Paul’s “Robust Conscience” and His Thorn in the Flesh

J. Gerald Janzen
Christian Theological Seminary

Abstract
-On the nature of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” Ralph P. Martin concludes, “The possibilities . . . fall into two categories, . . . human opponents and physical ailments;” and he notes that, while we ourselves may never know the truth, “in all probability, the Corinthians knew of what Paul spoke.” I propose that they knew “of what Paul spoke” from their own experience or observation of Satan in the latter’s function as an agent of God (1 Cor 5:1-5; 2 Cor 2:1-11). On the basis of the Satan theme common to these passages and 2 Cor 12:7, I propose that Paul’s thorn is the prick of conscience, his lingering remorse (re-morsus, “re-bite”) over his collusion in the stoning of Stephen and his persecution of the church. Such an interpretation I take to be reinforced by (a) the imagery for pain of conscience as a “prick,” or “bite,” or “gnawing” pain attested in ancient Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, as well as in modern Western textual traditions; and (b) the convergence in 1 Tim 1 of the thematic of conscience, Satan, and Paul’s past persecutory activity. Such a diagnosis of Paul’s thorn as lingering remorse suggests a revision of Krister Stendahl’s diagnosis of Paul’s post-Damascus Road conscience as “robust.” Rather, his formerly, misleadingly robust conscience is now healthily “chastened,” and informs his use of “conscience” language in, e.g., Romans and the Corinthian Correspondence.

Fifty years ago, Krister Stendahl challenged the view that Paul had found in Christ the solution to his introspective conscience, a conscience “crushed” by the judgments of a law whose demands he found impossible to fulfill.¹ To Stendahl, Paul

enjoyed a “robust conscience” both as a Jew and as a Christian. His argument has been widely accepted among Pauline scholars.

I agree as to Paul’s earlier conscience. I take at face value his own description of his earlier life in Gal 1:14, and his elaboration in Phil 3:5-6. But I believe Stendahl has misdiagnosed Paul’s Christian conscience, which I would call chastened. Our difference is epitomized in our respective construals of Paul’s thorn in the flesh: “a thorn [σκόλοψ] was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to pummel me in the face [ἵνα με κολαφίζῃ]” (2 Cor 12:7). As for what that thorn signifies, R. P. Martin writes, “The possibilities . . . fall into two categories. . . . human opponents and physical ailments.” He goes on to say, “In all probability, the Corinthians knew of what Paul spoke. We, however, are left on the outside of a two-way conversation. We will probably never know the truth”

I will argue a third diagnosis, with Adolf Schlatter who writes,

[T]he blows to the face are above all a disgracing, and this implies that the messenger assaults him as an apostle of the Accuser and holds up his sins before him. The blows of Satan’s messenger suggest the sorrowful intensity with which Paul bore within himself the recollection of his misdeeds in Jerusalem, which left him with an inextinguishable feeling of unworthiness. (1 Cor 15:9)

First, I shall briefly canvass allusions to these “misdeeds” in the Pauline tradition and elsewhere. Secondly, I shall adduce evidence for the “social imaginary” within which the Corinthians might naturally construe Paul’s image of the thorn as connoting remorse or “pain of conscience.” Third, I shall consider Paul’s other references to Satan’s activity in his Corinthian letters. Fourth, I shall identify a number of other thematic elements in Paul’s letters more broadly that resonate with fresh import when taken in relation to his thorn as continuing pain over his former persecutory zeal. Finally, I shall return to assess the adequacy of Stendahl’s assessment of Paul’s conscience.

I. Paul’s Persecutory Acts as Public Knowledge

Paul’s statement in 1 Cor 15:9 that “I persecuted the church of God” appears again in Gal 1:13-14 and in Phil 3:6; it is echoed in Eph 3:8 (“less than the least of all the saints”) and 1 Tim 1:12-16; and it becomes a leitmotif in the Book of Acts (7:58; 8:1, 3; 9:1, 4; 22:7; 26:10, 14). These various epistolary confessions, and presumed counterparts in Paul’s preaching and teaching, indicate three things: First, the

