

2ND CORINTHIANS 10-13

RECAP OF BACKGROUND

After writing 1st Corinthians, Paul visited Corinth (13:1). This was his second visit to Corinth, and it was a painful experience involving amongst other issues a problem of discipline (2:1-6). Paul then wrote to them “the sorrowful or severe letter” (2:4), which has been lost. This was actually Paul's third letter to the church. Titus carried this severe letter to Corinth and then on his return gave good news to Paul about a change of situation in the church when they met in Macedonia (7:6-8). In thanksgiving, Paul then wrote part of 2nd Corinthians (chapters 1-9) from Macedonia which is the fourth written correspondence from Paul to the Corinthians.

Since Paul's first letter, the Corinthian church had been swayed by false teachers, probably Judaizers, who emphasized ritualistic legalism, special knowledge (gnosis), and spectacular spiritual experiences. Being rhetorically impressive and charismatically endowed, they stirred the people against Paul. They challenged Paul's integrity, ministry, and authority and made charges of insincerity, financial indiscretions, spiritual impotency, and rhetorical ineffectiveness against Paul. They claimed that he was fickle, proud, unimpressive in appearance and speech and unqualified as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

It appeared these false teachers had finally gotten the upper hand and this caused Paul to write again, **a letter which forms the remaining part of 2nd Corinthians (chapters 10-13)**, this time confronting the Corinthians and his opponents as he defends his conduct, character, and calling as an apostle of Jesus Christ with a stern warning that he will deal personally with any troublemakers upon his next visit.

What concerned Paul preeminently was the presence of false teachers, claiming to be apostles, who had entered the church. They promoted their own ideas and at the same time sought to discredit both the person and message of the apostle. Second Corinthians was written to defend the authenticity of both his apostleship and his message. This was not carried out in a self-protecting spirit but because Paul knew that acceptance of his ministry and message were intimately bound with the Corinthian church's own spiritual well-being.

James K. Lowery

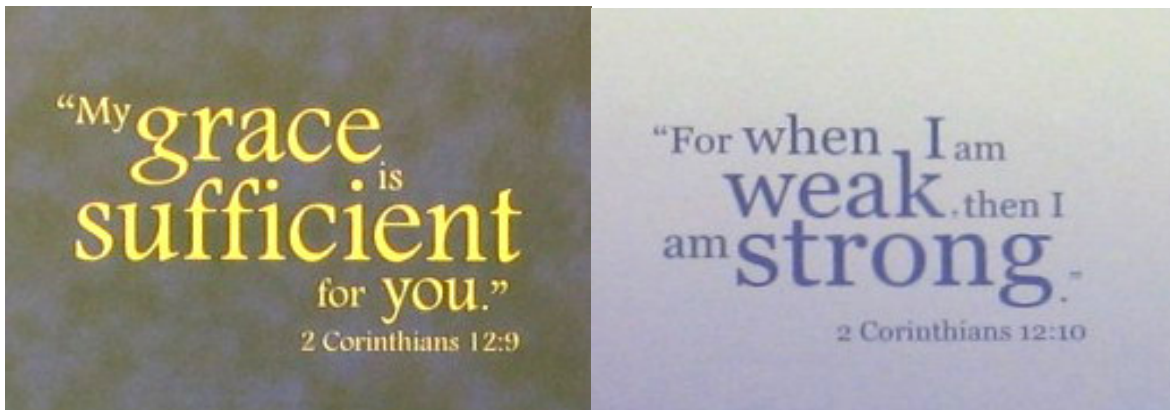
We increasingly inhabit a time and place in Western history when humility is perceived to be a sign of weakness; when meekness is taken for a vice, not a virtue; when puff is more important than substance; when leadership, even in the church, frequently has more to do with politics, pizzazz, and showmanship, or with structure and hierarchy, than with spiritual maturity and conformity to Jesus Christ; when the budget is thought to be a more important indicator of ecclesiastical success than prayerfulness and when loose talk of spiritual experience wins an instant following, even when that talk is mingled with a scarcely concealed haughtiness that has learned neither humility nor tears. To Christians hungry to understand and repent of these evils, **2 Corinthians 10-13 speaks with rare power and passion.**

These chapters are among the most emotionally intense of all that the apostle Paul wrote. Partly for that reason, they are also among the most difficult. His language is frequently passionate, his rhetorical questions emotive, his sequence of thought compressed, his syntax broken.

