

The Apostle Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

James Smyda

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As I'm sure most of you are aware, the Apostle Paul plays a very significant and even unique role in the New Testament. He is the author of more books of the New Testament than any other single individual. And if you read through the book of Acts, he is the major focus of the book. He and his ministry are the major if not the primary focus of the majority of the book. The other Apostles are certainly mentioned and their accounts are included, but when you look from about chapter 13 through the end of the book there's a major focus on Paul.

Paul also tells us in his second epistle to the Corinthians, that due to this unique role that he fulfilled he was also given a "thorn in the flesh". It was an issue that troubled him for much of his life. And as he explains to us in 2 Corinthians 12, he appealed to God at least three times to have this issue removed from him. But the answer that he received from God was "My grace is sufficient for you". God basically told him that, "No, Paul, this is an issue you're just going to have to endure and put up with but it's for your ultimate good."

Well, throughout my lifetime I've heard a good bit of speculation as to what exactly was this "thorn in the flesh" that Paul had to deal with. So, what we're going to do today in the sermon is take a closer look at this to understand what exactly does the Bible tell us was this "thorn in the flesh" that Paul was dealing with? More importantly, what are the lessons that we can learn and apply in our lives today from this particular account? So, if you'd like a title for this sermon it's:

The Apostle Paul's Thorn in the Flesh

So, to start off with, let's turn over to 2 Corinthians 12. This is the account where Paul mentions this. Again, 2 Corinthians 12. And we will start reading in verse 7.

2 Cor 12:7 *"And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8) Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9) And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10) Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (NKJV)*

As we can see, whatever this issue was it was obviously something that was unpleasant that Paul did not particularly enjoy. He appealed at least three times as he tells us here to have this issue taken away from him. So, obviously it was something he would've

preferred not to have to deal with. The answer he received is, “No Paul, you're going to have to put up with this and it's for your own good.” We can see from the latter couple of verses we read there that Paul came to the same conclusion that, “Yes, I accept that this is for my ultimate good and it's better for me that I have to endure through it, even though I don't like this.”

Well, what we're going to do today is again look in greater detail to see what exactly was this “thorn in the flesh”? Because again as I mentioned, throughout my lifetime I've heard a lot of speculation about what exactly was this “thorn in the flesh”? And most often it is speculated to be a medical problem. The reason for that is that the phrase “thorn in the flesh” is typically interpreted very literally. They say well this is something affecting his flesh. So, it must be a medical problem. Then from that speculation, they then go and look at some of the verses in his epistles that certainly seem to indicate he had some type of a vision issue that he was dealing with. Then they think, well, maybe that “thorn in the flesh” was a vision problem. It was a problem with his eyes and that's what he's dealing with.

Now, in a minute here we'll get into more detail how the Bible uses this term “thorn in the flesh” or similar language. But first let's just focus on what the purpose of this was. Because in the latter part of the verse here, it says “a messenger of Satan to buffet me”. Now what does “buffet” him mean? Now to understand that let's look at the Greek word that is translated into English here as “buffet”. Because we don't typically use the word “buffet” a lot in our everyday English today. So, it doesn't give us a clear meaning. But if we look at the Greek here, we can get a clearer idea as to what exactly he's getting at. The Greek word here is transliterated into English is “kolaphizo”. It's Strong's # 2852. The definition I'm going to give you comes from The Complete Word Study Dictionary of the New Testament by Spiros Zodhiates. The definition he provides for it is:

“To strike with the fist, to buffet, ...to mistreat...”

So, in other words this “thorn in the flesh” was something that would “mistreat” him. Well, we can see right there why he was appealing multiple times for God to take it away. Something that mistreats you is something you'd like to go away and not have to deal with. But why was this to mistreat him? Well, let's continue reading the latter part of this verse here. It says, “lest I be exalted above measure.” Now, if you see that phrase “exalted above measure”, that's at the beginning of verse 7 and at the end. Now, in both cases it's three words in English. It's one word in Greek. Now, the Greek word here that's translated into those three English words is transliterated into English as “huperairo”. It's Strong's # 5229. And again, from Zodhiates, the definition he gives it is:

“To lift above, elevate, exalt, be conceited, arrogant, insolent.”

