

Paul's Thorn and His Gnosis: Epistemic Considerations

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Introduction

One of the most significant aspects of Paul's apostolic ministry was his insistence that his knowledge of the gospel of Jesus was not gained by others but was received directly from the Lord. In his letter to the Galatians (1:12), Paul argues that the gospel he received was not taught by another person but that it was revealed (δὲ ἀποκαλύψεως) directly by God. It seems that Paul had to defend the validity of his ministry in this way on more than one occasion, and more specifically to defend his apostolic credibility or the source of his apostolic authority to the various churches he had encountered during his missionary journeys. In his "second" letter to the Corinthians,¹ it appears that one of Paul's motivations for writing (among several other motivations) was to defend his ministry against other "super-apostles" who seemed to be a source of competition with him.² As a defense, Paul states: "Even if I am an amateur in speech, I am not in knowledge" (εἰ δὲ καὶ ἰδιώτης τῷ λόγῳ, ἀλλ' οὐ τῇ γνῶσει; 2 Cor 11:6). Later in the discourse, Paul reveals that this at least part of this knowledge had to do with the divine revelations he received directly from the Lord.

His extensive knowledge, however, was potentially a source of pride and conceit for Paul, so he tells the Corinthians that he was given a thorn in the

- ¹ This paper assumes that the writer of this letter is Paul and also assumes the literary uniformity of this letter. See David H. Hall, *The Unity of the Corinthian Correspondence* (JSNTSup 251; London: T&T Clark, 2003), esp. 86–106; Christopher D. Land, *The Integrity of 2 Corinthians and Paul's Aggravating Absence* (NTM 36; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015). In addition, for a succinct summary of the Corinthian correspondences, see Jan Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians* (sp 8; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), 3–4; Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1–51; Ivar Vegge, *2 Corinthians—A Letter about Reconciliation: A Psychagogical, Epistolographical, and Rhetorical Analysis* (WUNT 2.239; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 7–33.
- ² Cf. Jerry L. Sumney, *Identifying Paul's Opponents: The Question of Method in 2 Corinthians* (JSNTSup 40; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), 158–61, who takes the view that the "super apostles" were the "Jerusalem Twelve," although Sumney sees that 1 Corinthians 10–13 is a separate literary unit from chs. 1–9.

flesh (σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί). The identity of this “thorn in the flesh” has been discussed extensively—but also cursorily—but the discussion seems to have waned in recent times, perhaps due to the perceived vagueness by which Paul identified his thorn. The consensus of most scholars seems to be that none will know for certain what it was precisely; but that seems to be the point of departure for many Pauline interpreters, whose suppositions of the identity of this thorn range over a variety of options. Jan Lambrecht summarizes the obvious: “There is no consensus concerning the kind of suffering Paul is alluding to by ‘thorn’ and/or ‘a messenger of Satan’ in v. 7.”³ In fact, I would concede that certainty regarding the nature of Paul’s thorn is not only implausible but dubious, since the immediate text and co-text does not disclose such precise information. On the other hand, there are various clues that can be taken into consideration, including knowledge of Paul as a person as revealed in the Pauline corpus⁴ and Acts, to make an educated and probable guess as to what Paul’s thorn precisely was.

To list all the possible suggestions of Paul’s thorn that have been put forth throughout the history of scholarship on the subject would be unnecessarily extensive.⁵ One of the most common hypotheses, however, of what Paul’s thorn was (or “stake” as some have it,⁶ although I think this distinction is quite immaterial to the discussion) includes a physical ailment or illness that hindered Paul in some way, such as an ear- or headache, some sort of eye-disease, or perhaps even epilepsy.⁷ Other related interpretations include some sort of

3 Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, 203.

4 I take the “Pauline corpus” to include all thirteen letters attributed to him. Pseudonymity, if true, does not necessarily discount the fact that the information about Paul in these so-called pseudonymous letters is still relatively accurate.

5 For some thorough lists of interpretive options, see Paula R. Gooder, *Only the Third Heaven? 2 Corinthians 12.1–10 and Heavenly Ascent* (LNTS 313; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 196–97; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC; London: A&C Black, 1973), 314–16; Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 858–59; Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 283–84. One list, for instance, suggests eight categories: spiritual temptation, opposition and persecution, carnal temptation, physical appearance, epilepsy, headaches, eye trouble, and malaria. Gooder herself simplifies the list into three categories: physical ailment, spiritual torment, and opposition or persecution.

6 Verena Jegher-Bucher, “‘The Thorn in the Flesh’/‘Der Pfahl im Fleisch’: Considerations about 2 Corinthians 12.7–10 in Connection with 12.1–13,” in Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht (eds.), *The Rhetorical Analysis of Scripture: Essays from the 1995 London Conference* (JSNTSup 146; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 388–98.

7 Cf. Jegher-Bucher, “Thorn in the Flesh,” 389; Jerry W. McCant, “Paul’s Thorn of Rejected Apostleship,” *NTS* 34 (1988): 550–72; Ronald Russell, “Redemptive Suffering and Paul’s Thorn in the Flesh,” *JETS* 39 (1996): 559–70.

speech impediment that hindered Paul from communicating (the gospel) in a persuasive, eloquent manner. Rudolf Bultmann writes with certitude that “σκόλοψ (stake, splinter, thorn) is used figuratively of a bodily malady which persists despite repeated prayer (v. 8), thus obviously a chronic malady.”⁸ He does not, however, develop any further justification of this interpretation, except for appealing to rabbinic usage of a similar Hebrew term, *basar*. Adolf Schlatter, commenting on this popular interpretation, seems to think that the “mistranslation” of σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί as “thorn/stake in the flesh” (*der Pfahl im Fleisch*) lends to its (mis)interpretation as a physical ailment of some sort.⁹

The major argument presented for a physical illness/ailment interpretation comes from Lightfoot, who made a connection with Gal 4:13, in which Paul informs the Galatians that he wrote to them because of a “physical weakness” (ἀσθενεῖαν τῆς σαρκός).¹⁰ Many have agreed with and have promoted Lightfoot’s theory, which is based on a few perceived propositions: (1) this was a physical pain of a very acute kind; nothing less can be implied by the language he uses; (2) the malady was humiliating to him, since it was a source to check his spiritual pride; (3) it was a great source of trial to his constancy and resolution, a hindrance to the gospel but also a great testimony for the gospel when he was able to overcome this malady; (4) it was something not concealable, as it came up in the course of his public ministry; (5) his ailment was probably permanent; and (6) his ailment was recurring.

