

## A Thorn in the Flesh

*...But he who troubles you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. (Galatians 5:10)*

Paul will refer to this unnamed man as his “thorn in the flesh.”<sup>197</sup> On three separate occasions, the apostle will ask the Lord to remove the thorn from his life. But Jesus will respond, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”<sup>198</sup> The Lord chooses not to remove the thorn from Paul’s life, yet He will rescue Paul *through* the sufferings that the thorn inflicts upon him. For years to come, the “thorn”—this unnamed Judaizer who is part of the circumcision party—will obsessively seek to destroy Paul’s work.

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197. Keener agrees that “Paul’s opponents were his thorn,” and says the idea that they were headed up by one man is possible. Personal correspondence with Craig Keener, 12/4/23. Bandy holds that my view on the thorn “has much merit” and “is the most likely” perspective. Personal correspondence with Alan Bandy, 12/6/23.

198. 2 Corinthians 12:9.

Under God's sovereign hand, he (the thorn) is given to Paul to keep him humble amid the glorious revelations of Christ that the apostle has received from God.<sup>199</sup> During His earthly ministry, Jesus predicted this kind of suffering when he upbraided the Pharisees.

*Therefore, behold, I send to you prophets, wise men, and scribes. Some of them you will kill and crucify; and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city.... (Matthew 23:34)*

Just as Paul (who was once a Pharisee) had persecuted the followers of Jesus “from city to city,” Paul’s thorn and the accompanying group of “agitators” will pursue the believers in Paul’s assemblies “from city to city.” In addition, the unbelieving Jews will persecute Paul in every town he steps into.

**Sharpening the Focus:** For generations, Bible commentators have offered multiple theories about the identity of Paul’s thorn in the flesh. The most popular theories range from various and sundry illnesses (malaria, epilepsy, ophthalmia, etc.), to haunting guilt for persecuting the church, to a sexual addiction Paul never overcame.

I’ve never found any of these common theories persuasive or satisfactory. To my mind, if we take the text, just as it is written, and compare it with other texts using similar language, then step back to take a fresh look at the New Testament narrative in its chronological sequence, an entirely different picture emerges—one I personally find compelling.

Let’s first look carefully at the text:

*By reason of the exceeding greatness of the revelations, that I should not be exalted excessively, a thorn in the flesh was given to me: a messenger of Satan to torment me, that I should not be exalted excessively. Concerning this thing, I begged the Lord three times that it might depart from me. He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Most gladly therefore I will rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest on me. Therefore I take pleasure in weaknesses, in injuries, in*

199. 2 Corinthians 12:1-10.

*necessities, in persecutions, and in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then am I strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)*

Paul plainly identifies the thorn.<sup>200</sup> It was a “messenger of satan” with the malicious purpose to torment Paul. The word “torment” means “to strike with the fist, to rain blows upon, to treat with violence.” It’s often translated as “harass.” When Paul asks the Lord to remove the thorn, the Savior responds, “My power is perfected in weakness” (v. 9, NASB). Paul immediately says that he would rather “boast in my weaknesses” so Christ’s power may dwell in him (v. 9, NASB).

What’s telling here is that Paul’s entire discussion in chapter 11 (just before he mentions the thorn in the flesh) is about his “weaknesses.” The context of 2 Corinthians 11:16ff. are the false apostles who caused him great trouble. He then gives a robust list of hardships that he endured for the gospel:

- imprisonment
- flogging
- being exposed to death
- forty lashes (five times)
- beaten with rods (three times)
- being stoned
- being shipwrecked (three times)
- spending a night and day in the open sea
- being in danger of rivers
- being in danger of bandits
- being in danger from his fellow Jews
- being in danger from Gentiles
- being in danger in the city and country

200. Barnett argues that the Greek word *skolops* translated “thorn” is used for a stake, thorn, or spike. It, therefore, seems to connote violence. However, when used in the LXX (Septuagint), it means only “splinter” or “thorn.” Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 569. See also F.F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 248.

