

A thorn in the flesh

In 2 Cor.12: 2-10 Paul describes how a person he knew was caught up into Paradise, and “heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat”. This profound experience apparently occurred fourteen years before he wrote this letter, that is, around AD 42–44. Paul is careful not to make the story of this extraordinary experience about himself, and even now he mentions it only reluctantly. He initially describes it vaguely as happening to "a man," though it becomes clear from the transition to the first person that he is speaking of himself. For Paul, such stunning revelations were a precious gift; for the Corinthians, they were important confirmations of Paul’s authority. So why was he so modest about them?

Paul had good reasons to be anxious that talking about such an exceptional experience could make the Corinthians think too well of him. So he chose to “refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me”. Also, he feared developing personal pride in God’s favour, that “exalted [him] above measure through the abundance of the revelations”.

God’s answer to Paul’s dilemma was not quite what Paul had hoped for. “Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me”. Paul does not specify the nature of his "thorn," and his other epistles do not directly mention it. But there have been plenty of speculations about what Paul was referring to.

The "thorn" is usually assumed to refer to the persecutions and hardships Paul faced. He certainly must have suffered deeply over Jewish rejections of the gospel, plus the loss of his former status as a respected teacher of the Law. He had constantly to argue against the Jewish opponents who followed him around, fiercely criticising his message and trying to undermine his converts. Another possibility is a real physical ailment.

Whatever it was, it was distressing enough to drive Paul to desperate prayer. “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’”.

The phrase "thorn in the flesh" is still used as a metaphor for "a source of continual annoyance or trouble", and God’s reassurance remains an inspiration for generations of sufferers.

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