

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 22 II Corinthians¹

BACKGROUND

We have just finished covering I Corinthians. Paul wrote the letter while on his third missionary journey in Ephesus. We will not rehash the information on Corinth that we covered earlier. Instead, we will concentrate on Paul's interaction with the Corinthian church that leads to Second Corinthians.

Paul originally came to Corinth on his second missionary journey. During the 18 months he stayed, Paul established the church there among Gentiles and Jews. After Paul left the church, Apollos and perhaps Peter came to the church and taught for a brief period. Paul continued to keep up with the church through messengers that went back and forth. Paul wrote an early letter to the church (some scholars call it "Corinthians A") that is no longer available (it is not "extant").² Out of concern, Paul wrote a second letter ("Corinthians B") called I Corinthians in our Bibles.

After Paul wrote I Corinthians, the problems continued to fester. Acts 19:22 and I Corinthians 16:10 seem to indicate that Paul sent Timothy and Erastus to Corinth. II Corinthians 1:1 indicates that Timothy returned to Paul in Ephesus, but the problems were not solved. So, Paul seems to have made a visit (which he termed "painful") in II Corinthians 2:1. After the painful visit, Paul returned to Ephesus where he wrote a "sorrowful" letter (II Corinthians 2:1-4), which scholars call "Corinthians C."³ We have an indication that Paul sent Titus in an attempt to help the situation.

While Paul was waiting for Titus's return, Paul left Ephesus and went to Troas. Before Titus arrived, Paul went on to Macedonia. While Paul was waiting for Titus in Macedonia, Paul started writing II Corinthians (see 2:13; 7:5; and 9:2). That places the epistle as being written in 56 A.D. Paul wrote about his plans and interactions with the church (1:1-2:4), the theology behind Paul's gospel message

¹ This lesson is an excerpt from Lessons 45, 46, and 47 of the Biblical Literacy series written by W. Mark Lanier. Full texts of these lessons can be found at www.biblical-literacy.com.

² Some scholars believe that the earlier letter, Corinthians A, is not lost but has been incorporated into the letters we have (I and II Corinthians).

³ This letter is no longer extant. Some scholars believe it is integrated into the Corinthian letters we have.

and our eternal life (2:5–5:10), and Paul’s ministry (5:11–7). While Paul was writing (chapter 7ish!), Titus arrived and brought Paul good news about the church’s willingness to submit to Paul and his teaching. Accordingly, Paul finished the letter covering the contribution for the Jerusalem church (8–9) and reaffirming his apostleship and authority (10–13).

THE TEXT

Second Corinthians reads very differently compared to First Corinthians. Whereas First Corinthians is orderly, practical, and moves logically step by step, Second Corinthians is anything but such! Second Corinthians is more theological than practical. While First Corinthians is orderly, Second Corinthians seems out of order. There are huge breaks in thought and big insertions off subject. While First Corinthians is targeted to answering questions the church posed and other specific problems, Second Corinthians is much more centered on Paul and his teaching, rather than the church and its practices.

ONE LETTER OF MANY? UNITY OF THE TEXT

The Text of II Corinthians has frustrated numerous scholars over the years because of its stop and start nature. In a number of places, the tone and content seem to change drastically. For example, Chapters 1-9 have a warm tone, while chapters 10-13 are harsh (see Kistemaker, 2 Corinthians New Testament Commentary, p.7). Also, the passage from 2:14 to 7:4 can seem like an insert if one looks at it closely. These folks note that 2:13 (immediately before the insert) reads, “So I said good bye to them and went on to Macedonia.” Verse 2:14 then stats a whole new train of thought. However, in verse 7:5 (after the insert), Paul returns to his thought in 2:13 saying, “For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest...”

This “start/stop” nature and these abrupt changes move a number of scholars to dissect this letter into parts, called the “partitive theory” of Corinthians. We will not delve into detail on this theory, for that would be greater than our task of Biblical literacy! But, we will add a note that whether the book is a whole or whether the church saw fit to combine several of Paul’s writings into one, we are still reading what the Apostle Paul wrote, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and brought together in scripture by that same Spirit.

Having made that note, there are good reasons to see this letter as a composite whole, starting and stopping and changing subjects at almost any time. We need to remember that Paul was not writing on a word processor. For that matter, he did not even have an eraser! Paul wrote on scrolls that were expensive and limiting in their use! Unlike a book where one might tear out a page that does not

fit or a notebook where one may reorder the pages to make better sense, a scroll is written without such editing from start to finish.

