

Paul's Thorn In The Flesh

by Wayne Goff

“And lest I should be exalted 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 above measure” 2 Corinthians 12:7.

The great question everyone wants to ask about this text is “What was the thorn in the flesh?” The simple answer is that we do not know. If God wanted us to know, then he would have told us. But since He veiled this information from us, we will never know for sure.

The more important question is “Why did God allow Paul to suffer this thorn in the flesh?” That answer is given: “Lest I should be exalted above measure.”

Paul is credited with having written by inspiration nearly one-half of the New Testament. This would have caused the most humble man to be tempted to think more highly of himself than he should. Apparently God felt that Paul needed a thorn in his flesh to prevent this self-exaltation, and so He gave him one.

Notice that Paul's prayer was answered by God. He prayed three times that the thorn might be removed, but God said “No!” We can rest assured that if we ask God anything according to His will, then He hears us (1 Jn. 5:14). But we must also be willing to accept the possibility of a negative reply! Paul learned to accept God's answer: “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). He said that he would then glory in his infirmities.

But God's answer to Paul could often be His answer to us! Do you believe that if God never answered another prayer of yours that His grace has already been sufficient for you? As a matter of fact, that is true for every Christian. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). We have no right to expect anything else from God, and yet we do anyway. God is the Giver of all good, wonderful blessings and He continues to give and give and give (James 1:17). He will never leave us, nor fail us, if we will trust in Him. But God will, for our benefit, sometimes say no. Learn to be able to accept and understand that truth.

Furthermore, God's strength is made perfect in weakness. It is when man needs God most that man sees best God Himself! While everything is going well, and we have sunny days, and happy times, there seems to be no need for God. But turn life's circumstances around, and we scream out for God! “God help us!” we cry. So it was with Paul. It was the thorn in the flesh that caused Paul to turn to God and ask for His help. All of us need to depend upon God daily.

The Thorn?

So what was that thorn in the flesh? Certainly we can conclude that it was some physical ailment that would not go away. Various theories have been held: malaria, epilepsy, insomnia, migraines, ophthalmia, earache, stammering speech, or a paralytic disorder. Some pretty good cases can be made for at least two of these.

Others have suggested that the “thorn” was simply the opposition of false teachers he met at Corinth and elsewhere. Again, these are educated guesses and that is where they will always remain.

Do you have a “thorn in the flesh”? If so, have you prayed to the Lord to remove it? If so, and the Lord replied negatively as He did to Paul, can you accept it? Will you recognize that God's strength is made perfect in your weaknesses?

Realize as well, dear readers, that this “thorn in the flesh” was not self-induced! Paul did not suffer from liver disease because he was an alcoholic! He did not suffer from lung cancer because he smoked! He did not suffer from grave obesity because of his obsession with food! Be sure that your thorn in the flesh originated from outside your fleshly passions.

“For when I am weak, then I am strong” Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:10. That is, when I am physically weak, then I am spiritually strong. Remember that truth in times of weakness, suffering, and temptation. God is a mighty rock, a redeemer, and a comforter in time of need. But you and I must call upon Him, trust in His Word, and meditate upon His precepts. Then can we learn to “trust and obey” in all times and circumstances.

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