

God's Enduring Promise When You Face a Thorn in Your Flesh

Jesus never promised us trouble-free living. In fact, He predicted the opposite—"I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer. I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). The psalmist added another dose of reality, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all" (Ps. 34:19). Believe it or not, we need our problems to help us learn, grow, mature and become stronger. Otherwise, we'd get complacent.

Paul Evans said, "Adversity is God's university." How true! It's the hardships we face that teach us the nature of God and allow our faith to grow. How could we know God is a healer if we were never sick? How could we know Him as our provider if we never had a need? How could we know Him as a Comforter if we never experienced loneliness or grief? How could we know Him as a Savior if we were never lost? Without a battle there is no victory and without a test there is no testimony!

▪ **Paul's Personal Problem:**

"And lest I should be exalted above measure . . . a thorn in the flesh was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me" (2 Cor. 12:7). Nelson's Bible Dictionary informs us the Greek word translated "thorn" may be used to refer to a stake on which a person could be impaled. So Paul compared his problem to something sharp that continually pricked him.

Here's the million-dollar question, what was Paul's thorn in the flesh? He intentionally left it vague and, as a result, preachers have speculated about it for over 1900 years. Some suggestions are so absurd they're not worth mentioning but

consider six possibilities:

1. **Guilt:** Some suggest that Paul battled intense guilt and haunting memories of how he persecuted Christians prior to his conversion (Acts 7:58; 8:1-3; 9:1; 22:20). Paul, we know, was a fanatical, religious zealot who instigated Stephen's stoning and imprisoned and wanted to execute other believers. He wrote in retrospect, "For I am the least of the apostles and am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Cor. 15:9).
2. **Temptation:** Some say Paul's thorn was a battle with lust, a desire for female companionship, due to being single. As a former Pharisee, he may have been married at one time (Acts 23:6). Some believe Paul was a widower. (How else could he offer so much sound marital advice unless he had some personal experience?) Regarding temptation he wrote, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). So he definitely didn't feel he was above carnal cravings.
3. **Physical Infirmities:** In the context of describing his thorn, Paul used the word "infirmities" three times (2 Cor. 12:5, 9, 10, NKJV), a term usually associated with sickness. He hinted that he had some kind of embarrassing eye disorder (Gal. 4:13-15; 6:11). Luke, the beloved physician, often traveled with him and may have treated him for various ailments.
4. **Persecution:** In nearly every city Paul preached, he either had a revival, a riot or both. In many places he was hounded by enemies, skeptics, Judaizers and false apostles. He catalogued his battle scars in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28: five times he was beaten with whips (39 stripes each), three times he was beaten with rods, once he was stoned, three times he survived shipwreck. In addition to physical suffering, he also carried the heavy spiritual burden of the churches he planted and pastored.

5. **A Messenger of Satan:** One version describes this as “one of Satan’s angels” that was sent to harass him. Paul had spiritual insight few others had. God used him in phenomenal ways (soul-winning, miracles, deliverance, writing, preaching, establishing churches and so on). Paul, second only to Christ Himself, was the most influential person in church history. When God uses someone to that degree, pride is always a possibility. So God allowed some kind of demonic influence to torment him, keeping him grounded and on his knees.
6. **The Corinthian Church:** There is a joke among scholars that this church was Paul’s thorn because of all the stress it gave him. Some of the issues Paul dealt with in the Corinthian Church were sexual sin (incest), personality cults, division, carnality, false doctrine, believers suing other believers, improper observance of Communion and the disorderly use of spiritual gifts and so on.

The list goes on and on of other possible “thorns.” The truth is we don’t know precisely what Paul’s problem was because he didn’t specifically say. We do know it was allowed to persist to keep him humble.

- **Paul’s Persistent Prayer:** So what did Paul do about his problem? He did what we usually do—he asked God to remove it! “I asked the Lord three times that this thing might depart from me” (2 Cor. 12:8). Paul prayed specifically, earnestly and repeatedly for God to remove the source of irritation. But sometimes our problems serve a higher purpose that we are not even aware of. Pity would have us tear open a cocoon to release a struggling butterfly, not realizing that the struggle of breaking out helps its wings develop so it can fly.
- **God’s Powerful Promise:** “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). God’s grace to endure the trial is greater than

the trial itself. You see, grace is not only unmerited love and favor, it is also divine ability to deal with our problems. So grace is the good will of God (favor) toward you and the good work of God (ability) in you. So what is your thorn? God may not remove it immediately, but He will grant you the grace to endure and overcome it. Then we can all say along with Paul, "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10b).

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