---

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations are from the NRSV.
4 The verb κολαφίζῃ carries this connotation also in Matt 26:67//Mark14:65; 1 Cor 4:11; 1 Pet 2:20.
5 Adolf Schlatter, Paulus der Bote Jesu (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1934), 667 (translation mine).
knowledge by others of these actions was widespread among nascent Christian groups. Second, Paul’s actions did not lie dormant in his subconscious, but tinctured his consciousness, as part of his self-knowledge, such shared knowledge constituting a form of conscience—conscientia / συνείδησις—in its “weak” sense of “knowing-something-with-others-who-know.” Third, in so far as this tinctured self-knowledge imbued Paul with a sense of his unworthiness, it constituted a “strong” form of conscience, where what one knows about oneself, and what one knows is known about oneself, impugns one’s moral standing.

So, Paul writes, “I am the least of the apostles, unfit [ὁ οὐκ εἰμὶ ἱκανός] to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am [εἰμι ὁ εἰμι]” (1 Cor 15:9-10). I note the contrasting relative clauses: ὃς οὐκ εἰμὶ ἱκανός and εἰμι ὁ εἰμι. Paul’s conscience of unworthiness to be an apostle is not obliterated, but it is assuaged, by his deeper sense of God’s grace enabling him to be an apostle. This confession corresponds to Paul’s confession in 2 Cor 12:7. On the one hand, the thorn; on the other hand, “My grace [χάρις] is sufficient for you.”

In one line of interpretation, this experience—of finding himself to be a sinner in his very striving to serve God according to the Torah—informs his most penetrating portrayal of the dynamics of sin, a deceptive dynamics leading to the cry, ταλαίπωρος ἐγώ ἄνθρωπος, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:7-24). At the same time, and more deeply, it is his experience of God’s grace in the face of sin at such depths (Rom 5:8-11, 20) that grounds and in-forms his sense of his apostleship (Rom 1:5; 12:3; 15:15).

II. Images of the Pain of Conscience in the Social Imaginary

I use the phrase, “social imaginary,” in Charles Taylor’s sense, as incorporating “a sense of the normal expectations that we have of each other; the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices which make up our social life.” Prior to and deeper than formal conceptualizations, it operates at the level of ordinary people’s imaginations, and is “carried in images, stories, legends, etc.” As “both factual and ‘normative,’” this sense assumes, even though

---


7 Granted, χάρις in these three passages carries the primary, more general connotation of a spiritual endowment for a specific commission; but given the circumstances in which Paul received this commission and endowment—his persecution of the very faith he was now to serve—the term in these three passages resonates also with the specific connotations it carries throughout Romans, most pointedly in 3:23-24. (See my remarks below on the connotations in Paul’s use of the verb χαρίζομαι.)
it can never exhaustively grasp, “some notion of a moral or metaphysical order.”

In this section, I offer evidence for my claim that imaging the pain of conscience as a sharp prick, or stab, or gnawing bite is a natural, pre-reflective part of the vocabulary of the social imaginary in biblical and surrounding, as well as succeeding, cultures. I shall trace such a usage backward in time.

(a) Our word “remorse” derives from remorsus, literally, “re-bite.” Thus, Julian Barnes, in a recent novel, has a character observe, “Remorse, etymologically, is the action of biting again: that’s what the feeling does to you. Imagine the strength of the bite when I reread my words. They seemed like some ancient curse I had forgotten even uttering.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his play, Remorse, has a character, in the first scene, set the theme for the drama with the words, “REMORSE is as the heart, in which it grows. / If it be gentle it drops balmy dews / Of true repentance, but if proud and gloomy, / It is a poison-tree, that pierced to the inmost / Weeps only tears of poison.”

In a familiar Western tale concerning The Fairy of Truth, this fairy, on the death of the king, furnishes his heir, Prince Darling, with a ring that is designed to prick the prince’s finger whenever he does something wrong. And a medieval play is translated into English as The Again-Bite of In-Wyt (or conscience).

(b) The Hebrew Bible contains no term corresponding to conscientia / συνείδησις. James Dunn writes, “it is well known that . . . Paul draws the concept of συνείδησις (‘conscience’) from Greek usage.” He goes on to note that “the concept (if not the experience) is almost wholly lacking in Jewish writings.” But the experience of conscience is most certainly articulated in “Jewish writings,” expressed in images that are more deeply rooted in the social imaginary that I am here tracing. Psalms 38 and 7 provide rich examples.

