

# DOCTRINE OF THE THORN IN THE FLESH

January 30, 1983

## I. Introduction preliminary considerations.

- A. Scripture: 2Cor.12:1-10.
- B. Climaxes a section dealing with a catalogue of Paul's common human problems (CHPs, or afflictions) beginning at 2Cor.11:23.
- C. It was, by its very nature, the most sensational and painful of Paul's sufferings.
- D. Its presentation is contextually tied to the most sensational of his visionary experiences (i.e. his rapture into the third heaven).
- E. The expression "*thorn in the flesh*" is used as a metaphor (i.e. not a literal thorn in the flesh) for a bodily affliction.

## II. What was Paul's "thorn in the flesh"?

- A. Representative examples of conjectures concerning the nature of Paul's "thorn in the flesh".
  1. Earache or headache (earliest explanation by Tertullian).
  2. All of Paul's persecutions taken together (so Chrysostom of the allegorical school of interpretation).
  3. Temptation of carnal lust (Roman Catholic writers of the medieval era gave rise to this ridiculous view).
  4. Severe form of ophthalmia (i.e. eye disease. This view is based on Paul's comments in Gal.4:15).
  5. A form of epilepsy.
  6. Recurrent malarial fever (Sir Wm. Ramsay this affliction is quite debilitating and is accompanied by a peculiar headache which is 'like a red hot bar thrust through the forehead'. Ramsay says Paul contracted this disease during his first missionary journey while in Perga in Pamphylia [Act.13:13]. Another author [W. M. Alexander] believes Paul's malady may be more specifically identified as Malta fever, which is accompanied by severe pain, nocturnal delirium, unsightly eruptions, and loss of hair).
  7. In our own day is the novel hypothesis that it was not physical affliction at all but, was "the great sorrow and unceasing pain" which he experienced in the soul because of Jewish unbelief, Rom.9:13. This view (M. Menoud) has Paul asking God to take away Jewish unbelief. Furthermore, this CHP came as a result of exceptional revelations he was privy to, not Jewish negative volition.
  8. Other solutions are hysteria, hypochondria, gallstones, gout, rheumatism, sciatica, gastritis, leprosy, lice on the head, deafness, dental infection, neurasthenia, an impediment of speech, and remorse for the tortures he inflicted upon Christians prior to his conversion.
- B. This thorn or stake in the flesh is described as "an angel of Satan", (Greek ἄγγελος Σατανᾶ, *aggelos satana*), 2Cor.12:7.
  1. A demon actually inflicted bodily pain upon the apostle.
  2. The fact Paul asked God to remove it three times, coupled with the metaphorical expression "thorn in the flesh", tells us how painful and debilitating these encounters must have been.
  3. That this affliction was periodic rather than continual is obvious, since Paul could not have functioned if it were a constant thing.
  4. What this physical harassment consisted of we do not know, only that it was extremely painful, more so than any other physical abuse Paul experienced. The expression in 12:7 says "*he might physically harass me*", which consists of the pres.a.subj.3rdp.s. **κολαφίζω** *kolaphizo* plus the acc.m.s. **ἐγώ**, *ego*. The verb is relatively rare in the New Testament (5X) and elsewhere occurs only in early Christian writers. The noun **κόλαφος**, *kolophos*, is fairly frequent outside the New Testament and was used in common speech. It means "box on

the ears'. The verb is used of a combination of physical and mental abuse, Mt.26:67; Mk.14:65 of Jesus; 1Cor.4:11; 1Pet.2:20. The verb gives us no clue as to the precise nature of Paul's affliction that is, what form the physical abuse took.

5. Conclusion: Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was a disabling, periodic and extremely painful ordeal inflicted by a demon directly.

### III. When did "the thorn in the flesh" first begin to occur in Paul's ministry?

- A. Its only mention is tied to Paul's private rapture into Paradise, 2Cor.12:14; cp. 79.
  1. The most extraordinary of Paul's visions and revelations occurred in 42AD. (2 Corinthians was written in 56AD; subtracting 14 years places the event in 42AD.)
  2. Paul was in Tarsus (the Syria-Cilicia region) from 37-43AD, based on Hoehner's chronology of the apostolic age.
  3. The thorn in the flesh was due to the revelations Paul received, and so must have begun toward the beginning of his apostolic ministry.
- B. We conclude that this affliction began shortly before his missionary journeys and lasted until his death.
  1. Its mention in connection with his most sensational vision and in association with his personal revelations in general leads to its initiation around 42AD.
  2. The fact he asked the Lord to remove it three times and the Lord's refusal leads us to conclude it was with him for the duration, or 26 years.

