

## **Paul's Thorn in the Flesh and Related Doubts: Does God have a reason not to heal?**

There are three common doubts that need resolving in many Christian's minds. These doubts often prevent them from receiving healing. Once these three areas are dealt with properly many are able to receive healing. These three doubts come from erroneous teaching concerning:

1. ***Paul's thorn in the flesh.*** *Is Paul an example of a person that God would not heal for a purpose.*
2. ***Job's sickness.*** *Does Job's sickness reveal that God wished Job to be sick for a reason?*
3. ***God's sovereignty.*** *Does God's sovereignty mean that God might chose not to heal..*

This article will address all three of these teachings that produce doubt about God's willingness to heal. Here is the first one.

***Paul's Thorn in the Flesh.*** Poor teaching about Paul's *thorn in the flesh* has created doubts in the minds of many people. These doubts have been sufficient to block healing for many people. Therefore, it is necessary to thoroughly analyze this passage. The primary verse in question is found in Paul's Second letter to the Corinthians. This verse reads:

***And 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 buffet me-- to keep me from exalting myself! 2 Corinthians 12:7***

To understand this verse, we must ask::

*What is the context of the verse?*

*What does the verse actually say that the thorn is?*

*What does the Greek word that is translated "thorn" reveal?*

After these questions are answered honestly, a good interpretation of this verse will be apparent. Let's consider the context of the verse.

The context of these verses is revealing. At the end of the previous chapter in 2 Corinthians, Paul is relating all the suffering, dangers, beatings, and imprisonment that he endured for the sake of the Gospel. He does not mention sickness anywhere in that passage. In that context in chapter 11, Paul speaks of being *weak* but certainly not as a reference to sickness but as a reference to the difficulties that he endured.

At the beginning of chapter 12, Paul explains that he had special revelations of Paradise, of the third heaven. Then he begins to speak of a thorn in the flesh given to keep him from *exalting himself* as a result of the *surpassing revelations* of the *third*

heaven, paradise. Therefore, a thorn in the flesh is given when someone has special surpassing revelation from God. A truth emerges that should help most people's faith:

***Most people would not qualify for a thorn in the flesh no matter what the thorn may be simply because they are not having surpassing revelations of paradise like Paul describes.***

Paul writes that he asked the Lord three times to remove the thorn but the Lord answered that *His grace was sufficient* for Paul and that *power was made perfect in weakness*. The Greek word translated *weakness* is used again here. Sometimes the King James Version of the Bible has confused people about this. It uses the word *infirmity* to translate this Greek word. In the time of King James (the 17th Century) this word simply meant *weakness*. Infirmity has changed its meaning since in the 400 years that have passed. To us, it means *sickness*. To them, it meant *weakness*. That is why modern translators don't use *infirmity* any longer to translate this word since it implies sickness. They use *weakness* which better conveys the meaning of the Greek word to the modern reader. There are a number of Greek words used in the New Testament used exclusively for sickness. This Greek word is not one of them. This Greek word was also used a few verses earlier in the previous passage in a context that has to do with *persecution*. Paul is probably using *weakness* again in this way. A verse in the next chapter also seems to indicate this strongly. Both words, *power* and *weakness*, are also used in this verse also. In this verse, Paul writes:

***For indeed He (Christ) was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we shall live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you. 2 Corinthians 13:4***

Here the word above translated *weakness* is the same word that Paul uses to describe what Christ said to him when he asked Him to remove the thorn. Paul is not saying that *weakness* is sickness. In fact, Paul says that Christ was crucified because of *weakness*. It puts the term *weakness* into the context of what unbelieving people were able to do to Christ. Christ's enemies were able to persecute Him and injure him physically through torture and crucifixion. Paul uses this word in the same way. Paul's *weakness* was *the suffering that he had to endure at the hands of enemies*. Christ's *weakness* was not sickness and Paul's *weakness* was not sickness either. Both experienced persecution.

The ordinary Greek words exclusively used for sickness in other passages in the New Testament do not appear anywhere in this passage. Additionally, just a few verses after writing about the *thorn* Paul writes that the *signs of the apostle* were present in his ministry. He mentions *signs, wonders and miracles*. This makes it highly unlikely that Paul would tell his readers about his own sickness and then a few verses later reveal his ability to do miracles. The context reveals that this *weakness*, the *thorn in the flesh*, must be something other than a sickness or a medical condition of some type. The context says that it was *persecution* rather than sickness.