Psalms 38 is a cry for divine help of one whose foot has slipped (v. 17) through foolish iniquities (vv. 5-6). The results are a pain felt deep in the body (v. 4); ostracism by friends and companions (v. 12); and gloating attacks by adversaries (vv. 13, 17, 20-21). This latter group, the psalmist says, “accuse me” (v. 21); the
verb being cognate with the noun נפש that figures in the Book of Job. But what the psalmist most deeply feels, and is most deeply exercised over, is God’s disciplining rebuke (v. 2), experienced as piercing arrows (v. 3).

Psalm 7 opens with the plight of one under assault by pursuers (v. 1) and conscious only of having integrity (v. 8). Yet, aware of the possibility of having done wrong (vv. 3-4), the psalmist wishes success to those pursuers (v. 5). So the psalmist invokes God who tries the minds and “hearts” (v. 9). For if one does not repent God has “prepared his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts” (vv. 12-13). Insofar as the wicked falsely accuse the psalmist, and their mischievous lies return on their own heads, God’s “fiery shafts” will accuse their own “minds and hearts.”

Job similarly experiences his friends’ accusations as blows on the cheek (!) and the arrows of God’s archers (Job 16:10, 12). Against the background of chapters 1-2, those human blows and divine arrows come as messengers of an accuser in whose understanding divine justice follows a remorseless logic of reward and punishment. But, while acknowledging he is not perfect, Job rejects accusations of a wrongdoing that would merit such overwhelming calamity, swearing, “My heart does not reproach me for any of my days” (27:6). The Septuagint, employing the Greek idiom for conscience, translates the verse, “I do not know [σύνοιδα] against myself any wicked action.”

Further demonstrative of the experience of conscience are Isaiah and Sirach. Isaiah in the temple cries, “Woe is me, for I am pierced [κατανένυμαι] through, for I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa 6:5). As Sirach has it, “happy are those who do not blunder with their lips and need not suffer remorse [κατενύγη] for sin”—literally, “is not pierced with pain for sin” (Sir 14:1).

(c) In the fifth century BCE, Euripides, in Orestes, dramatizes conscience as follows. When Menelaus finds Orestes sick and agitated, and pursued by “the furies,” and asks after the nature of his sickness, Orestes answers, “my conscience, since I know I’ve done a dreadful deed.” Quoting this line five centuries later, Plutarch goes on to say that such conscience, like an ulcer in the flesh, leaves behind it in the soul regret which ever continues to wound and prick it. For the other pangs reason does away with, but regret is caused by reason itself, since the soul,

---

13 The heart (נשר), literally “kidney,” metaphorically connotes the “gut-feeling” of one’s moral standing before God.
14 The “call” scenes of Isaiah and Saul/Paul are worth close comparison for the many elements they have in common, especially if we take the portrayals of Acts into account. It is intriguing, in such a comparison, to note the consonance between Isaiah’s Septuagintal τάλας ἐγώ and Paul’s ταλαίπωρος ἐγώ ἄνθρωπος in Rom 7:24.
15 Compare the same verb in Job 27:6.
16 Euripides, Orestes, (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), line 395 (pp. 156-57).
together with its feeling of shame, is stung and chastised by itself.

(De tranq. anim. 476)  

The images pile up—“wound,” “prick,” “pang,” “sting/bite,” “chastise” (the verb καλάζω, at the least, a resonant homophone of κολαφίζω in 2 Cor 12:7), and one’s consciousness as suffused with shame—all without letup, since all this is in the way of self-accusation and self-reproach, from one’s sense of the deep logos of things. Philo, too, repeatedly describes the convicted conscience with words for stinging or stabbing.  

When, then, the Corinthians read that Paul has been given a “thorn in the flesh” to “pummel him in disgrace” (κολαφίζῃ), they might naturally take this as referring to the pain of conscience. Such a reference would be reinforced by the figure of Satan in his familiar role as (over-zealous) accuser, especially in his other appearances in Paul’s Corinthian letters.