If we also remember that Paul did not necessarily write letters all at once, then we can see this letter taking a good bit of time for him. He clearly wrote while traveling, dictating one portion here, and another portion there. He might have set the letter down for a month and then resumed it. It seems very likely that he would have written a good bit of it with Titus gone. Then, Titus returns while Paul is writing what we deem chapter 7. In that event, it is fair to assume Paul would not throw away the scroll on which he had been writing to rewrite the first part. Paul would just add on to the scroll with the news Titus brought.

In short, the partitive theory offers students and scholars an alternative understanding for the ebb and flow of the context of the letter. By the same token, there are other legitimate reasons to understand the contextual flow. So, our key will be to follow Paul's train of thought, however it came to us!

THE THEMES

Different scholars have sorted through II Corinthians in an effort to catalogue the various themes in the letter. Alfred Plummer set out themes of: apostolicity, Christology, the trinity, the resurrection, and the second coming (eschatology). Kistemaker sets out themes of: suffering and glory, covenant and transformation, dwellings on earth and in heaven, reconciliation and righteousness, eschatology and Christology, and trust and apostolicity.

Each of these scholars grouped these threads found in the letter in a useful overview of the letter's content. Each of their commentaries is worthy of study and review. We will note some of the passages for these themes as we go through the letter itself.

THE LETTER

The letter does not lend itself readily to an outline. We will use the outline set forward earlier in the Background section of this lesson:

1. Paul's plans and interactions with the church (1-2:4);
2. The theology behind Paul's gospel message and our eternal life (2:5-5:10);
3. Paul's ministry (5:11-7);
4. The contribution for the Jerusalem church (8-9); and
5. Reaffirming Paul's apostleship and authority (10-13).

1. Paul's plans and interactions with the church (1:1–2:4)

Paul addresses the letter to the church in Corinth. Unlike I Corinthians, Paul adds all saints in Achaia (Greece) as recipients.

Paul explains that in the midst of his troubles and distress, he received great comfort from God. God's compassion and comfort enables Paul to comfort others (3-5). Paul's distress stemmed from great hardships and pressures. Paul and his companions "felt the sentence of death" in their hearts (1:9).

From this distress, Paul noted several truths:

1. As part of Christ, we receive not only the overflow of His comfort, but also the overflow of His suffering (1:5)!
2. We have the patience to endure suffering from the comfort of God and his saints (1:6).
3. From our suffering comes a reliance on God (1:9).
4. Our hope for deliverance comes from God, our deliverer (1:10)!
5. Prayer for those suffering does help (1:11).

From verse 12 forward, Paul discusses how his plans changed. Originally, Paul planned on visiting the Corinthians twice while on his swing through Macedonia. Paul changed those plans, and not because Paul was wishy-washy or made plans lightly. Paul explains that God does not flip flop on things – nor did he. Rather, Paul decided not to make another "painful visit" to spare the Corinthians the grief (1:23-2:2).

2. Paul's gospel message and eternal life (2:5 – 5:10)

Paul sets forward his forgiveness of any who caused him grief from that last painful visit (2:5). In light of the problems of the Corinthian church that we read of in I Corinthians, it is not surprising that Paul's next visit to the church would be painful!

Paul explains that he went on to Troas to preach but Titus had not yet returned; so, Paul had no peace of mind. Paul's heart troubled him over the church and how it was doing. He was bothered by the visit and the pain/grief it involved. Even the apostle Paul could not put those troubles out of mind!

Although, in the midst of his distress, Paul remembered the important lesson that we are who we are because of God. We do not live life apart from him. That makes us "the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and among those

who are perishing” (2:15). The aroma Paul left was important to him; so, Paul was never one to “peddle the word of God for profit” (2:17).

Paul ministered a New Covenant, not one written on tablets of stone, like the Ten Commandments, but a new covenant written by the Spirit on the hearts of men. This new ministry of a New Covenant was a world apart from before.

The earlier covenant was written on stone and brought death. The New Covenant of the Spirit was one of life and glory. While receiving the Old Covenant, Moses had to veil his face because the glory of the Lord was so great it affected Moses himself. Now, Paul says if the Old Covenant was surpassed with a more glorious covenant, then how bold we can be with our covenant!