Why focus on 2 Corinthians 10-13? Because these chapters most clearly reveal the heart and the mind of the apostle Paul. These chapters contain several well-known passages that have provided comfort and encouragement to countless generations of Christians. The “thorn in the flesh” passage (2 Cor 12:1-10) springs to mind most insistently, with its startling promise, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9) - a promise heralded in many a hymn and chorus. But there are of course many other parts of Scripture to learn, and each has its own collection of gems. What makes this passage unique is the clarity with which it reveals the heart and mind of the apostle Paul.

DA Carson

A Model of Christian Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10-13



Paul's Corinthian Correspondence and Visits

Events	References
1st Visit: Paul established church at Corinth during the second missionary journey. Paul left Corinth after 18 months and arrived at Ephesus.	Acts 18:1–19
1st Letter: On the third missionary journey, Paul laboured at Ephesus about 3 years during which he wrote a letter (the “ previous letter ” which is now lost) to Corinth, warning against immorality and idolatry, greed & bad conduct.	Acts 19:1–10; 1 Cor 5:9-11
2nd Letter: The church responded to this letter while members of Chloe's household also brought report of factions in Corinth. In response, Paul wrote 1st Corinthians from Ephesus to meet problems arisen and to answer various questions.	1 Cor 7:1; 1:11–12; 16:8
2nd Visit: He might then have made a hasty visit (“painful visit”) to Corinth during this time.	2 Cor 2:1; 12:14; 13:1-2
3rd Letter: Thereafter, he wrote a “ severe letter ” which is now lost and sent it with Titus to Corinth.	2 Cor 2:3-9; 7:8-12
Paul left for Troas after the Demetrius riot in Ephesus. At Troas Paul hoped to meet Titus and to learn of effects of his “severe letter”.	Acts 19:23–20:1 cf. 2 Cor 1:8-10 2 Cor 2:12–13
4th Letter: Paul finally met Timothy and Titus in Macedonia; Titus reported favorable reception of Paul's letter. Paul then wrote part of 2nd Corinthians (chapters 1-9).	2 Cor 1:1; 7:6–7, 13–16
After finishing chapters 1-9, but before actually terminating the letter and sending it off, Paul received additional bad news that the fickle Corinthians were succumbing to the Judaizers and reverting to their criticism of Paul. He therefore added chapters 10-13 to the letter as a rebuke.	“Reconstruction”
3rd Visit: Thereafter Paul made his third visit to Corinth.	Acts 20:2-3; 2 Cor 13:1

