

PAUL AND HIS THORN IN THE FLESH

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And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

A thorn in the flesh is always an annoyance, a painful intrusion into what might be a perfectly healthy body. The strange mystical experience endured by Paul bequeathed to posterity something to be perpetually discussed. His repeated request for deliverance was denied three times, but the troubled preacher was assured by the Lord, "My grace is sufficient for thee."

A Prevented Description... Fortunate

And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter (2 Cor. 12:3-4).

At some point in his life Paul had been given a special revelation, in which his spirit had been transported to the third heaven. It is necessary to understand that the Bible speaks of three heavens: (1) The atmospheric heaven from which earth receives its weather patterns; (2) The celestial heavens into which man is now sending exploratory rockets; and (3) The third heaven which is far out in space, and is the home of God. Christ ascended into that country and promised to return. Paul was allowed to view scenes and hear words which he was not permitted to describe nor repeat. It would be foolish to speculate about the details of the apostle's revelation. God refused to allow His servant to divulge what had been

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seen and heard, and it is extremely unlikely that He would give to others what was denied to Paul. Evidently, the apostle saw some of the wonders of the eternal world and heard things unsuitable for publication on earth. The Lord had reasons for enforcing silence upon His messenger, and perhaps someday these will be explained. Solomon said there was a time to speak, and another to remain silent. Paul would have agreed with that statement (see Eccl. 3:7).

A Probable Danger... Foreseen

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations (2 Cor. 12:7).

God gave to the church an example of His care for the work of His servants. When Moses died, the Lord became an undertaker. It was written: "So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Beth-peor: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day" (Deut. 34:56).

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There was a danger the children of Israel might make that grave into a shrine. Therefore, God refused to disclose where the body of their leader had been interred. Paul may have considered that fact when he urged the early Christians to walk circumspectly. Dr. G. Campbell Morgan illustrated that verse with a cat walking carefully along the top of a garden wall. Surrounded by many pieces of broken glass that had been secured in cement, the animal walked slowly and was never cut. The apostle was already admired by a great company of people, and the Lord was aware that immature converts might think more highly of their leader than of the cause he represented.

Paul was like Elijah, "a man of like passions as we are. Had he been less devoted to his Master, his ego might have been inflated. His words are illuminating. "Lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me" (2 Cor. 12:6). The church in Corinth was already divided into factions where members admired various

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leaders. Even some of the apostle's supporters might have been tempted to make certain claims to support their arguments if they had known what had been seen and heard in heaven. If the apostle had been permitted to describe what happened in the eternal world, no building nor amphitheater would have been sufficiently large to accommodate the congregation. When men attract more attention to themselves than to the Lord, they cease being God's servants.

A Painful Deterrent... Frightening

There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure (2 Cor. 12:7).

The apostle never suspected his statement would become part of every language. Any persistent problem is described as "A thorn in the flesh." Numerous ideas have been expressed, but the consensus seems to be that Paul suffered from a chronic eye disease. Some think it was the result of what happened near to the entrance to Damascus, when a light, above the brightness of the noonday sun, shone upon the would-be persecutor. Paul wrote one of his shortest letters to the believers in Galatia, and explained: "Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand" (Gal. 6:11). The Amplified Bible translates this verse: "(Mark care-

fully these closing words of mine.) See with what LARGE LETTERS I am writing this with my own hand."

That suggests a person with his face close to the parchment, someone obliged to use large letters to see what had been stated. Most of Paul's letters were written by friends who were trying to assist their beloved leader. If this interpretation is correct, he endured severe hardship as he traveled thousands of miles on his missionary journeys. His inability to read small script explains why he called his affliction "the messenger of Satan." Paul had no time to consider his experiences in heaven, for he was continually struggling against circumstances beyond his control.

Some theologians believe the apostle's thorn in the flesh

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was a quick temper; when his anger was aroused he could be very forthright in his denunciation of opponents (see Acts 23:1-5). His problem, whatever it might have been, was continually annoying, and it is not difficult to understand his frustration when a perfectly legitimate request was refused by the Lord.

A Personal Desire... Frustrated

There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

Paul was a great man of prayer, but since he asked the Lord to help him on three different occasions, it may be assumed he was desperate. It is significant that he never asked the fourth time. Elijah sent his servant up the mountain seven times before he was convinced help was about to arrive (see 1 Kings 18:43). To the everlasting credit of Paul, it should be said when the Lord told him, "My grace is sufficient for thee," the apostle never repeated his prayer. He recognized that God's grace was more to be desired than alleviation from personal discomfort. Someone has used an acrostic to explain the grace of God: "Great Riches At Christ's Expense." Webster's Dictionary defines grace as "The free unmerited love and favor of God." This statement corresponds with another made by the apostle. "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (see 1 Cor. 10:13).

God's grace is the antidote for every troublesome circumstance; it is the balm of Gilead to promote peace when disturbances become overwhelming. The writer to the Hebrews wrote, "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). When a man worships in the presence of

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God and remembers the blessings already received, it is impossible to be critical, complaining, and self-centered. When grace floods the soul, a trusting believer sees not the blackness of the sky, but the brilliance of the stars.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the famous British preacher, was returning to his home after a very difficult day in the city of London. He was oppressed and disconsolate when suddenly a text came to his mind. "My grace is sufficient for thee." His laughter became almost uncontrollable as he said, "Of course; of course. God's grace is sufficient for me." All Christians should know that grace is better than gloom. One entrances the soul; the other engulfs the spirit. David asked, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God" (Ps. 42:11).

A Present Deliverer... Favored

Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake; for when I am

weak, then am I strong (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

It should be remembered that Paul was describing "a thorn in the flesh" which had been given to him fourteen years earlier. He realized how God's grace had been sufficient for all his need. The promised help had transformed his life and turned difficulties into delights, persecution into pleasure, infirmities into inspiration. Perhaps prior to the beginning of his problems, he had relied upon his own ingenuity and self-sufficiency. When these failed, he learned to rest upon the promises of God. His words were impressive - "That the power of Christ may rest Upon me." He was not referring to a former vision, but to a continuing experience which began when the power of the Holy Spirit came upon him as the mantle of Elijah had fallen upon Elisha.

He wrote: "When I am weak, then am I strong." This understanding made it impossible to boast of anything except

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the Cross. It is challenging to read his words: "Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, reproaches, necessities, persecution." Every human instinct would rebel against such inconveniences, but evidently Paul had reached an exalted plateau of spirituality where the casual had been replaced by the extraordinary. The life of Christ was flooding his soul. He no longer looked at his problems, but at the omniscient Lord controlling his life. "That the power of Christ may rest upon me." This was the secret of Paul's success, for his experiences were sometimes strange and exasperating. Comparing himself with critics, he wrote:

Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more: in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep. In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches (2 Cor. 11:23-28).

It was remarkable that during these crises the power of Christ sustained the apostle. The source of such help is still available. It would be of great help if every Christian worker prayed:

Cleanse me from my sin, Lord:
Put Thy power within, Lord,
Take me as I am, Lord,
And make me all Thine own.
Keep me day by day, Lord,
Underneath Thy sway, Lord:
Make my heart, Thy palace,
And Thy royal throne.

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