Because of the ubiquity of the physical ailment interpretation proposed by Lightfoot and others, this seems to be a good place to respond. There are a couple of compelling reasons why I do not accept a physical illness, even a severe one, to be the identity of Paul’s thorn. First, I do not envisage Paul being so disrupted by a physical illness, no matter its severity, as to refer to it as “tormenting” or “harassing” him (more on the meaning of *κολαφίζω* below). The depiction of Paul in the New Testament, especially in Acts, is that of someone who has such a strong resolve to preach the gospel, that nothing—not even beatings and imprisonment—would stand in the way. For instance, in Acts 21, Luke recalls how the prophet Agabus foretells Paul’s imprisonment

8 Rudolf Bultmann, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (trans. R. A. Harrisville; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 224.

9 Adolf Schlatter, *Paulus der Bote Jesu: Eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1934), 666: “Die falsche Übersetzung ‚Pfahl im fleisch‘ gab den Anlaß zu medizinischen Betrachtungen: Paulus rede von einer zwar schmerzhaften, aber nicht tödlichen oder ihn gänzlich lähmenden Krankheit, und es fehlt nun nicht an Vermutungen, die diese Krankheit definieren.”

10 J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians: A Revised Text with Introduction, Notes, and Dissertations* (2nd rev. ed.; London: Macmillan, 1866), 183–88.

if he should continue his travels to Jerusalem (v. 11). Paul responds by saying, “For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 13). Perhaps Paul’s faith was not always characterized by such fervent zeal (depending on the chronology of Paul’s writing of 2 Corinthians in relation to the events in Acts 21), but I cannot imagine a Paul who has a significantly less zealous faith than is reflected in the above statement. Thus it seems unlikely that Paul would respond to some kind of physical ailment or illness as “tormenting” or “harassment” and plead in such a fervent manner for the Lord to take it away. I imagine, on the other hand, that Paul probably would not have cared too much about these sorts of things. More is to be said on this in a later part of this essay, but given my reasoning so far, this rules out all forms of physical ailments, illnesses, or impediments, including chronic earaches or headaches.

Second, the reason why the Galatians passage and the statement in 2 Corinthians must be connected is not given. It seems to be a preconceived notion that the ἀσθενεῖαν τῆς σαρκός in Galatians must be the same as the σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί in 2 Corinthians. It is undisputed that Paul had a physical ailment, probably some sort of eye-disease (possibly stemming from the Damascus road conversion, although that would just be conjecture at this point), and that Paul also received much physical abuse throughout his ministry (cf. Gal 6:17, where he states that his body bears the marks of Jesus). While these things are known about Paul, there are many other characteristics about Paul that are known, and one needs a more justified reason why the thorn in 2 Cor 12:7 has a connection with the weakness in Gal 4:17.

Third, early on in his “first” letter to the Corinthians, Paul turns over the conventions of the world regarding wisdom and power, and expounds the vision of the cross as true wisdom and power. It seems unlikely, in view of Paul’s previous exposition of wisdom and power, that he would then ask God to take away a physical weakness. Granted Paul is human and fallible, but there would have to be a more compelling reason to think that Paul shifted his views so drastically regarding his physical weakness. This does not mean that Paul did not struggle with whatever physical ailments he had; it just means that it was not the thorn in the flesh he refers to in 2 Cor 12:7.

Moving away from physical ailments of various sorts, other propositions for Paul’s thorn relate to things like a general temptation to sin, distress because of the unbelieving Jews, a general psychological feeling of unworthiness of the gospel, or some other psychologically or emotionally related source.¹¹ Still others have contended it was another external factor, such as sexual

11 Cf. the list in Gooder, *Only the Third Heaven*, 197, esp. n. 35.

temptation or his opponents (at Corinth).¹² However, given his statements in his first letter to the Corinthians regarding his singleness, I do not see a “struggle” with sexual temptation as fitting the description of this thorn in the flesh. Paul states in 1 Corinthians 7 that he wishes that all were like him (v. 7). Most commentators on 1 Corinthians 7 suspect that this refers to his ability to sublimate his sexual desires and focus upon the propagation of the gospel.¹³ Even if Paul did experience sexual temptation, it does not seem likely that this would be a source of harassment for Paul, significant enough for him to plead with God to take it away from him. Even the idea that Paul struggled with his opponents at Corinth (or some other city) does not fit with the type of humbling that resulted from the harassment Paul received from this thorn/messenger of Satan. It seems to me that Paul accepted the opposition that he would face in his ministry, and thus it would not be something that he could or would plead to be taken away. Furthermore, if his opponents were giving him enough grief, and they were the thorn that Paul wanted to be removed, all he would have had to do was to preach the gospel in ways that did not attract as much attention in areas that were more receptive. But in fact, Paul went to many cities that responded to his preaching in violent ways, including Jerusalem.

All of the options for understanding Paul's thorn that I have identified so far do not seem to fit the Paul that is depicted in the New Testament, one who was singularly focused on his mission to preach the gospel, one who did not shy away from physical adversity or danger, one who wished others were single as he was in order to focus on the ministry entrusted to them, and one who withstood imprisonment after imprisonment, beating after beating, so that the gospel might be heard throughout the known world. D. A. Carson states,

It is equally clear that this thorn was something substantial, not some minor irritation. An apostle who could willingly put up with the sufferings and deprivations listed in 1 Corinthians 11 would not beseech the Lord so strenuously and repeatedly for the removal of some minor problem that could easily be borne. Paul's thorn was something very painful or extraordinarily embarrassing, and perhaps both.¹⁴

12 E.g., Terence Y. Mullins, “Paul's Thorn in the Flesh,” *JBL* (1957): 299–303, who argues that it refers to Paul's enemies. Cf. also Jegher-Bucher, “Thorn in the Flesh,” 389.

