

## THE THORN IN THE FLESH: A PAULINE VIEW OF SUFFERING IN 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7

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### Abstract:

*This paper seeks to uncover the spiritual lesson Paul intended to convey through the expression "a thorn in the flesh" in 2 Corinthians 12:7. While much discussion has centered on the nature of this thorn, this study emphasizes its purpose and function within Paul's message. By examining the broader context of 2 Corinthians and focusing specifically on 12:7, the paper aims to reveal the deeper spiritual insights Paul was imparting to his audience.*

**Keywords:** *Thorn, Flesh, Suffering, Christian.*

### Introduction

The primary objective of this paper is to elucidate the spiritual lesson that Paul aimed to convey through the expression "a thorn in the flesh" in 2 Corinthians 12:7. While numerous discussions have concentrated on the nature of the thorn itself, this study places a distinct emphasis on its intended purpose or function within Paul's message. To achieve this, the paper conducts a detailed analysis of 2 Corinthians, beginning with broader thematic elements and progressively narrowing its focus to the key verse of 12:7. Through this approach, the paper seeks to uncover the deeper spiritual insights that Paul imparted through this metaphor.

### Analysis of 2 Corinthians 12:7

#### General considerations

The letter of Second Corinthians is dynamic and challenging. Dynamic because it shows vivid experiences that a church leader (Paul) has to face, when trying to lead his brethren (the Corinthians) through the ways of the Lord. Challenging because the composition of the letter such as the Bible registers, has been put into question, and as result, some have proposed that this dynamic story should not be seen as a unity, but as a collection of several letters,<sup>1</sup> breaking the

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars hold that the letter of Second Corinthians as we have it today is a composition. For instance Margaret E. Thrall believes that 2 Corinthians is composed of three separate letters: 1) chapter 1-8 plus 13:11-13; 2) chapter 9 and 3) chapters 10:1-13:11, see Margaret

entire narrative into pieces. However, as far as this study of 2 Corinthians 12:7 is concerned, the unity of the letter is accepted and taken for granted.<sup>2</sup>

The structures proposed for 2 Corinthians<sup>3</sup> show that Paul deals with different issues, which weave the general idea of the letter. For instance, from 1:12-2:11 he defends himself from the accusations of those who were claiming that he was an indecisive person; in 2:12-7:15 he presents his sufficiency as apostle of Jesus Christ, he commands the Corinthians not to yoke with unbelievers; because the Corinthians failed in giving offerings for the church in Jerusalem, he encourages them to give offerings in chapters 8-9; and finally, in chapters 10-13 he deals with those “super-apostles” that were denigrating his person and ministry.

### **A connecting word within the epistle**

Within the epistle of Second Corinthians a word that is repetitive and which seems to serve as connector is the word “boast” or “to boast.” This affirmation is made mainly because throughout the epistle, Apostle Paul has used this word as verb and noun. The first reference is found in 1:14 (noun), while the last one is in 12:9 (verb). He uses it in particular situations and singular arguments. Thus, in order to grasp the meaning of Paul’s words in 12:7 a zoom throughout the letter –especially the closer context of 12:7- would be useful.

Chapters 10 and 11 constitute the closer context of chapter 12. In both chapters Paul boasts of something in particular, and this is done as part of the discussion he is holding with the super-apostles (11:5, 13). For instance, in chapter 10 he boasts of his ministry, and in chap 11 he boasts

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E. Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Critical and Exegetical Commentary (CEC) I (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 4. There are another sets of theories of composition for 2 Corinthians, which run from the belief in one book as a whole unity, until the view of 13 letters as components of it; see this explanation in Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (NIGTC) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 8-10.

<sup>2</sup> See the explanation of Paul Barnett, who says that “2 Corinthians possesses an intrinsic unity,” because Paul’s historical situation agrees with the period between his second and third visits to Corinth, in Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 15-26; and the position of R.V.G. Tasker who claims that “in no early Christian writer is there any suggestion that the document is composed of parts of different letters, or that it was not all written at one time to meet one particular situation” in R.V.G. Tasker, *2 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (TNTC) 8 (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1983), 23-35.