### IV. The "why" of the thorn in the flesh.

- A. Paul tells us specifically why he was permitted to suffer in this fashion in 2Cor.12:7 "*And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations* (instr. ὑπερβολή, hyperbole, gen.pl. ἀποκαλύψεις, apokalupsis), *for this reason* (διό, dio conj.), *lest* (ἵνα μή, hina me) *I should be inflated with pride* (pres.pass.subj. 1p.s. ὑπεραίρω, huperairo, verb occurs 3X: 2Cor.12:7 [2X]; 2Thess.2:4 [of Alex.]), *there was given to me* (ao.pass.ind. δίδωμι, didomi + μοι, moi; this was a grace CHP!) *a thorn in the flesh an angel of Satan in order* (ἵνα, hina) *that he might physically harass me* (see above) *in order that* (ἵνα, hina) *I should not be inflated with pride* (same verb construction).
- B. From this verse we see two contributing factors to the necessity for this affliction; namely,
  1. The nature and magnitude of Paul's visionary experiences.
  2. The strong effect this had on the pride complex of Paul's STA (sinful trend of Adam) grid.
- C. Due to Paul's assignment in the plan of God, he was privy to more special revelations and visions than any other in the Church Age; cp. 1Cor.14:18; 2Cor.12:1,7; Gal.1:11,12; 2:2; Eph.3:3. The fact so few are mentioned explicitly in the New Testament is consistent with Paul's policy to boast in his weaknesses, 2Cor.11:30.
  1. The thorn in the flesh was not given to blunt the arrogance of his vision in connection with his visit to the third heaven alone, but in regard to all his revelations.
  2. These revelations elicited a strong response from the pride complex of Paul's STA.
- D. Due to Paul's STA, God authorized Satan to afflict Paul's flesh.
  1. Had Paul not suffered this particular affliction (among the many that were a part of his niche, cf. Act.9:16; cp. 2Cor.11:23-28), he would have stumbled over the stumbling block of his STA.
  2. In his case, he might have taken his grace privileges and used them as a springboard to engage in self-exaltation.
  3. In effect, he would have become like "*the many*", cp. 2Cor.2:17, and engaged in self commendation, exaltations and self aggrandizement.
  4. Unlike them he would have had a basis in fact to boast where they did not, see Col.2:18.
  5. He would have wound up like them and lost the prize, 1Cor.9:24-27; Col.2:18; 2Tim.4:7,8.

### V. Further observations on Paul's thorn in the flesh and his STA.

- A. This forms one more piece of evidence of the functional existence of the indwelling STA in the

great apostle (and so all believers).

1. The pride complex, along with the lust pattern in general, harried Paul all his Christian life.
2. This is clearly set forth in Romans 7; cp. 7:8.
3. This explains his athletic metaphor in 1Cor.9:27.
4. Any attempts to explain away the inner conflict by denying the STA constitutes apostasy and blasphemy, Gal.5:16-24; 1Pet.2:11; cp. 1Jn.1:8-10.

B. The thorn in the flesh did not guarantee Paul would not enter reversionism.

1. The severe physical affliction served to discourage arrogance in Paul.
2. The justice and grace of God provided a strong inducement not to enter "super Pastor-Teacher" reversionism.
3. In no way were the basic principles which govern the Christian way of life modified to assure Paul would consummate his Phase 2 honorably (i.e. volition, the grace apparatus for perception, ISTA, etc.).

C. Paul's physical liability was a grace asset to discourage STA disorientation.

D. The fact God would not remove the thorn indicates the STA assault continued to the very end, 2Cor.12:8,9.

E. Paul finally accepted the necessity for this test and boasted in his CHPs.

## VI. Theological implications and applications of this doctrine.

A. Satan does on occasion gain permission to afflict mankind directly.

1. Job (Job.2), Paul and unbelievers under Antichrist's rule (Rev.9) are examples (also the incestuous Corinthian).
2. In each instance Satan is granted permission to inflict pain, but only within closely defined limits.
3. Satan seeks to get believers to deny God, but God uses the suffering to prove Satan wrong and to benefit the positive believers.
4. In Paul's case Satan actually had a part in Paul's ultimate blessing!

B. The necessity for the thorn in the flesh makes a strong statement about the functional existence of the ISTA in Paul and therefore all believers through the stages of spiritual growth.

C. Believers experience physical disabilities to help prevent positive volition from tripping over the stumbling block of their STA.

1. We know that some unbelievers who are positive at God consciousness have to lose some asset(s) before they will believe (example: Nebuchadnezzar), Mk.9:43-47.
2. The STA keeps tripping up faith in Christ.
3. This is also true of some believers.
4. So God is free to remove any human asset (wealth, health, etc.) when the loss produces adjustment.
5. Those who are negative are not influenced by this

D. Perfect health, possessing the details of life, etc. (when exploited by the STA) can lead to negative volition.

1. So learn to adjust to your chronic CHPs.
2. God's grace is sufficient to bring you to maturity.
3. Learn, like Paul, to associate your special CHPs with the maturity adjustment to the justice of God, and so boast in them.