*What does the verse actually say that the thorn is?* The verse does clearly reveal what the *thorn* is. People that say that Paul's thorn in the flesh was sickness often ignore what Paul wrote that the thorn actually was. Paul writes that the *thorn* is *a messenger of Satan*. The Greek word that is translated *messenger* is the same Greek word that is often transliterated as *angel* elsewhere in the New Testament. Literally Paul tells us that the thorn in the flesh is *an angel of Satan*. It is a poor *leap-of-logic* to say that this thorn is sickness when the actual passage says the thorn is *a satanic angel*. Since Paul tells us through this context of all the persecutions he endured, a much more reasonable interpretation would be that *Paul was asking the Lord to stop the actions of a fallen angel who stirred up persecution against him wherever he went*. In the same way that the devil stirred up trouble around Christ leading to His crucifixion, Paul was suffering trouble caused by this fallen angel in the same way. This seems to be validated by further study of the words used in this context.

*What does the Greek word that is translated "thorn" reveal?* The use of this particular Greek word reveals a great deal. The Greek word that is translated *thorn* in this passage is *skolop*. This Greek word only appears in the New Testament in this verse. However, this Greek word appears three times in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. A great deal of evidence exists that suggests that Paul and other First Century preachers used the Septuagint to preach from in their ministries to the ancient world. The apostle Paul was probably very familiar with how *skolop* was used in this ancient version of the Old Testament. *Skolop* is found in three passages in the Septuagint; Numbers 33:55, Ezekiel 28:24 and Hosea 2:6. In Numbers, this word is used in reference to the enemies of Israel. It reads:

***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 eyes and as thorns (skolop) in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land in which you live. Numbers 33:55***

This use of *skolop* above supports the interpretation that *Paul's thorn in the flesh had to do with persecution from enemies stirred up by a fallen angel*. The passage above does not support the idea that sickness was in some way involved.

The second place where *skolop* is used is found in the Book of Ezekiel. In that context, God declares that Sidon and other enemies will no longer be a *thorn* in Israel's side. This usage supports the idea that the *thorn* has to do with enemies rather than sickness. Ezekiel writes:

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

Their enemies had been a thorn in their side according to the prophet. Again, this does not point to sickness but rather to the thorn being a reference to persecution from enemies.

In Hosea, the use of this word is not as clear as the previous two uses. The verse simply says that God will prevent His people from going after false lovers by a wall of thorns.

***Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns, (skolop) And I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths. Hosea 2:6***

This particular use does not reveal anything else to help except that the verse does not reveal *skolop* as having a connection to sickness. None of the three uses of this word in the Greek Old Testament relate to sickness and two are related to difficulties with enemies. It is more reasonable to conclude that Paul was describing difficulties caused by persecution.

In summary, a close analysis of this verse does not reveal that Paul had a sickness or injury. The verse itself reveals that an *angel of Satan* was the problem and the context reveals that *difficulties from enemies* is the *weakness* that Paul asks the Lord to remove. Suggestions from other verses that Paul had eye problems, or other conditions such as speech difficulties, are often built upon the assumptions that Paul's thorn in the flesh was a medical condition. However, the biblical foundation for these speculations and theological doubts is very weak. It is unlikely that Paul's thorn in the flesh was a medical condition.

We are not saying that Paul never had a medical condition to deal with. We know that he could get sick like any other person. What we can conclude is that Paul could receive healing like any other believer. Paul does not provide an example of someone that God was not willing to heal.

### **Considering the Example of Job**

When considering an Old Testament story such as Job, it is important to remember that the Old Testament will never reveal as much and as clearly about the purposes of God for Christians as Christ Himself. The book of Job reveals nothing about the New Covenant that God has made with us through Christ. This book doesn't teach us about Christian healing at all. Christ does not quote from the Book of Job about healing, sickness or anything about the purpose of God. However, we will consider Job because misinterpretation of his experience has been the cause of many doubts about the purpose of God.

Some have seen Job as an example of a righteous person who God made sick for a purpose. However, when the actual story is examined, we find that *the devil made Job sick and God healed him*. It is amazing that some actually think that God wanted him sick when the devil made him sick and God healed him. What God wanted is what He did in the situation. God wanted Job well. God certainly did not want what the devil wanted!

Often this story is presented as a reason for someone remaining sick for a long period, however Job did not remain sick for long. Most of the 42 chapters in the Book of Job was a single, uninterrupted conversation with his friends followed by a conversation with God. The entire conversation could have happened in a matter of hours.

The conversation begins in the first verses of Chapter 3 and ends half way through Chapter 42 which is the last chapter. There are only 8 verses at the end of the chapter that are not connected with the long conversation. In other words, nearly 39 and a half chapters of this book occurs in one long uninterrupted conversation which could have happened on a single day. At the end of the conversation with his friends and with God, God heals Job. He lived to be 140 years old and was greatly blessed and increased by God.

If someone remains sick without divine healing, then Job cannot be used as an example for him or her. If someone dies without divine healing, they did *not* have a *Job's Experience* because they were not healed.

