AN ANGEL FROM SATAN:
PAUL’S THORN IN THE FLESH (2 CORINTHIANS 12.7-10)

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The relationship between the Devil and disease, sickness and sin, healing and forgiveness, exorcism and deliverance continues to intrigue interpreters of the New Testament at both scholarly and popular levels. Whether the challenge presented by this issue is the greatest one facing the Pentecostal and charismatic movement or not, many of those in the tradition would agree that a proper understanding of this topic is one of the movement’s greatest needs. This study, which seeks to contribute in a small way to that goal, is part of a more comprehensive investigation of the relevant New Testament texts which reveal something about the relationship between the Devil and disease, sickness and sin, healing and forgiveness, exorcism and deliverance.1

The Pauline literature is especially significant for this larger enquiry in that so much relevant data is to be found there. Among these passages are those which speak about the origins of certain illness (1 Cor. 11.27-34) as well as those that reveal something of Paul’s attitude toward illness (his own [Gal. 4.13-16] and that of others [Phil. 2.25-30; 1 Tim. 5.23; and 2 Tim. 4.20]2). This investigation is devoted to an examination of a specific relevant Pauline text.

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2. Although a host of critical problems surround the authorship of the Pastoral
In only one place (2 Cor. 12.7-10) does Paul appear to attribute the origin of an illness to the Devil; this is a text which is located in a section of 2 Corinthians that has been the subject of intense debates. The primary issue concerns the epistle’s literary integrity, with several scholars questioning whether it is proper to regard chs. 10–13, in particular, as originally part of the letter as a whole. Whether one agrees with such a judgment or not, when reading these chapters it is not difficult to understand why questions are raised concerning its integrity. For in these chapters a perceptible change of tone is witnessed from that in chs. 1–9.

Paul’s primary purpose in 2 Corinthians 10–13 is to defend his apostolic ministry against what appear to be vicious attacks on the part of his opponents who themselves pose as apostles. As a means of response, Paul agrees to ‘play the fool’ and boast about his ‘qualifications’, which include numerous trials, persecutions, and periods of suffering.

In 12.1-7a, Paul reveals that he had an extraordinary spiritual experience that defied explanation. Not only did it include a journey to the third heaven but also the hearing of sacred words which ‘are not proper for anyone to speak’ (v. 4). After affirming the trustworthiness of his words, Paul refuses to reveal anything else so that no one would think too highly of him (v. 6). At this point he writes:

And concerning the extraordinary nature of the revelations; therefore, in order that I might not be puffed up, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, an angel of Satan, in order that it (he) might beat me, in order that I might not be puffed up. Concerning this I called unto the Lord three times