

3. CHARISMATIC QUESTIONS ANSWERED:- WHAT ABOUT PAUL'S THORN IN THE FLESH?

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So far we have proved that healing was practised in the apostolic church in a wide and on-going variety of circumstances. There really can be no disagreement; the Gospel message concerning the future kingdom of God, which Jesus laid down for all time and gave his very life's blood to guarantee, includes the present-day ministry of healing.

At this juncture, I can hear what is perhaps the most common reason why many are not sure it is God's will to heal us today ...

BUT WHAT ABOUT PAUL'S "THORN IN THE FLESH" (2 Cor. 11:21 -- 12: 10)?

Paul was defending his credentials as an apostle of Christ. As well as cataloguing all his sufferings by stonings, beatings, shipwrecks and dangers of all sorts, he appeals to **the exceptional character** of his visions when he was **caught up to the third heaven**. The relevant verses read,

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12: 7-10 NRSV).

So the reasoning goes, If Paul's **thorn in the flesh** was a sickness of some sort, and if God refused to heal him --- despite his pleading three times for God to take it away --- then perhaps this exception disproves the rule? ¹

We must be honest enough to admit that if this line of thinking has substance to it, then it at once casts a big shadow of a doubt upon our Lord's teaching about the kingdom of God **and** healing.

How shall we answer? Well, the first thing necessary is to see what Paul meant by the phrase, **a thorn in the flesh**. If, as is commonly assumed, Paul meant he had some kind of physical sickness or ailment, then we must agree that it was not God's will to heal Paul, and we have a genuine out-clause --- one obstinate exception that seemingly cancels the general rule.

But does one exception to any general rule, rule out the general rule? I will let **Canon Jim Glennon** reply;

In other disciplines, in physics for example, "the exception proves (or illustrates) the rule." If there is an exception to the rule, it is an exception, and the rule stands as the general norm. To argue from the apparent exception to a denial of the rule is illogical and unfounded. And in this case, it makes what Christ has said to account for nothing! Surely it is what the New Testament says as a whole that is the important point. ²

¹ Dispensationalists add that the charismatic gifts ceased after the apostles died and once that first generation passed. They appeal to the apostle Paul's seeming inability to heal Trophimus (2 Tim. 4:20) and Timothy's **frequent ailments** (1 Tim. 5: 23), not to mention his own sickness in the flesh.

² Jim Glennon, Op. Cit., p158 (My emphasis underlined).

Thus, even if we wish to appeal to Paul's **thorn in the flesh** as an exception to the rule, we have not cancelled out the fact that generally in the NT healing is revealed to be part and parcel of Jesus' gospel-commission.

I would add that if Paul's thorn in the flesh is a valid reason for setting aside Jesus' teaching and example, then we should equally argue that the uniquely personal reasons for Paul's non-healing must also be the cause for our exception(s) ... **the abundance of revelations**, or as our translation has it, "**the exceptional character of the revelations**". The stated reason why **a thorn was given me in the flesh**, says Paul, was to **keep me from being too elated** ... (2 Cor. 12: 7 NRSV).

Does anybody reading this who says healing is not for today even remotely qualify for non-healing because they have been **caught up to the third heaven** and witnessed unique visions? The particular circumstances that led to Paul's thorn in the flesh are given as the reason for his thorn and why God did not answer his prayers for relief. Do we qualify for this exception? If not, then non-healing is probably not a reasonable disqualification for the rest of the NT teaching and narrative.

BUT, WHAT IF ...

But, what if Paul's **thorn in the flesh** was not a physical sickness at all? Oh, it will immediately be objected, Paul's thorn was **in the flesh**, so it must have been a bodily ailment. Well, not so fast! Here's why we must not jump to that popular conclusion;

Paul, wholly steeped in the OT Scriptures as he was, did not pluck the phrase **thorn in the flesh** out of mid air. He did not coin a new term for physical sickness. In fact, he is using a well-known OT phrase, for in the OT "thorns" were a common expression of speech used to refer to affliction, persecution, trouble inflicted on God's people by others;

The inhabitants of the land ... shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides (Num. 33: 55).

They shall be a scourge on your sides, and thorns in your eyes ... (Josh. 23: 13).

And there will be no more for the house of Israel a prickling brier or a painful thorn from any round about them who scorned them ... (Ezek. 28: 24).

This demonstrates that in Paul's parlance, "thorns" surely were the hurtful persecutions and trouble caused by God's enemies; never in the OT are thorns referred to as physical sickness. "Thorns" were hurtful people. This is further corroborated by Paul's description that this thorn in his flesh **was a messenger of Satan to torment me (2 Cor. 12: 7)**.

The Greek word translated as "messenger" is the word *aggelos*, which you recognise as our word for "angel". In the NT it is translated "angel" 181 times, and seven times as "messenger". *Aggelos* is always translated as another person --- whether a human or a heavenly being --- and never, not once without exception(!) does it ever refer to sickness or any other physical object.