So, you can see this was basically something given to Paul's life that would mistreat him for the purpose of preventing him from becoming conceited or arrogant. Or to use kind of our modern day vernacular to become “full of himself”. To become bigheaded and full of pride. That's kind of the objective here. We'll see here later in this sermon, this is

specifically because of the “abundance of Revelation”. It's because of this unique role that Paul is given. This is basically to keep him humble. So that this unique role that he is given -- he doesn't become full of pride and doesn't go around boasting of how special he is and what a big “alpha male” he is. It's to prevent that human nature tendency is what this is about.

But now let's look into what exactly was this “thorn in the flesh”? Because as I mentioned, throughout my lifetime most often this phrase “thorn in the flesh” is taken very literally. In other words, well it's something affecting his flesh, so it must be a medical problem. Well, what this logic misses is that the Bible uses this type of language about a thorn -- like a “thorn in the flesh”, or a “thorn in the side”. We'll see several ways this particular phraseology is used around a “thorn”. It's used as an expression very much how we use that type of expression in our English today. Because today we'll refer to a problem that's a “thorn in our side” or an individual that just irritates us as that person's just a “thorn in my side”. Or this situation has just been a “thorn in my side”. We're not referring to a medical problem, something that gives us physical pain from a medical standpoint. We're referring to something that's just troubling us as an annoyance and makes our life difficult and painful to go through.

Well, what we're going to see here is that the Bible uses this type of phraseology around a “thorn” very much the same way. To see examples of this turn over to Numbers 33. What we're going to see here is several examples where the Bible uses this type of phraseology specifically in reference to the Canaanites and the other pagan nations that were in the Promised Land. The Israelites were commanded when they took over the Promised Land. They were told to wipe out these nations and drive them out of the Promised Land. As you're probably aware, they were also given instructions not to enter into marriages with these individuals, not to mix with their culture. And the whole purpose of that wasn't about mixing their bloodlines or combining their DNA. *It wasn't really a racial thing. It was more of a cultural religious issue.* Because the instructions were always, if you enter into marriages with them, well, then you'll start taking on their practices. You'll worship their gods. You'll basically take on their culture, and it'll pull you away from the true God.

Well, there were numerous times they are told if they don't follow God's instructions and stay away from these people -- wipe them out and not be directly involved with them -- that it's going to wind up being a “thorn” for them. What we're going to see here in several examples in the Old Testament is, it's phrased like they are a “thorn in their side” or a “thorn in their eyes”. There are various ways it's spoken of. But it's always using this reference to a “thorn”. Again, not as a literal thorn that's causing physical medical pain. It's an expression to communicate a concept. But to notice this, let's start in Numbers 33:50.

Num 33:50 *“Now the LORD spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan, across from Jericho, saying, 51) “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When you have crossed the Jordan into the land of Canaan, 52) then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy all their*

engraved stones, destroy all their molded images, and demolish all their high places; 53) you shall dispossess the inhabitants of the land and dwell in it, for I have given you the land to possess. 54) And you shall divide the land by lot as an inheritance among your families; to the larger you shall give a larger inheritance, and to the smaller you shall give a smaller inheritance; there everyone's inheritance shall be whatever falls to him by lot. You shall inherit according to the tribes of your fathers. 55) But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall be that those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell. 56) Moreover it shall be that I will do to you as I thought to do to them.' ” (NKJV)

Notice that's how it refers to them as a “thorn in your side”. Again, it's not specifically referring to the physical pain of a thorn is poking me, and I have a medical problem as a result. It's just saying that they're just going to be a constant problem. They're going to harass and oppress you. They're just going to cause problems for you and it's just going to be an ongoing problem because you didn't follow the instructions to wipe these people out and not have anything to do with them.

But let's notice that in the Old Testament this particular phrase shows up multiple times throughout several books. This reference to them being “thorns”. So, turn over to Joshua 23. We'll see here where Joshua again, reiterates this same instruction. It's Joshua 23. We will start reading in verse 1.

