

A Thorny Subject: Paul's Thorn & Ours

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So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. (2 Corinthians 12:7, ESV)

Christians struggle to understand and thereby apply the passage of Paul's thorn in the flesh. Some consign it to the dustbin of theological esoterism. Others seek answers. Regardless of the level of understanding or sanctification of believers, they desire to know the identity of the thorn. This quest to know is not an unreasonable pursuit. After all, the Lord included the passage for the instruction of his people, and for their growth. Even this passage is profitable for teaching and training in righteousness. Indeed, Paul himself makes application of the thorn's painful presence to himself and to his readers.

For its present-day applications, then, studying the thorn is a worthwhile pursuit for both sinning and suffering saints. Are they given to conceit? Surely that temptation remains in the hearts of believers. Are Christians harassed? Paul affirms this reality when he calls the thorn a "messenger of Satan" sent to harass him, used by God to prevent a conceited heart in Paul. Surely Paul is not in a category of one. Therefore, this text is useful for all believers. However, the question remains: what is Paul's fleshly thorn? Inquiring minds inquire. Seeking the identity of the thorn is no small matter. Yet the desire to know is not merely to titillate the intellect in seeking things too lofty for it. Discovering the identity of Paul's thorn should help Christians make application in their respective thorny relationships.

Summary of Interpretations

All inquiring minds have to acknowledge that the quest to uncover the identity of the thorn is fraught with interpretive difficulties. The challenge is evidenced by the diversity of viewpoints among Bible interpreters. Even a cursory consideration of the commentaries yields reason for skepticism. Perhaps it is too high of a goal to expect unanimity on such a difficult text. Even the more confident commentators wisely stop short of dogmatism. Some reject the possibility of knowing altogether, and so they suspend judgment this side of heaven (Harris,¹ Matera²). Others adopt the view that the thorn is a reference to a bodily affliction like ophthalmia, migraines,

¹ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 857.

² Frank Matera, *II Corinthians: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 283-284.

malaria, or epilepsy (Tertullian,³ Hodge,⁴ and Hughes⁵). Calvin prefers to have his cake and eat it too by putting forth a plenary interpretation, saying that the thorn is a summary term for all of the temptations which Paul underwent.⁶ Still others interpret the thorn as a reference to some spiritual opposition manifested through false prophets, apostles, or teachers. Chrysostom, for instance, sees the thorn in the dynamic duo of Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20), or otherworldly adversaries. Grogan says the thorn is likely a term for Paul's enemies.⁷ Similarly, Guthrie, feeling some pressure to choose, loosely holds the view that the thorn represents the painful opposition to Paul's ministry seen in his persecutors.⁸ Barnett likewise reasons thus, and tentatively views the thorn as a rising Judaizing, anti-Paul movement, but he is quick to assert uncertainty.⁹

With so many options on the table, how can we choose? Should the diversity of opinions ruin our hope of nailing down any definitive answer? Granted, we likely cannot know for certainty what Paul's thorn was. This admission may tempt the reader to put down this article altogether and read something else. However, the hope is that admitting uncertainty is more a mark of humility and invitation to be good Bereans than an encouragement to dismiss the matter wholesale. What is suggested below is not entirely unique, although the conclusion was reached independent of the research that went into this paper, and the boldness to advance the proposed interpretation may be distinctive.

Because the thorn relates to sin and suffering, matters with which all Christians have to do, we would do well to avail ourselves of whatever Biblical data and Scriptural connections God has put in his Word. By doing the hard work of connecting the biblical-theological dots, we will, Lord willing, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus. The student is not flying blind. Indeed, by knowing how the phrase is used in the Old Testament, and through a contextual reading of 2 Corinthians, we may be closer to an answer than first thought. In other words, utter skepticism is unwarranted. The more we study this issue, the greater should be our expectation of adopting confidently and applying effectively a solid biblical-theological answer. After we have considered the data available to us in the Scripture, we will see how Paul's thorn applies to Christians today who suffer from similar thorns.