NATURE OF OPPOSITION

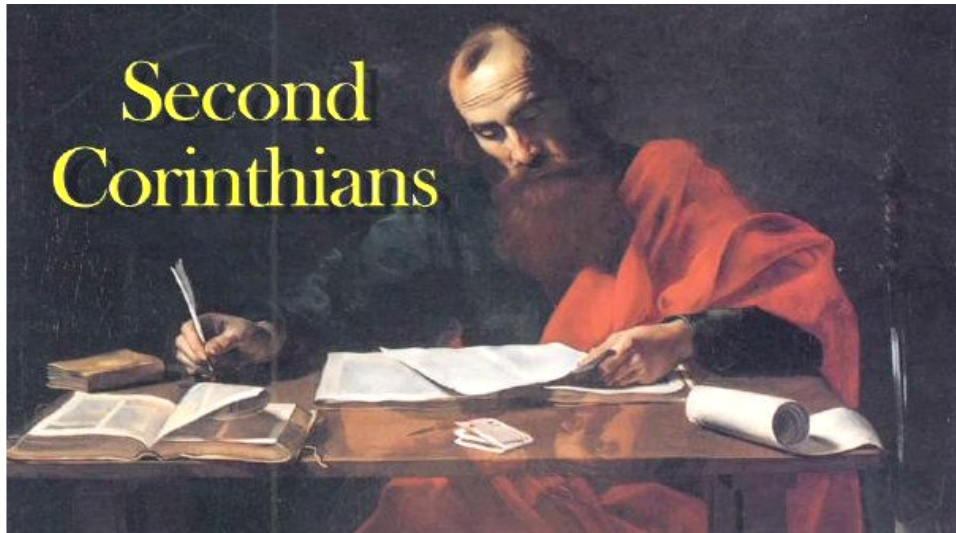
1. Essence of Attack

- Opponents' aim is to call Paul's authority into question while magnifying their own in order to woo the Corinthians' allegiance to themselves (2 Cor 10:7-18)
- They belittled Paul for:
 - His less than acceptable rhetoric
 - His lack of personal impressiveness
 - His refusal to receive payment for his services
- If it had been just a personality attack, Paul may not have responded as forcefully.
- But the situation was such that, not only were the attitudes and values being inculcated by these opponents so deeply pagan and so intrinsically self-centred, these self-promoting leaders were actually preaching another Jesus, a different spirit and a different gospel (11:4).
- The gospel was at stake and with it the eternal well-being of the Corinthians. Which was why Paul asked them to test if they are still in the faith (13:5) and exposed his opponents as “false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ” (11:13).

2. Identity of Opponents

- Not native to the Corinthian church but people who entered as latecomers and gained positions of leadership and voices of authority (10:13-15; 11:14; 12:11) as evidenced by their parading of letters of introduction and commendation.
- These false apostles or “super” apostles were likely to be some type of Judaizers whose aim is to impose Jewish practices and all or part of the Mosaic law upon Gentiles as conditions for salvation or at least for Christian maturity.
- They were destroying the fundamental structure of Christianity in insisting that something in addition to Christ was necessary for salvation or Christian growth.

STRUCTURE OF LETTER



1. Unity of 2nd Corinthians

- The letter of 2nd Corinthians can be seen to comprise of two parts, likely to be written at different times, to prepare for Paul's third visit to Corinth:
 - Chapters 1-9 (Part 1)
 - Chapters 10-13 (Part 2)

2. Outline of Part 2

- Paul's Defence of His Apostleship (10:1-18)
 1. His humility (10:1 - 6)
 2. His authority (10:7 - 18)
- Paul's Defence of His Boasting: Fool's Speech (11:1 - 12:13)
 3. Like a fool (11:1 - 21a)
 4. In his service and suffering (11:21b - 33)
 5. In his heavenly vision (12:1 - 13)
- Paul's Final Warnings & Greeting (12:14 - 13:14)
 6. Final defence and appeal to the rebellious (12:14 - 13:10)
 7. Closing greetings (13:11 - 14)

PAUL'S DEFENCE OF HIS APOSTLESHIP (10:1-18)

1. His Humility (10:1-6)

- Paul directly responded to those who were criticizing his humble appearance in Corinth
- The Corinthians have been captivated by the outwardly impressive Judaizers where power and prestige lay at the heart of their ministry
 - They brought letters of recommendation (3:1)
 - Pointed to ecstatic and visionary experiences to legitimize their claims (5:13; 2:1)
 - Boasted of the distance they had travelled in coming to Corinth (10:13–18)
- The Judaizers and their Corinthian friends despised Paul
 - They accused him of being authoritative only when away, through his letters
 - And humble or timid when present (verse 1), not a quality they valued
 - To them Paul was a 'worldly' minister (verses 2 and 3), lacking divine power in anything he did (verse 4).
- Paul responded with an appeal
 - That he was humble or timid was due entirely to his imitation of the meekness and gentleness of Christ (verse 1; cf. Matt 11:29)
 - That he was 'worldly' (in the 'flesh') probably means that Paul did not pretend to be more than an ordinary man; nothing to him beyond what was seen and heard (cf. 12:6)
 - His 'power' was to be experienced only in the gospel he spoke, not in himself
- Ministry according to the flesh
 - The Judaizers were in fact the ones who worked 'according to the flesh'
 - In presenting themselves as powerful and extraordinary, they were the ones who were worldly in their perceptions and therefore lacking in the true power of God

- Their worldly weapons are the kinds of tools of the trade as relished by them, including “human ingenuity, rhetoric, showmanship, a certain splashiness and forwardness in spiritual pretensions, charm, powerful personal charisma” (DA Carson)

Throughout history many ministers have sought to make an impact on people in terms of their supposed powers and paranormal qualities. Christians and congregations, by failing to see that God's power is found in his Word, are vulnerable to ministers who possess or claim to possess extraordinary power.