Joshua 23:1 *“Now it came to pass, a long time after the LORD had given rest to Israel from all their enemies round about, that Joshua was old, advanced in age. 2) And Joshua called for all Israel, for their elders, for their heads, for their judges, and for their officers, and said to them: “I am old, advanced in age. 3) You have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations because of you, for the LORD your God is He who has fought for you. 4) See, I have divided to you by lot these nations that remain, to be an inheritance for your tribes, from the Jordan, with all the nations that I have cut off, as far as the Great Sea westward. 5) And the LORD your God will expel them from before you and drive them out of your sight. So you shall possess their land, as the LORD your God promised you. 6) Therefore be very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, lest you turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left, 7) and lest you go among these nations, these who remain among you. You shall not make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause anyone to swear by them; you shall not serve them nor bow down to them, 8) but you shall hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have done to this day. 9) For the LORD has driven out from before you great and strong nations; but as for you, no one has been able to stand against you to this day. 10) One man of you shall chase a thousand, for the LORD your God is He who fights for you, as He promised you. 11) Therefore take careful heed to yourselves, that you love the LORD your God. 12) Or else, if indeed you do go back, and cling to the remnant of these nations—these that remain among you—and make marriages with them,*

and go in to them and they to you, 13) know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations from before you. But they shall be snares and traps to you, and scourges on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land which the LORD your God has given you.” (NKJV)

Here we have basically the same concept being expressed. It's worded a little bit differently. Thorns “in your eyes” rather than “in your side”. But in both cases, again, this is an expression. It's a figure of speech that this is going to be an ongoing problem is what this is going to be. Now, let's notice this again in the book of Judges. Just turn over to Judges 2. We'll see again this same type of reference being made about the pagan nations around them. Again, we see this reference to “thorns” as a figure of speech, and again, not as a literal medical problem. This is in Judges 2:1.

Judges 2:1 *“Then the Angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said: ‘I led you up from Egypt and brought you to the land of which I swore to your fathers; and I said, ‘I will never break My covenant with you. 2) And you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed My voice. Why have you done this? 3) Therefore I also said, ‘I will not drive them out before you; but they shall be thorns in your side, and their gods shall be a snare to you.’ ” (NKJV)*

Now it is once again this concept of a “thorn in their side”. Again, not as a reference to a medical problem but just as a snare, a trap for them. Just something that's going to trip them up and just create ongoing problems in their life if they don't deal with it.

So now let's look back at where we started in 2 Corinthians 12. Look at this from the perspective that a “thorn in the flesh”, again, is not a reference specifically to a medical problem. It's an expression of something that's going to cause Paul problems in his life. Again, let's look back at 2 Corinthians 12. Let's look again at verse 7.

2 Cor 12:7 *“And lest I should be exalted above measure...” (NKJV)*

Again, be conceited, become full of himself and arrogant. This is to keep him humble. That is what this is about.

“...by the abundance of the revelations,...” (NKJV)

Because of this unique role that Paul fulfilled. And we'll look more at that in detail here in a minute.

“...a thorn in the flesh was given to me,...” (NKJV)

Now again, if we just follow the trend in the Bible this is more of an expression. This is not specifically identifying a medical problem. This is just something to give him grief and cause problems in his life. As we saw, to “buffet” means to “mistreat”. This is

something to mistreat him. Now let's notice what it states is actually "mistreating" him.

"...a messenger of Satan to buffet me,..." (NKJV)

To "mistreat" me.

"...lest I be exalted above measure." (NKJV)

So, the key phrase here is *a messenger of Satan*. Now, to understand what this is getting at, we just need to look at the Greek word that is translated as "messenger" here in English. It is transliterated into English as "aggelos". It's Strong's # 32. Again, the definition I'm going to give you is from Zodhiates. He defines it as:

"Messenger, one sent to announce or proclaim. A messenger, one who is sent in order to announce, teach, perform, or explore anything...An angel, a celestial messenger, a being superior to man. God is represented as surrounded by a host of beings of a higher order than man. These He uses as His messengers and agents in administering the affairs of the world and in promoting the welfare of humans... In 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 1:6, some of the angels that sinned are said to have been cast down to hell. They are called the angels of the devil or Satan...In Rev. 9:11, the angel of the bottomless pit is the destroying angel..."

See this word "aggelos" here is the word that's typically translated in the New Testament as the English word "angel". Now it can mean a "messenger". It can refer to a physical human being who's being sent as a messenger. It can be used like that. But it's also often used to refer to angelic beings. To either righteous angels or again angels who sinned and who followed Satan in his rebellion. Because that's what this is referring to here. This is an angel of Satan. It's a demon that followed Satan in his rebellion.