The Reason for the Thorn

The context is crucial for understanding Paul's thorn in the flesh. Paul had been caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2) and paradise (2 Cor. 12:3), where he had received revelations of surpassing greatness (2 Cor. 12:7). Another mystery, one outside the scope of this article, is the content of the revelations which Paul mentions. There is every reason, however, for this to remain a mystery since Paul himself tells the Corinthians that they were "things that cannot be told, which

³ Tertullian, "On Modesty," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 86-88.

⁴ Charles Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, Geneva Series of Commentaries (Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 661.

⁵ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 447.

⁶ John Calvin, *1-2 Corinthians*, Commentaries, vol. 20, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker House Book Company, 1981), 373-376.

⁷ Geoffrey Grogan, *2 Corinthians: The Glories & Responsibilities of Christian Service* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2007), 285-286.

⁸ George Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 587-592.

⁹ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 570.

man may not utter” (2 Cor. 12:4). Therefore, for Paul to plumb the depths of the surpassing revelations is off-limits. It is a quest not to be started. Needless to say, when Paul was caught up to the third heaven, the Lord must have revealed to him marvelous things.

Granted, Paul speaks about “a man in Christ,” and it is on this man’s behalf (not his own) that Paul will boast (2 Cor. 12:5). Nevertheless, as we read on, it becomes clear that Paul himself had the vision and the surpassing greatness of revelations (2 Cor. 12:7). That is why he, and not a separate “man in Christ,” received the thorn in the flesh. And we know the purpose of the thorn was to kill conceit *in Paul*. As such, it makes sense only if it was Paul himself who ascended to the third heaven (i.e., God’s heavenly abode). Moreover, the whole literary context is about Paul’s boastful, foolish speech. He begins chapter 12 saying he will *continue* boasting, and when we read chapter 11, we see that he was “boasting” about his own status, sufferings, and achievements. Paul really went into heaven (whether in the body or out of the body is a matter about which only God knows).

In truth, Paul experienced visions. The word for “visions” (ὄπτασια) is used only three other times in the New Testament. Luke used the word in the beginning of his Gospel when Zechariah refers to his temple vision of the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:22), then again near the end of his Gospel in reference to the women’s vision of angels at Jesus’ tomb (Luke 24:23). Finally, he used it in Acts in Paul’s address to King Agrippa (Acts 26:19), in which Paul speaks about his vision of the Lord on the road to Damascus. Outside of Scripture, the word was used by the early church father Polycarp of his three-day, pre-arrest trance-like vision of his impending martyrdom by being burned alive.¹⁰

As far as Paul was concerned, his visions were authentic. Paul went to heaven and received real revelatory visions (or visionary revelations) about which he was not permitted to recount. That experience puts Paul in a unique position. Will Paul, one who once boasted in knowledge, return to his old self and arrogate to himself a knowledge superior to that of the whole world? No, and the Lord will make sure that Paul does not exalt himself. The Lord paves the way for Paul’s humility by guiding him on a thorny path.

Old Testament Use

Paul’s use of “thorn” (σκόλοψ) in 2 Corinthians 12:7 is the only time the New Testament uses the word. This fact would immediately turn some away from having any hope in identifying Paul’s meaning. But not even *hapax legomena* are beyond usefulness. In situations like this, it is helpful to see whether the Old Testament uses the word or phrase. As it turns out, there are four instances of the phrase “thorn in the flesh/side” in the Old Testament, and the use in every one of them is consistent with the others.

First, in Numbers 33:55 the Lord warns the people through Moses of the danger of not driving out the Canaanites from the land: “But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs (σκόλοψ in the LXX) in your eyes and thorns (βολις in the LXX) in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell.” The Lord threatens the Israelites that unless they utterly drive out the Canaanites from the Promised Land, the Canaanites will be a pain in their neck, or a thorn in their sides.