Paul Barnett

- Demolishing the strongholds of disobedience
 - The Corinthians were gravely mistaken in their underestimation of the strength of human rebellion against God
 - Paul likens this to the owner of a powerfully guarded fortress, apparently impenetrable to outside attack
 - Paul's weapons, so far from being ‘worldly’, actually possess divine power to demolish strongholds (verse 4), arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God (verse 5)
 - Paul's ministry, unassuming as it was in personal terms, was capable of taking captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (verse 5)

2. His Authority (10:7-18)

- Paul refused to employ the professional rhetoric of his day to impress others (cf. 1 Cor 2:1-5); turns instead to re-establishing his authority by:
 - Defining the proper criterion for apostolic authority
 - Demonstrating that his ministry, not that of his opponents, actually meets that criterion
 - Comparing his opponents' practice of commending themselves (verse 12) with the basis for his own boasting (verses 13-18)
- Judging by appearance (10:7-11)
 - The person who judges by appearance always lives to give a good appearance
 - Paul lived to please God, never tried to be a man-pleaser, being confident of his calling and credentials from the Lord

- He could have pulled rank and invoked his apostolic authority, but refused to exercise that authority in an unspiritual manner
 - The purpose for his authority was *to build them up, not tear them down*
 - How foolish of these Corinthians to discredit Paul because he lacked the physical stature or the oratorical power
 - Paul warned them that his presence at his next visit would be just as powerful as his letters!
- Let God do the commending (10:12–18)
 - These false teachers were members of a “mutual admiration society,” comparing themselves with one another and thinking very highly of themselves (cf. Gal 6:3–4)

Apparently these self-promoted apostles compared notes on their visions, their racial and cultural pedigrees, their training in rhetoric, their abilities to command fees and lead men - all relative criteria of little importance in God's eyes... The heart of Paul's countercharge is that their boasting is improper, their self-commendation unrestrained and dishonest, and their focus on man and not God.

DA Carson

- Paul asked where were these “great teachers” when he risked his life to start the church in Corinth?
- Anybody can come along after the hard work is done, criticize the founder, and take all the glory!
- Paul had stretched himself out to reach the people in Corinth with the Gospel, and he was hoping to get their assistance in taking the Gospel “to the regions beyond”
- The Judaizers had come along and were boasting in a work that they had never accomplished
- Paul's policy was to take the Gospel where nobody else had ever gone while the Judaizers' policy was to invade another man's territory and take over the work he had done

The only standard that matters is the approval of God and the only commendation that counts is His word of praise.