For those who do not know the Greek, it may be objected that many, if not most, of our translations read that Paul requested **that it would leave me (v. 8)**. To the English reader the "it" is more easily taken to refer to a sickness than to a person. However, the verb here is in the third person singular. And depending on context it may be translated as either, "he, she, or it". ³ So, which option best fits the context here? Hold that thought for a minute!

We must note another complication in the mix. Even those who read the Greek sometimes point out that the word translated "sickness" throughout the NT is the word *astheneia*. It's the word in **James 5:14**

³ Some English translations do say Paul asked God **that he (i.e. the messenger of Satan) would leave me**.

translated as “sick” ... **the prayer of faith will save the sick man**. It’s also the same word in the passage before us where Paul says he will **boast all the more gladly of his weaknesses**.

Thus, some contend, it’s inconsistent to translate *astheneia* in one place as “sickness” and in another place as “weakness”. Why could Paul not really be saying he would **boast all the more gladly of his sicknesses**, because they were being allowed for his good?

Yes. *Astheneia* is translated various ways in the NT, depending on which fits the local context best. It can refer to sickness, physical weakness, character weakness, weakness in faith, weakness in understanding, the weakness of the Law and the elements of religion, etc.

So, given that context is always the final arbiter, what’s the best way to take *astheneia* in **2 Corinthians chapters 11 & 12**? It’s clear Paul is writing about the effects the actions of others have had on him ... insults, persecutions, beatings, stonings, and the like. *Thus, the context concerns hardships* of different sorts in the form of persecution that came to him as a Christian and in particular as an apostle of Christ.

It is for this precise reason that, as far as I am aware, all English translations make *astheneia* refer to “weakness” rather than to sickness or disease in **2 Corinthians chapters 11 & 12** . The context in **James 5: 14-15** on the other hand most obviously concerns a sick person.

We conclude therefore, that Paul’s **thorn in the flesh** was another person (or perhaps an evil angel) stirred up by Satan to harass and physically annoy the apostle. To use our modern expression, whoever this individual was, and whatever he or she did, they were a stinging agitation to Paul. Our modern expression, “he’s a real pain in the neck” is an exact equivalent! The pain in the neck is not a literal ailment, but a metaphor for a tormentor.

The result of this persecution gave Paul a fresh experience of his own weakness (after his mighty heavenly revelations) and thus kept him humbly dependent upon the grace of God. Such a “thorn” drove Paul to a new sense of the Lord’s keeping and power. He says as much where he combines the two thoughts;

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities (2 Cor. 12:10).

I conclude that Paul actually prayed to the Lord that **he** who was the painful thorn in Paul’s side **would leave me [alone]**. I wholeheartedly concur with **Jim Glennon**, that the traditional interpretation --- that Paul’s thorn was a sickness --- **has to be soundly rejected. If we accept, as we should, our Lord’s teaching as primary, we will not expect to find anything in the rest of the New Testament to discount it ... What Christ revealed remains unquestioned and uncompromised. What is surprising is that the Christian church in the main has accepted this objection without critical enquiry, and has been content to set aside the teaching of our Lord!** ⁴

THE PLACE OF MODERN MEDICINE

Another matter. Someone may be wondering what our position on modern medicine should be? ⁵ I answer that after having first committed our needs to the Lord, that because we have every duty to preserve life for as long as God allows, then we have every right to seek the best available medical help. Modern medicine and Christian faith for healing stem from the same understanding that it’s God’s will for us to be healthy and well.

⁴ Jim Glennon, *Your Healing is Within You: A Pastoral and Scriptural Presentation of the Healing Ministry of the Church*, Hodder & Stroughton, 1978, p162

⁵ I touched on this in the first instalment. See pp 5-6

However, sometimes we must recognise that the sick person has come to the end of their God-given lifespan and it's no longer right to pray for their healing. Discernment will be given to the one who earnestly seeks God's mind for this particular situation. God guides as well as heals. And more often than not, the understanding that the end has come will be recognized by the individual and backed up by the medical profession. The matter will be established by the double witness of God and man.

Perhaps this is what **the apostle John** meant when he talked about **a sickness that leads to death**. When God gives His peace to our hearts in this circumstance, the apostle advises that prayer for healing is not appropriate (**I John 5: 16**). For such a person the end is a blessed rest in the Lord awaiting His resurrection call to immortality and eternal health.

BUT CAN'T GOD USE SICKNESS TO TEACH US VALUABLE CHARACTER LESSONS?

Yes He can and many of the saints after being raised up from their sick beds have said so. But I wonder how much suffering through sickness has been unnecessary? I am convinced that nowhere in the NT is sickness revealed to be beneficial suffering! Sickness is always sickness and not once said to be a blessing.