<sup>3</sup> There are several structures for Second Corinthians. For instance, David E. Garland divides it into five sections, see David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary (NAC) 29 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 45. Murray J. Harris arranges his commentary in three parts constituted, see Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, IX-XI. Ralph P. Martin<sup>3</sup> divides it in eight sections, see Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary (WBC) 40 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 39.

because of his suffering as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Although his boasting is seen clearly in the two previous chapters, in 2 Cor.12 he stops doing it, and he introduces a reason for that.

Chapter 12 could be considered as a chapter of contrast, in fact, a careful reading of 12:1-10 will show that the main theme here is “the boasting of Paul vs the thorn in his flesh.” Evidently, 12:7 is part of this interesting discussion, and therefore should be considered within those limits. Furthermore, 12:7 is the verse where “the thorn in the flesh” –which apparently is the agent that makes Paul to stop boasting- is mentioned for the first time.

### Seeing 2 Corinthians 12:7 in its immediate context

This section is divided into two parts, the first one from vv.1-7a, and the second one from vv.7b-10.<sup>4</sup> The reason for the boasting of Paul is found in the first section (vv.1-7a). He can perfectly boast because of the revelation he received fourteen years ago (v.2). Such a vision of the Paradise together with extraordinary things that he heard being there (v4), are good sources for making himself great. The word “ἀποκάλυψις” (revelation), which appears twice, v.1 (ἀποκαλύψεις) and v.7a (ἀποκαλύψεων), encloses this first argument of the apostle, that is, “his right for boasting.”

In the following section (vv.7b-10), Paul sets up his second argument, the reason why he avoids boasting. The two sentences at the beginning of v.7b “διὸ ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι, ἐδόθη μοι σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί” (“Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh” (NIV), have the function of establishing a clear contrast regarding the previous verses. While there is a considerable reason for his boasting (vv.1-7a), there is also a good argument for not doing so, which is introduced in v.7b. The subordinating conjunction “ἵνα” (in order that) marks the beginning of a set of sentences that express purpose. Five times the author uses this conjunction, three in v.7, one in v.8 and one in v.9, indicating that all those verses are connected, and they form a unity.

Although this division is evident, the unity of the two sections should be highlighted. The usage of the verb “καυχάομαι” (to boast), which appears in three different forms within both sections,<sup>5</sup> is a proof that the issue of boasting is a connector, and it shows that the entire passage (vv.1-10) is given within the boundaries of one particular theme, “boasting.” This means, that though the passage contains two sections in itself, it is dealing with same theme. In addition, if the verb “ὑπεραίρωμαι” (to exalt oneself) which appears three times in v.7 is taking into account, such a connection is strengthened, since this verb carries a similar idea to that of boasting.

### Establishing 2 Corinthians 12:7

*καὶ τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων. διὸ ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι, ἐδόθη μοι σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί, ἄγγελος σατανᾶ, ἵνα με κολαφίζῃ, ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι. (2 Cor 12:7 BGT)*

<sup>4</sup> This division (1-7a, and 7b-10) is made basically considering the two different arguments proposed by Paul.

<sup>5</sup> In v.1 “Καυχᾶσθαι”, in vv.5 and 9 “καυχῆσομαι,” two times and one respectively, and “καυχῆσασθαι” in v.6.

The natural reading of the text will call for attention, because of the way in which is arranged. It seems that the first sentence “καὶ τῆ ὑπερβολῆ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων” (and the superiority of the revelation) should have been included in the previous verse (6), but it did not. In fact, when the thought flow is followed, it results easier to establish the thematic relation of this verse with v.6 than v.7. This could be an explanation for the insertion of the conjunction “διὸ”<sup>6</sup> (wherefore), whose purpose could be that of marking the beginning of a new sentence. Actually, the sentence is pointing to the revelation that the apostle just introduced in vv.1-4, and whose motif is to present a plausible excuse for boasting as he affirms in vv.5-6. Unlike vv.5-6, v.7 introduces the particular reason why he does not boast of such revelation.

When some versions of the Bible like NIV and NET translate this text, they make a punctuation between the two sentences, highlighting the connection of the first sentence with v.6, and they leave the rest of the verse as belonging to v.7. In the case of versions like NAS and NKJ both sentences are considered as part of v.7, and therefore, they are translated like one verse; while versions like NJB prefer to avoid confusions by omitting the first sentence.