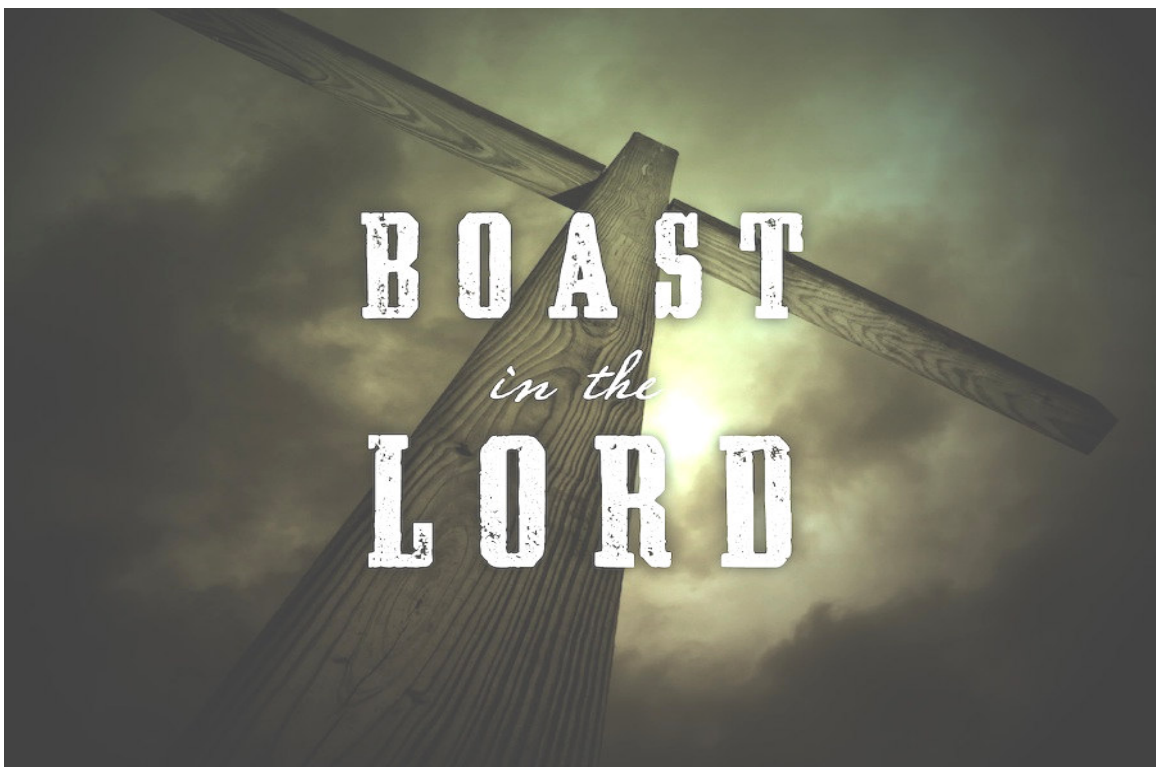
Sam Storms

- Paul was wise enough to leave the matter of commendations to the Lord alone

- Choosing instead to refer to Jer 9:24 in verse 17, *"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord!"*
- Boasting in the Lord is referring probably to boasting in the glory of His character and the majesty of His deeds
- Our boast therefore must be in the beauty of Christ's person and the splendor of who He is, together with a celebration of what He has done in grace and kindness and power and compassion

...bragging on God, making known His sufficiency, drawing attention to what He is like and how He loves and the way He so gloriously governs the world!

Sam Storms



Questions for Reflection/Discussion

What criteria do you apply when thinking about whether or not a person's ministry is powerful?

What is the problem with some of today's so-called "powerful" preachers and ministers?

PAUL'S DEFENCE OF HIS BOASTING: THE FOOL'S SPEECH (11:1 - 12:13)

1. Like A Fool (11:1-21a)

- Paul gives his reasons why he feels compelled to act like a fool by boasting of his Jewish pedigree (verses 21b-23) and visions (12:1-4) rather than only in the Lord (10:17-18)
 - Desperate situations demand desperate measures!
 - But before Paul starts his boasting to prevent the Corinthian Christians from being further seduced by the false apostles, he prepares them first
 - He exhorts the Corinthians to put up with his “foolishness” (verses 1-6)
 - He handles one more specific charge (verses 7-12)
 - He exposes the troublemakers for what they are (verses 13-15)
 - And he prepares them by explaining again what he is about to do (verses 16-21a)

- Put up with me! I'm jealous for you! (11:1-6)
 - Boasting is utterly repugnant to Paul
 - But the situation before him appears to demand that he stoops to what he condemns and apes his opponents' methods
 - He is willing for the sake of the Corinthian Christians to engage for a few moments in conduct he regards as fundamentally distasteful, sub-Christian, foolish and be intensely embarrassed by the prospect of his imminent boasting
 - And with some sarcasm, he goes on to say,

“Since most of you regard me as something of a buffoon, a pathetic excuse for an apostle, a religious clown of sorts, go ahead and patronize me a little longer as I try to make my case.”

