



## **A THORN IN THE FLESH**

**Kevin Presley**

Welcome. I'm glad to be with you today and I'm thankful for a few moments of your time to look into the word of God. One of the most common questions people ask about God is why He allows suffering, especially in the lives of His own people who love Him and are trying to serve Him. It seems logical that if God is Sovereign over this world and if He possesses all power that He could and would easily remove any difficulty and pain from the lives of His children. But He doesn't. Why? There are several reasons suggested in the Word of God but today, we want to focus on one.

God sometimes allows us to suffer for our good. You say, but that doesn't seem right. Perhaps it seemed that way even to the Apostle Paul, but he came to understand that it's true, nonetheless. And it led to him having a completely different perspective on his trials and tribulations – of which Paul experienced many.

Let's read together from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. 2 Corinthians 12:1-8. There he writes: "It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord: I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me. And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I "pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me."

What were these visions and revelations to Paul about and what was this thorn in the flesh given to him? What did one have to do with the other and most importantly, what was God doing to Paul in all of it? What lesson did he learn and is there a lesson for us too?

One of the Apostle Paul's greatest challenges and annoyances in his ministry was the influence of Judaizing teachers among the churches. These false prophets were preaching a perverted gospel. They had corrupted the truth by adding to the gospel the ordinances of the Old Testament law, especially circumcision. These men were infiltrating the churches Paul had established throughout the Greek world and they were binding tenets of the old covenant upon new believers. At the same time, they were telling the churches not to pay attention to Paul. They were undermining his influence and challenging his credentials as a true apostle of Christ. Paul faced this all throughout his ministry because he was converted and made an apostle later than the others. Some were suspicious of Paul and accused Him of preaching a false message and so they wanted to turn churches like Corinth against him.

Paul made a vigorous defense of his apostleship and his message by pointing to several things. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11, he shows them that he was not some charlatan who was simply fleecing them for money by preaching a false and seductive message. Rather, he says that he had refused to take any money from them. He had every right to take financial support as a preacher, but he would not charge them for his work so they could not accuse him of falsely preaching for money. He then points to his Jewish credentials. The Judaizers claimed to follow the laws of Moses, but Paul reminds them that no one was more of a Jew by birth or background than he. Third, he points to his many sacrifices and sufferings he had willingly endured for their sakes. He had subjected himself to poor treatment, outright persecution, deprivation, almost lost his life, and selflessly devoted himself to the care of the churches. Those are not the characteristics of a hypocrite.

But then, greater than all, Paul cautiously shared with them a great experience the Lord had granted to him many years before... it was an experience others could not claim. The Judaizers who were trying to upstage and outshine Paul could not make such a boast, but Paul could. He says in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter."

The first thing we should see is that God HONORED Paul. Paul was privileged to be an apostle and be used by the Lord as one of His select ambassadors and with that, God had imparted several visions and revelations to Paul. A vision was when God would supernaturally transport one in mind or person to see something. Such visions were rare and granted to only select ones in the age of revelation. By "revelations", he means that God had supernaturally revealed certain things to Paul. We can read of several such experiences in the book of Acts, for example, and these were exciting and exclusive things Paul was allowed to see and receive. Perhaps the greatest of all of them was this one which so overwhelmed Paul that he was careful in speaking of it. In fact, there were aspects of this vision that God would not permit him to tell anyone about, specifically, the things he heard spoken while there. Paul, in spirit and maybe even in his body was transported TO the third heaven (which refers to the abode of the godhead and the angels) and INTO Paradise. It was such an awesome and glorious experience that Paul even refers to himself in the third person as he describes it.

If it all sounds mysterious to us, imagine being Paul. He couldn't even fully comprehend what had occurred. For example, he wasn't sure whether he went there mentally or in his literal body. We don't

know why God took him there or what God showed him or what he said to him while he was there, but God had some purpose in giving Paul this grand privilege! There is no doubt that God honored Paul with this marvelous experience. Can you imagine if God were to allow some preacher in our own time to experience such a thing? Do you think they could keep it quiet like Paul apparently had for so long? Of course not! They would write a book about their 7 minutes in heaven, or they would sell it as a thrilling movie plot. There would doubtless be a speaking tour and they would make the rounds on the TV and radio talk show circuit. If their claim were believable, millions would clamor to see them and meet them. They would instantly become a star in the evangelical world. There would be little limit to their fame and the stature because of the experience they had had. Even as great of a man and humble of a servant of Christ as Paul was, it was a temptation for Paul to use this sensational vision and other revelations he had received as a means of acceptance and popularity with the people.

We're not living in the apostolic era and since all truth that God intended to reveal to man has been revealed, we're not living in the age of such visions and revelations as Paul and others received. However, sometimes God uses people in remarkable ways. Sometimes, preachers are incredibly talented, or they are given great opportunities for ministry and used by God and with such perceived honor comes the temptation to pride and self-importance. Such is true with the Christian in general. Some are used by God in great ways and are especially effective in the church or possess talents, opportunities, and privileges that others do not. And when doors always seem to be opened and not shut; when our successes seem to outnumber our setbacks; when our dreams are never replaced with disappointments, you would think we would glorify God for such success but that's rarely the case.

