** Although it is impossible to determine exactly the nature of Paul's "thorn in the flesh," we can glean powerful principles applicable to all. The Lord has more need of our weakness than of our strength: our strength is often His rival; our weakness, His servant. Man's extremity is God's opportunity; man's security is Satan's opportunity. God's way is not to take His children out of trial, but to give them strength to bear up against it (John 17:15).

In time of infirmity, pray! But do not be surprised if the answer to your prayers are similar to those given to Paul. The Lord may choose not to remove the infirmity. Instead, He may choose to give you the strength to endure it. If so, then rejoice that the power of Christ has enabled you to find away to cope with the sadness and problems present in your life.