Just to see some examples to back that concept up, turn over to Matthew 25. We will see here where it specifically talks about the devil's angels. The "messengers", the angels who sinned who followed Satan. This is Matthew 25:41. Now we're going to jump into a context here. The latter part of this chapter is describing the scene where Christ is separating the sheep from the goats. He's basically judging the rest of mankind at the end of the period of time pictured by the Eighth Day. This is His final judgment to decide who goes into the Kingdom of God and who goes into the lake of fire. But let's just jump to verse 41, and just notice the wording here.

Matt 25:41 *"Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels:'"*
(NKJV)

And "angels" here, this is the same Greek word that we just saw translated as "messenger" in 2 Corinthians 12:7. But it's the devil and his "angels". It's the devil and his "messengers". This is the "messengers" of Satan. This is basically referring to the exact same thing that 2 Corinthians 12 is referring to. Because this is basically talking

about how they're going to eventually be thrown in the lake of fire, that that's their ultimate fate. We'll see a couple more verses here that again uses that same Greek word in this same context. Turn over to 2 Peter 2 and we're going to read verse 4.

2 Peter 2:4 *“For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment;”* (NKJV)

He's referring you to the ultimate judgment of all the angels who rebelled and followed Satan. But again, the Greek word here for “angels” is the exact same Greek word we read in 2 Corinthians 12:7. This is the “messengers” of Satan. Just to see one other example, tune over to Jude. Jude is a one chapter book that's just right before the book of Revelation. We're going to read Jude in verse 6.

Jude 6 *“And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day;”* (NKJV)

Again, just another reference of the angels that sinned and followed Satan. They're ultimately going to be thrown in the lake of fire. But what I want you to notice in all of this is if we just follow that same Greek word in these examples, what a messenger of Satan is -- as it's worded there in 2 Corinthians 12:7 -- we're talking about a demon. What Paul was saying was there was a demon that was buffeting or mistreating him. That was basically causing ongoing problems in his life. And this was for the purpose of keeping him humble. That's basically what he was saying.

To see a good example of how this concept works, turnover to the book of Job. I think this gives us a very good illustration of how this concept works and how it plays out in our lives. Again, this is Job 1. And we will see here kind of the behind the scenes story of what took place in Job's life. Because according to the way the account is recorded here, we have no reason to believe that Job understood what was happening behind the scenes while all these events were playing out in his life. He's just experiencing all this calamity that's taking place in his life and wondering what's going on and why is this happening to me? Well, we get the advantage when reading the book to read the first two chapters and seeing what's happening behind the scenes from a spiritual perspective. But the dynamics of how this is described here in Job 1 and 2 can really help us understand the concept of what Paul was getting at in 2 Corinthians 12. To notice this, start in Job 1:6.

Job 1:6 *“Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. 7) And the LORD said to Satan, “From where do you come?” So Satan answered the LORD and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it.” 8) Then the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?” 9) So Satan answered the LORD and said, “Does Job fear*

God for nothing? 10) Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. 11) But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face!” 12) And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power; only do not lay a hand on his person.” So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD.” (NKJV)

Notice here that God is in charge the entire time. He's basically telling Satan exactly how far he can go. He's like, you can go this far and no further. Because at this point in the story, He basically forbid Satan from touching Job's health. He says, you can go after every other part of his life, but you can't touch his health. Now we're going to see a little bit later here, He removes that restriction. But notice here when Satan goes after him, there's all manner of physical problems that happen in Job's life. His children are killed. His business is affected. His possessions are greatly affected. And these are all physical calamities that are taking place in Job's life. But there's a spiritual source behind it of Satan himself who's bringing these events about. Pick up in verse 13.

