

# St. Paul's problems



**Question:** God says to St. Paul in 2 Corinthians that whatever his “thorn in the flesh” was, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (12:7, 9). And in Romans, St. Paul says: “What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate” (7:15). Is there a connection between these two texts so that Romans 7 is describing St. Paul's thorn?

– **Howard**, via email

**Answer:** Who the “I” of Romans 7 is to be identified with is much debated by scholars. It is unlikely a merely personal depiction of St. Paul himself. He is more likely describing the condition of the human person without Christ or someone living in the flesh rather than the Spirit.

However, even if the “I” of Romans 7 were Paul, there is a clear indication at the end of Romans 7 and into Romans 8 that the condition of futility is reversed:

“Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. ... For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has freed you from the law of sin and death. For what the law, weakened by the flesh, was powerless to do, this God has done: by sending his own Son ... ” (Rom 7:25-8:3).

Therefore, there seems no connection with the “thorn in the flesh” of 2 Corinthians 12, which God permits to stay, and the condition described in Romans 7, which is taken away.

Further, the Greek word translated as “thorn” is *skólops*. It surely refers to a thorn, sharp splinter or a pointed stake. But as such it seems more of a physical affliction, rather than a spiritual one. The word translated as “flesh” is *sarx*.

In Paul's usage, *sarx* can sometimes mean the physical body, as it likely does here. Most of the time, however, St. Paul uses *sarx* (flesh) to refer to our sinful and rebellious nature. If he were using the word "flesh" as an allegory for our sin nature, the flesh does not need a thorn, it already is a thorn. So it seems more likely that St. Paul is using "thorn" and "flesh" to refer to some sort of physical malady that he endured.

Hence, it does not seem that the two texts you mentioned are related. The text from Romans 7 speaks to a past spiritual battle and may not even refer to Paul himself. The text from his second letter to the Corinthians speaks more likely to an ongoing physical malady.

## Holy Spirit as 'uncle'

**Question:** Since the Church views the Holy Spirit in masculine terms, can we view him as the brother of God the Father and our uncle?

– **Robert Bonsignore**, Brooklyn, New York

**Answer:** No, Scripture nowhere uses such terminology to speak of the Holy Spirit. In modern times some have tried to assign images to the Holy Spirit in order to resolve the mystery of who he is.

Some, as you note, have tried to turn him into a feminine principle in God and call him "she" and "her." Terms such as "uncle" would also be in this category.

While understandable, this attempt to "domesticate" or "understand" the Holy Spirit on our terms is misguided if it goes beyond what is revealed. Of the Holy Spirit Jesus says, "The wind blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8). There is a mystery to respect here.

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