13 E.g., Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 513.

14 D. A. Carson, *A Model of Christian Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10–13* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 150.

Taking Carson's statement into consideration, Paul's thorn in the flesh—that messenger of Satan who tormented Paul to such a degree that caused him to plead to the Lord—was most likely not a physical or physiological source of agony.

Early last century, Adolf Schlatter proposed that the nature of the blows that the messenger of Satan inflicted upon Paul was the remembrances of his misconduct in Jerusalem, that is, his persecution of Christians, and this constant reminder had given him a deep sense of unworthiness of the apostolic ministry to which he was called. Schlatter writes: "Dann erinnern die Faustschläge des Satansengels an die schmerzhafteste Stärke, mit der Paulus die Erinnerung an seine Missetaten in Jerusalem in sich trug, die ihm ein nie verlöschendes Gefühl der Unwürdigkeit gaben, 1 15, 9."¹⁵ He also asserts that Paul was not pleading with the Lord about the healing of a disease, but the removal of a satanic power that revealed his guilt and powerlessness: "Das Subjekt von ἀποστῆ ist ἄγγελος; Paulus bat nicht um die Heilung einer Krankheit, sondern um die Entfernung einer geistigen Macht, die ihm seine Schuld und Ohnmacht zeigte. ἄγγελος, nicht das bildliche skolops, ist in der Aussage des Paulus der Hauptbriefe."¹⁶ I believe that Schlatter's thesis, at least to a general degree, should be given more consideration, especially due to the lack of attention it has been given particularly in English-speaking scholarly circles. I do not think that the effect of the harassment led to Paul's sense of guilt and unworthiness of the gospel, since that seems to be inconsistent with much of what he wrote in his letter to the Romans and Galatians, among others. But it appears that Schlatter's basic idea should be given more attention and consideration in this discussion.

In this essay I will provide four reasons that seem to indicate that the identity of Paul's thorn is this sort of demonic oppression that reminded Paul of his former way of Christian persecution. To be more specific, I contend that the thorn in the flesh was indeed a demon from Satan, who constantly reminded Paul—whether through visions, dreams, nightmares, or otherwise—of the knowledge of his past sins before his conversion, when he would imprison, threaten, and even murder his now brothers and sisters in Christ. I assert that this is a type of oppression that would cause Paul to plead with God to take it away from him and that fits what we know about Paul. His thorn was not merely a physical ailment or illness but a demonic force who would remind Paul of the actions he regretted and wished he could take away.

¹⁵ Schlatter, *Paulus der Bote Jesu*, 667.

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Exegetical Considerations

Many remain agnostic on the precise identity of the thorn, stating that there is not enough evidence in the text to determine it. Of course most, if not all, agree that it was not a literal thorn but a metaphor for something (although inconsequential discussions regarding the precise meaning of *σκόλοψ* still occur).¹⁷ But the meaning of the metaphor is what leaves many interpreters perplexed, and many simply either remain agnostic on the issue or endorse a tautological interpretation. For instance, Paula Gooder writes:

The detailed discussions about the nature of the thorn in the flesh remain inconclusive. Paul does not provide sufficient information to enable the interpreter to decide what, if any, particular affliction is meant by the phrase the thorn in the flesh. It therefore seems preferable to adopt the most simple [*sic*] explanation offered by the text: that the thorn in the flesh and the angel of Satan are one and the same thing: Paul's thorn in the flesh is the opposition he experienced by the angel of Satan.¹⁸

While Gooder seems to propose an interpretation that goes no further than what the text says—hence, some might say it is “true to the text”—her identification of the thorn is not helpful. The question arises: what sort of opposition did the “angel of Satan,” or demon, give Paul? It seems fairly obvious that the thorn and the demon are the same, but the question is in identifying the nature of the opposition which tormented Paul. In order to answer this question, there are a number of key exegetical issues, many revolving around the lexical semantics of words and phrases in this passages, that seem to narrow down the options.

The Meaning of “Thorn in the Flesh”

Much of the discussion surrounding the meaning of “thorn in the flesh” relates to *σκόλοψ* being a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament.¹⁹ Many translate this as “thorn,” but some translate it as “stake,” the major difference being that one is bigger than the other. This discussion, however, is not really material to solving the problem of the meaning of “thorn,” since it is clear that it is a

¹⁷ E.g., Lightfoot, *Galatians*, 186.

¹⁸ Gooder, *Only the Third Heaven*, 197. Cf. also the argument by David Abernathy, “Paul's Thorn in the Flesh: A Messenger of Satan?” *Neot* 35 (2001): 69–79, who argues that “thorn in the flesh” is the metaphor, and “messenger of Satan” the referent of that metaphor.

¹⁹ Jegher-Bucher, “Thorn in the Flesh,” 390.

metaphor for something else; the meaning lies in its metaphorical usage.²⁰ It would seem absurd that Paul would plead for God to take away a literal thorn (or stake) in his side, when it could easily be taken out by oneself (or with the help of others if necessary). Moreover, the precise meaning of σκόλοψ is not properly determined through etymological studies, as James Barr pointed out many years ago, but through the immediate and local co-text and context.²¹