III. Satan in Paul’s Letters to the Corinthians

(a) In 1 Cor 5:1-5, a man’s flagrant incest moves Paul to hand him over to Satan “for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit might be saved in the day of Jesus Christ.” With Anthony Thiselton, I construe this as “judicial verdictive and directive illocutions which expel him from the congregation.” These “illocutions” would aim to evoke an answering sense of self-reproach, so that “the offender, bereft of the approval and support of the community, will find his self-sufficiency and self-reliance eroded until he comes to reach a change of heart.”  

The organic register, and isolating effect, of this reproach as “social pain,” is illuminated by current neuroscientific findings that give images at the moral heart of a “social imaginary” even greater depth and force. Writing of “the painful sources of social bonds,” Panksepp and Biven note that “[o]ur earliest social bonds, when firm and secure, nourish our psychological health for a lifetime,” but that separation, or even the prospect of separation, gives rise (across mammalian species and even in young chicks) to distress and pain. Moreover, “[we] respond intensely to uncaring emotional gestures directed toward us; anything that hints at shunning or even milder forms of social exclusion is experienced as psychologically painful.” According to Naomi J. Eisenberger and Matthew D. Lieberman,

18 E.g., Philo III (LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 130), 100 (Deus 100); 101 (Deus 183); Philo VII, (LCL; 1937), 51 (Decal. 87).
19 Anthony Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 399.
20 Compare Philo’s portrayal of conscience as self-reproach, in Det 23 (LCL II, 216-19); Det 58 (LCL II, 240-43); Det 146 (LCL II, 298-99); Deus 125-26 (LCL III, 72-73).
22 Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Biven, The Archaeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human
“Just as physical pain has evolved to alert us that something has gone wrong with our bodies, social pain is a similarly potent signal that alerts us when something has gone wrong with our social connections to others.” They suggest that “social and physical pain share the same underlying system, and that this overlap has several consequences for the way these types of pain are detected, experienced and overcome.” With this we may compare Jacob Milgrom’s remarks, in his aptly titled work, Cult and Conscience: “The ancients did not distinguish between emotional and physical suffering. The same language describes pangs of conscience and physical pains [among other texts Milgrom notes here Ps 38:2-11, 18-19].”

When, then, Paul can speak of a “thorn in the flesh, in Paul’s “social imaginary” referencing one’s organic self in integral relation to the organic selves of others in a psychosocial, symbolic nexus—the image may be taken to function both metaphorically and literally concerning the emotional and physical pain rendered by Satan’s messenger.

How, then, would Thiselton’s “judicial . . . illocutions,” involving reproach, register on the offender? In the “social imaginary” of the day, as shaped by Scripture and ages-long social experience, it might well come as the fiery shafts of Ps 7 (cf. the “flaming arrows” of Eph 6:16). Such remorse, as a self-knowing consonant with the community’s knowing, would already, in that mode, reconnect the penitent to the moral community. But full “salvation” or restoration to utter wholeness of relations—including, perhaps, the full healing of the offender’s painfully awakened conscience—apparently awaits “the day of the Lord.”

(b) In 2 Cor 2:5-11, a penitent wrongdoer is in danger of being overwhelmed by excessive “pain” (λύπῃ), the pain of remorse (v. 7). The community has levied a severe punishment on him, probably some sort of “judicial verdictive and directive illocutions which expel him from the congregation.” But now they are to forgive (χαρίσαςθαι) and comfort (παρακαλέσαι) him (v. 7). These verbs carry powerfully pointed connotations in Paul’s own “cave of resonant signification.”

The verb παρακαλέω makes its appearance, in this letter, with the stunningly powerful berakhah with which the letter opens (2 Cor 1:3-7); it and its cognate noun occurring no less than ten times. In the berakah this “admonition, exhortation, encouragement, comforting, consolation,” abounds to counter the general human condition of affliction and sufferings. But insofar as it is grounded in

