

Paul's Foolish Boasting
2 Corinthians 12:7
Part Five

We are continuing on in our study of **2 Corinthians** and are presently in a section that we have entitled "**Paul's foolish boasting.**" In this section Paul, in attempting to protect the Corinthians from the improper boasting of his opponents whom he considered to be false apostles, chose to engage in a very similar kind of boasting.

This is why we saw Paul boasting of his heritage in **2 Corinthians 11:21-22**. This is why we saw Paul boasting of his sufferings in **2 Corinthians 11:23-33**. And this is why we saw Paul boasting of his visions and revelations in **2 Corinthians 12:1-4** where Paul, speaking of his experience in third heaven or in other words paradise, told the Corinthians that he heard and saw things that he was not permitted to speak.

And this is where we left off in our study several weeks ago. So where did Paul go next as he pressed forward in this section of Scripture that we have entitled "**Paul's Foolish Boasting?**"

Paul, after having spoken to the Corinthians about the surpassing greatness of his revelations in **2 Corinthians 12:1-4**, then went on to explain how he in spite of the surpassing greatness of the revelations was able to remain humble, and where did he provide us this explanation? He provided us this explanation in **2 Corinthians 12:7-10**. And this is the passage that we will begin to examine this morning.

So now let me read these verses for you. "**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.**" So did Paul in these verses provide an explanation of

how he, in spite of the surpassing greatness of his revelations, was able to stay humble? Absolutely!

And this leads us to the question that we will be seeking to answer this morning as we begin our examination of **2 Corinthians 12:7-10**.

So, what is the question? How did Paul, in spite of the surpassing greatness of his revelations, remain humble before God? So this is the question. But before we seek to answer this question I would like to briefly comment about the importance of it.

Humility is a big deal when it comes to our relationship with God, or in other words the only posture that is acceptable to God and thus brings favor from God upon our lives is when we are bowed before Him. Hopefully we all agree with this. What does **James 4:6** tell us? It tells us **“God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”**

So in light of this truth, do we want to live in this place of humility before God recognizing that He is the creator and that we are the creatures, that He is the Almighty One and that we are the weak ones? I would hope so! But unfortunately because of the weakness of our flesh and its propensity to exalt itself, this posture of humility, or in other words this posture of remaining bowed before God is difficult for us to maintain especially when we perceive ourselves as having been blessed with something that others have not been blessed with.

This is why the question that we will begin to answer this morning about Paul is so important. And again what is the question? How did Paul, in spite of the surpassing greatness of his revelations, remain humble before God and men?

First of all, Paul was able to remain humble because God had given him a “thorn in the flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7-8).

So let me now read for you **2 Corinthians 12:7** and see if this is not so. And what did Paul say? **“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!” Clearly we would have to say, based on these verses, that God had given Paul **“a thorn in the flesh.”**

But why would I say to you that it was God who gave it to him? Why would I say such a thing? I would say such a thing because who else would have given Paul **“a thorn in the flesh”** to keep him from exalting himself, other than God?

It certainly wouldn't have been Satan, for why would Satan have wanted to keep Paul humble? Obviously he would not have wanted to keep Paul humble. Therefore the only person left that could possibly have given Paul this **“thorn”** with the specific intent to keep Paul from exalting himself, or in other words to keep him humble would have been God Himself.

So now let us take a closer look at this **“thorn in the flesh”** that was given to Paul by God. And we will begin by looking at the word **“thorn.”**

The word “thorn” (SKOLOPS) refers to something sharp such as a stake or a sharpened shaft. This was the nature of this figurative gift that God gave to Paul. It was something therefore that could penetrate and perhaps even impale someone very much like a “stake” or a “sharpened shaft” could impale someone. And this was the graphic image I believe that Paul was seeking to communicate to his readers when he spoke of the gift, or in other words this “thorn” that had been given to him by God, for I believe that Paul saw himself as having been impaled by this figurative “thorn” and impaled in such a way that it made it very difficult for him, in spite of the surpassing greatness of the revelations that he had experienced, to exalt himself.

So let me ask you this question. How would you like to receive a gift like this for your birthday or as a Christmas present?

