Paul’s Thorn in the Flesh

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. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.

2Corinthians 12:7-10

In looking at this passage of scripture we find an issue of a great deal of controversy. It should not be such, but due to the pride of men and the foolish assumption that any one of us is any more able to interpret or understand scripture, many forbid themselves the hearing of another’s ideas, no matter how realistic or honest they may be. Being a fairly young man I often run into trouble with this sort of thing. Honestly studying a scripture and presenting what could very well be the truth of a matter is looked down upon in our day. If it was not written by another “Doctor” of theology or some famous preacher then it is totally un-acceptable. It fails to occur to many preachers that some of the greatest works in Christian literature came from some men who were known to be “unlearned and ignorant men”. With this thought in mind, let us look at the verses before us.

In studying the life and ministry of the apostle Paul from the time of his conversion one would be correct in saying that he would be a man to follow as he followed Christ. Paul was one of those saints that we all can look at and say, “Wow! I wish I could be like him.” And with that in mind, I can not bring myself to believe that such a great man of God as Paul would have been greatly discouraged by a mere physical infirmity. He was willing to suffer and gladly for the sake of the carrying of the gospel. To think that he would have set down and pouted over his believed bad eye-sight or possibly a stooped back; Whatever physical infirmity he may have suffered, would be to completely destroy the character of a man so willing to suffer happily for his Lord. Paul would not have been discouraged by such a trifling thing as bad eye-sight, a limp, a fever, a stooped back. No, he would have taken it in stride and kept going for the Glory of God. What could have been that thorn in the flesh, then.

Knowing that I have already found a number of brethren who just can’t stand to hear this type of thing because they all have their idea already as to what that thorn was. I will give my own idea. And because it was not in one of their commentaries which do more for most preachers today than does the word of God, it is written off as unacceptable. If we as preachers would spend less time reading after other men, get in the word of God, read, meditate and pray we might learn some things. How did they learn I wonder? By reading?
Oh! You think? Well, by reading and following God and using some common-sense in studying the word of God let us look at just a couple of things in these verses. (keeping in mind that I am not arguing that Paul had some physical infirmities such as the ones already mentioned, I believe he did myself.)

In looking at what Paul said about this thorn in the flesh, he told us some things about it that are over-looked. He said that it was the messenger of Satan. Last I understood, Satan is a spirit. The flesh, as well is not a reference to the physical body at all times. It is often a reference to human nature. In this case, and with the character of Paul in mind it would stand to reason that this would be an infirmity that went far beyond the physical body. If we look at the messenger too we will see that it is a spiritual being and it would stand to reason that it would be a spiritual attack. This attack on the flesh (human nature and emotions) could easily bring about physical symptoms. This is known a physiological illness. It is a physical illness that results from psychological conditions. In considering these facts, it is not at all unreasonable to believe that Paul’s thorn in the flesh may have been internal.

I would like to submit, into consideration, (among the opinions of all the preachers who have willingly voiced their opinions, yet refuse to accept the fact that theories are not limited to themselves) the theory that Paul’s thorn in the flesh could have been memories. Of course I know that they would be constantly brought up by the messenger of Satan. But it still remains a great possibility that said messenger was reminding the apostle Paul in many of the places that he preached. “There is the son of a couple that I imprisoned, there is the wife of the man that I dragged out of his house and stoned to death, and there is the husband of a woman I had scourged to death.” Oh, the anguish that this one-time persecutor of Christians must have been in when he stood to preach to familiar faces, whom he now loved so much that he would have eagerly given his life for. No wonder he besought the Lord thrice to remove it. It would do us good to think of this and remember that we do reap what we sow. Our sins do follow us. Nag at us. Haunt us. It is part of our flesh, our human nature. We know that we are forgiven if we are saved. But Satan knows our past and will try to torment us with our memories. To let this thought go by un-noticed in this passage of scripture is careless and irresponsible.