Second, Moses’ successor Joshua also warns Israel of the danger of Canaanite entanglement. He desired that the Israelites remain in the land once given and allotted. Therefore, before his death he summons all Israel and warns them that even though the Lord has graciously given them all

¹⁰ Michael Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 230-231.

this land, they will be driven out of the land if they marry Canaanites and do not drive them out utterly. In Joshua 23:13, he says that these pagan nations will “be a snare and a trap for you, a whip (ἤλος in the LXX) on your sides and thorns (βολίς in the LXX) in your eyes.”

Third, the fulfillment of what the Lord admonished in Joshua 23 is realized in Judges 2:3. Because the Israelites did not obey the Lord, the angel of the Lord says of the Canaanites, “I will not drive them out before you, but they shall become thorns in your sides (here “thorns” is supplied in our English versions), and their gods shall be a snare to you.”

Finally, in Ezekiel 28:20-26, the “son of man,” (Ezekiel) prophesies against Sidon. This prophecy against Sidon is good news for Israel, as it points to a reversal of the mistreatment and contempt that Israel’s neighbors showed her: “for the house of Israel there shall be no more a brier (σκόλοψ in the LXX) to prick or a thorn (ἄκανθα in the LXX) to hurt them among all their neighbors who have treated them with contempt” (Ezek. 28:24). The prick or thorn is a reference to the neighboring nations set against the Israelites.¹¹

When we boil down the Old Testament use of the phrase, therefore, in each of these instances there is either the threat of God sending the wicked to the Israelites because of their faithlessness to the covenant, or the promise of the wicked being removed. But in every passage it is the wicked, persecuting, troublesome, godless nations which are a thorn in Israel’s side. These are antagonistic, hostile, subversive, and unbelieving people opposed to God and to his people. This is how the phrase “thorn in one’s side” and its verbal and substantival parallels are used in the Old Testament. This Old Testament context is the only available background grid through which to understand Paul’s context and thorn in 2 Corinthians.

First Corinthians

However, before proceeding to 2 Corinthians, we will take a quick look at an analogous situation in 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 4:11, Paul uses the verb *κολαφίζω* (“to buffet”) in a context similar to that of our main text under consideration. Here are Paul’s words in verses 11-13:

¹¹ To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted (*κολαφιζόμεθα*) and homeless, ¹² and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

The parallels between this text and 2 Corinthians 12 are many. In 1 Corinthians 4, Paul defends his apostolic authority as one who is a servant to the Lord. As he follows the Lord, so should the Corinthians. Paul and Apollos have been gifted with knowledge only the Lord could give. This knowledge is also shared with the Corinthians. However, with this knowledge comes a warning: do not go beyond what is written by showing favor over another (1 Cor. 4:6). The careful reader can freely admit to a subtle parallel to the revelations given to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 and the subsequent thorn to keep Paul in check.

As Paul proceeds in the chapter, he speaks of the sufferings that he and Apollos had received, representing the experience of all Christians generally: a death sentence, weakness, dishonor, hunger, and thirst (1 Cor. 4:9-11). Bluntly, he says that he is “like the scum of the world” (1 Cor. 4:13). Their trials are more than this, however. He includes his being reviled, persecuted, and slandered. All these are ways in which he has been “buffeted” (1 Cor. 4:11). Opposition from the

¹¹ Hosea 2:6 (2:8 in LXX) may be a fifth use consistent with the others. The text uses *σκόλοπιν* to refer to the increasing pressure from pagan nations like Assyria to hedge Israel in, lest she pursue foreign gods and nations as her additional husbands.

world is a manifestation of Paul's being buffeted, beaten, struck in the side. Thus "to buffet" becomes a verbal equivalent of the thorn in the side, and is used in much the same way.¹²

Second Corinthians

We now have a good handle on how the words and parallel ideas for "thorn" have been used in Scripture. We may be right in summarizing Paul's second letter to the Corinthians thus: there is much affliction, but even more comfort in the lives of God's people, because their God is the God of all comfort. We see this theme of God comforting the afflicted from start to finish (c.f. 2 Cor. 1:3 and 2 Cor.13:11).