In the following part of v.7, the expression “ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι” (in order that I may not exalt myself) appears twice, at the beginning of the verse and at the end. Regarding this second occurrence, several manuscripts omit it because seems to be unnecessary or redundant. However, others support it and consider it as repetition whose function is to make emphasis.<sup>7</sup>

### Theological Analysis

The verb “καυχᾶσθαι” (to boast) appears 20 times throughout the entire epistle, and it has a twofold connotation. In three of the occurrences (5:12; 7:14; 9:2) it carries a positive sense. For instance, Paul says to the Corinthians that he is giving to them reasons for being proud of him (5:12); he has boasted of them before Titus (7:14); and he has boasted of them also before the Macedonians (9:2). There is not nothing wrong in congratulate them for certain behaviors. As Bultmann says, “this is not self-glorifying. There is simply expressed in it his confidence in the congregation.”<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Paul uses the verb with a negative connotation. Curiously, the rest of the occurrences (10:8, 13, 15, 16, 17; 11:12, 16, 18, 30; 12:1, 5, 6, 9) take place in the section where Paul is facing the accusations of the “false teachers” (Chap. 10-13), and as it is expected, a rough language appears. For instance, as a result of the boasting of these “false teachers” or “super-apostles” (11:12), Paul claims the right for boasting (11:16): “since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also” (11:18). This suggests that the boasting which is referred in this discussion is not at all positive but negative. However, some verses like 10:17 and 11:30, though within the sharp discussion, have a positive connotation.

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce M. Metzger says that “the excision of the conjunction seems to have occurred when copyists mistakenly began a new sentence with καὶ τῆ ὑπερβολῆ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων, instead of taking this words with the preceding sentence.” Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 2002), 516.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 517.

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, “To Boast,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 3:650.

In the immediate context of 2 Cor 12:7 (12:1-10), the verb “καυχάομαι” has these two connotations. v.1 carries the negative aspect of the boasting, “boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable.” In vv.5 and 9 Paul will boast of his weaknesses, which has a positive sense, while in v.6 it carries a negative sense, “for if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish.” It is in the middle of the discussion about the “boasting,” that 12:7 is given. Here the verb “καυχάομαι” does not appear, but the verb “ὑπεραίρω” (to exalt oneself), whose meaning is sharper. What is important is that this verb follows the negative connotation of “καυχάομαι” in previous verses (vv.1 and 6).

In the phrase “διὸ ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι” in 7b (“Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited,” NIV), the conjunction “ἵνα” indicates purpose, “in order to.” To understand this function is crucial for the entire discussion. The particle ἵνα gives meaning to “thorn in the flesh,” leaving no room to meaningless actions. It was in order to keep him from becoming conceited that such a torment was given. The fact that this conjunction is repetitive in v.7 points to the intentional nature of thorn, which was sent “ἵνα με κολαφίζῃ” (in order to torment me), and “ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι” (in order to keep me from becoming conceited). As it was mentioned before, this last expression seems to be redundant and some have tried to see it as an unnecessary repetition. However, by considering the use of the conjunction, it can be said that the apostle continues emphasizing once again the function of the thorn. Paul Barnett clearly affirms: “This verse is powerful intentional; each of these elements is purposive.”<sup>9</sup>

This phrase could be also translated as, “in order that I may not exalt myself.”<sup>10</sup> In this translation the emphasis is not only upon ἵνα, but also upon the adverb “μὴ” (not) and the verb “ὑπεραίρω” (to exalt oneself). Almost without explanation, Paul changes to a new construction. He no longer uses the verb καυχάομαι but ὑπεραίρω. The former is a common word in the Pauline epistles (Rom 2:17, 23; 5:11; 1 Cor 1:29, 31; 3:21; Gl 6:13; Phi 3:3, etc.), but the latter constitutes a rare word within his writings. Actually, ὑπεραίρω has only three occurrences in the NT and those are in the Pauline epistles, two here in 12:7 and one in 2 Thessalonians 2:4. The use of this verb is also rare in the LXX. It only appears four times (2 Ch 32:23; Psa 37:5; 71:16; Pro 31:29).

Here in 12:7 the apostle Paul does not change from “boasting” to “exalting oneself” without motive. This is something intentional. The reason is that a simple boasting can turn to self-exaltation; and ὑπεραίρω seems to mark that climax point. The simple “boasting” of previous verses, can turn into self-exaltation, and that is the reason why the “thorn in the flesh” is given.