- He then provides them with 3 reasons to put up with his foolish boasting
- “Because I'm divinely jealous for you!” (verses 2-3)
- “Because you accept all kinds of nonsense from the rival apostles easily enough!” (verse 4)
- “Because I'm not inferior to these super-apostles!” (verses 5-6)

It is right for a husband to be jealous over his wife or for a pastor to be jealous over his church. And just as Israel in the OT is compared to the wife of Jehovah, so the church is called the bride of Christ. Paul's desire was to keep the church pure, free from false doctrine and worldly living. In the OT, going after false gods is compared to adultery; in the NT, worldliness is called adultery (James 4:1-4). How can a local church be seduced from Christ? By following Satan's false teachers (verses 3, 13-15). The only defense against spiritual adultery is faithfulness to the Word of God. How jealous we should be over the church for which Christ died!

Warren Wiersbe

Paul's opponents are aptly described as 'very superior'. It was their belief, apparently, that God's power would come upon their power, making them men of hyper-power. In their eyes Paul had no power of his own and therefore none from God; he was quite power-less, 'weak' and lacking in 'competence' (cf. 3:5-6; 11:21). Such is the modern preoccupation with power and miracles in some circles that the minister who lacks these things is regarded as inferior or not genuine. It is the gospel, not the miraculous, which is the power of God.

Paul Barnett

It seems a growing number of professing Christians in America are prizing style over substance. Witness the proliferation of slick preachers with their smooth, often silky, delivery, their winsome ways in the pulpit, their facility in the turning of a phrase, or their ability to craft just the right illustration or image. Words fall from their lips like honey from the comb. Their appearance is impressive and their voices mellow and soothing. Of course, there's nothing inherently wrong with this until it is discovered that they are largely devoid of any meaningful content! Words that are easy to hear are often theologically empty. They are stylish, but shallow. Their delivery is charismatic, but their doctrine is abhorrent. Manner triumphs over matter.

Sam Storms



**Stop Worshiping &
Idolizing Celebrity Preachers**
Do you live off of another mans reality of Christ?

- Is it a sin to preach the gospel to you free of charge? (11:7–12)
 - It is evident that the Corinthians were deeply offended that Paul had not accepted payment from them for his earlier ministry among them
 - Possibly this old wound had been opened by the presence of these false apostles in Corinth, who were evidently receiving money for their ministry (cf. 11:20; 2:17)
 - When Paul had worked among them six years earlier he had been prepared to accept support from the Macedonians (verse 9) but not from the Corinthians
 - In their minds this could only mean that he loved the Macedonians but did not *love* the Corinthians (verse 11)
 - His answer *God knows I do! (love you—verse 11)* was obviously heartfelt, in view of the great pain they had caused him over the years
 - The problem was, in reality, that they were not opening their hearts to him (6:11–13), preferring even false apostles to him (11:1, 4, 19–20).

At that time it was customary for the wealthy to put other people under obligation by gifts and favours. The practice of patronage was deeply embedded in Greco-Roman society. The expectation was that the affluent gave money to travelling philosophers and that this was received without question and with due deference and gratitude to one's patron. In declining the Corinthians' gifts Paul was, from their viewpoint, in serious breach of social convention.

Paul Barnett

- Such men are false apostles! (11:13–15)
 - Paul has been referring to these false apostles and in these verses he argued that they are really false to their core!
 - They are the masquerade of piety, through ecstatic speech (5:13), the visions and revelations (12:1, 7) and the miracles (12:12) with which they clothed themselves
 - They are servants of Satan and their work is characterized by deception
 - They will reap the reward of their deceit
- Answering a fool according to his folly (11:16–21a)
 - Paul finds it necessary to warn his readers again

- That what he is about to do is the shoddy work of a fool, not of an apostle
- He wants them to know that in speaking this way he is not following Jesus' example or claiming to have heard the Lord instruct him to do so

Paul was boasting so that he might help the church, while the false teachers boasted so that they might "help themselves" to what they could get out of the church. Paul's motive was pure; theirs was selfish. Verse 20 lists the various ways the Judaizers had taken advantage of the church:

<i>Enslave you</i>	<i>They taught a doctrine of legalism that was contrary to the Gospel of grace.</i>
<i>Devour you</i>	<i>They "ate up" all they could get in the church; they took advantage of their privilege of receiving financial support.</i>
<i>Take of you</i>	<i>The image is that of a bird caught in a snare or a fish caught on a hook. "The baited you and caught you!"</i>
<i>Exalt himself</i>	<i>They exalted themselves, not the Lord Jesus Christ; they loved to be honored and treated as great leaders.</i>
<i>Strike you</i>	<i>This probably refers to verbal attacks rather than physical violence; the Judaizers did not hesitate to "slap them in the face" and embarrass them in public</i>

In turning his attention to the Corinthians themselves, Paul's tone becomes ironical, even scathing as he tries to make them see that their vaunted tolerance has enslaved them, their proud wisdom has proved to be folly, their blind acceptance of the intruders and their false criteria have resulted in pain.