Unsurprisingly, one source of affliction is Satan and his demonic servants, as we see most especially in chapters 10-11. Early in the letter, Paul recognizes the crafty, Satanic designs aimed at God's people by tempting them not to forgive the repentant sinner in their midst (2 Cor. 2:5-11). The theme of Satanic opposition and affliction does not return explicitly, in the sense of the term "Satan" being used, until 2 Corinthians 11:14 when Satan disguises himself as an "angel of light." But when the theme does resume, its use is significant for our present purpose. Indeed, Paul uses the same word for "angel" in 11:14 as he does for "messenger" of Satan in 12:7 (ἄγγελος), speaking of his thorn in the flesh.

In chapter 11, Paul speaks of this Satanic deception in the form of "false apostles," and "deceitful workmen" who are "disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (2 Cor. 11:13). Because Satan disguises himself as an angel or messenger of light, so too do these Satanic servants (2 Cor. 11:15). The emphasis of deceit and disguise recalls the garden of Eden where we read that the serpent was "more crafty" than all the other beasts (Gen. 3:1). Eve was right to point out that the serpent "deceived" her (Gen. 3:13). Most significantly, this serpentine seduction is noted at the start of 2 Corinthians 11, where Paul brings us back to the garden by highlighting the cunning serpent that is seeking to deceive the Corinthians (2 Cor. 11:3-4). This is who Satan is; this is what he does. He is the father of lies, the grand deceiver (John 8:44). So, is it any surprise that his devilish children will likewise lie, deceive, and disguise themselves against God and his true messengers?

This Satanic opposition is exactly what we observe in 2 Corinthians. Paul defends his apostleship throughout the letter, and the last few chapters constitute his defense in its most concentrated form. He has to refute a false gospel (2 Cor. 11:4), false apostles (2 Cor. 10:12, 17; 11:13), and the so-called "super-apostles" (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11). These false apostles opposed Paul and the gospel of Jesus Christ and said that Paul was a hypocrite, that he was weighty while away but weak while present (2 Cor. 10:1, 10). It is by means of his wolves in sheep's clothing that the Serpent of old has sought to lead astray the Corinthians and to harass, or buffet, Paul by opposing his gospel efforts (2 Cor. 12:7; the word for "harass" is the same word for "buffet" in 1 Cor. 4:11).

What does all this Satanic opposition have to do with Paul's thorn in the flesh? All this contextual build-up helps us to see that Paul's mention of his thorn is in the midst of false apostles, deceitful workmen, and servants of Satan. In fact, a brief outline of chapters 11-12 shows that Paul mentions these false apostles (2 Cor. 11:1-15), speaks of his sufferings and the thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 11:16-12:10), and then speaks again of the false apostles (2 Cor. 12:11-13). In fact, the structure is quite similar to 1 Corinthians 4. The connection should be clear. Paul sees his suffering in general, and his thorn in the flesh in particular, in the context of satanic, super-apostle opposition. These "apostles," like Paul, were messengers, but they brought a message from Satan, one that condemned and deceived, instead of one that saved.

¹² The word is used only two other times in the New Testament (Mark 14:65, and 1 Peter 2:20), both of which refer to the persecution of the godly at the hands of wicked, hostile men.

What then is Paul's thorn in the flesh? Paul tells us that it is a messenger of Satan. It is these false teachers viewed collectively in 2 Corinthians 12:7 ("messenger," rather than "messengers"), who are aimed against Paul and calling him an imposter (2 Cor. 6:8). Whether viewed collectively or individually, Paul's thorn is an anti-Paul group or person led by the spiritual forces of evil. It is a band of false apostles or an individual false apostle opposed to Paul's apostleship, and seeking to lead astray the Corinthians. This group or individual was hostile to Paul as a true messenger from God confirmed by signs (2 Cor. 6:8; 12:12), whom God himself commended (2 Cor. 5:20; 10:8, 18), evidenced further by the Corinthians themselves (2 Cor. 3:1-3) and by Paul's tearful affliction (2 Cor. 6:4). As he did with the godless nations in the Old Testament (one might even call them offspring of Satan a la Genesis 3:15), Satan, by raising up false teachers, brothers, and apostles, has kept up his deceitful opposition against God's people (in our case, the Corinthians) and God's messenger (Paul).