Paul uses the verb in 2 Th 2:4 to refer to the antichrist, “He will oppose and will exalt himself (ὑπεραιρόμενος) over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God” (NIV). The spirit of exaltation of the antichrist is what the apostle is talking about in 2 Cor 12:7; a spirit that thinks to deserve the revelations of God (2 Cor 12:1-4), or that come to reject the necessity of the Superior Being. In Psalm 38:4 king David uses the same verb when he says: “For my iniquities are gone over (ὑπερῆραν) my head...” (NAS). Therefore, exalting oneself carries the meaning of going over certain position or person. Thus, the “thorn in the flesh” helps Paul to avoid such a great sin, the spirit of the man of

<sup>9</sup> Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 567.

<sup>10</sup> This is my personal translation of the phrase, which follows the translation of NIV mainly, but with a little more emphasis on the adverb and the verb, as the Greek seems to indicate.

lawlessness. The magnitude of this attitude of self-exaltation shows the importance of the thorn, and Paul will explain it later. Scott J. Hafemann underlines this idea by saying that “Paul knew that to boast in his visions, as his opponents were doing, would lead to exalting himself in a way that would cut out the very heart of the gospel.”<sup>11</sup>

After this phrase appears the famous expression “*ἐδόθη μοι σκόλοψ τῆ σαρκι, ἄγγελος σατανᾶ ἵνα με κολαφίζῃ*” (“there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me” NAS). Regarding the verb “*ἐδόθη*” (to give) several positions have been taken. I should be said that this verb is an aorist passive, meaning that was something done in the past, but not for the apostle; someone gave him the thorn. The problem with this passive verb has been to determine whether it was a work of God or Satan. Scholars agree that this is a “divine passive,”<sup>12</sup> that is, God performs the action.

Hafemann says that “Paul’s use of the divine passive in regard to his receiving this ‘messenger’ as well as for the rapture into heaven may be intended to correct the accusation of his opponents that his ‘thorn’ was the work of Satan alone, not of God. From their perspective, Paul’s inability to overcome it thereby called his legitimacy into question.”<sup>13</sup> Although Hafemann sees God as the giver of the thorn, his position is based on the presupposition that the Corinthians were acquainted with Paul’s thorn, which seems to be not explicit in the text. The language that Paul uses is not definite but indefinite. He says: “there was given to me “a thorn in the flesh, not “*the* thorn in the flesh.” The expression “*σκόλοψ τῆ σαρκι*” does not have an article, therefore it is of unknown nature for the Corinthians, but not for him.

Another way in which commentaries explain the nature of “*ἐδόθη*” is by using the example of Job in the OT. The passages of Job 1:8-12 and 2:3-6 record the discussion of God and Satan having Job as the center of it. R.V.G Tasker explains the origin of Paul’s suffering by considering Job’s case: “The affliction was of Satan but permitted by God.”<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, some scholars prefer to see God not only as allowing Satan to act, but as direct responsible. Christian F. Kling says that “we must not, however, conclude from thence that “*ἐδόθη*” implies merely a Divine permission, for it includes the idea of disposing or ordaining.”<sup>15</sup> In the same line of thought Ulrich Heckel says the thorn of Paul was sent by Satan, but given for God.<sup>16</sup> And R. C. H. Lenski explains

<sup>11</sup> Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (NIV) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 461.

<sup>12</sup> See Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 568; and Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, 462.

<sup>13</sup> Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, 462.

<sup>14</sup> Tasker, *2 Corinthians*, 175.

<sup>15</sup> Christian Friedrich Kling, *Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Lange’s Commentary (LC) 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 1960), 200.

<sup>16</sup> Ulrich Heckel, “Der Dorn im Fleisch: Die Krankheit des Paulus in 2 Kor 12,7 and Gal 4,13f.,” ZNW 84 (1993): 65-92. Quoted in Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (NIV) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 462.

it by saying that “God intends to try Job, to prove his faith victorious; Satan intends to destroy that faith.”<sup>17</sup>

Although the affliction of Job was caused by Satan, it was God who brought Job to Satan’s attention.<sup>18</sup> It should not be forgotten that God initiated the discussion about Job’s integrity: “Then the Lord said to Satan, “have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on the earth like him...” (Job 1:8; 2:3. NIV). What remains unknown is the reason why God initiated such a conversation, but for sure it was not purposeless.