Ironically, the easier the Christian experience seems to be, the colder our faith often grows and the more distant from God we drift. God taught Paul an important lesson. The lesson Paul learned was that it may have been tempting to boast about all the visions and revelations, the honors and the privileges, the victories, and the successes, but such boasting was misplaced, and it was wrong. In verses 5-6 he says: "Of such a one (speaking of himself and the honor he had received) I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me." Paul is saying that I could brag about this experience, and unlike others who apparently had tried to impress the Corinthians with incredulous claims of miraculous experiences, Paul would have been telling the truth. But Paul didn't want their estimate of him to be based on his claims of how God had honored him. He wanted their faith to be in God and not in man. And that's the very lesson that God was teaching Paul himself... for Paul to place his faith in God --- not in Paul. What do I mean by that? I mean that Paul, like the rest of us, had to learn that it is not what Paul had done for God, but what God had done for Paul. You see, God may have honored Paul but then God humbled Paul because God didn't want Paul thinking more of Paul than he should have. So, notice what he says in verse 7: "And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure."

To keep Paul from becoming proud and self-sufficient (which is always a temptation to man when he enjoys successes in life), God balanced his successes with suffering. Just as God had honored Paul, He then humbled him, and Paul had to learn how to take both from the hand of the Lord. What was Paul's mysterious "thorn in the flesh"? The bible doesn't not explicitly tell us, and bible students and theologians have an array of ideas about the matter. If we were to list and explain them all, we would need much longer than the time of this program! What clues do the scriptures give? Whatever it was, Paul calls it "a messenger of Satan to buffet me..." Of all the theories, there are two general ideas that have merit. One is that this was a LITERAL fleshly affliction; that Paul was dealing with some illness or

physical disability that was causing him great pain and annoyance. One frequent suggestion is that Paul was nearly blind. Some have theorized that he is referring to a case of Malaria he had contracted. Others think kidney stones, and yet others think perhaps it refers to migraine headaches.

But then there is the possibility that Paul is speaking more metaphorically and referring to the persecution he had to face from unbelieving Jews. The phrase “thorn in the flesh” comes from three words in the original text which could be translated “in the flesh” which would likely refer to something literally bothering Paul’s fleshly body, but it could also be translated “FOR the flesh” which would carry more the idea that whatever this was, the word flesh simply means it was something Paul had to deal with as long as he lived in the flesh, or in his temporal body. If that be the case, it is likely referring more to a circumstance such as the violent opposition he was facing in his ministry.

Either explanation could fit the language as best we understand it. We know that sometimes Satan was allowed to afflict people with illness as a test of their faith, such as in the case of Job. But we also know that peoples and nations can be symbolically referred to as thorns, as well. I won’t argue with you about it, but I personally tend to believe Paul was referring to the persecution he faced nearly everywhere he went. In Numbers 33:55, the Canaanites, for example, are referred to as “irritants in the eyes and thorns in the sides of the Israelites.” Also, when Paul says this thorn was a messenger of Satan to buffet him, the word “buffet” means to strike with the fist and is the same word used by Mark to describe the abuse Jesus received at His trial.

At the end of the day, however, it’s not important to know WHAT the thorn was as much as it is to understand the PURPOSE the thorn served. This thorn was allowed by God to accomplish something in the heart and life of Paul. Listen to the English Standard Version in verse 7: “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.” You see, God allowed Paul to suffer to keep him from thinking too highly of himself and to keep him from forgetting his reliance upon God’s strength. Friend, that should help anyone who is a Christian understand the point of much of the suffering in our own lives. Don’t we often ask, “why would God allow such trouble to come into our lives if we are trying to live for Him?” “If God cares about us, why doesn’t He take these problems away?” It may indeed be physical problems – disabilities, sicknesses, limitations... But it may also be other types of difficulty. Maybe it is antagonization and opposition from unbelievers or false brethren. Maybe it is even the consequences of past sins and failures. You know, God is gracious and willing to forgive, but that doesn’t erase the earthly consequences of our sins and sometimes there is pardon yet there is punishment in this life. And the prouder we were when we sinned, the farther and harder the fall! There are many who live with hard regrets bitter reminders and will never fly quite as high as they might have had they never fallen into some sin. It may be some other limitation that you think keeps you from being all that you think you should be for Christ. Have you ever stopped to think that “thorn” might just be for your own good? It was for Paul! Painful as it was and painful as it may be for you or for me, it is for our good if we’ll just stop and look at it through the eyes of God. Because, before we close, I want you to see that God humbled Paul so that He could then HELP him. Paul earnestly prayed to the Lord, three times or on three different occasions. He was doing business with God and begging God to take away what he viewed as an obstacle to his success in the ministry. But notice how God answered in verse 9: “And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”

You see, Paul needed to learn that any strength he had was in and through God. He had to painfully learn a lesson that most of us could stand to learn ourselves as we tend to become conceited and self-

sufficient. God hates pride and He loves His people too much to let us go on living in something that He detests. If we refuse to humble ourselves, then we destine ourselves for ultimate destruction. Paul WAS humbled and he learned to accept God's help instead of resenting the suffering – and in the end, God was glorified by the humble and committed life of this faithful servant.

Listen to him in verse 10: "Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong." Friend, that's the whole point in Paul's thorn in the flesh. That's the lesson Paul learned from his sufferings and that's the lesson we should learn from our sufferings. Lean upon God for His grace and His help. Don't become bitter about suffering, learn to be blessed by it. Say, like Paul, "His grace is sufficient", and realize that God, as Paul told the Corinthians earlier in this same letter, chapter 4:16-17, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,."

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