---

25 Compare Philo’s characterization (Somn 1, 91 [LCL V 344-5]) of repentance as “younger brother of complete guiltlessness.”
Christ’s sufferings that abound “for us” (v 5), this παράκλησις implicitly embraces and counters the pains of awakened conscience. This is underscored by the opening characterization of God as “the Father of mercies [οἰκτιρμῶν] and the God of all consolation [παρακλήσεως]” (v. 3). These terms bracket, as it were, Israel’s whole story, from its covenant foundations at Sinai, where God resolves the potentially fatal idolatry of the calf in God’s self-disclosure as “a God merciful and gracious,” to the prospect of its restoration after the exile, as Second Isaiah proclaims, “Comfort, comfort [παρακαλεῖτε, παρακαλεῖτε] my people, says your God,” where these words, speak to the heart (so the Hebrew underlying “tenderly”), function in part to assuage Israel’s conscience for the “sins” that incurred the exile. The importance of these foundationally and eschatologically loaded terms for Paul, as evidenced by their appearance in 2 Cor 1:3, is indicated also by the strategic rhetorical appeal, in Rom 12:1, to “the mercies of God,” and, in Rom 15:4-5, by the way Paul summarizes the eschatological import of his Scriptures in the categories of “steadfastness” and “encouragement,” these hope-inducing virtues coming as gifts from “the God of steadfastness [ὑπομονῆς] and encouragement [παρακλήσεως].” The way this last phrase echoes the berakhah in 2 Cor 1:3 further underscores how this whole complex of terms goes to the heart of Paul’s theology—a theology grounded in his experience of God’s mercy and παράκλησις in the face of his own grave sin.

What I am getting at is that the first person plural pronouns “we” and “us” in 1 Cor 1:3-7, like those in Rom 5:6-14, have Paul’s own “I” at their heart. So, when Paul says in 2 Cor 2:11—identifying the root cause of the penitent’s “overabundant pain” (περισσοτέρᾳ λύπῃ) in v. 7—that “we are not ignorant of [Satan’s] designs, at the center of that “we” lies Paul’s “I,” an “I” who, plagued by the thorn, and praying that it be removed, received the Lord’s answer, “my grace [χαρίς] is sufficient for you.”

Given, then, how, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom 5:20), in the present instance Paul calls upon his addressees, in effect, to “abound all the more” in the grace-of-forgiveness toward this penitent sinner, as signaled in the fourfold reiteration of the verb χαρίζομαι, in 2:7-10 (NRSV supplies an implied fifth occurrence in v 10). But why—when the preferred word for forgiveness in the New Testament is ἀφίημι and cognates—does Paul choose the rare verb for forgiveness, χαρίζομαι? I suggest that, in dealing with the question of grave sin, and the “excessive pain” of a conscience awakened to its gravity, Paul works out of such a conscience that is nevertheless assuaged and sustained by divine χαρίς as embodied in “our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 13:13; 1 Cor 15:9; 2 Cor 12:9). Paul himself, I suggest, knows what it is to be overwhelmed by “excessive remorse;” and he knows that it is by God’s χαρίς that one survives Satan’s
excessive taunts and accusations. For him, the verb expressing forgiveness is, then, χαρίζομαι.26

For all Stendahl’s misreading of Paul’s Christian conscience, he has said something profound about conscience in general, in addressing the theme of “judgment and mercy” at a civil rights rally on Martin Luther King Day in 1972:

The opportunity for repentance might seem to be a small thing to all except those who have even the slightest notion of the magnitude of their sin. Those who have a knowledge of the evil which they or their culture, or their country, or their wealth has caused—the consequences of which are irrevocable and are fed as poison into the world—they know the meaning of this mercy, this margin for repentance. . . . If the consequences last, is it really important that the individual or even the people repent? Yes, it is, for them, for God, and perhaps for the future. But the guilt lies heavy.27

The guilt lies heavy. Can one who has caused irreversible harm to others, in all conscience want to forget? The more sensitive such a conscience, the sharper the pain under the unsparing gaze of self-accusation, the implied or overt disapprobation of others, and the sense of heaven’s just judgment. What would grace consist in? Forgetting what one had done? That would be immoral; a lie and a murdering of the truth. Grace, for Paul, is the ability to go on, despite the lingering pains of conscience, sustained by the grace of Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

(c) Finally, a cluster of items in 2 Cor 11 serve as a thematic run-up to the thorn. Paul has been dealing with opponents who challenge his apostolic credentials, compared with credentials of which they boast. He first mocks them in 2 Cor 11:5 as “super-apostles.” Then in 2 Cor 11:13-15 he exposes them as “false apostles, deceitful workers,

posing [μετασχηματιζόμενοι] as apostles of Christ.