Why, O Lord?

If the interpretation above is biblically reasonable, there is another question to answer, or objection to address: "Why?" The objection reasons in this way. In 2 Corinthians 12:7, this thorn is *given* to Paul. Paul pleads *with the Lord* to have it removed. Therefore, the Lord gave this thorn to Paul. The thorn is a divine gift. "Why," the objection goes, "would the Lord give Paul opposition of this kind? It seems counter-productive to God's plan of spreading the gospel. Is God shooting himself in the foot? Would a loving God send opposition to his follower who has fully devoted himself to the Lord?" There is much to be said about the relationship between God and deception, but a brief response should suffice.

When we read Deuteronomy 13:1-3, we see some of God's first words on the subject of prophecy and false teachers. If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams comes, gives a sign, but gives a message against God, what are the Israelites to do? Not listen to the false prophet, of course! But we notice that in verse 3, this whole prophetic scenario takes place only because of the Lord's testing. The end of verse 3 concludes, "For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul." One might say that the Lord stirred the pot. The Lord, in effect, is bringing a false teacher into the Israelite camp to test them. Will they be loyal? Will they be lovingly devoted to him alone? Our God is sovereign. His sovereignty even directs and uses error to test his people, that he might highlight the truthfulness of his own Word. We must affirm the Lord's meticulous providence in accordance with Scripture—the Lord dealt with the Israelites thus, and that is how he dealt with Paul.

What shall we say, then, about Paul and his thorn? Paul has already spoken. The thorn was given to him to keep him from being conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations he had received (2 Cor. 12:7). In this verse, Paul begins and ends with the Lord's purpose in mind—to prevent a conceited heart. The only other time this word for "conceit" is used is in 2 Thessalonians, when Paul speaks of the man of lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:4). The lawless man exalts himself against every so-called god and proclaims himself to be God. Paul understands well that knowledge can be used to puff one up. Self-aggrandizement is the way of fallen man. At the smallest gain of knowledge lurks the temptation to be proud of self.

Now consider Paul, who had received great visions and abundantly great revelations. The Lord pulled back the curtain for Paul and shows him *who-knows-what?* Surely, it was awesome and excellent. It was a vision of the Lord in the heavens. And then, just when Paul is feeling good about this newfound, superior revelation, the Lord steps in and stealthily slips a thorn into his side. Surpassing revelations, followed by a messenger of Satan. This messenger was sent to harass Paul (literally, to buffet, or beat him up). It sounds like God sent a mercenary to do his divine bidding! Would God really do that? Scripture shows that he did it to Adam by sending Satan, to Job by

sending Satan, to Israel by sending the offspring of the Serpent, and now to Paul by sending the messenger of Satan.

The One Most Thorned

But the mystery of divine affliction goes even deeper. There was one more person who was tested, one who came into the world with devils filled that threatened to undo him, one who came into the world with thorns and thistles encamped around him, one, indeed, whose sacred head was crowned with a crown of thorns. In Matthew 4:1, Scripture says that Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. Who led Jesus? Was it Satan? Certainly not. It was God the Spirit. To what, then, did the Spirit lead Jesus? To devilish temptations. Not merely to a messenger of Satan, but to Satan himself, so that Christ might be tried, tested, and opposed. And in those temptations, the Word of God was challenged; it was perverted, twisted, softened, and craftily denied.

God sent his Only-Begotten Son (the one in whom he is always well-pleased) to be tested, and that testing involved the opposition of God's very Word. God did not spare his own Son. Such testing was essential to Jesus' state of humiliation, as he retraced the steps of Adam, retraced the steps of Israel, and succeeded at every point in his thorny trials. At every point when Adam and Israel got pricked, buffeted, beaten up, or "thorned and thistled," *they* sinned. *They* compromised God's Word. *They* failed. But not so with Christ. When he was tempted in every way as we are, and even when he was crowned with that thorny crown, *he* remained sinless. *He* held fast to the Word. *He* succeeded. *He* earned our much-needed righteousness. Such faithfulness is worthy of all of our worship.