Thus, the divine passive in 2 Cor. 12:7 points to God as the giver of the thorn. Ralph P. Martin rightly affirms that the word “*δίδομι*” (to give) was normally employed to denote God’s favor (cf. Gal 3:21; Eph 3:8; 5:19; 1 Tim 4:14).<sup>19</sup> Apostle Paul would hardly attribute to Satan a divine action. The fact that Paul pleads God to take the thorn from him (v.8) can carry the idea that He (God) gave him the thorn. In addition, the action of God in refusing to respond to Paul’s prayer (v.9) implies both, His right to do it or not, and His intention in giving the thorn.

By including the expression “*ἄγγελος σατανᾶ*” (a messenger of Satan) which describes the “thorn in the flesh,” Paul does not indicate origin. Probably, this shows that Satan also takes advantages of the thorn, “Satan comes as God’s adversary to lure people away from God’s rule, or he comes as God’s proxy to implement trials that God authorizes.”<sup>20</sup> Barnett explains it as follows:

This language suggests (1) that Satan was the immediate cause of Paul’s difficulty – symbolized by the word *skolpos*; (2) that, because the *skolpos* was given by God, Satan is subject to God, not His equal (as in dualism); and (3) that in a profoundly mysterious way God was the ultimate source of that *skolpos*.<sup>21</sup>

The use of the word *σκόλοψ* (thorn) calls for attention. The only part it appears in the NT is here in 2 Corinthians 12:7, and its meaning is difficult to understand. In the OT there are three occurrences of this word (Num 33:55; Eze 28:24; Hos 2:6), and most of the time it is translated as “thorn,” though “stake” is another possible meaning. Discussion has been raised about how to understand this word in the context of 12:7. For instance, Gerhard Delling claims that the word “*σάρξ*” (flesh) should be understood as material, as referring to the physical life; therefore, the “thorn” could be a physical illness.<sup>22</sup> Harris and Heckel have also argued that the “thorn in the

<sup>17</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1946), 1300.

<sup>18</sup> John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (NICOT) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 73, 79.

<sup>19</sup> Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 606.

<sup>20</sup> Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 522.

<sup>21</sup> See Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 570.

<sup>22</sup> Gerhard Delling, “Thorn,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), ed. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 7:412.

flesh” is best taken to refer to a physical sickness;<sup>23</sup> and others have gone farer trying to specify the sickness, “the infirmity was bodily, not spiritual or mental...It was evidently some affliction that affected the eyes (Gal 4:13-15).”<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, a group of scholars believe that it was a spiritual ailment. Tasker claims that the protestant view of a physical illness “should be abandoned for that in favor of the exegesis of the Reformers and many of the early Fathers, that the “thorn” was spiritual in character.”<sup>25</sup> The discussion continues, and hypothesis such as impediment of his speech, malaria, epilepsy, hemorrhoids, mental illness because of his anguish for the churches, melancholy and so on, have been suggested. Barnett says that “broadly speaking, Paul’s reference has been thought to be either *physical* (an illness, disfigurement, or disability, or moral temptation) or *relational* (opposition to his ministry or persecution).”<sup>26</sup>

The truth is that Paul does not specify his thorn in the flesh, therefore, all hypothesis can be considered but without establishing any final conclusion. As far as the passage of 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 is concerned, a possible explanation could be that because God and Paul make the thorn in the flesh equivalent to a weakness in v.9, then it may refer to the insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties in v.10, things which are considered to be weaknesses. Nevertheless, something to keep in mind is the advice of Barnett: “Doubtless speculations will continue to be made. Pastorally, however, it may be to our advantage not to know. The very openness of the identification allows wide possibilities of personal application to a broad range of personal suffering, which precise identification might limit.”<sup>27</sup>

The quest of Paul’s thorn should not affect the main idea of the passage. This “thorn in the flesh” was sent *ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι* (in order that I may not exalt myself), but also *ἵνα με κολαφίζῃ* (to buffet me).” This last verb “*κολαφίζῃ*” (basic form: “*κολαφίζω*”) carries the meaning of “boxing or buffeting with the fist.” This word is not very common. It appears only five times in the NT (Matt. 26:67; Mark 14:65; 1 Cor 4:11; 2 Cor 12:7 and 1 Pet 2:20). In Matt 26:67 and Mark 14:64 Jesus is literally buffeted during His trial; in 1 Pet 2:20 it refers to the Christians who are experiencing different kind of sufferings; finally, Paul uses the verb twice, in 1 Cor 4:11 and 2 Cor 12:7 pointing to his own sufferings.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 859; and Heckel, *Der Dorn im Fleisch*, 462.

