

PAUL'S THORN IN THE FLESH

Jon Macon

We learn in 2 Corinthians 12:7 that the Apostle Paul was given “*a thorn in the flesh.*” There has been much speculation about what this particular thorn in the flesh was. For example, it has been suggested that it was eye problem, based on statements about Paul’s eyes in Galatians 4:13-15. However, we have not been given the specific details about this thorn in the flesh, which means the Lord did not consider it necessary for us to know everything about it. It also means we should be careful not to say something not found in God’s word (1 Pet 4:11). Nevertheless, we *are* told that Paul’s thorn in the flesh was “*the messenger of Satan to buffet me*” (2 Cor 12:7). The important point is that Satan was bringing temptation to Paul through his thorn in the flesh. Paul did not boast of his abundant revelations so that others would not exalt him, and he was given his thorn in the flesh to prevent him from being exalted himself about his abundant revelations. Paul said, “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” (2 Cor 12:7).

Our requests of God are not always granted

Concerning his thorn in the flesh, Paul said, “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me” (2 Cor 12:8). God did not agree to remove Paul’s thorn in the flesh. The Lord said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for thee: *for my strength is made perfect in weakness*” (2 Cor 12:9). God’s refusal to remove Paul’s thorn in the flesh in spite of Paul’s three requests that He remove it demonstrates that we will not always receive everything we ask for in prayer. It is true that “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (Jas 1:17). It is also true that the prayers of God’s saints come up to Him on His throne like sweet incense (Rev 5:8; 8:4). God is the source of all good things, and He has the power to give them, and He is pleased when we pray to Him and ask Him for good things (Php 4:6). He desires to give good things to His children when they ask Him (Matt 7:7-11). It is essential to ask, and ask with importunity, in order to receive (Matt 7:7-11; Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-8; John 16:23-24; Jas 4:2). It is also essential to please God and keep His commandments in order to receive what we ask of Him in prayer (Psa 34:15-17; 66:16-20; Isa 59:2; John 15:7; Jas 5:16; 1 Pet 3:12; 1 John 3:22). Paul certainly was a keeper of God’s commandments, and he showed his faith in God by his three requests to have the thorn in the flesh removed. But in spite of all of that, it was still not God’s will to remove Paul’s thorn in the flesh. When praying for things God has *promised* us, the Lord says we must “ask in faith, nothing wavering” (Jas 1:6; see also Matt 21:22). If we doubt, we will not receive “*anything* of the Lord” (Jas 1:6-8). For those things that God has not promised, God still tells us to make our requests

PAUL'S THORN IN THE FLESH

(continued)

made known to Him (Php 4:6). But for those things he says, "And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us: and if we know that he hears us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him" (1 John 5:14-15). If God has not promised us something, we may ask for it, but we must ask *if it is according to His will*. But in those cases, it might not be His will and we might not receive our requests. For example, Jesus asked the Father to "let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt 26:39-44; Mark 14:35-39; Luke 22:41-44). In that situation, it was *not* the Father's will, and Jesus had to drink the cup. In Paul's case, it was not the Lord's will to remove Paul's thorn in the flesh. Certainly, if it was not the Father's will to fulfill certain requests by Christ and Paul, then there will be certain requests that we make that it will not be God's will to grant us.

The pathway of spiritual growth

The Lord was not willing to remove Paul's thorn in the flesh, and he told Paul the reason: "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. 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). As the Lord states in verse nine, our goal is indeed to be made perfect (i.e. complete) like Christ (see also Matt 5:48; 10:25; Luke 6:40; Rom 8:28-29; 2 Cor 13:11; Eph 4:11-13; Php 2:5-8; Col 1:27-28; 3:10; 2 Tim 3:16-17; 1 Pet 2:21; 4:1-2; 5:10; 1 Jn 2:5-6; 4:17). Suffering for righteousness' sake is the pathway by which we grow spiritually (2 Cor 1:3-6; 4:16-17; 12:9-10; Gal 3:3-4, Php 3:10-15; Heb 2:10; 5:8-9; Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-9). That is why it is necessary for all Christians to suffer persecution for righteousness' sake (Matt 13:21; Php 1:29; 1 Thes 3:14; 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Pet 2:21; 3:9). Suffering for righteousness' sake is how Jesus grew to completion (Heb 2:10; 5:8-9). Christ's sufferings are our example to follow (2 Cor 1:3-7; 1 Pet 2:19-25), so that we can also grow to be like him (Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-9). Therefore, we should rejoice when we suffer for doing well (Matt 5:10-12; Luke 6:22-23; Rom 5:3; 2 Cor 12:9-10; Jas 1:2; 1 Pet 1:6; 3:14; 4:12-16), because that is the way that Christ's strength is made perfect in us (2 Cor 12:9-10). That is how our faith is purified (1 Pet 1:6-7), how we grow in patience (Rom 5:3-4; Jas 1:2-3), and the way we grow to be spiritually complete (Jas 1:3-4; 1 Pet 5:10). For this reason, Romans 8:18 says that "*the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*" That is why the specific details of what Paul's thorn in the flesh is beside the point. What matters is understanding where we are going (spiritually), and how we must get there.