“13) Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house; 14) and a messenger came to Job and said, “The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them, 15) when the Sabeans raided them and took them away—indeed they have killed the servants with the edge of the sword; and I alone have escaped to tell you!” 16) While he was still speaking, another also came and said, “The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; and I alone have escaped to tell you!” 17) While he was still speaking, another also came and said, “The Chaldeans formed three bands, raided the camels and took them away, yes, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; and I alone have escaped to tell you!” 18) While he was still speaking, another also came and said, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, 19) and suddenly a great wind came from across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; and I alone have escaped to tell you!” 20) Then Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and he fell to the ground and worshiped. 21) And he said: “Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.” 22) In all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong.” (NKJV)

Notice up to this point, as I mentioned, God has set a restriction that Satan can't touch Job's health. Well, as we're going to read here in the beginning of chapter 2, He removes that restriction and Satan's able to go after that as well. But I want you to notice is there's all these other calamities that are happening in Job's life. From Job's perspective, as a physical human being, he doesn't understand what's happening. It's just calamities coming at him from every direction. But there's a spiritual force that's causing all of this to take place. Again, just understanding the dynamics of this is going to help us understand the picture of what this “thorn in the flesh” was for Paul because

this is what was happening in Paul's life. He had a spiritual source that was creating all manner of persecution and problems in his life. That's the source of what he's talking about there in 2 Corinthians 12. Let's just continue reading in chapter 2 here. Because as I mentioned God now removes the restriction on Satan and allows him to go after Job's health as well. This is chapter 2 in verse 1.

Job 2:1 *“Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them to present himself before the LORD. 2) And the LORD said to Satan, “From where do you come?” Satan answered the LORD and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it.” 3) Then the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil? And still he holds fast to his integrity, although you incited Me against him, to destroy him without cause.” 4) So Satan answered the LORD and said, “Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will give for his life. 5) But stretch out Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will surely curse You to Your face!” (NKJV)*

See, he's basically saying “Let me go after his health. If I go after his health that'll really get to him.” Now, pick up in verse 6.

“6) And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, he is in your hand, but spare his life.” (NKJV)

In other words, you can do anything to him, just don't kill him. In verse 7:

“7) So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD, and struck Job with painful boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. 8) And he took for himself a potsherd with which to scrape himself while he sat in the midst of the ashes. 9) Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast to your integrity? Curse God and die!” 10) But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips.” (NKJV)

So, you can see here, Job's life basically just gets turned upside down and turned into a nightmare that nobody would ever want to go through. The source behind all of this is Satan behind the scenes bringing all this calamity upon him. Now again, God's in control the entire time. He's setting restraints as to what Satan is allowed to do but Satan is the source of all the problems. We're going to see here that this is the key to understanding what the “thorn in the flesh” that Paul was dealing with was.

But we also need to understand that this is a concept that applies to all of us as Christians. Not necessarily to the severity of what Job went through. I'm sure none of us would want to go through what Job faced. We probably don't face this at the level of what Paul dealt with. But as Paul himself tells us, the same basic concept applies to everyone who's a Christian. In fact, it's a requirement in the contract for being a

Christian. To see this turn over to 2 Timothy 3. Because we'll see here that Paul himself gives us a very all inclusive statement that we just simply can't get around. That tells us that this concept applies to all of us. It's just part of being a Christian. 2 Timothy 3:12.

2 Tim 3:12 *“Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”* (NKJV)

Notice it's an all encompassing statement. He's not saying that this only applies to individuals like myself -- meaning Paul who fulfilled this special role -- or we're just referring to the Prophets in the Old Testament or just the Apostles in the New Testament. No, he's saying this concept applies to everyone. I think it's also important for us to realize, notice he says everyone who wants to live godly in Christ Jesus. Everyone who accepts Christ as their savior.

Well, that applies to everyone who's called in the future as well. This applies to everyone who's offered salvation during the Eighth Day period as well. That's why Satan is released again after the millennium to fulfill the same role that he's fulfilling now. Because see, oftentimes people will read this particular verse, and they think of persecution only in the context of being thrown in prison for preaching the truth or having lynch mobs want to beat you up and murder you for what you believe in. And while those concepts certainly apply to this, we have to realize that the persecution we're talking about is persecution from Satan and his demons. And that's something that we all face again not necessarily to the severity of having your life threatened or being thrown in prison or killed. But as Peter tells us, he warns all of us that Satan is the persecutor out to get us. And to notice that turnover to 1 Peter 5:8.

1 Peter 5:8 *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.”* (NKJV)

So, he's telling us Satan is the persecutor. He's the one out to get all of us and that's something we all have to struggle against. I think oftentimes we think of this just in terms of temptation to sin. Or just trying to fight our human nature and the battle that we have to deal with there. It certainly applies there, but we also have to think of it in terms of Job's example. Of seeing calamities and physical things that can come at us in our lives to test and try us and to persecute and mistreat us and make our lives difficult for us. That can come from spiritual sources as well.