Indeed, in the NT the Christian's source of suffering is always said to derive from the actions of others who are dishonest, mean, hurtful, jealous, hateful, angry, or in any other way injurious to our well-being. We suffer because of our Christian faith and because the world hates righteousness.

Also, our own sin and disobedience --- stupidity and lack of wisdom --- are also unfortunate reasons for our suffering. And the Bible says such suffering is a beneficial blessing of incalculable gain, if we humble ourselves under the hand of God, confess and repent and receive the promised forgiveness.

Thus, the meaning of "suffering" in the New Testament is always "for being a Christian;" it never means "being sick" ... "Suffering" for the Christian is intended to be redemptive; "sickness" is to be healed. ⁶

THE PRAYER OF FAITH.

I wish to close this brief look at the question as to whether **The Gospel of the Kingdom Includes Healing For Today** on a very practical note. Given that God has shown He wants us to be healthy, and when needed, to be healed, how are we to pray when sickness does strike? How do we draw upon God's promises through Christ? How are we to pray **the prayer of faith (James 5: 14-15)**?

Of course, Jesus mentions the prayer of faith in **Mark 11: 22-24**, and it's appropriate to refresh it;

And Jesus answered saying to them, "Have faith in God. Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says is going to happen, it shall be granted him. Therefore, I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted you."

James 1: 6 echoes Jesus' words, **Let him ask in faith, with no doubting**. The prayer of faith is the prayer that knows what God's will is, knows what He has promised us, and then asks Him to make His word real in our situation.

We must ask definitely and specifically. We then thank Him we have received what we asked, and then we continue to confess it is so. We do not doubt we now have the answer we asked --- no reservations. Faith means you are thanking God *before* it happens. Faith substantiates by going beyond what we currently see, to what we hope for and believe we receive. This is what He has told us pleases Him.

⁶ Jim Glennon, Op. Cit., p 156

I unashamedly again refer to the man who taught me so much on this subject, [Canon Jim Glennon](#). Based on Jesus' own teaching from [Mark 11: 22-24](#) I learned to pray like this (not just for healing for myself or others but for other needs too). This is [Jim Glennon's](#) template I have used and encourage you to use too;

Loving Father, we praise your Name that You have drawn close to us in Jesus Christ and revealed what You have provided for us and want us to have from Your hand. Thank You for your promise to us that the prayer of faith will enable the sick person to be restored to health.

We praise you that you have also revealed to us how we are to pray. Father, forgive us that so very often we have not prayed in the way that Jesus taught us. We would repent of that, and by Your grace, so pray that Your blessing may be given to us now and at all times.

Father God, I now accept your healing for my need. I accept it humbly and gratefully and completely. I accept it so that it is *what* I accept and the way I think of myself. I thank You for it and rejoice that I am giving glory to You by exercising faith. I thank You now and will continue to thank You until faith gives way to sight.

Show me what I can do to put my faith into action. As my faith is small, I know You will not expect me to act upon my faith all at once, but I believe You are showing me the first step I am to take.

Through Christ our Lord, Amen. ⁷

CONFESSION

I will close this topic by saying that to my shame, I have not always followed this. But any apparent lack of power in my own life and testimony must not be explained away as though Jesus' Gospel of the kingdom has in any way changed or run out of steam. I will not change the words of my Lord. Rather, I will humbly confess the lack of power and my own unbelief. And I will continue to affirm that God does not change. He is the same now as He was in the First Century. Our generation is as needy for the gospel of the kingdom **and** for healing as they were back then.

I will continue to believe that Jesus revealed the heart of his Father God in all his words and actions. He therefore revealed that Divine healing is close to God and His plan for the kingdom. And the example of the first Christians faithfully obeyed this revelation. I must faithfully teach all my Lord has committed to us through the word of his faithful apostles. My generation cries out for a living touch from the Living Lord!

I am well aware that these three brief articles on the question of whether [The Gospel of the Kingdom Includes Healing for Today](#) has barely scratched the surface. But hopefully it's been enough to challenge us as Christ's body in the world today to fall on our knees and seek fresh anointing from God to be faithful conveyors of His Gospel of the Kingdom as preached by Jesus.

May I let [Canon Jim Glennon's](#) own testimony inspire us? He solemnly witnesses that, "[My main reason for my involvement in the healing ministry is that, more than anything else I know, it is a most effective means of proclaiming the good news of Christ ... I have seen more people converted to Christ through the ministry of healing, than through any other form of outreach I myself have shared in. And I have seen more Christians enter into a deeper spiritual life through the laying on of hands for healing, than in any other way, as far as my experience goes.](#)" ⁸

As members of the body of Christ, it is incumbent upon us to believe in, support, pray for, and work, to promote the gospel-word of our Saviour who said, "[Heal the sick **and** say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you'](#)" (Lk. 10: 9).

⁷ Op. Cit., p52

⁸ Ibid., p126