<sup>24</sup> “In the Flesh” [2 Cor 12:7], *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary (SDABC)*, rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1976-1980), 6:920.

<sup>25</sup> Tasker, *2 Corinthians*, 175.

<sup>26</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 569.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 570.

<sup>28</sup> K.L. Schmidt, “To Buffet,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 3: 819. See also Moses Silva, “To strike (with the fist),” *New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology and Exegesis (NIDNTE)* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 2:718.

The thorn was sent to him with a particular mission, not only to prevent him from self-exaltation, but “to strike him.” An unceasing fight between Paul and the thorn is implied. The fact that Paul says: “three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me” (v.8), indicates that such suffering is not fleeting. It is this continuous battle that keeps him from boasting. However, the continuous “buffeting” is not the final function of the thorn. Actually, this phrase is connected with the last sentence “*ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι*” (in order that I may not exalt myself). By using once again the phrase that introduced the giving of the thorn, Paul wants to emphasize the central reason of it, to keep him from self-exaltation.

Likely the doubling of the phrase “*ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι*” (in order that I may not exalt myself) brought the minds of the Corinthians back to Paul’s main idea. This phrase forms a sandwiching with its homologous at the beginning of the text, and such repetition has the function of highlighting the purpose of the thorn. See the chart below:

καὶ τῇ ὑπερβολῇ τῶν ἀποκαλύψεων.  
 διὸ *ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι*, ἐδόθη μοι σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί, ἄγγελος σατανᾶ,  
*ἵνα* με κολαφίζῃ,  
*ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι*.

#### **Paul’s response to the “thorn in the flesh.”**

1. Rejection: It was not easy for Paul to accept the thorn whatever it was. v.8 expresses the discomfort of the apostle: “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.” The pleading shows the anguish of the apostle. It was difficult for him to handle this suffering. Martin affirms that “the number three is a reminder of Jesus’ temptations in the garden of Gethsemane and the three times He petitioned the Father to remove the cup from him.”<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless this rejection does not mean not to be willing to accept it (the thorn).
2. Acceptance: The answer of God in v.9a, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" is another way of saying not. But more than a simple negation, God’s answer is intended to reveal a deep truth, that is, Paul should rest in God’s power. James Hastings rightly states: “There are two ways of helping a man burdened with what he has to do or bear. One is to take the burden off his back, the other one is to strengthen his back to bear the burden.”<sup>30</sup> In Paul’s case God strengthens him to bear the burden. This response taught him a wonderful lesson that he accepted. The exclamation in v.9b (“therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power

<sup>29</sup> Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 612.

<sup>30</sup> James Hastings, “The Second Epistle to the Corinthians.” *Speaker’s Bible (SB)*, ed. Edward Hastings (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 15:198.

may rest on me”) can be expressed only once Paul learned the lesson. “He set himself to learn why it was sent and what it was meant to teach, and most of all what it was in him that needed such a discipline.”<sup>31</sup> Paul answer reflects the biblical principle of Jeremiah 9:22-23 about “boasting in the Lord.” In this passage the verb *καυχάομαι* appears 5 times; curiously, that is the same verb that Paul has been using throughout the whole book 2 Corinthians, especially in the last section (chap. 10-13). So, Paul decided to boast but in the Lord, as he said in 10:17, but particularly in God’s great power.

3. Philosophy of Life: Since v.5 Paul anticipates his decision concerning the thorn. He says “but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses.” The same idea is repeated in vv.9b and 10. It is significant to comprehend that 2 Cor 12:1-10 is written after the events mentioned there. This means that Paul has already made up his mind about the thorn. At the beginning, it was difficult for him to accept it (v.8), but now it is something common for him. The thorn simply provides him with an opportunity for being strong. Lenski says, “The higher Paul’s work was, the more necessary for him was the constant realization of utter dependence on the Lord; for if he withdraws his hand, Satan would have him utterly in his power.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, it could be said that Paul is now used to the thorn, and this is not masochism, but faith. Ironically, for him to be weak is to be strong. Humanly speaking, this is not possible at all, but he is able to affirm this because he is used to see spiritual realities and to speak spiritual words (1 Cor 2:13).

