

## **Coping with the Enemy** **Part II - The Thorn in the Flesh**

***“And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities [weaknesses] that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in [weaknesses] in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong”*** (II Corinthians 12:7-10).

Satan hassled Paul ceaselessly. But, of course, every move that Paul made dealt a blow to him and his nefarious purposes. But he could no more give Paul a break than a fighter could give his opponent a break. And therefore Paul would be a most important authority on the subject. We do well to heed his words. Nor ought we to go beyond his words. This, of course, assumes that Paul was indeed given the revelations which, according to the text, might have caused him to be over exalted in the flesh.

There are many things about Satan and his work that are still uncertain, but Paul has given some very clear teaching on the subject. Paul’s discussion of his “thorn in the flesh” to the Corinthians gives us some very important clues.

For one thing, it is quite obvious that God has a very direct hand both in allowing Satan to buffet His people, or in stopping him. The world, over which Satan seems to have a considerable amount of control, has its almost daily catastrophic evidences of Satan’s freedom to perform his nefarious deeds. We certainly wish that God would step in and eliminate Satan’s control. But that does not seem to be in accordance with His ultimate purposes. Why that is true is always a matter of speculation. The eternal query—“Why?”—is the constant response to Satan’s wretched ravaging of the earth. We do not often know why. My response to people in this situation is usually that we should not try to figure out why, but leave it in God’s hands and “let it float.” I call that “pontoon pragmatism”—don’t try to spiritualize it, just leave it with God and go on. We can drive ourselves crazy trying to figure it out. The usual concern is, “What have I done wrong?” As in the case of Job—probably nothing. But if one goes down that road, Satan is ready to jump in and pour on the charges and the guilt. It is very important to remember that if God has some message for you in a given situation, it will be abundantly clear to you—you will not have to search it out. God does not play games with our minds. If there is no obvious word from God, drop it! It is well to recall the words of the famed puritan divine—Robert South. Commenting on the affair in the Garden of Eden, South says, “It is well to leave off listening where God hath left off speaking. For he that hath an ear where God hath no tongue, may find himself instead listening to the voice of the tempter.”

This is abundantly clear in Paul’s case. Paul was doing nothing wrong. It suited God’s purpose to leave the affliction and make of Paul an example of human

weakness and divine grace. Perhaps God is saying to Satan, “Do your worst to my people—this time they will remain true.”

But Paul does give us some very specific words in regard to the subject in II Corinthians 12. The simple truth is that God does allow Satan to afflict His people. But to what degree? What was Paul’s thorn in the flesh? Again, there is considerable speculation on this point. Many have thought that it was some physical handicap. That is a possibility, but not necessarily so. It is more likely that it was a demon spirit attached to him in the nature of a special assignment to harass him. Paul was faced with constant hindrances and afflictions in a never ending stream. But then, of course, his ministry was a never ending stream. So continuous were the attacks that it would be a full-time job for any demon. And the idea of a “messenger” supports such a possibility. Notice that it was not a “message” but a “messenger”.

The purpose of this “messenger” was, in Paul’s own words, “Lest he be exalted above measure.” The magnitude of Paul’s assignment in receiving the revelation of God for the Church, could easily lead to pride. Paul’s constant buffeting would be a good balance. The idea of a physical handicap does not always fit this purpose. Very often people with physical handicaps have a certain justified sense of pride in being able to overcome them and get on with their lives. Thus physical handicaps do not automatically produce humility. But, whatever it was, it was a source of great distress to Paul and he sought earnestly relief from God.

God’s response to Paul provides us with some extremely important insights to the problem of Satan’s dealings with believers. In the first place we should note that this demonic activity was “in the flesh” and not in the spirit. That is to say that Satan could never get inside Paul to affect his spirit, but he did seem to have considerable freedom in dealing with Paul’s flesh. It is most important to understand that as long as Christ is in our spirits, Satan cannot penetrate them. And if it be said that Satan is able to get in when we are out of step with God, it must be observed that Christ is no coward, who runs out the back door just because Satan comes knocking on the front. We can depend on Christ to be there when we need Him. Our spirits are veritable citadels in the charge of Christ the Great Commander in the battle against Satan. If our citadels are in the charge of ourselves, we are most vulnerable to Satan and our salvation is disturbingly insecure. Always remember that we humans are no match for Satan, but Satan is no match for God. Outside the citadel, in the realm of the flesh, the battle rages fiercely. But inside, the spirit is safe in the care of Christ.

This demonic activity was not, for Paul, a sometime thing, but rather like a thorn which lies under the skin and festers, giving continuous pain. When the thorn is removed, so the source of the pain. But, in Paul’s case, God did not choose to remove it (in spite of Paul’s “fervency”). This again provides us with great insight. In some quarters, there is the assumption that the only thing that stands in the way of having all of our problems resolved; all of our illnesses healed; all of our afflictions removed—is our own lack of faith or virtue. This concept has caused much grief and despair in the family of God, who assume that because they are not delivered there must be something wrong

with themselves. And so to the distress of the affliction is added the burden of guilt. This is a most cruel and unconscionable thing for shepherds to impose upon the sheep.

So how do we cope with our satanic afflictions? Once again, Paul gives great insight. God's grace is sufficient for the affliction. Usually it is not the affliction or pain itself that causes the greatest distress, but rather the anxiety as to how long it will last. The clue lies in focusing on the moment and not on the future. How long will the darkness last? We don't know. But the presence of Christ within us, while it may not hasten the dawn, does light up the night. The secret is to take the affliction a day at a time or an hour or even a moment. We have grace for the present, but not for the future. God does not make us a repository of His grace, but a channel. So the grace comes moment by moment. Nor do we have the grace to bear someone else's trial. If we are inclined to challenge God over the trials of others—How could He do such a thing?—we must realize that He gives the grace to them to bear the trial and not to us to think about it.

So it is true that Satan does afflict the saints in their flesh. But it is equally true that he cannot penetrate our spirits because Christ is the commander of our spiritual citadel. Satan is no match for Him and that is why He can declare positively—“My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”

So stand fast in the moment, in the river of God's grace, “for His strength is made perfect in weakness.”

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*Next month “Part III—Demon Possession vs. Demon Affliction”*  
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