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We have examined previously how the Word of God interprets itself in the verse and in the context. If a word, expression, or idea does not interpret itself in the verse or in the context, another key is to examine where it has been used before, its previous usage. We will apply this Biblical research key to understand the expression “thorn in the flesh” from II Corinthians 12:7 because its meaning is not readily clear from the verse or the context. What is the meaning that God intended?

II Corinthians 12:7:

And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a THORN IN THE FLESH, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

Although this scripture does not completely interpret itself in the verse, we sometimes gain clues from the verse. Here we see where the thorn in the flesh was from: it was a messenger of Satan, not of God. The Greek word from which “messenger” is translated is *angelos*, which is translated 181 times as “angel(s)” and 7 times as “messenger(s).” In the 6 places besides II Corinthians 12:7 where the word *angelos* is translated as “messenger(s),” it always refers to an individual or individuals. It is logical that “messenger” in this verse also refers to individuals or people.

To further understand and clarify thorn in the flesh, let’s consider two places where similar expressions have been used before. The first occurrence is in Numbers 33.

Numbers 33:50-52,55:

*And the Lord spake unto Moses in the plains of Moab by Jordan near Jericho, saying,
Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye are passed over Jordan into the land of Canaan;*

Then ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and destroy all their pictures, and destroy all their molten images, and quite pluck down all their high places.

But if ye will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you; then it shall come to pass, that those which ye let remain of them shall be pricks in your eyes, and THORNS IN YOUR SIDES, and shall vex you in the land wherein ye dwell.

God instructed Moses to tell the children of Israel that when they claimed the Promised Land, they would need to make sure the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, were completely removed from the land; if they did not, Israel would suffer consequences. Clearly, verse 55 is not implying that the Canaanites would literally be in their ribs. This is a figure of speech, and we can see that it refers to people who would vex them, or hinder and obstruct them.

Another verse with an expression using “thorns” is found in Joshua. Joshua had led the children of Israel in claiming the Promised Land. But after many years, he had grown old and the children of Israel had allowed some former inhabitants of the land to live among them, so Joshua gave them this warning:

Joshua 23:11-13:

Take good heed therefore unto yourselves, that ye love the Lord your God.

Else if ye do in any wise go back, and cleave unto the remnant of these nations, even these that remain among you, and shall make marriages with them, and go in unto them, and they to you:

Know for a certainty that the Lord your God will no more drive out any of these nations from before you; but they shall be snares and traps unto you, and scourges in your sides, and THORNS IN YOUR EYES, until ye perish from off this good land which the Lord your God hath given you.

This phrase in Joshua 23:13 again refers figuratively to people. The thorns in their eyes are people. Both previous usages we’ve looked at refer clearly to people, so the “thorn in the flesh” in II Corinthians 12:7 represents people also, people who were trying to cause hurt to Paul and to discourage him.

Now that we know that the “thorn in the flesh” represents people, let’s consider some of the ways these messengers of Satan attempted to obstruct Paul’s ministry and the work God had called him to do.

Acts 14:19:

And [while Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra] there came thither certain Jews [Judeans] from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and, having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead.

This record in Acts tells us that after Paul finished preaching in Lystra, Judeans—people—took him outside the city and stoned him, leaving him for dead. Thankfully God healed Paul, and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe, where they preached the Word to that city.

In II Corinthians 11 Paul himself shared some of the things done to him by people.

II Corinthians 11:24-26:

*Of the Jews [Judeans] five times received I forty stripes save one.
Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned....
...in perils by mine own countrymen...in perils among false brethren.*

Look at how the messengers of Satan attempted to obstruct Paul's ministry. But as God told Paul in II Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness...." Paul relied on God's abundant supply and overcame each time so that he was in nothing defeated.

All Scripture interprets itself in the verse, in the context, and as used before. As we apply these keys to Biblical interpretation, the Word will continue to open up to us, and we will see even more clearly the perfection and profit of God's Word. The Bible need never be a closed book to us as we allow the Scripture to interpret itself.

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