In this fight against the false apostles, there is something in which Paul can boast, his weaknesses (vv.5, 9). This should not be mistaken with arrogance, because according to Paul the thorn is always there to remind him of his frailties. Instead of that, this is a full understanding of “Justification by Faith,” a clear evidence that Paul experienced God’s grace. That is the deepest truth Paul has to learn about the thorn. Yes, it is real that biblically speaking, the explicit reason is “to keep him from exalting himself” (v.7), but the way in which Paul closes the section, points to a more profound teaching. In the two final verses (vv.9, 10) the apostle repeats the same idea: “I will boast gladly about my weaknesses, *so that Christ’s power may rest on me*” (v.9), “For when I am weak, *then I am strong*” (v.10). “Power” and “Strength” act like synonyms in the two passages. He is strong only because of Christ’s power. A total recognition of imperfection and inability is found here. Paul knows that he is helpless if he desires to stay by his own in this fight against his thorn in the flesh. That is why he prefers to rest on God’s power.

Dependence on God’s grace is a major theme of Paul’s letters (Rom 3:24, 27-28;4:5; Gal 2:21; 5:6; Eph 2:8-10; Phi 3:9). Justification by faith in Jesus Christ is what make people saved – in this case Paul- and able to obey God’s law. Garland says, “we learn from the message given to Paul that God’s grace is not just the unmerited favor that saves us but a force that also sustains us throughout our lives.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, the final purpose of the thorn in the flesh is to generate a complete dependence of Paul in the Lord.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 15:197.

<sup>32</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1301.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 524.

### **Do all “thorns” (sufferings) come from God?**

In Paul’s case, God is who gives the thorn in the flesh, in order to keep him from self-exaltation. However, believers cannot generalize base on this particular verse (2 Cor 12:7) to say that God has “thorns” for everyone. It is true as Garland affirms, that “the ambiguity about what Paul’s stake in the flesh might be allows others to identify their own personal “thorns” with Paul’s and to appropriate the theological lesson.”<sup>34</sup> People can bring out from this passage spiritual lessons, nevertheless, it should be clarified that not everything that seems to be a “thorn” is the result of God’s work. For instance, in Numbers 33:55 God warned to the children of Israel: “But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall come about that those whom you let remain of them will become as pricks in your eyes and as *thorns* in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land in which you live (NAS).” The power of election was in their hands, but they did not obey God’s command. Thus, the sufferings did not wait, and Israel experienced agony from those heathen nations, and they became “thorns” for Israel, as it is registered in the books of Judges mainly, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, etc.

Another biblical example is that of David, who instead of being fighting “at the time when kings go off to war” (2 Sam 11:1) preferred to stay at his palace, and then the enemy tempted him with a beautiful woman (v.2). As a result of his sin, he killed Uriah (another sin) trying to cover his mistake (vv.14-15; 23-24), the new born baby died (12:19), and the sword never departed from his house (12:10). He suffered because of his wrong decisions, but not because God wanted it so. King David’s “thorns” were the result of his actions. However, in both cases (Israel, and David), God never refused to pardon them and to give them second changes, though the consequences of their sins remained. The mercy of God was always available for them as it was for Paul, and for others in the Bible, and it is still available for whoever seeks the Lord.

### **Conclusion**

The “thorn is the flesh” of 2 Corinthians 12:7 is given in the context of boasting. God does not want Apostle Paul to pass into a most serious level of boasting, “self-exaltation”, so He himself (God) provides a suffering, which has as mission to remind Paul of his weaknesses. The nature of such a “thorn” remains unknown and only hypothesis can be made, but without arriving to definite conclusions.

Likely Satan took advantages from Paul’s sufferings, trying to make him doubt of God; however, the apostle learned the lesson, and he could realize that the end of the “thorn in the flesh” was not a purposeless suffering. He recognized that God gave the thorn, which opened an opportunity to experience God’s power, which at the same time was the deepest truth God wanted him to contemplate.

Finally, Christians can bring spiritual applications out from Paul’s “thorn in the flesh.” However, to affirm that all sufferings humans experience come from God, is to go beyond the teaching of the Bible, which clearly presents many examples where sufferings are cause because of the sin, because of Satan, and because of humans’ natural inclination to disobey the law of God

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<sup>34</sup> Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 521.

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