

UNTOWARDNESSES: 2 Cor.12.7 "thorn in the flesh"

1. Paul poetically flits between ideas and idea-images (as did all Hellenistic-Jewish and Hellenistic-pagan preachers), so there's no way to settle the literal/metaphorical issue on "thorn." (Cp. Apollonius of Tyana's great prison sermon--2.221ff--in which he flits between the IDEA of confinement and IMAGES of confinement: prison, chains, body, house, gypsy house on wheels, being in business, being in government, and finally being hooked on spectacles--and, withal, refusing to face the fact that one has it within one's Greek-aunonomous power to self-imprison or self-release anytime anywhere.)

2. Gk. for "thorn" orig. meant "stake," but commonly in NT times a "thorn" or "splinter." Normal metaphoric use was confined to physical trouble, esp. pain, as pain is the fundamental BVR (basic visceral response) of the image. (Thus, bad eyes would be excluded, but not painful eye injury/disease; and disabilities would be excluded.) My conclusion from the image and from the word-use: Paul has a chronic physical pain that steadily deflects his attention from his ego (which, for reasons of his genes-commitment-situation, tends to puff itself up) to his physical body (which is running itself down,--as he says--"the outward man perishing"). Vs.10: "When I am weak" in my own powers, "then am I strong" in "grace...Christ's power...for Christ's sake."

3. Vs.6 is a classic putdown on professional and experiential pride: "I do not want anyone to have a higher opinion of me than he has from what he has seen me do and heard me say" (TEV). His self-putdown models against his Corinthian rivals' self-putup (vs.11). The scribe's temptation to ego-puffery is knowledge of the PAST Word; the prophet's, knowledge of the FUTURE; and the charismatics' --and chaps.12-14 are Paul's longest passage on charismatic religion--EXPERIENCE in the PRESENT (of which a present secular version is the Human Potential Movement; cp. "Ways" 1,4,5,8).

4. For "thorn," the Latin has "stimulus"(!); and both Gk. and Lat. uses, for the vb., a pugilistic term: "strike with the fist," "maltreat violently." I take it from this that the chronic pain was intense--but it may be Pauline hyperbole, though I think this unlikely. A severe ascesis, roughing it against his body (though not, as Hindu-Buddhist, essentially contra-body: an operational, not a metaphysical, struggle).

5. Of course if we move from the physical to the metaphorical-beyond-the-body, we might imagine a spiritual(decisional)-psychic(imaginal)-mental(cognitive) pain or even disability; or even a situational factor, such as his competition, the "super-apostles" (on which see, says New Am. Bible, Nm.33.55 or Ex. 28.24). But I reject these extensions, in favor of the Biblical Seminary "Inductive Bible Study" principle (as I remember it from Howard Tillman Kuist), "When the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense."

6. The Lucifer principle is to claim; the Christian incarnational principle is to show. Lucifer (Satan), in our passage, is self-canceling: his "angel"--"thorn" does not deter or even deflect Paul, who by God's grace turns the evil into good, the weakness into strength. (On "weakness," I'd go for malaria or sleeping sickness as the "thorn" if there were more pain in these diseases; the Fathers added eye disease,* epilepsy, and even stammering--all sheer guesses.) He elsewhere revels in weakness as Jesus-identification: 1Cor.1.27-29--he, history's most powerful letter-writer!

7. Why did so many of the Fathers and the Reformers think it a spiritual affliction? Because they had an affliction, viz. a chronic distaste for the body. On which see Norman O. Brown's LOVE'S BODY and Gabriel Moran's RELIGIOUS BODY.

*I don't cotton to efforts to make this disease out from Gal.4.13-15 and 6.11. As for the large, "bold," John-Hancock penmanship of Paul, that comes of his authoritarian ego which God used Satan to keep in check (as God used Satan to keep in check that OT authoritarian ego, Job).

(Bill from
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