Turn over to Ephesians 6. This is probably a reference you're very familiar with in terms of thinking of spiritual forces behind the scenes how they will affect us. Again, we typically apply this to our battle with our human nature, which again is a very accurate connection with this. But that's also think in terms a little bigger than that. Of how that can affect physical things in our lives as well. This is Ephesians 6:12.

Eph 6:12 *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.”* (NKJV)

So, both Peter and Paul here are telling us that we have to deal with this persecution. With these constant challenges in our lives and things that mistreat us and tempt us and try to be snares and traps for us, and there's a spiritual force behind it all. Again, this is a concept that applies to all of us.

But to fully understand what Paul was dealing with, we have to understand the concept that Paul was in a special role. The underlying concept behind all of this is basically the idea that to whom much is given much is required. To see what I'm talking about, let's turn back over to 2 Corinthians 12. Because let's notice here that it specifically tells us that the reason that Paul was kind of singled out here to have this "thorn in the flesh" -- to have this persecution from Satan and his demons at a higher level than the average Christian is going to have to deal with -- is because of this unique role that he had. To notice this let's again read verse 7.

2 Cor 12:7 *"And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations..."* (NKJV)

In other words, because of this unique role that Paul fulfilled. Because as I mentioned, Paul writes more of the New Testament than any other single author. As I also mentioned before, the book of Acts has a strong focus on Paul and on his ministry. Paul is a guy that Christ appeared to in visions directly teaching him. He was taken up to heaven in a vision. And he described the things that he saw. He had a very unique role in the revelations that he received and the role that he fulfilled for all time.

Well, there's a package deal that comes with that. To understand this concept, turn over to Mark 10. We'll see here a conversation that takes place with the Apostles James and John -- who are oftentimes referred to as the "sons of Zebedee" -- and a conversation that they have with Christ. Because what we can learn from this is the concept of basically to whom much is given, much is required. That if you want to be put in a special role and have particular honor because of that role, well, there's a painful side that comes with that as well.

Just to kind of illustrate a personal example with this, a number of years ago I was having a conversation with a good friend of mine. In fact, one of the best friends of my life. He was one of the Ministers that ordained me an Elder. He was talking about the tendency of a lot of people wanting to kind of self-promote themselves or people who desire to be in a leadership role in the Church and kind of politic to try to put themselves in those roles. The way that he would describe it is he would say, "Oftentimes these are people who are looking for a title and not a job description."

In other words, what he meant was they want to be called an Elder or a Pastor or some role of that nature and they want to be behind the podium and preaching and telling people what they think and have people honoring and listening to what they say. But they oftentimes don't want the downside to the role. They don't want to catch the grief and deal with the trials that come as a package with it. See, this particular concept of

there being kind of a proportional painful side to the role is something that Christ expresses here with the sons of Zebedee. To understand this, let's start in Mark 10:35.

Mark 10:35 *“Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask.” 36) And He said to them, “What do you want Me to do for you?” 37) They said to Him, “Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory.” (NKJV)*

See what they're asking for is we want the limelight. We want to be right next to You and have everybody look at us as the big dogs and the alpha males that are in charge of everything. That's what they're focused on. Now notice Christ's response to them. Because He immediately tells them, “You don't know what you're asking.” Because there's a downside that comes with this that you're not taking into account. Pick up here in verse 38.

“38) But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” 39) They said to Him, “We are able.” So Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized; 40) but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared.” (NKJV)

See, He was expressing to them that they didn't realize what they were asking. I'm sure at that point they didn't. They didn't grasp the painful side that was going to come with this. What Christ was getting at when He refers to the “cup that I have to drink from”, He was talking about the persecution and specifically as we're going to see here, He's talking about the brutal beatings and murder that He's going to receive. As Christ told them, He said, “You will indeed drink from that same cup.” Well, if you look at what happened with most of the Apostles, most all these guys they were persecuted and they all got violently murdered at the end of their life.