- being in danger at sea
- being in danger from false believers
- going without sleep
- going without food
- being cold and naked
- the daily pressure of his concern for the ekklesias he raised up<sup>201</sup>

Interestingly, he describes all his sufferings as “weaknesses,” never once mentioning being sick or ill (see 11:30). The word “weakness” in 11:30 is the same Greek word that’s used for “weaknesses” in 12:5 and 12:9-10. In 12:10, in addition to “weaknesses,” he mentions “insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties.”<sup>202</sup> He never mentions sickness or illness, which is odd if the thorn were a physical sickness of some kind. (The Greek word *angelos*—translated “messenger” in 12:7—tends to be used for personal beings, not impersonal instruments like sickness, psychological problems, eye trouble, etc.<sup>203</sup>)

Paul begins his argument in chapter 11 by talking about the “false apostles” and “deceitful workers” who transform themselves as angels of light. He goes on to say that even satan disguises himself as an angel of light (11:14). Interestingly, the Greek word for “angel” in 11:14 is the same word for “messenger” in 12:7 (which Paul refers to as a “thorn”).

201. Paul’s list in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28 reads like a parody of the famous inscription of Augustus in which the emperor cataloged the glories of his reign (*Acts of Augustus*, 1.4). In 2 Corinthians 11, however, Paul lists his sufferings and losses rather than his achievements. Clinton Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, 3:250.

202. Barnett observes that in 2 Corinthians 11 through 12, Paul presents himself as a man of weakness, meaning, he is a “man of suffering,” just like his Lord (Isaiah 53:3, NIV). Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 566.

203. Some have tried to argue that Paul had an eye disease based on the phrase “pluck your eyes out” in Galatians 4:15. But this is not a reference to Paul having eye trouble. Rather, it was a familiar figure of speech similar to someone saying, “You’d give your left arm for someone.” N.T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography*, 123. It was a graphic idiom for going to the extreme to benefit another person. Richard Longenecker, *Galatians*, 193; Craig Keener, *1–2 Corinthians*, NCBC (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 240, n. 273. It was also a familiar expression for affection in antiquity. Personal correspondence with Craig Keener, 5/1/16.

*For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as Christ's apostles. And no wonder, for even Satan masquerades as an angel of light. It is no great thing therefore if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works. (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)*

Paul tells us that these “false apostles” are “servants” of satan. That is, they are messengers of the devil, doing his bidding. They masquerade themselves as messengers of light just as satan does. They traffic in slander, innuendo, misrepresentation, and defamation (see Acts 13:45; 2 Corinthians 6:8; 1 Timothy 6:4, NLT). They also bring persecution by stirring up the people, whether fellow Jews or Gentiles (as in Acts 17; 2 Corinthians 12:10). Right after Paul mentions his thorn in the flesh (12:7), he says that he is not inferior to the best apostles and he worked the signs of a real apostle in their midst.

*...for I am in no way inferior to the very best apostles, though I am nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were worked among you in all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty works. (2 Corinthians 12:11-12)*

Consequently, if we view 2 Corinthians 11 and 12 as a discussion about the weaknesses in which Paul boasts, we begin to make better sense of what his thorn was all about. In the Old Testament, the term “thorn” is used as a metaphor for a person or group that persecutes God’s people:

*But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those you let remain of them will be like pricks in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will harass you in the land in which you dwell. (Numbers 33:55)<sup>204</sup>*

In this context, God’s enemies are called “thorns” in Israel’s sides (flesh) that “vex” and torment them. These “thorns” were human beings motivated by God’s enemy. When we read the New Testament as a narrative, taking it in its chronological sequence, we discover something interesting. Everywhere Paul planted a church, a group of detractors opposed

204. See also Joshua 23:13 and Judges 2:3.

his ministry and made a calculated effort to discredit his apostolic authority and assail his character in the eyes of the Christians for whom he cared.

In Galatians, Paul indicates this group of detractors was headed up by one man in particular. Paul refers to the detractors saying: “Only there are *some* who trouble you and want to pervert the Good News of Christ” (Galatians 1:7); “I wish that *those* who disturb you would cut *themselves* off” (Galatians 5:12).