A Thorn Common to Christians

God gave Paul that thorn of apostolic opposition to remind him that the Lord's grace was sufficient for Paul in his weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). Paul could say that despite the "insults" and "persecutions" (2 Cor. 12:10), he would rest upon Christ. After all, that is exactly how Paul began the letter. In recounting all the affliction he experienced in Asia, he said that he was to the point of despairing of life. Why would God give him such affliction to the degree that Paul despaired of life itself? That question is just as difficult as the objection about God giving Paul an anti-Paul group of false apostles. Paul's answer is, that intense God-given affliction in Asia was to make him rely not on himself but on God (2 Cor. 1:9).

This answer does not sound too different from God sending the thorn to prevent conceit in Paul. After all, suffering has as one purpose in the mind of God—the need for reliance on God's grace and comfort and not on oneself. When God related to the Israelites, he in effect told them, "Depend on me, not on those godless nations." This divine message from the immutable God remains for us as we likewise live in evil days (Eph. 5:16; 6:12-13). In effect, he calls us back to himself, "Depend on me and my Word and my gospel, not on teaching contrary to my Word, not on your imaginations." This divine motive is sufficient to account for the divine gift of a thorn in the flesh.

What about us? For me, I can easily recount times when my defense of the Word of God was opposed by both unbelievers and believers. I remember counseling an unbelieving husband of a believer who desperately needed help for their marriage. In the first few counseling sessions, I was laying the foundation on which all my counseling would be built—the Bible. Even though the husband repeatedly affirmed that the Bible had good moral teachings, he admitted that for him, the Scripture was no more inspired than Socrates. Sadly, the counseling did not last beyond those few sessions. In every meeting I was met with an argumentative husband who would not submit to the Scriptures.

On another occasion and in a different context, I boldly defended God's Word. I was in Salt Lake City, leading a team of high school Juniors and Seniors on a week-long mission trip. Each day of the week, we would put ourselves in conversations that involved the clash of worldviews: that of Scripture versus that of Joseph Smith, Jr. and his Another Testament (i.e., the Book of Mormon). As we began the week on Sunday, we attended the local Latter-day Saints ward for its "worship" services. On this particular Sunday, the LDS had its Testimony Sunday during which time any person might come up and bear a testimony. I waited for 45 minutes, hearing LDS testimony after testimony. As I sensed the time drawing to a close, I immediately arose, walked up to the front, and spoke for about 5 minutes, bearing my testimony that the Bible (not the LDS Scriptures) was the only Word of God, and that Joseph Smith Jr. was not a prophet of God.

This testimony shocked them, to be sure, but I calmly left the room and entered the foyer. A few minutes later, a man approached me. He had earlier given his tearful testimony of how God had worked in his life. He now wanted to speak with me. After some insistence on his part, I agreed to talk with him outside. I was hopeful and thought that perhaps the Lord was doing something transformative in this man's life right before my eyes. I soon learned that the Lord was doing something, but not what I had expected or hoped. The moment he had me outside, he began to yell inches away from my face, cursing me up and down. When he finished spewing his vitriol, he slapped my shoulder and left. That encounter shook me, as no one had really talked to me like that before.

One can imagine my confusion. "Why, Lord, did you allow me to defend and proclaim your Word so boldly, only to be shut down so decisively and violently?" Trusting in the sovereignty and goodness of God, why would my efforts be opposed? Does God not desire his Word to be proclaimed boldly and received by faith? Certainly, he does. Nevertheless, the Lord has his purposes for sending out his Word. As he says in Isaiah 55:11, "so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." Sometimes, the Lord purposes the unbeliever's storing up of wrath for the Day of Judgment. At other times, the Lord purposes the salvation of the elect. In either case, his Word goes forth, and it is received or rejected according to his secret, sovereign, good purposes (Deut. 29:29). After greater reflection and brotherly encouragement, I came to see that the Lord put into immediate action even my weak testimony to expose the hypocrisy and folly of a man assured of our mutually exclusive destinies.

