

Paul' s Thorn in the Flesh

Scripture is full of little enigmas which add a bit of spice to Bible study. Chasing down clues, unraveling conundrums, understanding the culture of the time and original languages — and connecting the dots. One of these enigmas is St. Paul's mention of a messenger of Satan to keep him humble. What could that be?

Paul was given a thorn in the flesh, which he said was a messenger from Satan to harass him, to keep him from being elated due to the revelations he had received from God. Having such special and unique revelations, could cause Paul to be puffed up and arrogant. Paul says God is keeping him humble with the affliction.

The Greek word for *thorn* is “*skolops*” which means exactly that — “a small spike or thorn; typically found on bush or vine plants; especially that causes irritation and annoyance when touched” (*Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*).

Speculations have swirled around the identity of the actual thorn Paul does not tell us what the actual thorn was. Speculations have suggested everything from psychological suffering such as sexual temptations or depression, to temptations toward disbelief or even the constant resistance of his opponents.

Others have argued for an actual physical malady that was possibly visible to the public. The suggestions range from headaches to epilepsy to ophthalmological, related to the eyes.

Good minds have wrestled with this from ancient times and it is not something that is necessary to know or Paul would have revealed it in his writings, but everything in Scripture is interesting to me and I try to figure it all out like others have in the past.

Paul's listeners and readers would know what Paul was referring to since they saw him and knew the malady.

Paul himself implies in Galatians 4:13-14 that it is a physical ailment that is readily seen by others, not an internal condition or an immoral predilection. He writes,

“You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.” As we will see, the only bodily member that Paul mentions in the context (actually the next verse) of his physical suffering are his eyes.

I have always concluded that Paul's thorn in the flesh were his eyes, something to do with his vision even an unsightly appearance possibly with swollen and draining eyes, oozing, scabby and itchy. Whatever it was, it was repulsive to people, but even though “a trial” to the Galatians they did not “scorn or despise” Paul because of it.

Let's follow the clues and see if we are correct. Let's start at the beginning. At the very moment of Paul's revelation of Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus the light was so bright it blinded his eyes. We read,

“Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him....

“Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus....

“And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight.” (Acts 9:3, 8, 18)

The great light of the revelation caused blindness and after Ananias laid hands on him and prayed, scales fell from his eyes

and he could see again. What were those scales and did it have a permanent effect on his eyes?

The Greek word for scales is *lepis* meaning husks (like the covering of a wheat kernel) or *scales* like on armor or a fish. “The way Luke the physician describes the miracle, rules out the idea that ‘as it were scales’ should be taken metaphorically” (Orchard, *Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*).

We will see later that another great revelation received by Paul was the cause of his thorn in the flesh.

Let’s look at the key passage, where Paul talks about his revelations and the infliction he was given to keep him from being “puffed up”. This is the passage where he specifically mentions his eyes, and the context is quite telling.

Though speaking in the third person, Paul is referring to his own experience.

“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ...and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.” (2 Cor 12:2, 4)

Notice he heard the vision but does not mention that he saw it. It is not unthinkable that the eyes affected by the first revelation may also be the bodily organ affected by this vision of heaven. Paul then relates the result of the heavenly experience, now speaking again in the first person,

“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.” (2 Cor 12:7)

Though he prayed that this messenger of Satan, the thorn in the flesh, would be taken away from him God let it remain telling Paul that in his weakness he was strong.

Now back to the Galatians. They were the ones specifically that were affected by his ailment, but though it was a trial to them they were not repulsed by it. Instead, Paul mentions their reaction.

“For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.” (Gal 4:15)

Why would Paul mention his physical ailment and then suggest that they would have plucked out their own eyes and given them to him if his eyes were not the obvious physical element that everyone could see? Out of sympathy for him, they would have eliminated his ailment by giving him their own eyes.

Now let's see a few hints that might confirm this conclusion.

We know Paul dictated his letters to a scribe (amanuensis) which is confirmed in Romans 16:22 “I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord.”

Even during Paul's lifetime imposters were writing in Paul's name so even though written by various scribes Paul signed his letters with his unique style. It seems this included large letters. Here are three examples,

“I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.” (Col 4:18).

“I Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the sign of genuineness in every letter of mine; it is the way I write.” (2 Thess 3:17)

“See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.”(Gal 6:11)

If the issue was his eyes, it would make perfect sense that he could not write the small letters on the papyrus or parchment, and therefore had his scribe write for him. But to ensure that it was actually from him and authentic, he signed his unique large letters at the end of the epistles.

Why large letters? It would fit perfectly with poor eyesight or diseased eyes.

We are told that his epistles were weighty and powerful, but his physical appearance was weak and unimpressive (2 Cor 10:10). I’m quite convinced that his eyes contributed to his off-putting appearance but the letters dictated by him were still powerful, in part based on the revelations he had received.

Visibly diseased or oozing eyes would certainly fit all the puzzle pieces and it seems to me to adequately explain the thorn in the flesh.

In a Jewish trial setting in Jerusalem, Paul is confronted by the High Priest along with the Pharisees and Sadducees. The High Priest would be readily known by sight with his unique priestly garb and appearance—and so would the two sects be recognizable. Anyone who was Jewish, from Jerusalem or who had visited the Temple often would not mistake the High Priest.

However, in this case the High Priest Ananias, a well known personage in Jerusalem, orders the men near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Paul responded,

“Then Paul said to him, ‘God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the

law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?' Those who stood by said, 'Would you revile God's high priest?' And Paul said, "I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'" (Acts 23:3–5)

We could ask, why would Paul, who was looking "looking intently at the Council" (v. 1), not recognize the high priest unless he was not able to see him clearly, presumable due to an eye condition?

And it subsequently says that he "perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees" so he threw out a statement that caused dissension between the two sects. Had he not seen both groups were both there, but only perceived it later?

When we connect all the dots and consider all the clues it seems likely or even certain that the "thorn in flesh" suffered by Paul was visible, off-putting, painful and a condition that effected the very bodily organs that were associated with both of the major visions he had received.

Interestingly it is often the blind who see more clearly than the sighted. Or perhaps sometimes a man is made blind before he can see.

Paul is an example of this—as he approached Damascus with eyes blazing with hatred only to be blinded by the light to humble him before God and to see the truth. (Acts 9:8)

Another is a blind man near Jericho who called out, "Son of David, have mercy on us." Why is this significant? Those following Jesus did not realize he was the "Son of David" — a title for the Messiah. But the blind man could see what the sighted could not. He saw the spiritual reality — he recognized Jesus as the Messiah. His blindness was healed. (Luke 18:35-43)

God works in our lives in many and often mysterious ways. His actions are not always what we expect or wish. But as with Paul, we can trust God in that whatever he brings our way, it is for our good and the good of the kingdom of God.