And no wonder, for even Satan

poses [μετασχηματίζεται] as an angel of light.

So it is not strange if his servants, also,

pose [μετασχηματίζονται] as servants of righteousness.”

The synonymous parallelism in the repeated verb suggests a similar synonymity in

26 Mindful of James Barr’s strictures against overloading a word’s given occurrence with connotations it legitimately carries elsewhere, I nevertheless follow Samuel Taylor Coleridge when he writes, “I include in the meaning of a word not only its correspondent object, but likewise all the associations which it recalls. For language is framed to convey not the object alone, but likewise the character, mood and intentions of the person who is representing it.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 115-16 (italics original).

what Satan and these super-apostles pose as. Satan, in posing as an “angel [or messenger] of light,” poses as a “servant of righteousness,” while these super-apostles, posing as “servants of righteousness,” operate as servants of Satan. This synonymity is analogous to Job’s friends who, in their accusations, unwittingly serve the hermeneutics of suspicion of the Satan of the prologue. But what of the image here of Satan as an angel or messenger of light? The image of light appears also, in a context concerning conscience, in 1 Cor 4:1-5 where, not incidentally, Paul is defending his apostolic credentials against detractors:

> With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself [οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐμαυτῷ σύνοιδα], but I am not thereby acquitted. [so much for the significance of a robust conscience!] It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then everyone will receive their commendation from God.

Paul’s imagery of “light” here suggests what it means when Satan poses falsely as an angel of light. His proper, God-appointed office as awakener of conscience is penultimate and instrumental—to bring people to repentance so that they may be saved in the Day of the Lord. But in posing as an angel of light, and operating (as in Job) with a logic of strict and unrelenting judgment for sin, Satan presumes to speak with eschatological finality, pronouncing ultimate doom on the truly guilty, and, where he can, sowing seeds of false guilt. For he is the ultimate hermeneut of suspicion.

And I suspect that these “super-apostles” pose as servants of righteousness, in part, by pointing to Paul’s moral stain, his moral “weakness,” in having persecuted the church. He will shortly claim that stain as the very badge of his apostleship, bearing the stamp of the grace of God in Christ. Meanwhile, in thinking that their critique of Paul’s moral stain makes them servants of righteousness, they show that they have not fathomed what the gospel means by God’s righteousness as justifying the ungodly.

**IV. Echoes of Conscience as Fire**

Sandwiched between Paul’s references to Satan in 2 Cor 11:14 and 12:7, Paul asserts a double-barreled rhetorical question containing an image that may in its own way signal Paul’s lingering remorse. Concluding a catalog of things he ironically

28 This idiom, occurring only here in the New Testament, occurs in the LXX only in Job 27:6.
boasts about, he says in 2 Cor 11:29a, “who is weak, and I am not weak?” Then, as specifying the particular form of weakness that is coming to mind, he says in v. 29b, “Who is made to stumble [σκανδαλίζεται], and I do not burn (πυροῦμαι)?” It is often taken (e.g., in the RSV, NRSV, and ESV) that when others are made to stumble, Paul burns with indignation. But if so, I take it that he burns also with sympathetic shame, arising out of his own shame at having stumbled over the stone of stumbling that God had laid in Zion, a rock that would make people fall (πέτραν σκανδάλου), but a rock such that “whoever believes in him will not be put to shame” (Rom 9:33). That stone and rock is a crucified Messiah, which, Paul says (speaking out of personal experience), is “a σκάνδαλον to Jews” (1 Cor 1:23). So when he now says, “who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn?” I take him to speak in solidarity, out of his own experience of burning shame.

When we read this sentence that way, we suddenly hear fresh resonances in other Pauline references to fire. (a) In Rom 12:17 he counsels, “repay no one evil for evil,” and again in 12:21, “do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” In saying that in this way they will heap “burning coals” (ἄνθρακας πυρὸς) on their persecutors’ heads (12:20), he may intimate how the proverb (Prov 25:21-22) speaks to his own experience.