An important factor that many point out in determining the meaning of “thorn” is the dative τῇ σαρκί.²² LN identify five semantic domains in which σαρξ is a part of: (1) body, body parts, body products (§8.4, §8.63); (2) people (§9.11, §9.12); (3) kinship terms (§10.1); (4) psychological faculties (§26.7) and (5) nature, class, example (§58.10).²³ Jegher-Bucher concludes that the meaning of “flesh” is “Paul’s physical nature,”²⁴ based on the Hebrew “equivalent” *basar*. Setting aside the fallacious lexicography for the moment, I note above the various semantic domains—hence the broad semantic range of the word—to make the point that the word σάρξ does not necessitate the meaning of “flesh” in a “literal” sense of the word. But even that is not the *main* point; the main point is that the whole phrase “thorn in the flesh” is a metaphor for Paul; it refers in a symbolic way to something else that caused him enough torment to plead with God about it. Whatever was irritating Paul at the time was something represented as a thorn in the flesh. My conclusion is that the meaning of “thorn in the flesh” is not the crux of the interpretation of this matter. The main issue is determining what the metaphor stands for. To this end, I look to

20 Cf. the discussion in David M. Park, “Paul’s ΣΚΟΛΟΥΣ ΤΗ ΣΑΡΚΙ; Thorn or Stake?” *NovT* (1980): 179–83, where he concludes that the meaning of σκόλοψ is “stake.” But as I have stated already, this does not satisfy the problem of *what exactly* Paul was referring to.

21 He states: “The damaging thing about such pieces of etymologizing is not that they attempt to make historical statements about the words but that they are worked into arguments in which something seems to depend on these words, and commonly give a spurious twist to the meaning of a word at some crucial point in an argument” (James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961], 108).

22 Matera (*11 Corinthians*, 282) briefly argues that this should be translated “a thorn *for* the flesh,” taking it as a dative of advantage rather than a dative of place, but (1) these categories of datives seem to be fallacious and circular in reasoning, and (2) it is unclear how this conclusion contributes to the understanding of the nature of Paul’s thorn. Regardless, as I state above, it does not seem important what “type” of dative is used here, since the whole phrase is a metaphor for another referent.

23 Johannes P. Louw, and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (2 vols.; 2nd ed.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1989).

24 Jegher-Bucher, “Thorn in the Flesh,” 391.

the broader co-text and context, looking at the meaning of other key phrases in the discourse.

The Meaning of "Messenger of Satan"

This phrase stands in apposition to "thorn in the flesh" and provides a narrow range of meaning for what "thorn in the flesh" refers to. As Gooder states, the thorn in the flesh was a messenger from Satan.²⁵ While it is necessary to be more detailed as to what the particular opposition was, it is helpful to define what ἄγγελος σατανᾶ means. ἄγγελος is often translated as "angel" in the Bible, but its meaning can be "messenger" as well (cf. Lk 7:24, where messengers of John had left); in fact, these two terms are not always mutually exclusive. A majority usage in the New Testament—including the Pauline corpus—of ἄγγελος is "a supernatural being that attends upon or serves as a messenger of a superior supernatural entity,"²⁶ so it seems to fit the context to define ἄγγελος in this way.²⁷

So far, then, it has been determined that the identity of the "thorn" is some supernatural being that has come from Satan, i.e., a demon. As Schlatter states, "Der Pfahl für sein Fleisch besteht darin, daß ein Engel des Satans zu ihm gesendet wird mit dem Auftrag, ihn in das Gesicht zu schlagen."²⁸ This may bring about some allusive reference to what happened to Job, and perhaps, there may be some connection, but that connection will not be made at this point.

The Meaning of "Torment" or "Harass"

The lexeme κολαφίζω is found in two semantic domains in Louw and Nida's lexicon: (1) physical impact (§19); and (2) violence, harm, destroy, kill (§20). The first definition of κολαφίζω provided is: "to strike or beat with the fist, either once or repeatedly; to strike with the fist, to beat with the fist."²⁹ The second definition is a figurative extension of the first definition: "to cause injury or weakness or possibly a circumstantial difficulty; to cause harm to."³⁰ Perhaps, these two definitions are not too far off from each other and can be conflated,

²⁵ Gooder, *Only the Third Heaven*, 197.

²⁶ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, §12.28.

²⁷ On the other hand, defining ἄγγελος as a messenger of Satan (as most English versions have it translated) does not seem to affect the interpretation significantly, since a messenger of Satan can readily be an angel, or more accurately, a demon.

²⁸ Schlatter, *Paulus der Bote Jesu*, 666.

²⁹ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, §19.7.

³⁰ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, §20.27.

understanding that figurative or metaphorical extensions to the core meaning of a word can be applied in various contexts.³¹ This lexeme appears five times in the New Testament, and in three cases it is clear that it is a physical beating that is being referred to (Matt 26:67; Mark 14:65; 1 Pet 2:20). The fourth case (1 Cor 4:11) can also be taken literally (the NIV translates this as “we are brutally treated”), but a figurative meaning can also be applied to make sense. The fifth, of course, is the subject of this essay.

Considering this brief analysis, while it may be possible that the Satanic messenger is causing physical harm to Paul, there is no evidence in either Acts or Paul’s letters that these physical beatings were such that caused Paul the type of anguish represented in 2 Corinthians 12. In fact, as mentioned already, Paul resolved to go to Jerusalem in spite of the prophecy about him being bound and imprisoned. For Paul to plead with God to take this thorn away implies that he had no ability to remove it himself; but physical beatings could easily be avoided for Paul if he had preached more in secret or preached in more friendly or neutral environments. Considering this, it seems more likely that when the thorn was harassing Paul, it was beating him down in a *figurative* sense.

The Meaning of “Weakness”

The word usually translated “weakness,” ἀσθένεια, is listed in three semantic domains in Louw and Nida: (1) able, capable (§74.23); (2) sickness, disease, weakness (§23.143); and (3) fear, terror, alarm (§25.269). Perhaps the reason why many commentators may hold to a physical ailment interpretation is because of the common understanding of ἀσθένεια as referring to a physical sickness or illness (cf. the frequent comparison of 2 Cor 12:7 with Gal 4:17 without any textual justification). Indeed, in the previous co-text, Paul refers to his physical “beatings” (2 Cor 11:24–29) as “weaknesses.” Some conclude that the “weakness” in 12:9, when the Lord responds to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness,” is the same weakness as in the previous chapter and is a referent to Paul’s thorn. At first glance, this seems to make sense, drawing from the context. It may, however, be possible that the semantic range of weakness is broad enough to compass various types of weakness, even in close textual proximity.