He refers to the one man heading them up saying: “But *he* who troubles you will bear his judgment, whoever *he* is” (Galatians 5:10).<sup>205</sup> At the end of the letter, Paul says something else worth noting:

*From now on, let no one cause me any trouble, for I bear the marks of the Lord Jesus branded on my body. (Galatians 6:17)*

You can almost hear a prayer behind this statement in which Paul is asking the Lord to remove this person who is troubling him and the churches.

Putting all this together, an important picture emerges. Paul’s thorn was likely a man (inspired by satan) obsessed with discrediting Paul and his ministry, just as the religious leaders in Jerusalem were obsessed with destroying Jesus and His ministry. This man followed Paul wherever he traveled, beginning in Galatia (Acts 14ff.). He was from the church in Jerusalem, most likely a Pharisee who converted (Acts 15:5).<sup>206</sup> And he made it his mission to subvert Paul’s gospel and undermine Paul’s work.

This “messenger” or “servant” of satan was in league with a group of others who followed him (Galatians 1:7; 5:12). They followed in Paul’s footsteps to the churches in Galatia, Thessalonica, and then to Corinth. (I will later argue that he is the ringleader of the “super-apostles” whom Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians chapters 11 through 12.)<sup>207</sup> Paul responds to their accusations in Galatians 1:10-24; 2:1-18; 1 Thessalonians

205. Also compare what Paul says about the “one” person in 2 Corinthians 11:4, NASB with Galatians 1:9, NASB. The wording is almost identical.

206. I believe this man was Paul’s peer in gifting, intelligence, zeal, and uncommon devotion to his cause.

207. Witherington agrees that the opponents in Corinth were headed up by a “ringleader” and argues the point from the Greek. Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 447.

2:3-6; 2 Corinthians 10 through 12. On three occasions, Paul asked the Lord to remove this person from his life. He was a torment, frustration, and harassment to Paul and his work. But the Lord answered and said that His grace was sufficient.

The Lord didn't remove the thorn. He instead enabled Paul to bear with it. Near the end of his life, Paul would reflect on the persecutions he endured in Galatia saying,

*You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. (2 Timothy 3:10-11, NIV)*

The persecutions and afflictions still came, but they didn't stop Paul from moving forward. By God's grace, Paul *endured* them all, for God's grace was sufficient. While this text probably isn't referring specifically to Paul's "thorn," the principle involved is the same. The men who visited Galatia and Corinth with their "gospel" seemed to have been fellow Hebrews from the Jerusalem church (although operating without its approval and misrepresenting the assembly—see 2 Corinthians 11:22 and Galatians chapter 1 through chapter 2). That is, these men were recognized Christians—in name at least.

To my mind, this interpretation fits the evidence better than the alternatives. And it's one that is confirmed by the experience of many servants of God. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor writes,

*The nature of the thorn in the flesh has intrigued commentators from the early patristic period to the present day. But a common-sense look at what Paul actually did in the course of his lifetime excludes any bodily or psychiatric disease.... The only hypothesis for which a serious case can be made is that by the thorn in the flesh Paul meant opposition to his ministry from within the Jesus movement. His mention of "a messenger of Satan" implies an external, personal source of affliction, and previously he had identified as 'servants of Satan' (2 Cor. 11:14-15) his Antiochean adversaries in Corinth....<sup>208</sup>*

208. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: His Story*, 191. Murphy-O'Connor identifies the "Antiochean adversaries" as the Judaizers who visited Antioch, Galatia, and Corinth. Likewise, Paul Barnett argues that

Barnett is in agreement saying, “More plausibly, Paul’s *skolops* [thorn] is the rise of the Judaizing, anti-Paul movement, such as was then all too obvious in Corinth.”<sup>209</sup>

The agitators<sup>210</sup> arrive in Galatia and begin visiting the four assemblies.<sup>211</sup> Introducing themselves as brothers from the Jerusalem assembly—the one the original apostles of Jesus founded<sup>212</sup>—they tell the new converts in Galatia the following:

- Jerusalem is the center of God’s work on earth. The twelve apostles are the only authorities who can define the true gospel because they were commissioned by Jesus Himself. Paul did not come from Jerusalem, he was not commissioned by Jesus, and he was never part of the Twelve. We, however, live with the Twelve!
- Paul visited Jerusalem shortly after his conversion and spent some time with the apostles there. The apostles instructed him in the basic principles of the gospel

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the Jerusalem-based countermission (a term he uses for the circumcision party) followed Paul to most of the assemblies he raised up. Paul Barnett, *Paul: Missionary of Jesus*, chap. 9. Barnett writes, “A significant source of Paul’s missionary sufferings was the countermission of the Jerusalem-based Jewish Christians who sought to impose circumcision on the Gentile believers” (191).

209. Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 570. In addition, after reading my thesis on Paul’s thorn, Barnett remarked, “There is the reasonable possibility Paul was referring to the Jewish counter-missionaries. Your case is well worth arguing.” Personal correspondence with Barnett, 1/14/24.

210. These are the Judaizers. For details on the debate over their identity, see Thomas Schreiner, *Galatians*, 39-46. Schreiner argues that the opponents (rival teachers, agitators) are Judaizers.

211. After the agitators visit Galatia, they will visit the churches that Paul will plant in Greece, leveling the same accusations against him as they did in Galatia. In his magnificent book, Barnett confirms my theory of a unified attempt to thwart Paul’s work. Paul Barnett, *Paul: Missionary of Jesus*, 144-153, 157. Barnett also discusses the influence of the countermission in Rome (152). Alan Bandy supports this reconstruction saying, “We do see clear instances where Paul’s opponents would travel great distances to cities where Paul was ministering to oppose the gospel work being done. As such, it actually is very likely that a highly organized attempt at deconstructing Paul’s ministry indeed was the case. Your case is very plausible.” Personal correspondence with Alan Bandy, 12/6/23.

212. Longenecker agrees that the agitators were most likely Jewish “Christians” claiming the authority of the home church in Jerusalem. They saw James as the official leader of the strict Law-abiding group in the church, even though James wasn’t in line with what they were doing. Richard Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty*, 196.

and authorized him to preach the message he learned from them. But when he left Jerusalem and returned to Cilicia, Paul modified his gospel to make it more acceptable to the Gentiles. He removed “the hard parts,” especially circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, and observing the Jewish dietary laws.

- Paul’s gospel is deficient. Because Paul is a people pleaser, he preaches an easy gospel and omits the difficult parts.
- The gospel that Paul proclaims is not supported by the apostles or the Jerusalem assembly. Believing in Jesus coupled with obeying the Law of Moses justifies as well as sanctifies a person before God.
- In order to be part of “the Israel of God” and demonstrate that a person is part of God’s covenant family, you (all the males) must be circumcised.<sup>213</sup>
- Peter is the chief apostle.<sup>214</sup> Yet Paul had the arrogance and audacity to rebuke him to his face! (We saw this happen in Syrian Antioch with our own eyes.) This horrible act proves that Paul is a freelancer, a rogue doing independent work in conflict with the ministry of the Twelve.
- Paul is inconsistent in his views. While he doesn’t preach circumcision to the Gentiles, he secretly preaches it to the Jews.<sup>215</sup>
- Paul is insincere. He adapts his gospel to his environment, a classic trait of a people pleaser.<sup>216</sup>

213. This explains why Paul uses the phrase “Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16, NIV.

214. Evangelical scholars are in agreement on this point. See Paul Barnett, *From Jerusalem to Illyricum*, 161; Herbert Lockyer, ed., *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 824; J.D. Douglas, et al., eds., *New Bible Dictionary*, 917.

215. Paul *formerly* preached circumcision before his conversion. In this regard, he advanced in Judaism beyond his peers (Galatians 1:14). To further their arguments, most detractors will typically point to what a person once believed and practiced, even if those beliefs and practices were abandoned long ago.

216. Galatians 5:11. I give more detail on what provoked Paul to write Galatians as well as provide a deep dive into the letter in my master class *Spiritual Graffiti: Galatians in 3D* at [thedeeperchristianlife.com/classes](http://thedeeperchristianlife.com/classes). This master class (along with all my other master classes) presents the epistle to the right brain and the left brain as well as to the heart.

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