Paul notes that the veil Moses wore was much like the veil that non-believing Jews wear to the New Covenant. The greatest glory is that shown in the New Covenant. Yet, just as the Jews could never see the glory reflected in Moses because of the veil, the Jews wore a veil that kept them from seeing the glory of the New Covenant.

Believers, however, are different! We have unveiled faces and behold the glory of the Lord, even as we are being transformed ourselves into that glory (3:7-18).

Because Paul has this ministry of this covenant of glory and life, Paul walks plainly in truth of word and action. He needs no pretense or show. He needs no deceit or secrets. He has a glorious word of truth; a covenant that sets men free to live eternally with God. He has the clear light of the good news that Jesus died and was resurrected on mankind’s behalf. This is a word Paul preaches gladly. For this is a shining light from God into our hearts. It is the light of the Lord Jesus himself (4:1-6).

In spite of having this glorious light and covenant, the suffering that we do shows that the power and light we have is not our own but comes from God. This allowed Paul and all believers to understand that our sufferings and our bodies that fall apart (“earthen vessels”) serve as reminders that *inwardly* we are being renewed. Inwardly, we are already seeing the start of what time will manifest to us fully – namely, the glory of our heavenly dwelling with God. There will come a day for all believers when we will be clothed immortally with the heavenly body God has made for us. While we groan and suffer now, we have confidence that our eternity is secure in the hands of a mighty and loving God. God secured his eternity in our hearts by placing his Spirit there (4:7-5:5).

This brings Paul to the logical conclusion that we are better off after death as we join God for eternity. Nevertheless, while here in this earthen vessel, we serve him faithfully. We gladly live to please our king before whom we will stand when life is over! At this ultimate judgment, we will receive our due from God for the things we have done on earth – whether good or bad (5:1-10).

PERSONAL NATURE OF LETTER

We also consider some of what makes this letter so personal **to** Paul and so personal **about** Paul. One scholar has noted, “If you want to really get to know Paul, spend time in Second Corinthians.”⁴

Why is that so? Think about it. You see more deeply into a person when he/she is under attack and responds to critics. In Second Corinthians, Paul spends a great deal of time defending himself from a variety of assaults. We do not have the benefits of reading or hearing the negative material circulating about Paul and his ministry, but by using a bit of deduction, we easily learn some of what his adversaries said.

Reading both letters together gives a good bit of insight into those things that hurt Paul and caused Paul to write as he did. We know that Paul felt a fatherly role to the church itself (1 Cor. 4:15). We also know that Paul established the church and stayed there longer than he had at any other church at the time, save his “home” church at Antioch (Acts 18; 1 Cor. 3:6). After Paul left, the Corinthians received teaching from others, some godly, some not necessarily so (Acts 18:27; 2 Cor. 11:3-6; 13-15). The result of these other teachings left the church divided in loyalty and doctrine (1 Cor. 1:10-12). The church had serious problems with some believing they were superior to others in the church and to Paul himself (1 Cor. 1:18-2:5). Paul confronted these problems in letters and made a painful, quick visit to Corinth that caused Paul and the Corinthians grief (2 Cor. 2:2). Paul never wrote off the church; Paul kept reaching out in pain and love. Paul tried teaching the church correct doctrine and practice, while confronting his critics.

Out of this turmoil emerges 2 Corinthians in which Paul defends himself, as well as his ministry, his lifestyle, and his apostleship. Yet, as Paul gives this defense, he does so recognizing that God is his ultimate defense. In this way, 2 Corinthians provides insight into a man who feels compelled to defend himself and his ministry, but who also accepts the suffering and slander that comes to followers of a suffering and slandered Messiah.

⁴ Conversation with Charles Mickey.

A MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION (2 COR. 5:11-6:13)

Paul spent the first 4 1/2 chapters speaking of his plans with the Corinthians, his suffering, his new covenant message, and the bodies of clay we now live in, and the heavenly bodies that await us in glory. Paul explains that we have a new covenant of glory written on our hearts. Paul then takes this teaching about Christ in us (the new covenant written on our hearts) and the promise of a glorious resurrection body that awaits believers, and he applies it to his teaching and ministry.

Paul writes that his motivation for teaching – and his motivation for a plain and transparent life – is the fear/awe Paul has for the Lord. Paul lives his life to convey the truth of a crucified Messiah to men. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know he was not writing out of pride. Paul is not “trying to commend” himself to the Corinthians “again” (5:12) which was evidently something he had been accused of earlier. Apparently, some opposing Paul were proudly following those with “good visibles” (rich teachers? handsome teachers?) as opposed to proudly following Paul and those with good hearts!

