

“Thorn in the Flesh” 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

¹ Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. ³ And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—⁴ was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. ⁵ On behalf of such a man I will boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses. ⁶ For if I do wish to boast I will not be foolish, for I will be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one will credit me with more than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷ Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! ⁸ Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. ⁹ And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

It almost seems like there have been dozens of interpretations regarding the metaphor “thorn.” I have literally read or hear all of the following: headaches, earaches, eye disease, malaria, epilepsy, speech impediment, hypochondria, deafness, remorse (dealing with past genocide), gallstones, gout, rheumatism, dental issues, lice, stuttering, limp, temptations, ministry failures, homosexuality and even child support. No, I’m not making that up last one.

Some of these may be the result of the word “weakness” which is repeated in the text 5x. And, of course, Paul says that “even if I am unskilled in speech” in 2 Corinthians 11:6, so perhaps he doesn’t speak well. It’s also possible that he has some issues with his eyes (Damascus experience in Acts 8, Gal 4:15; 6:11).

Having said that, there are some important things to consider.

First, what does the metaphor represent? A “thorn in the flesh” clearly represents pain. Just think of how irritating and painful a small splinter can be. Now think of how much worse a thorn must be. Yes, this is an image of pain.

Second, what image does the metaphor set forth? Paul has been given something, that for the moment at least, seems permanent. He has a thorn in the flesh that is meant to keep him humble — that is meant to keep him reliant upon the grace of God. So, it’s an image of pain that causes him to keep his eyes on the Lord.

Third, how is the word “thorn” used metaphorically in the Bible? With exception to Jesus using the word in the parable of the sower, 2 Corinthians 12:7 is the only metaphorical usage in the NT. In the OT, however, the word “thorn” or “thorns” is used 42x, 9 of which are metaphors.

Judges 2:3 – thorn in your sides

Numbers 33:55 - But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall come about that those whom you let remain of them *will become* as pricks in your eye and as thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land in which you live.

Joshua 23:13 - know with certainty that the LORD your God will not continue to drive these nations out from before you; but they shall be a snare and a trap to you, and a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good land which the LORD your God has given you.

2 Samuel 23:6 - worthless thrown away like thorns

Psalm 118:12 - They were extinguished as a fire of thorns

Proverbs 15:19 - The way of the sluggard is as a hedge of thorns, But the path of the upright is a highway.

Ezek 2:6 - And you, son of man, neither fear them nor fear their words, though thistles and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions; neither fear their words nor be dismayed at their presence, for they are a rebellious house.

Ezek 28:24 - And there will be no more for the house of Israel a prickling brier or a painful thorn from any round about them who scorned them; then they will know that I am the Lord GOD."

Micah 7:4 - The best of them is like a briar, The most upright like a thorn hedge ...

The major take-away here is that the word is often used to describe people! And that shouldn't really surprise us because the second critical issue we need to see is the literary context of our passage.

Let's read verse seven again: "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a **thorn in the flesh**, **a messenger of Satan to torment me**—to keep me from exalting myself!"

This seems pretty clear. We might also want to consider the surrounding context, particularly what comes at the tail end of chapter 11. Here it is:

²³ Are they servants of Christ?—I speak as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. ²⁶ I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; ²⁷ I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? ³⁰ If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, ³³ and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.

Yes, Paul's "thorn in the flesh" is a person. But who is really surprised? After all, we still have the saying, "He a pain in my side."