To see that that's what Christ meant by referring to the “cup that He would drink from”, let's turnover to Matthew 26. Because we'll see here the account towards the end of Christ's physical life on earth. In fact, the night right before He's about to be arrested and betrayed and then His torture is about to begin before He's eventually murdered the next day. Notice here when He is praying to God basically asking for a plan B. Is there some way I can avoid this? Similar to Paul, He appeals three times for this to be taken away from Him. He comes to the same conclusion that the Apostle Paul does in 2 Corinthians 12. That I'll endure it and it's for the ultimate good that it takes place. But notice as Christ is making this prayer how He refers to it as a “cup”. He specifically uses the same language in referring to what He's going to go through here, as He did when He was talking to the sons of Zebedee. Also notice, as we read through this, that as this is playing out, the sons of Zebedee, James and John, are two of the individuals that are with Him while this is taking place. Now let's pick up here in Matthew 26:36.

Matt 26:36 *“Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, “Sit here while I go and pray over there.” 37) And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed.” (NKJV)*

So, I think it's interesting that James and John were there as part of the group that are with Him while this is taking place. Pick up in verse 38.

“38) Then He said to them, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me.” 39) He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” (NKJV)

Again, now notice He's referring to the suffering He's about to go through as a “cup”. Picking up in verse 40.

“40) Then He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “What! Could you not watch with Me one hour? 41) Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” 42) Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done.” 43) And He came and found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy. 44) So He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. 45) Then He came to His disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46) Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand.” (NKJV)

So, you can see from His comments here, He's about to be betrayed. Obviously, that's what He's referring to as the “cup”, and taking this “cup” away from Me. Now as I mentioned, this whole concept of having spiritual forces that will mistreat us. That just try to cause problems in our lives and that will persecute us. That is a concept that just applies to all Christians at some level.

But as we saw here with the example of James and John and their request to Christ that they wanted the chief seats. They wanted to be right on each side of Christ there and have all the glory. Well, Christ was making the point to them that if you want to have the special role there's a lot of pain that's going to come with that. *It's a package deal.* See, this is the key to understanding what happened with Paul and why he was specifically mentioned as receiving this “thorn in the flesh”. Which we saw is a “messenger of Satan”. An angel of Satan, a demon, that was oppressing and mistreating Paul.

Because this was basically made clear from the very beginning of Paul's ministry that he was going to have a very painful road to go. To see that turnover to Acts 9. This is the chapter where Paul is stricken down on the road to Damascus. Where Christ gets his attention and tells him that he's persecuting His people and then takes away his

eyesight and Paul's blind and now it's humbling him and getting his attention. Well, then Christ goes to Ananias and gives him the instructions to go over and to baptize Paul and to perform a healing to restore his eyesight. But then let's notice here a comment that Christ makes when He's giving Ananias these instructions. This is in Acts 9:10.

Acts 9:10 *“Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” 11) So the Lord said to him, “Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. 12) And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight.” 13) Then Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. 14) And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.” 15) But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16) For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake.”* (NKJV)

Now, notice here that Christ tells him, “I've got plans for Paul. He's going to fulfill a special role for Me and it's going to hurt.” In other words, Paul's going to have a lot of pain along the way. He's going to accomplish a lot of good, but it's going to hurt while he's doing it.

If we just jump down the page here to verse 23. What we're going to see here is from the very beginning of Paul's ministry, he's got people plotting to kill him and attempting to kill him from the very beginning of his ministry. This follows him throughout the rest of his life. He's eventually -- like the rest of the other Apostles -- he's violently murdered, he's beheaded. Now again, that particular detail is not recorded in the Bible, but that's generally agreed upon among historians that his life was ended by being beheaded. But let's just notice what was happening to him just as soon as he started his ministry. This is down in verse 23.

Acts 9:23 *“Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. 24) But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him. 25) Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket.”* (NKJV)

Paul is constantly running for his life throughout all of his ministry with people trying to kill him. He also gets violently attacked many times. Turn over to 2 Corinthians 11, and we'll see here the list. Kind of the overview of all the issues that Paul had to deal with. Also just take note as we read through this that this is just one chapter right before he talks about his “thorn in the flesh”. Because again these are directly related. This is 2 Corinthians 11, and we'll start in verse 22.

2 Cor 11:22 *“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. 23) Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a*

fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. 24) From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. 25) Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; 26) in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; 27) in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness— 28) besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches.” (NKJV)

That's an incredible list that none of us would want to have as part of our own life, all the trials that he had to go through. See this is the “thorn in the flesh” that Paul was referring to. He had a demon specifically coming to stir up trouble in his life. Again, it was through multiple means. It wasn't just specifically a health problem. It's kind of similar to Job where you've got all of these various problems coming from multiple angles and constantly coming at you. Where it can include medical issues, but it's not specifically narrowly defined as just that. He's constantly being mistreated, “buffeted” as we read. Again, this is for the purpose of keeping him humble.