There is no doubt about the sanctifying effect such opposition has had to my defense and proclamation of God's Word. Herman Bavinck, commenting on the sovereign hand of God over evil, says, "Scripture repeatedly states that Scripture uses sin ... to test and chastise believers (Job 1:11-12; 2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Cor. 10:13; 11:19; 2 Cor. 12:7)."¹³ Later in the same volume, speaking this time on the kind and level of influence that Satan has on the children of men, Bavinck says, "all [suffering] has its root in sin, indeed not always in personal sins (for there is a sparing of the wicked [Gen. 18:26ff.] and punishment as a testing of the righteous [Job 1; Matt. 13:21; John 9:1; 11:4; 2 Cor. 12:7])."¹⁴ In each statement above, Bavinck cites 2 Corinthians 12:7 to buttress his points.

Bavinck is not affirming anything contrary to the Reformed tradition in which he was raised. Indeed, three hundred years before Bavinck, Calvin wrote of similar things in his *Institutes*. In the context of writing on the Devil's power as subordinated to God's power, Calvin cites 2 Corinthians 12:7 to prove the point that the Lord uses Satan to buffet all the children of men, and Paul was no

¹³ Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 3, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2006), 64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

exception. He says, “Paul admits that he was not free from this sort of strife when he writes that, as a remedy to tame his pride, he was given an angel of Satan to humble him.”¹⁵

If Paul needed his pride buffeted, then a thorn would do the trick. Colin Kruse says that the Satanic torment was used by God to keep Paul spiritually well-balanced.¹⁶ If Paul needed a spiritual balancing, would it not be presumptuous for us to assert our imperviousness to thorns or the needlessness of these thorns from above?

For me, I know the salutary effect the thorn can have if I entrust myself to my heavenly Father. Returning to the account in which I boldly proclaimed and testified to the Word of God, there was another encounter that I had, one that took place about 20 minutes after that verbally violent encounter with the man who spoke with me outside. Back inside the ward, I was sitting in the foyer, and suddenly a young wheelchair-bound lady rolled over to me. We had a nice chat about her life. The only thing that was missing in our conversation was the only thing that should have been the point of our conversation: the gospel. Just minutes after my bold defense and apologetic proclamation of God’s Word, the Lord sent me a thorn in the form of a sweet, young lady who did not speak to me as that man had done earlier, but whose heart no less opposed the real Jesus Christ and his Word. And it was that second encounter that the Lord used to humble me when pride engorged my spirit. The initial courage with which I spoke did not endure before the disagreeing but friendly face of this young woman. The Lord has his thorns to humble us.

How should we react when, faced with these thorns, we fail to respond faithfully to God in our trials? We need not despair, because Christ is ours. The familiar hymn says it well:

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side;
bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
leave to your God to order and provide;
in ev’ry change he faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: your best, your heav’nly Friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.¹⁷

Our Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep, does not regret his giving himself for our justification. Despite our failings, our righteous standing remains, because our righteous High Priest and Shepherd remains. This same Shepherd, however, will not stop leading us in a world of opposition. He will lead us on paths of righteousness, but sometimes those paths take the sheep through the valley of the shadow of death. In that Death Valley are thorns and thistles in abundance, persecution from the world, fiery darts of enmity from Satan, and even mordacious fellow sheep. All of these the Good Shepherd uses to humble us, to kill conceit in our hearts, and to drive us back to the throne of grace. Christ by his Spirit is even now at work in our lives to sanctify us through testing. In the face of thorns, we can rely on God whose power runs through our spiritual veins. When we are tested and opposed, we are taken back to the God of all comfort,

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 176.

¹⁶ Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, Exegetical Guide to the New Testament (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 251.

¹⁷ Katharina von Schlegel, “Be Still, My Soul,” in *The Trinity Hymnal* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), #689.

whose Word is truth, and who cares for us. Christ's power abides in us. When we are weak, then we are strong ... because of Christ!