Evidently, the charges against Paul go beyond his physical and material shortcomings. Some have even charged that Paul was out of his mind! So, Paul explains that if he and his companions are indeed “out of our mind, it is for the sake of God!” If, however, Paul is in his right mind, which no sane person should dispute, then all Paul’s actions are “for you [the Corinthians]” (5:13).

What was driving Paul? Christ’s love for Paul and for all of us compelled Paul. Christ’s love could never be clearer. The love was not merely spoken with words. Nor was it shown in simple affection or gifts. The love of Christ was demonstrated in this world by the ultimate sacrifice – a physical death and resurrection. Christ for us. Christ in our stead. That love pushes Paul to do all he could to proclaim to mankind the love of mankind’s Savior.

Paul never viewed people or the world the same again. The world had been alienated from God, but could be reconciled through Christ. This was a real event that had happened in Paul’s lifetime. There were hundreds of witnesses, including Paul himself. This is why Paul saw a new creation in Jesus Christ of all believers. The old covenant was gone, but so was the old life.

We live in a reconciled state of closeness to our God. As God, through Christ, was reconciling the world to himself, Paul was an ambassador through whom God made an appeal to men. Paul had a ministry of reconciliation, bringing the truth to people that a direct relationship with God was possible. People could now have sins forgiven, renewed with God’s unblemished righteousness. Paul was excited that God’s day of salvation spoken of in Isaiah 49:8 had arrived (5:16 – 6:2).

This profound action of God among mankind moved Paul. Paul would minister and speak freely to the Corinthians to convey the wonderful truth of what God did in Christ and what it meant to humanity. Paul's hardships paled in comparison to his participating in seeing God's salvation bearing fruit in believers. So Paul gladly endured "troubles, hardships and distresses, beatings, imprisonment and riots; hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger" (6:5).

Paul was first and foremost God's servant. Those who would discredit him would discredit his Master, God. Paul was God's servant in the face of the hardships, but also in his "purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report" (6:6-8).

Paul was almost the opposite of how he was being portrayed. Paul was "genuine, yet regarded an imposter; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet living on; beaten and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (6:8-10). This explanation and answer to his critics could only grow out of deep conviction in the truth of Paul's mission and message.

THE HOLINESS OF BELIEVERS (2 COR. 6:14-7:2)

After this defense, Paul seems to pause and adjust to a slightly different subject. This may be one of the places where Paul put his pen down for a week, or maybe a month, picking it up at a later time to write on something else that has occurred to him. He writes of the necessity of separateness between believers and unbelievers.

We understand this section a bit more if we note the meaning of the word "holy." The Greek for "holy" is *agios* (*hagios*). Its meaning echoes that of the Hebrew word for "holy", (*qodesh*). Both words strongly convey the idea of "separateness" in the sense of someone or something that was set apart. For example, certain people set apart for God's service in the Old Testament were considered "holy." In fact, the Jewish nation itself carried the term "holy" because it was a nation chosen by God, set apart from the other nations (Dt. 7:6). Even the Sabbath day was set apart as different from the other days, and hence was called "holy" (Gen. 2:3). These were "holy" because they were not "common," but were separated from the common for dedicated and special use before God.

This is why the church and we believers are called to be holy. We are not your average fallen humans! We are set apart for God's service. The Holy Spirit dwells within us. We have within us Christ, our assurance of glory. And, so we

are unique as a people among the nations of the world. We are holy!

Paul writes that as holy people, set apart from others, separated for God, as his children, as his dwelling place on earth, we are to live differently. We are not to be “yoked together with unbelievers.”⁵ Light and darkness do not dwell together, so we are to “purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit.” We are to perfect being set apart for God (i.e. “holiness”) out of our reverence for God who dwells within us and makes us separate (holy) (6:14-7:1).

PAUL’S JOY AND STEWARDSHIP (2 COR. 7:2-9:15)

In chapter 7, Paul again returns to the theme of defending himself in the face of attacks we can no longer hear directly, but can still clearly understand by the nature of Paul’s defense. Paul writes that he has neither wronged nor exploited anyone. Paul is careful in writing his defense that the Corinthians understand that he is not scolding those who support him. In fact, he is greatly encouraged by them and would willingly die for them (7:2-4).