31 This is based on my view of lexical monosemy, as opposed to polysemy. See Charles Ruhl, *On Monosemy: A Study in Linguistic Semantics* (SUNYSL; Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989); Stanley E. Porter, “θαυμάζω in Mark 6:6 and Luke 11:38: A Note on Monosemy,” *BAGL* 2 (2013): 75–79.

But regarding the meaning of ἀσθενεία, Louw and Nida state that its use in 2 Cor 12:9 refers to *inability* or *incapacity* (§74.23), as a parallel to δύναμις (ἡ γὰρ δύναμις ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ τελεῖται; for power is perfected in weakness). Weakness in this context, paralleling “power,” most likely refers to the inability of Paul to take out his own thorn. It may be considered a physical weakness in the sense of physical inability, but probably not a physical illness, such as an ophthalmological disability. Given this meaning of weakness, it is easy to see that Paul, nor any other person, would have no ability of themselves to get rid of any demonic oppression, only something that could be accomplished by God.

Conclusion

There may be several other exegetical considerations to be made in this passage, but the ones I have addressed are most important for the discussion. Considering the brief exegetical analyses above of some key phrases, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, “thorn in the flesh” was a metaphor for something else that caused some sort of injury to Paul. Second, the source of this thorn was satanic in nature, and probably a demon from Satan. Third, the action that the thorn performed upon Paul was quite excessive; it was so injurious to Paul that he pleaded with the Lord to have it removed. And finally, the weakness that Paul identified in this discussion was likely an inability to do anything to change his situation. There are also some broader contextual clues that help narrow down the options for what this thorn was; these are what will be discussed in this next section.

The Purpose of the Thorn

The thorn was given to Paul not arbitrarily or vindictively but for a greater purpose: to prevent conceit. Murray Harris writes: “It was given to Paul as a direct consequence of the revelations he received in paradise.”³² Of course, this may depend upon one’s view of whom Paul refers to in the previous context. There, Paul describes “a man” who has experienced a great vision from God of the third heaven (2 Cor 12:1–4). Many commentators, including Harris, believe that Paul refers to himself in the third person here and describes what he himself actually witnessed.³³ But he also states that in order to be kept

32 Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 857.

33 E.g., Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 835; Barrett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 307–308; Matera, *II Corinthians*, 279–80. The discussion of whether this “man” was Paul himself or a mysterious third person is a subject of scholarly debate. I loosely take the

from conceit *because of the greatness of the revelations*, he was given a thorn, a kind of “divine protection, lest the visionary become overly exalted in his self-estimation because of the abundant revelations he had received.”³⁴ The revelations that are referred to in this statement seem to be the revelations of the previous verses. While Paul provides only a glimpse of the visions that he had received, it was potentially a great source of pride. Paul, or anyone else who witnessed such grand visions for that matter, would have been susceptible to believing that he was perhaps superior to those who did not receive such privileged visions. If Paul uniquely received these great revelations, inside information from the Creator of the universe that no one else was privileged to know, it would have been very tempting for him to be proud, to walk as if he were superior to his fellow Christians because of the knowledge he had been entrusted with. Of course, pride is considered to be one of the most grievous sins, and the consequences of being proud and arrogant has been documented throughout Scripture: Saul’s kingdom was taken away from him (1 Sam 13:8–15); Nebuchadnezzar was given a mental illness (Dan 4:28–33); Lucifer was banished from heaven (Ezek 28:1–19); and many other examples of pride leading to the downfall of people, not to mention the warnings throughout Scripture of the consequences of pride (e.g., Prov 6:16–17; 16:18; 1 Pet 5:5–6). Paul himself could have been susceptible to such pride (whether or not he was the receptor of the visions mentioned earlier), so a thorn was given to him to protect him from conceit, from thinking he was more spiritual, favored, and spiritually better than others.

To convey the importance for the purpose for his thorn, Paul repeats the phrase ἵνα μὴ ὑπεραίρωμαι both before and after the main statement, ἐδόθη μοι σκόλοψ τῇ σαρκί, ἄγγελος σατανᾶ, ἵνα με κολαφίσῃ. Not only does repetition serve to indicate a cohesive text; here, it seems to function as an indicator of prominence.³⁵ Without getting into a detailed discussion regarding the linguistic feature of prominence, the repetition seems to highlight the purpose of Paul’s thorn. This means that Paul wanted to emphasize the importance of the fact that the purpose of this thorn was to prevent any conceit from taking over him.

majority position that Paul is referring to himself in the third person, but an alternative view that Paul speaks of someone else does not seem to affect my argument one way or another.

34 Matera, *II Corinthians*, 282.

35 Cf. Stanley E. Porter, “Prominence: An Overview,” in Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O’Donnell (eds.), *The Linguist as Pedagogue: Trends in the Teaching and Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (NTM 11; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 45–74.

What needs to be considered at this point is how this prevention of conceit relates to the identity of Paul's thorn. Indeed, the thorn would have to relate directly to the potential for pride, due to the purpose statements identified above. In other words, the thorn would have to be something effective enough to keep Paul from conceit. Would a physical ailment be a source of humility for Paul? Would a speech impediment be a source of humility? Perhaps. But given the grandeur of the revelations which he was not even able to reproduce in words (v. 4), and given what is known about Paul as a man who did not shy away from physical danger or harm (more on this in the next section), it seems unlikely that a physical ailment or oppression from his opponents would keep Paul from conceit. In other words, the degree of Paul's suffering would have to be adversely proportional (if it is even measurable) to the degree of blessing he received through the revelations, in order to be prevented from conceit. And since the source of potential pride was spiritual in nature (it was not as if the revelations would tempt him to think he was intellectually or physically superior to others), it seems to make sense that the humbling that Paul received would be spiritual in nature as well. In any case, it is clear from the context, and it seems to be overwhelming, that the purpose of Paul's thorn was to prevent conceit in him. So whatever the thorn was, it would merit the ability to achieve this purpose.

