

Paul's Thorn in the Flesh
(14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B)

2 Corinthians 12:7-10—Power Made Perfect in Weakness

⁷ And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, *a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated.* ⁸ Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; ⁹ but he said to me, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*” I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that *the power of Christ* may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for *when I am weak, then I am strong.* (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

1. Revelations: Paul’s being “caught up to the third heaven” (12:2)
2. Thorn: “thorn in the flesh” (12:7)
3. Option #1: Paul’s Opponents:
 - a. Suffering caused him by “all adversaries of the word” (John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians* 26.2 [trans. *NPNFI* 12:400]).
 - b. Strength: Paul identifies the thorn as “a messenger from Satan” (2 Cor 12:17)
 - c. Weakness: leaves unexplained a thorn “in the flesh” (2 Cor 12:7).
3. Option #2: Sexual Temptation
 - a. The “sting of the flesh” (Latin *stimulus carni*) (2 Cor 12:7 Latin Vulgate)
 - b. “Concupiscence arising from [the] flesh,” by which Paul “was troubled a great deal” (Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on II Corinthians* no. 473).
 - c. Strength: makes sense of the *fleshly* nature of the torment suffered by Paul
 - d. Strength: Paul elsewhere ascribes sexual temptations to “Satan” (1 Cor 7:5)
 - e. Weakness: based on a less-than-literal Latin Translation
 - f. Elsewhere Paul describes himself of receiving the “gift” of celibacy (1 Cor 7:7)
4. Option #3: Physical Ailment:
 - a. “Some bodily infirmity” (Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians* 4:13 [T. Sheck]).
 - b. “Pain in the ear or head” (Tertullian, *On Modesty* 13 [trans. *ANF* 4:87]).
 - c. Modern times: Paul suffered from problems with his eyesight (cf. Gal 4:13-15)
 - d. Strength: Paul uses “large letters” when he writes in his own “hand” (Gal 6:11).
 - e. Strength: “something like scales fell from his eyes” (Acts 9:18).
5. Option #4: Unknowable: we cannot know the exact nature of the mysterious “thorn”
 - a. “Whatever that was” (Augustine *On Nature and Grace* 27, 31)
6. Weakness: “my power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9)

Living Tradition

John Chrysostom: Paul wanted to be delivered from these things, but *when God told him otherwise he accepted it* and was even glad about it. *There is consolation in affliction and grace in consolation.* (John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 2 Corinthians* 26:3-4 [trans.

NPNF1 12:401).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B)

1. Which theory of Paul's "thorn" in the flesh do you find most convincing? Why? And what are the spiritual implications of this interpretation for your life?

For Further Reading

1. Bray, Gerald, ed. *1-2 Corinthians*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VII. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999
2. Ambrosiaster. *Commentaries on Romans and 1-2 Corinthians*. Translated and edited by Gerald L. Bray. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009.