At this point in Paul’s writing, Titus has returned to him with encouraging news of how the Corinthians feel and care for him. Paul understood from Titus that his last letter hurt some Corinthians. While Paul writes that he feels badly about hurting them, he was happy that the Corinthians’ sorrow led to repentance. Paul explains that godly sorrow can lead to wonderful, life-changing things for a Christian. Their sorrow produced an earnestness to clear themselves, an eagerness to make things right, an alarm to issues, and a desire to see justice done. This reaction encouraged Paul (7:8-13).

Titus himself was also encouraged and delighted at the Corinthians’ response to Titus and Paul’s message. Titus grew in affection from his time at the church (7:13-16).

Paul then addresses the issue of the Corinthian contributions for the work of the saints. Jerusalem and its surrounding area were severely famine-stricken. Food

⁵ This is a passage that is easily taken out of context by some to justify an “isolationist Christianity” where there is as little interaction with the world as possible. That is not a fair construction for two reasons. It loses the balance inherent in the immediate context itself. It is our unique calling and restored relationship that separates us from others. That results in a different lifestyle, yes, but not isolation. As Paul has already written, we are the aroma of Christ to those outside the church. Jesus taught the same when he taught that we were the salt of the earth. We preserve and flavor the world in the name of Christ. We are a light set on a hill, not because we are to be isolated from the world, but because we are what they see shining in the midst of the world’s darkness. Jesus sent us into the world to proclaim his message. It is the balance between being in the world for God’s purposes but not being of the world and its purposes.

was very expensive. Paul used this famine and the resulting starvation to bring funds from Gentiles in to the home Jewish church. No doubt this helped unite both giver (Gentile) and receiver (Jew) in Christ. For this contribution, the Macedonians (from where Paul was writing) were freely giving to God out of extreme poverty with overflowing joy (8:1-5). Paul wants the Corinthians to follow through on earlier commitments and similarly give earnestly to the work. Paul reminds the Corinthians of Jesus' giving. As God, Jesus was rich, but he became poor on our account so we could become rich in our eternal destiny (8:6-15).

Titus was returning to Corinth to collect the remaining gifts, and Paul emphasizes that the money is being handled VERY carefully so neither God nor man could question or criticize how the gift was used (8:16-24).

As Paul explains his heart on this issue of giving, he adds an important admonition:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." (9:6-8)

This passage is worth more than a passing reading. This passage has several truths at its core. First, everything is God's. Anything we have, we have as a result of his blessings. Second, God does much of his work through the church. What he has given us is not for OUR purposes, but for HIS. Third, when we give to him and his works, we should give with joy, recognizing that what we give is what he entrusted to us. He gave it to us for us to use and give as HE sees fit. So, we are to give and watch him use not only what we give, but also the right attitude with which we give. Those who give generously and cheerfully are those to whom God can entrust more. God entrusts more because those are people who will use the greater sums for HIS purposes as well.

This passage is not teaching a blind "give to the Lord so you can get richer!" The goal is not getting richer. The goal is being a trust-worthy vessel God can use to get his work done. By the same token, Paul recognized and PRECEDED this passage with his clear conviction of his obligation to handle the gifts rightly before God AND man. Paul never used this teaching as a means to enrich himself or his lifestyle. Paul counted it an honor to live for God in want.

CLOSING CHAPTERS

As we draw the Corinthian correspondence to a close, we see more clearly some of the slanderous and hurtful accusations hurled at Paul from within the confines of the church. As we discover some of these harsh insults, we marvel at Paul's loving and controlled response – not one of vengeance, but one of truth, defense, and challenge. Paul constantly works every event back to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As this letter draws to a close, we see most clearly that Paul practiced what he preached: Everything drew its significance and importance in reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Nothing else mattered.

The closing chapters of Second Corinthians also offer the challenge of understanding some of the more difficult verses in Paul's writings. We will consider a number of issues including spiritual warfare, visions of paradise, unanswered prayer, and self-examination.

PAUL'S DEFENSE AND HIS FOOL'S SPEECH (10:1 – 11:33)

As we read through chapters 10 and 11, Paul makes obvious references to a number of things that have been said to him or about him. It is hard to make sense of a number of verses if we fail to realize that Paul is responding to and referencing accusations and insults hurled at him by others. For example, chapter 10 starts with Paul writing:

By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you – I, Paul, who am “timid” when face to face with you, but “bold” when away!