I believe that if we were to be honest this morning I don't believe that there would be very many of us here this morning that would be to very excited about receiving a “thorn” that was so sharp that it could impale us as a present. But this exactly is what Paul told the Corinthians that he received from God. He received from God “a thorn” which by its very nature could penetrate someone or perhaps even in fact impale someone very much like a “stake” or “sharpened shaft” could impale someone.

So, what exactly was this “thorn in the flesh” that God had given Paul? Most present day interpreters have concluded that when Paul spoke of his “thorn in the flesh” that he was referring to some kind of bodily ailment. And certainly this view is as good or perhaps better than any other view. But just to give you a sense of how problematic it has been throughout the history of the church to establish the specific kind of ailment or the specific kind of testing that Paul was alluding to when he spoke of this “thorn in his flesh,” let me give you a brief history.

The earliest attempt to identify what Paul was alluding to when he referred to his thorn in the flesh can be found in the writings of Tertullian.

Tertullian, a prolific early Christian writer from Carthage, wrote late in the 2nd century that Paul’s thorn in his flesh was a headache. Such writers as Chrysostom, Pelagius, Primasius and Jerome confirmed that Tertullian’s position actually became the tradition of the early church.

Chrysostom however, though noting that this was the tradition of the early church, rejected the thought that God through the instrumentality of Satan would inflict Paul with a physical malady.

Therefore, Chrysostom, though acknowledging the tradition of the early church, chose rather to view the “thorn” as various adversaries of Paul such as “Alexander the coppersmith.” Such writers as Augustine and then a man named Photius later cautiously embraced this view. All of these views were later overwhelmed in the medieval period by a totally different view.

During the medieval period largely fueled by a misrendering of the Latin vulgate, the Roman Catholic Church concluded that Paul’s thorn was related to the lust of the flesh. And what did Calvin, writing during the period of the reformation, think of this view? He thought this view was ridiculous rather choosing to think that Paul’s thorn represented all the various temptations and persecutions, which Paul was subjected to over the course of his ministry.

More recently, many of the commentators that have concluded that Paul’s thorn in the flesh was a physical ailment have come to believe that it was some kind of severe eye problem (Galatians 4:12-15).

Their support largely comes the following passage. Let me first of all read for you Galatians 4:12-15. **“I beg of you, brethren, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong; (13) but you know that it was because of a bodily illness that I preached the gospel to you the first time; (14) and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself. (15) Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me.”** So do these verses seem to indicate that Paul had some kind of illness associated with his eyes? At least at that particular point in time it certainly would seem so. But whether or not this particular illness, that very well could have been associated with his eyes, was in fact the **“thorn in his flesh”** that Paul referred to **2 Corinthians 12:7**, I have no idea, and guess what? Neither does anyone else!

But even though there is no unanimity concerning the specific identity of this thorn, the one thing that everyone can agree on is that it was some kind of heavy-duty affliction that was so intense and so chronic that it kept Paul bowed before God’s throne of grace and prevented him from exalting himself.

So how did Paul, in spite of the surpassing greatness of his revelations, remain humble before God? Paul was able to remain humble because God, as an expression of His kindness toward Paul, had given him some kind of heavy-duty affliction that was so intense and so chronic that it kept Paul bowed before God’s throne for fourteen years since the time he first experienced the surpassing greatness of his revelations right up until the writing of this epistle.

But this is not all that we learn about this **“thorn in the flesh.”** Although Paul’s thorn in the flesh was “given” by God in order to keep Paul from exalting himself, it was sent by Satan in order to torment him.

And isn’t that exactly what the **verse 7** tells us? **“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.”** So can we conclude based on what we just read that although Paul’s thorn in the flesh was **“given”** by God in order to keep Paul from

exalting himself, it was sent by Satan in order to **“torment him?”**
Absolutely!

God and Satan are always working at cross-purposes with each other, but Satan’s actions will never be able to override God’s sovereign purposes. And this is what we see here. This is why Paul’s thorn in the flesh, though having been sent by Satan as a messenger to torment him, or in other words to slap him around was pictured by Paul as having been “given” to him by God.

And for what purpose did Paul see God in His sovereignty giving him this “thorn in his flesh” as a messenger of Satan to torment him? Paul reiterates God’s purpose at the end of **2 Corinthians 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!”**

May God give us the grace to see our afflictions as a gift designed by Him to keep us humble and to prevent us from exalting ourselves.