(b) In 1 Cor 3, addressing party rivalries oriented around supposedly competing apostles, Paul points out how he planted and Apollos built. Then he says:

Each one’s work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. . . . If any one’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss [ζημιωθήσεται] though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Cor 3:13-15)

In the verb ζημιωθήσεται I hear the ring of Paul’s own experience. He had thought that in his zeal for God he was making such tremendous gains (Phil 3:7). But all he had thought to be doing for God, especially in his prosecution of the church (Phil 3:6), showed itself, in the light of his encounter with a crucified Christ, to be “loss” (ζημίαν) (Phil 3:7, 8). What, then, for Paul, is the fire of 1 Cor 3 but the purgative fire of a conscience that recognizes, in retrospect, that all his zeal for God had in fact accomplished nothing, for it had inflicted great harm on the very goals he was striving to serve? (c) And then, as echoed in Eph 6:16, there are the “flaming arrows” of the evil one, so named because he is a rogue accuser posing as ultimate judge.

V. Stendahl on Paul’s Conscience: A Final Assessment
So I come back to Stendahl’s blanket assertion as to Paul’s robust conscience, not
only at the outset of his adult activity as a zealous Jew, but also as a Christian. In his comments on the thematics of sin in Paul, he writes,

To be sure, no one could ever deny that *hamartia*, “sin,” is a crucial word in Paul’s terminology, especially in his epistle to the Romans. Rom 1–3 sets out to show that all—both Jews and Gentiles—have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God. . . . Rom 3:21–8:39 demonstrates how and in what sense this tragic fact is changed by the arrival of the Messiah.

Then he turns to Paul’s own case, as reflected in his references to his persecutory past:

It is much harder to gage how Paul subjectively experienced the power of sin in his life and, more specifically, how and in what sense he was conscious of actual sins. One point is clear. The Sin with a capital S in Paul’s past was that he had persecuted the Church of God. This climax of his dedicated obedience to his Jewish faith (Gal 1:13, Phil 3:6) was the shameful deed which made him the least worthy of apostleship (1 Cor 5:9). . . . [W]hen 1 Timothy states on Paul’s account that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am number one [hon protos ego eimi]” (1:15), this is not an expression of contrition in the present tense, but refers to how Paul in his ignorance had been a blaspheming and violent persecutor . . . . Nevertheless, Paul knew that he had made up for this terrible Sin of persecuting the Church, as he says in so many words in 1 Cor 15:10: “. . . his grace toward me was not in vain; on the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I but the grace of God which is with me.”

sense of God’s grace in Christ, “the guilt lies heavy,” to cite Stendahl’s own more profound if general diagnosis. Third, there is almost a note of glibness in Stendahl’s “Paul knew that he had made up for this terrible Sin.” Make up for the harm one has caused? When their “consequences . . . are irrevocable and are fed as poison into the world”? If the energy Paul put into his apostolic labors was given further impetus by his sense of guilt for what he had done—by the thorn that acted as a spur—his own testimony is, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on (!)” (Phil 3:12). In any case, Paul’s words in 1 Cor 15:10 do not refer primarily to what Paul has done, but to the efficacy of God’s grace in and through such an unworthy apostle. It is this sense of his own human frailty as nevertheless undergirded by God’s grace that enables him to extend the same sort of encouragement to his “beloved brothers and sisters” at the end of this chapter (1 Cor 15:58).

Conclusion
The thorn, stinging and burning under Paul’s skin, is a chastening and salutary reminder that he is who he is by the grace of God. And that grace is sufficient. It is that sense of grace in his weakness that is the ground of his strength (2 Cor 12:9-10), and of his identification with all who are in any way weak (1 Cor 9:22), his sense of solidarity especially with the world’s refuse and offscouring (1 Cor 4:13).

A robust conscience is an enviable state of soul. Or not. Saul of Tarsus found that it can be a deadly dangerous thing. His Torah-grounded persecution of the church and the church’s Christ, in all the robustness of a clear conscience, stands as a warning to all religious zealotry, especially where it understands itself, like the early Paul, as a Scripturally-grounded servant of righteousness. Paul, we might say, spent the rest of his life as a “recovering zealot,” graced by God and yet, as one form of that grace-in-operation, chastened in conscience. If we are to be “imitators” of Paul (Phil 3:17), the lesson may well be, “beware the person with a robust conscience!”