See that's one of the big lessons that we can learn from this. Because as we read earlier in Paul's example, he appealed to God multiple times to have this taken away from him. The answer he got was “NO”. The answer he got was, “My grace is sufficient for you”. But this is for your ultimate good and he accepted that. So, let's just notice here, pick up in chapter 12 here in verse 8.

2 Cor 12:8 *“Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.” (NKJV)*

Now, as you can imagine from the list that we just read of all the persecutions he received, you can definitely see why he would be appealing multiple times “Please make this stop. I'm not enjoying this. Every time I turn around, someone's trying to kill me. Someone's beating me up. They're throwing me in prison. I'm just harassed constantly everywhere I go.” You can imagine why he would be appealing to God multiple times “Please make this stop!” Now pick up in verse 9.

“9) And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10) Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (NKJV)

See, one of the big lessons that we can learn from this. The trials that we go through that we oftentimes plea, “God please take this away from me because I'm not enjoying this trial.” While it's certainly appropriate to do that and to ask for God to remove that or at least give us the strength to get through it. It's also important to realize it's for our

ultimate good. Because He does it ultimately to build His character in us. And even though it's a painful unpleasant experience for us to go through, it is ultimately for our benefit. To see an example of that turn over to Romans 5 and we'll start reading here in verse 3.

Rom 5:3 *“And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4) and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5) Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”* (NKJV)

He's telling us that these harsh trials that we have to go through, they build God's character in us. Even though it's not something that we enjoy going through it is for our ultimate good. See, this is why the Apostle James tells us to count this all as joy. As it's something good in our life. Now, that's something easy to say and very hard to do. But let's just turn over to James 1 and see this. James 1:2.

James 1:2 *“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3) knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4) But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”* (NKJV)

Again, as I mentioned, that's easy to say and hard to do. I don't know if you're anything like me when I'm getting hit with trials. I don't think, “Goody, this is so great. I'm getting beat up by trials.” Normally it's the opposite. It's, LORD, please take this away. I'm not enjoying these trials.” I think that's how most of us will respond to it. But, again, to continue in our Christian lives I think it's important for us to realize it is for our ultimate good. In fact, it's only after we've successfully endured through those trials that we can receive eternal life. To see that, just jump down to verse 12 here of James 1.

James 1:12 *“Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”* (NKJV)

Now if you look at the English word “proved” in my New King James here in verse 12. It's translated from the Greek word “dokimos”. It's Strong's # 1384. Again, the definition I'm going to give you comes from Zodhiates. He defines it as:

“Proved, receivable, tried as metals by fire and thus be purified...Hence to be approved as acceptable men in the furnace of adversity...”

In other words, we don't receive eternal life until we've been proven through the “furnace of adversity” and until we've successfully endured through those trials. So, we can see here, even though we may face the “thorn in our flesh” at a much less severe level than Paul did -- I'm sure we would all prefer to deal with it at a much less severe level than Paul did -- the principle is the same for us. We have to endure through it because it's for our benefit. Just like in Paul's case where this was to keep him humble.

Again, specifically because he did have an abundance of revelation. He fulfilled a role that most all of us are never going to be asked to fulfill and never be given that opportunity. But we also don't have the same level of pain that he had to go through. But the same basic concepts apply to us. We all have to face that spiritual persecution and we all have to successfully endure through it. One of the keys to that is, again, realizing that just like Paul, it's for our ultimate good. That God does it out of love and it's to build our character and if we successfully endure through it, we'll make it into his Kingdom. And when we're looking back, we'll think it was all worth it.

Brethren as we go forward from the Sabbath in our Christian lives, let's learn from Paul's example and his "thorn in the flesh". And realize that we have a "thorn in the flesh" to deal with as well. It's basically the same thing. Hopefully at a much less severe level. But we face the same type of issues. We have that spiritual persecution, and we have to successfully endure through it as well. So, let's learn from the example of the Apostle Paul and realize that God gives us that "thorn in the flesh" to deal with for our ultimate good.