DA Carson

Often times, groveling submission to oppressive and self-serving leaders is hardly less evil than the arrogance that demands it. In other words, there's no excuse for yielding to people who elevate themselves by humiliating and enslaving others.

Sam Storms

2. In Service & Suffering (11:21b-33)

- Although forced to boast by his opponents, and after a long preparation and justification of his doing so (verses 1-21a)
 - Paul finally boasts in his identity
 - In stark contrast to his opponents, he boasts at great length in his weakness
 - This is his appropriate way to glorify God's grace and power in his life (verse 30; see 2:14-16a; 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 12:5-10)
- The opponents & Paul (11:21b–23a)
 - Paul begins the “Fool's Speech” proper here
 - This “Speech” is his “daring” (verse 21b) reply to the apparent jibes that he is “weak” and a “fool” in contrast to the false apostles who are strong and wise
 - He not only accepts their labels but expands and elaborates upon them in an astonishing catalogue of “weaknesses” and “foolishness”
 - And he starts by declaring that he is in no way inferior to any conceivable rival the Corinthians may dare to advance , “What anyone else dares to boast about... I also dare to boast about” (verse 21b)
 - While he reminds his readers yet again, “I am speaking as a fool” (verse 21) and “I am talking like a madman” (verse 23)

There are more than thirty items Paul mentions in verses 21-33. Of these, all relate to aspects of his suffering and weakness except for what is found in verse 22 where he focuses on his pedigree and concludes that he falls short in nothing when compared to these false apostles.

Sam Storms

- Paul asks 3 questions, all having to do with a person's relationship to the OT (Hebrews, Israelites, Abraham's descendent) in verse 22b
- In terms of pedigree, Paul is no less a Jew than any of these Judaizing false apostles
- He then turns from the old covenant to the new, from race and heritage to achievement and insists on his superiority as a servant of Christ in verse 23a

- The catalogue of weaknesses & hardships (11:23b-33)
 - Instead of talking next about his exploits and his victories as a superior servant of Christ, Paul details instead his sufferings, loss, shame and defeats in verses 23b-29
 - He thereby overthrows all categories of boasting used by the triumphalistic false apostles
 - It is almost as if the primary incontestable criterion of true apostleship is massive suffering in the service of Christ

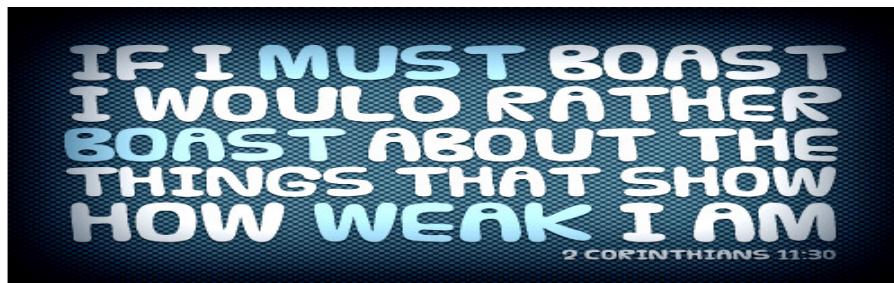
Paul's chief credentials of apostolic ministry were the wounds on his body that he received in serving Christ (see Gal. 6:17). Keep in mind that Paul wrote these things before the events in Acts 20ff transpired, and that most of the items on this list are not even mentioned in Acts! And the great apostle would never have mentioned them at all were it not for the fact that he was defending the Gospel. It is an arresting fact that Paul claims that his suffering, not the praise of men, was the best proof he had for asserting his apostleship.