The N.I.V. puts “timid” and “bold” in quotation marks to give us their interpretation that Paul is quoting what others have said about him.⁶

We would be remiss in understanding this passage if we were to read it as Paul affirming that he was timid before the Corinthians and bold when away. We do Paul's letter more justice by understanding that some Corinthians felt thusly about Paul, and Paul saw fit to respond to those beliefs.

Paul adds emphasis to his coming defense appealing “by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.” The meekness and gentleness should never be confused with timidity! Would those same Corinthians who labeled Paul timid be as quick to label the meek and gentle Son of God timid? We can assume not! Paul

⁶ We should remember that the old Greek used in ancient times did not have punctuation functioning like our quotation marks.

underscores this by saying his solution might well be to come back to Corinth and boldly confront several people there.

Paul could well confront his adversaries. Paul was not without the necessary weapons. But, the weapons Paul would bring would not be the world's weapons of war. Paul would not confront his adversaries with sword and shield, nor even fists. Paul saw the battle itself as something quite beyond the physical world and its people. To challenge someone to a dual would achieve nothing. In fact, it would miss the real point at issue.

So, Paul brought to "battle" weapons not of this world. His weapons were nonetheless VERY potent; for Paul's weapons had divine power to demolish strongholds. With his weapons, Paul demolished every pretension and argument. Paul had weapons to even capture thoughts and bring them into submission and obedience to Christ. Paul was anticipating punishing the disobedience of his adversaries, failing their change of heart and action (10:1-6).

Paul pointed out that the Corinthians were not looking properly on the situation. They looked only at the surface of things rather than the full truth. So, the Corinthians would consider too much of themselves and their views merely because they "belonged to Christ." Paul points out the superficiality of this reasoning noting that, of course, he also belonged to Christ! Mere status as a Christian does not make one's actions or beliefs right (10:7-8).

Among other insults some in Corinth levied against Paul was that Paul's "letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing" (10:10). Paul says that these people should be careful. Upon his return to Corinth, they will find him in person as weighty and forceful as he is in writing! (10:11)

Paul finds these people unwise in their self-boasting and self-commendation. Paul would not stoop to compare himself to those who were measuring themselves to themselves! These are people that were claiming with great pride who they were and what they did. Whether they were beautiful in appearance or enthralling speakers made no difference to Paul. Paul was "just" someone whom God entrusted with taking the gospel to Corinth and beyond! So, let the others commend themselves if they choose, Paul was happy to have the commendation from the Lord that was inherent in his calling and work (10:12-18).

Paul strikes a tone in chapter 11 that explains some of the previous sarcasm from his pen. Paul explains that he had a godly jealousy for the Corinthians. Paul felt the responsibility of presenting the Corinthians to Christ as a pure virgin before

her wedding. Paul's fear was that Satan would lead the Corinthians astray in their minds, replacing their pure and sincere devotion to Jesus with heresy (11:1-4).

Paul's concern was motivated in part by the arrival in Corinth of some self-proclaimed "Super Apostles." These folks were not intimidating to Paul and he speaks of them bluntly. While Paul was not a trained orator⁷ or professional speaker, he certainly knew what he was speaking about! (11:5-6) These men were false apostles and deceivers. They were not real apostles but fakes! That should come as no surprise because "Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness" (11:15).

Evidently, these super apostles came into Corinth proclaiming proudly their own accomplishments. This self-trumpeting was opposite to the approach Paul took with the Corinthians. Paul considered the super apostles fools. If the Corinthians wanted to consider Paul a fool, then Paul could also come in and proclaim his own greatness as well. Once Paul did so, no super apostle could compare in qualifications with Paul.

Paul was a Hebrew and Israelite.⁸ In service to Christ, Paul had suffered numerous imprisonments, repeated floggings and beatings, multiple exposures to death, and three shipwrecks. Paul was in constant danger from bandits, from Jews, from Greeks, in the cities, in the country, at sea, and even in the church from false brothers. Paul went without sleep, hungry and thirsty, cold and relatively unclothed. More than all that, however, Paul carried the burden of caring for churches like Corinth (11:21-29).

Those events seem pried from Paul's pen. He is clearly uncomfortable lest the words seem like bragging. To Paul, it seems foolish to even write it. Accordingly, scholars often label this Paul's "Fool Speech." Yet, Paul feels compelled to write to demonstrate the foolishness of the Corinthians following some fake boastful self-proclaimed apostles. What would take Paul gladly on a journey of life like he led? What would it take to get such a well-educated, devout Jew, leader of his people, comfortable Pharisee living in Jerusalem in the good graces of his government and faith?