The Personality and Character of Paul

Much is revealed in Acts and the letters of Paul regarding his person and character, probably much more than is often realized. One particular characteristic that stands out, in relation to this discussion, is that Paul had a resolve to preach the gospel in the face of great opposition. There are several passages in Acts that recount episodes in which Paul was physically persecuted, along with Paul's own reaction and response to these events.

Acts 14:19–22

According to the chronology outlined in Acts, the first recorded physical persecution Paul received was during his first missionary journey. What might have incited this stoning of Paul was his response to the Jews' rejection of Paul's preaching of Jesus back in Antioch. The stoning happened in Lystra, but a previous city he was in was Antioch of Pisidia, and it was there that Paul stated, "Since you thrust [the word of God regarding Jesus] aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles" (Acts 11:46). This "rejection" by Paul must have incited the Jews in Antioch quite severely,

as they followed him to Lystra, along with Jews from Iconium (another city he was previously in), and stoned him there. Not only did they stone him, but they convinced the crowds there to participate as well. No mention is made of whether Barnabas was stoned as well; Luke mentions only Paul.

Luke then records that they dragged him out of the city and left him for dead. This little detail is often overlooked, but it must be noted that the stoning of Paul in Lystra was literally a near-death experience for him (unless Paul merely faked that he was dead, which is possible). Nevertheless, Luke records that after the disciples surrounded him—perhaps to verify whether or not he was alive—he got up, went back to the city, and the next day took Barnabas to the nearby city of Derbe to continue the mission. What is notable is that it took him less than a day to decide (if there was even a decision to be made) he would continue his ministry. Not only did he go to Derbe, but he went back to the cities he visited previously, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (in Pisidia), the very cities which hosted those who had stoned Paul. This type of resolve to preach the gospel early on in his ministry should not be taken lightly, and it illustrates Paul's steadfast character in the face of physical oppression.

Acts 16:19–40

After the incident at Lystra, Paul eventually went back to Antioch (in Syria), possibly to recuperate and prepare for a second journey. Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem after that, where the leaders there convened what is typically called the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Some time after the Council convened, Paul and Barnabas had no small dispute regarding the inclusion of John Mark, who had previously deserted Paul in Pamphylia, on a subsequent missionary journey. They agreed to disagree and separated; Paul traveled through Syria and Cilicia with Silas as his new partner. During their journey, they were in the city of Philippi, where they met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination. She had followed Paul for many days, and Paul, having become agitated with her, expelled the demon out of her. This, however, upset the owners of the slave girl, who were making profit from her abilities. They grabbed Paul and Silas, dragged them to the agora, and accused them of wrongdoing. Not only were Paul and Silas verbally attacked, the magistrates ordered them to be beaten with rods after having been stripped of their clothes. After the beating, they were imprisoned, with their feet cuffed to the stocks.

Luke records that later that night around midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns in their prison cell (Acts 16:25). While they were singing, there was a great earthquake, which resulted in the prison doors opening and the bonds unfastening. The jailer, realizing all of this, was about to kill

himself with his sword,³⁶ but Paul reassured him they had not left. The jailer broke down at the feet of Paul and Silas and asked them, "What must I do to be saved?" How did the jailer even know to ask this? The only reasonable answer seems to be that he had heard the message of salvation through Paul and Silas (or possibly someone else, though that seems less likely) in the jail cell. The significant part of this whole incident is Paul's (and Silas's) singular focus in the midst of their physical persecution. They were concerned with one thing: the gospel and proclaiming it wherever they are. In spite of their physical weakness after the public beating and imprisonment, they were able to preach the gospel to the jailer and his entire household. Not only that, but when the magistrates ordered the police to let Paul and Silas go, their response was indignation: they disclosed the fact that they were Roman citizens, and therefore unjustly beaten—a fact that could have been disclosed *before* the actual beatings and imprisonments. One must wonder why Paul did not disclose this all-important information earlier; but regardless of why, the fact remains that Paul was not afraid of physical punishment for the sake of the gospel.

Acts 17:16–17

By this time, Paul had been thrown into prison and beaten a number of times. Yet, Paul's resolve was steady and unaltered in preaching the gospel. Later on during this second journey, after almost being attacked in Thessalonica, he arrived in Athens, not an insignificant city in the Empire at the time. While in the city, he was provoked within himself (παρωξύνετο τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ) because of all the idols there. Because of this provocation, he went into the synagogues and agoras to reason with the Jews and God-fearers. Perhaps Athens was not a violent city as the previous cities Paul visited. But again, the point here is that Paul was not afraid of physical persecution; his singular resolve *in his spirit* was to make known the gospel of Jesus.

Acts 21:10–14

This incident was mentioned briefly in the introduction section of this essay, but it illustrates again Paul's singular resolve and unabashed commitment to proclaiming the gospel. At this point, Paul was just completing his third missionary journey and was preparing to head for Jerusalem from Caesarea. At Caesarea, a prophet named Agabus arrived and warned Paul through an object

³⁶ This was presumably because the honorable thing to do as a Roman soldier who did not fulfill his mission was suicide. Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 364.

lesson: he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet, and said that the man who owns this belt would be bound in this manner. Paul's response, as might be expected, was: "I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13). There is no dispute or skepticism of Agabus's prophecy by Paul or anyone else,³⁷ and Paul probably knew such physical persecution would be awaiting him in Jerusalem. But somehow, he was convinced that he must endure and go to that city.

Acts 27

After several points of contact with the Roman tribune, chief priests, the governor, and Agrippa the king, Paul had appealed to Caesar, so they left on a ship to sail to Rome. Through a prophecy, Paul realized that the trip would result in much damage and loss of lives, so he warned the centurion and others of this pending catastrophe. The centurion, Luke notes, did not take heed to Paul's warning, and the owner of the ship, along with the captain, continued with the original plan of journey. As the narrative unfolded, Paul's prediction came true and the ship was engulfed by the storm. While they were stranded in the middle of the sea, no lives were lost, and an angel of the Lord reminded Paul that he would stand in trial in front of Caesar.