Sometimes the logic is presented that *if God allowed Job to be sick, then God must have wanted him sick*. However, this is extremely bad logic and it conflicts with Scripture. God is allowing a multitude of evil, wicked, destructive things to go on in the world that are clearly not His will. God is allowing murder, rape, incest, fornication, adultery, theft and a multitude of other evil things. *Because God is allowing these things, are we to believe that this is what God wants?* No! God is not schizophrenic. Just because God allows something doesn't mean He wishes it to be so.

How then are Christians to evaluate the will of God? It is rather simple. Jesus Christ shows us the perfect will of the Father by never sinning and always doing what the Father wished. Christ reveals the will of the Father in saving, healing and delivering people. It is the devil that kills, robs and destroys the lives of people not God. Let's not be double-minded and confuse these simple biblical facts with complex, demonically inspired logic and shadowy theology that transforms the work of the devil into God's work. Christ is saving, healing and delivering people. The devil is killing, robbing and destroying people. It is just that simple.

### **Spiritualizing Sickness and Injury**

Often these days we see Christian people spiritualizing their sickness or their injuries and thereby creating doubts for themselves. They imagine a purpose and a spiritual reason for their sickness. For example, a person with an injured or painful neck might think that the root cause is stubbornness. They would be drawing this idea from the Old Testament where God describes the stubbornness of His people Israel as being "stiff-necked". They might believe that they must deal with this character problem in their life before receiving healing. This belief keeps them from coming to Christ as Healer in child-like faith.

Another example is someone who is physically deaf who has been told that if their deafness is a result of not listening to God. A blind person might be told that their

blindness is a result of being spiritually blind. Of course, Jesus never resolved a spiritual problem first of all to get someone healed physically.

A pastor once told Roger Sapp that his cancer was a reflection of the disunity of his church. When his church had unity, he would be healed of his cancer. Dr. Sapp told him with a grin that he would probably die then since he had no control over the unity of the church. He kindly disputed this pastor's spiritual interpretation of his sickness. Once he saw that healing was not based on unity but faith in Christ, he was healed of his cancer.

These kinds of interpretations of sickness are out-of-control spirituality. Not once did Christ indicate that someone must solve a problem of character or anything else before receiving healing. These ideas create serious doubts in people. They create problems, some impossible to resolve, that must be fixed before someone can come to Christ for healing. They prevent reception of Christ as Healer with child-like faith.

### **Doubt about the Sovereignty of God**

Occasionally someone will assert that the sovereignty of God means that God does not heal if He chooses not to heal. Often they are relying upon Old Testament passages to support this doubt-producing idea. There are several very wrong ideas in this theology. First of all, this would have God the Father acting in a very different way than His Son Jesus demonstrates. When we see Christ, we see the Father. The Father's will and purpose are exactly as Christ reveals them. These matters remain the same yesterday, today and in the future because Christ remains the same.

Christ reveals the sovereignty of God perfectly. He shows us exactly how sovereignty works out in practice. He heals all who come to Him in child-like faith. He does not heal those who respond to Him in unbelief as they did in Nazareth. Why? They simply did not come to Him for healing. He never demonstrates that the Father is making arbitrary or mysterious decisions about who will be healed and who will not be healed. Instead, Christ demonstrates that all can receive if they come to Him.

Doubt prevents many from coming to Christ in child-like faith. Doubt is an element in our thoughts that causes us to disqualify ourselves from healing or other blessings from God. We doubt God's will and purpose. *"Maybe God won't heal me."* *"Maybe God is trying to teach me something through this sickness."* *"Maybe it's not time to be healed."* While these are all very popular ideas, they are simply not the truth.

All these ideas are not validated in the ministry of Christ. He heals all who come. He never reveals a purpose for anyone remaining sick. He never postponed a healing because of timing. Jesus healed people just like you in the multitudes. He healed the good, the bad and everyone in between. The only qualification for healing was to believe that He would help and come to Him. The very same Jesus is seated at the right of God today. Nothing has changed. We receive healing exactly the same way that the multitudes received by coming to Him in faith and not disqualifying ourselves.

### **Doubt about Death and Dying**

Another doubt that is related to the idea that God might be using sickness and injury in the life of a believer is the idea that God might want to bring a person to Heaven by sickness. Sick born again Christians who die go to Heaven but in no way does this mean that God wished them to die in this way. We must remember that perfectly well people die also.

Sickness is not the only road to death. Everyone eventually will die if Christ tarries. Some will be sick and some will be well. It is quite possible to put your head on a pillow completely well and wake up in Heaven. Sickness is not necessary to produce death. Some die who are completely well. Therefore, healing is available to all who believe right up to the moment of their death.

After death, after we sleep in Christ, a complete reception of what Christ accomplished at the cross will occur. Death and all that the Fall in the Garden, the curse and the devil have afflicted upon humanity will all be swallowed up in resurrection victory. In the meantime, healing is available to believers that they may live in abundant life until they die and then fully experience eternal life. *Healing belongs to you now because of what Jesus has done!*

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