⁷ At the time, Greek culture produced a specific training and job occupation of "Orator." Lawyers, teachers, and politicians were all trained as "Orators."

⁸ By using both terms, Paul was likely referring not only to his heritage as a Jew (the term "Israelite"), but also the fact that his family records were secured throughout the captivities so the heritage could be traced (a "Hebrew").

Only two options seem readily possible: (1) Paul was a delusional nut-job or (2) Paul had a real encounter with a resurrected Jesus that showed truth and mission to the man. Paul was clearly no nut-job. That left the obvious conclusion to the Corinthians (and indeed to us!) that Paul encountered the risen Jesus.

It is also quite interesting that when Paul writes in a way that seems to boast his accomplishments, Paul does not write of what the world might put on a resume to impress folks. Rather than list prominent worldly achievements, Paul lists sufferings and personal weaknesses (11:30). Why? We can understand that the weaknesses show the very work and sustaining power of God in Paul's life. No one continues or lives in such weaknesses, much less boasting in them, unless something greater is at work.

PAUL'S DEFENSE AND THORN IN THE FLESH (12:1-21)

Paul continues his defense in Chapter 12. Paul continues his "boasting," in spite of its evident repulsion to him, as Paul furthers his resume to the Corinthians.

Evidently, the super apostles credentialed themselves with claims of super natural visions and revelations. Paul then moves to this same subject for himself. In doing so, however, Paul shifts his form of writing to a form termed "arm's length" narrative. This form of writing has Paul talking from his own personal experience as though he was a third person. So, we see Paul writing, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven" (12:2).

Paul then goes on to describe the experience. Yet, Paul does not give us the content of the revelation itself. In fact, Paul says the inexpressible things he heard he was "not permitted to tell" (12:4). In other words, the super apostles may claim some wonderful divine vision/revelation but such were not the basis for someone's claims of superiority. Paul reverts back to his earlier comments, that the weaknesses he endured and worked through are the best testimony of God in his life (12:5-6).

Paul then discusses his infirmity, his "thorn in the flesh," about which scholars make suggestions, but really have no definitive answers. The best seems to be a vision issue based on a number of passages in Acts, Galatians,⁹ as well as Corinthians. It makes sense in an almost ironic manner that if Paul's thorn in the flesh was a vision issue that Paul should segue to his thorn after speaking of the most incredible "supernatural" vision Paul experienced. The thorn was one that Paul had prayed for God to remove three times. The thorn remained to keep Paul from becoming conceited because of his "surpassingly great revelations" (12:7).

⁹ See the lesson on Acts and Galatians for a discussion of those texts.

So, Paul kept his perspective about him as one who had great visions from God, yet earthly vision issues that would not leave.

Whether the thorn was vision related, Paul sought its removal multiple times to no avail. We should remember that Paul is writing this after a three-year stint in Ephesus where Paul was so famous as a healing vessel of God that the Ephesians even used Paul's handkerchief and aprons for healing (Acts 19:11-12). Yet, Paul was never to see the healing of his own infirmity. From this, Paul derived a great lesson which he recorded for the Corinthians and which the Holy Spirit has seen fit to secure for us:

He [God] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (12:9)

No wonder Paul delighted and spoke so clearly about his own weakness. It was to God's glory that Paul worked in the midst of weakness. In the weakness, the power of Christ could work! (12:9-10)

Paul ends chapter 12 expressing personal concern for the Corinthians. He wants them to understand that his motivation for what he says and writes is a loving concern for them. Paul wants the best for them and will give as a parent gives to a child for the Corinthians to be all they can before God.

FINAL COMMENTS (13)

With chapter 13, Paul brings his letter to a close. Paul reminds the Corinthians that two or three witnesses must establish testimony adequate for conviction in court. Twice, Paul visited the Corinthians, and the next visit will make three. That is sufficient warning that they better get in line! (13:1-4)

Paul reminds them that Christ was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. Paul may be laden with weakness, but he can and will come in the power of God. Accordingly, Paul urges the Corinthians to examine and measure or test themselves. Paul does not want his next visit to be harsh. He wants the Corinthians built up, not torn down (13:5-10).

So, Paul concludes urging the Corinthians to "aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, [and] live in peace" (13:11). Paul blesses the Corinthians through the Trinity ("May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" 13:14) and the letter is done.