What is interesting to note about this incident is Paul's reaction to the captain, owner, and centurion after the storm. He basically tells them, "I told you so, but do not worry..." Though Paul is sometimes perceived as timid and weak in person behind his weightier letters (cf. 2 Cor 10:10), this may be somewhat exaggerated at times, especially considering the various depictions of Paul through the pen of Luke. Perhaps he was seen as timid and weak by the Corinthians, but at other times he is shown to be strong and courageous in the midst of danger.

37 There is some debate on whether Agabus's prophecy was completely accurate or not, but I do not see that the *supposed* differences between Agabus's prophecy in Acts 21 and the actual occurrence later in the same chapter necessitate an erroneous prophecy on Agabus's part. Cf. the discussion in Wayne A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (rev. ed.; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 77–83. Grudem argues that Agabus made two small mistakes, but this contention simply seems to be a result of his larger argument that New Testament prophets did not have the requirement to be as accurate as Old Testament prophets did. Without getting into a detailed discussion here (this is beside the point I am arguing for), I think Agabus's prophecy was actually correct in that the Jews were responsible for Paul's arrest; not that they had to physically arrest him themselves, but that their earlier outburst resulted in Paul's arrest by the Roman cohort. In other words, Agabus's prophecy was not about the *manner* in which the Jews would arrest Paul but the fact that they would be responsible for his arrest.

Given these descriptions of Paul in Acts, it is evident that he was a person who withstood physical suffering in a significant way; not only did he withstand it, he sometimes welcomed it for the sake of the gospel being proclaimed. Furthermore, if the thorn was given to Paul soon after his conversion, or before or early on in his ministry, there is a chronological difference to prevent the "thorn" from being persecution.³⁸ So far I have argued strongly against those views that identify Paul's thorn to be his opponents in various cities, but it seems that, in principle at least, if he had no fear of these oppressors who nearly killed him time and time again, he would have a similar view against any physical ailments or disabilities as well. In other words, it seems implausible, given the depiction of Paul as I have highlighted in Acts, that Paul would have been significantly affected by any type of physical detractor, be it an external oppressor or his own ailment, to respond as he does in 2 Corinthians 12. These things would not even be on his radar of concerns, and it seems unlikely that he would plead to the Lord to take these things away from him.

The Prominence of Past Sins in Paul's Testimonies

Schlatter's proposal regarding the identity of Paul's thorn was that it was a demon (messenger of Satan) who reminded Paul of his former misdeeds in Jerusalem, namely of persecuting Christians, many of them to their death. He goes a bit further than I would, however, to say that it was a guilty conscience that motivated Paul to plead for its removal, but perhaps it is not necessary to take the thesis further than these demonic reminders. It seems inconsistent to say that Paul felt a deep guilt for his misdeeds, and yet in his letters, particularly to the Romans and Galatians, he expounds a theology of justification by grace through faith (e.g., "there is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus"; Rom 8:1). But perhaps Schlatter may be correct in pointing to Paul's prior misdeeds as significant in other ways.

Paul retold his conversion story a number of times, at least four times as recorded in the New Testament, twice in Acts, once in his letter to the Galatians, and once in his first letter to Timothy. It is probable that he told it many more times during his life, and implausible that he only recounted it four times. But the number of times is not the point; the point is that in each recounting of his conversion experience, he recalls the former life he lived as a persecutor and zealot of the Jesus movement.

38 Cf. Abernathy, "Paul's Thorn," 75.

Acts 22:4

This is the first recorded report of Paul's own conversion testimony, apparently in Aramaic (i.e., a Hebrew dialect). The context of this testimonial is in the temple in Jerusalem, where Paul had just been arrested, after having been attacked and beaten—the Jews had recognized who he was and had intended on killing him. Before being taken away, Paul asked for permission to speak, and began with his upbringing in Tarsus as a strict Jew and later Pharisee. The testimony included the fact that he persecuted “the Way” to the death (ἄχρι θανάτου), binding and delivering Christian believers to prison. Not only was he zealous in Jerusalem, but he had letters prepared so he could do the same in Damascus.³⁹ Of course, this is when Jesus by divine revelation revealed himself to Paul and converted him, redirecting his path to proclaiming the gospel of Jesus.

It must be noted that Paul mentions that he was responsible for the *deaths* of Christians. This must not be glided over superficially, but that he was responsible for the deaths of those he would now call brothers and sisters, ἀδελφοί, would have had a significant impact upon him.

Acts 26:9–11

In his defense before Agrippa the king, Paul gives his testimony, similar to the one he gave in the temple courts in Jerusalem. He stated: “I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities” (Acts 26:10–11).

In these few verses, there are several elements that should be recognized as prominent.⁴⁰ In the midst of several perfective aspects (aorist tense-forms) he uses to describe his activity in Jerusalem, locking up saints and casting votes against them (κατέκλεισα, κατήνεγκα), he foregrounds the activity of

39 These were probably letters of recommendation (or commendation), which were common in the first century. Cf. John Lee White, “Ancient Greek Letters,” in David E. Aune (ed.), *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament* (SBLBS 21; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988); cf. also Clinton W. Keyes, “The Greek Letter of Introduction,” *AJP* 56 (1935): 28–44; Chan-Hie Kim, *The Form and Structure of the Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation* (SBLDS 4; Missoula, MT: University of Montana Press, 1972).

40 While my intention is not to get into an extended linguistic discussion here, it is important to note in Paul's conversion testimony that he *foregrounds* several elements. Cf. David I. Yoon, “Prominence in New Testament Discourse: Gal 1,10–2,10 as a Test Case,” *FN* 26 (2013): 3–26; Porter, “Prominence,” 45–74, esp. 58–61 on how verbal aspect conveys prominence in discourse.

killing (ἀναιρουμένων) by use of the imperfective aspect (present tense-form). He continues his discourse in foreground with the imperfective aspect by referring to punishing them (τιμωρῶν), compelling them to blaspheme (ἡνάγκαζον βλασφημεῖν), being enraged against them (ἐμμαινόμενος), and persecuting them (ἐδίωκον). What is seen in this brief analysis is that Paul emphasizes certain parts of his testimony, namely the activities related to persecution and murder. Paul saw it vividly and relayed it vividly to others, through an imperfective aspectual usage.

Gal 1:13

Paul also recounts his conversion testimony in his letter to the Galatians. He states: "For you have heard about my former life in Judaism, how I *persecuted* the church of God excessively and *destroyed* it" (Gal 1:13; italics mine). Both verbs, ἐδίωκον and ἐπόρθουν, are in the imperfective aspect (imperfect tense-form) and are foregrounded in this discourse.⁴¹ Again, Paul sees it appropriate not only to mention his previous way of life, but to identify what he actually did: persecute and destroy the church of God. Rather than use general language, he specifies the exact activities he was involved in before he was converted.

1 Tim 1:12–16

In his first letter to Timothy,⁴² Paul does not repeat his conversion testimony, but he does recount his former way of life. He tells Timothy: "formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and violent person" (1 Tim 1:13). A few statements later, he refers to himself as the foremost of sinners (1:15). Paul was not simply giving lip-service to his sinfulness; he still remembered, after many years of devotion and missionary service for the gospel, the specific activities he was involved in to destroy the Christian movement. Perhaps something reminded him constantly of his sins. Perhaps during his time in prison for lengthy periods of times, there were visions of his past haunting him. The ancient Roman

41 Yoon, "Prominence in New Testament Discourse." I argue that some prominent elements in Paul's post-conversion testimony are related to his activities prior to conversion. The most prominent element in Gal 1:11–2:10 seems to be that Paul has been set aside for gospel ministry, the purpose of his calling, but his former life is also highlighted.

42 Pauline authorship of 1 Timothy is assumed in this essay; see Jeremy Duff, "P46 and the Pastorals: A Misleading Consensus?" *NTS* 44 (1998): 578–90; Stanley E. Porter, "Paul and the Process of Canonization," in Craig A. Evans and Emanuel Tov (eds.), *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (ASBT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 173–202; Stanley E. Porter, "Paul and the Pauline Letter Collection," in Michael F. Bird and Joseph R. Dodson (eds.), *Paul and the Second Century* (LNTS 412; New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 19–36.

prison was a dark place, darker than our modern prisons. Paul did not have to include references to his sins in Timothy's letter, since one of the purposes of the letter was so that Timothy would know proper conduct in the church (1 Tim 3:15). The letter is filled with commands for Timothy and his congregation in how they ought to function. But it may be the case that Paul revealed a bit of his internal struggle while writing such a personal letter to him.

What is clear is that Paul did not easily forget his former life, nor did he nonchalantly shrug it off in the name of grace and mercy. For Paul, who taught against sin and carried on the teachings of his Lord, he had lived a life of hatred and vileness, and caused much damage to the Christian church. He had personally attacked Christians, ordered them to execution, gone into the homes of Christians and violated them, and done many other horrendous things. Those who live in the post-Reformation era, who may view Paul through a Reformation lens, sometimes miss the personal side of Paul who probably struggled with his former life. After all, it was he himself who did these things, and one cannot think he simply forgot about those events after his conversion. In fact, as I have argued, he mentions them on a number of occasions (and probably more that have not been recorded), and it is a significant part of his conversion testimony.

Conclusion

The debate surrounding the identity of Paul's thorn may be endless, and I agree that a final decision for determining what it is cannot be made with absolute certainty. I have, however, provided some major reasons why Paul's thorn was most likely a demon who reminded Paul of his pre-converted life, murdering and torturing Christians for their faith in Jesus. If the supposition is correct that Paul refers to himself regarding the surpassingly great revelations that were given to him at the beginning of 2 Corinthians 12, it is likely that the thorn is also revelatory in nature by paralleling these visions.

I agree with Gooder as a starting point: it was a messenger of Satan, or, in our language, a demon, that had tormented Paul. But Gooder's proposal is still unhelpful and vague, because the question still arises: what did the messenger of Satan *do* to torment Paul? I think Schlatter's proposal is also helpful: that a messenger of Satan tormented Paul by reminding him of his former sins of murder and torment of Christians. Although I cannot state this with absolutely certainty, given what is known about Paul as a person and minister of the gospel, including his persistence in the face of much danger, and given the prominence of his past in his testimony, it seems likely that the torment of the

satanic messenger was a constant reminder, whether through nightmares or visual recollections, of Paul's past life as a persecutor of his now brothers and sisters. Undoubtedly, he must have come into contact after his conversion with some friends and family of those whom he persecuted and murdered. Perhaps he came into contact with the victims themselves who survived, since Paul traveled extensively in that region. But I would disagree with Schlatter when he states that Paul had a guilty conscience regarding these things (cf. 2 Tim 1:3, where Paul confesses his "clear conscience" [καθαρὰ συνειδήσει] before God). Paul knew, probably better than anyone else did, that his guilt was banished with the death and resurrection of Jesus. But the visions of his past life may have still haunted him, a vision he would not have wanted to "see" any longer.

Paul's reception of these exceeding visions of heaven and grandeur that could not be repeated, his knowledge of these things, made him susceptible to one of the most grievous sins of pride and conceit. In order to prevent this from happening, to counteract these grand revelations, Paul was given a thorn in the flesh, a demon, to harass him. The harassment paralleled the heavenly visions: they were visions instead of his past life of persecution. Paul pled with God to have these visions stopped, but God responded with: "My grace is sufficient for you; for my power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). God wanted Paul to trust in his grace in spite of his past sins, to trust in the power of grace to forgive his previous sin. Paul's inability to vanquish these visions allowed him to trust in God's power to forgive. The knowledge that Paul gained from the heavenly visions resulted in a continued knowledge of his sins, in order that he would remain humble.