Warren Wiersbe

- It seems that Paul's heaviest burden was "the care of all the churches" (verse 28), akin to the climax of his trials
- Spiritual battles are always more costly than physical ones. Praying for the new Christians, feeding the lambs and the sheep, and warding off Satan's attacks are demanding tasks

Paul closes with an especially interesting item (verses 32-33): his escape from Damascus (Acts 9:23-25). How humiliating it must have been for this great rabbi to be lowered over a wall in a basket! Would the Judaizers have stooped this low? No! They would have compromised their message and walked out of the city gate! Paul faced suffering from the very first days of his ministry until the very last days. "Yea, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12, NKJV).

Warren Wiersbe



For Reflection/Discussion

In his book *A Model of Christian Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10-13*, DA Carson writes,

We would have no knowledge of the extent of Paul's labors, privations, and beatings were it not for the fact that, in the providence of God, Paul is forced to write this parody in order to save the Corinthian church; for it is quite clear the apostle would not easily have offered such information. His agony over the matter is our great gain. It is very humbling to become intimately acquainted with a servant of Christ like Paul. But we will not be honoring him, nor worshipping the Lord he loves, if we do not reflect a little further on the appropriate application of our own lives of so moving and candid a self-portrayal.

1. Christians ought to be greatly ashamed of boasting about strengths, skills, victories, training, successes and productivity in their lives as if, on the one hand, we either earned those things or deserved them, or as if, on the other, such things make us intrinsically more acceptable to the Lord Jesus Christ.

What do we have but what we have received? And if we received it as a gracious gift from God, how dare we boast about it (1 Cor 4:7)? Does not the most elementary grasp of the gospel assure us that we are accepted by God solely by the merits of Christ Jesus the Redeemer? Why then so much boasting? Is our love of man's applause stronger than our love for Christ?

2. Christians ought to be quick to admit to their weaknesses, because rightly handled our weaknesses will serve to extol Christ's strength and therefore bring glory to Him.

I know a Christian leader who openly advises his colleagues never to admit their weaknesses. To do so, he says, might give opponents an advantage. Christian this leader may be; but in this respect he thinks like a pagan.

Sam Storms, in his book *A Sincere and Pure Devotion to Christ: 100 Daily Meditations on 2 Corinthians* writes,

Paul provides us with his spiritual CV in 2 Cor 11:21-33 and it's nothing short of shocking... **what about our spiritual CV?** When it comes to listing our qualifications as servants of Christ (2 Cor 11:23), would the document look any different from the one we submitted to our most recent employer?

3. The Heavenly Vision (12:1-13)

- Because his opponents boast in their spiritual experiences (in addition to rhetoric, eloquence, ability to command fees, leadership, knowledge of the truth, ethnic identity), Paul is also forced to boast, however foolishly
 - In his own visions and revelations in verses 1-6
 - In verses 7-10, he returns to boasting about his weakness, revealing the presence of a thorn in the flesh
 - Stating clearly the principle behind this aspect of his self-commendation In verses 9-10
 - Paul's earthly weaknesses, not his revelations, are to be the platform for demonstrating the Lord's power and grace

- Paul's revelations from Christ (12:1-6)
 - Paul turns now to a question which had apparently been flung at him: 'What *visions and revelations* could Paul claim as credentials for his ministry?' (verse 1)
 - The "man in Christ" Paul is talking about here is, of course, himself (verse 2)
 - "Fourteen years ago" (verse 2) would probably be around AD 42-44 when Paul was probably in or around Tarsus or Antioch, prior to his first missionary journey
 - The "third heaven" (verse 2) is paradise (verse 4), the very heaven of the presence of God
 - Paul gives no detail (as his opponents have?) about the place of the *body* in this experience (verses 2, 3)
 - What Paul heard from God was inexpressible and private

God's purpose for Paul involved the apostle in staggering sufferings, formidable opposition and quite incredible challenges; and so to fortify him for his service and sufferings, the God of all hope displayed to the apostle a little more of the glory to come than most of us perceive, so that it would serve as an anchor for his soul in the roughest weather.

DA Carson

- He said nothing about this experience (verse 4) lest any Christian start honoring him more than he deserved
- Paul is saying: 'I want you to look at what I am, not what I was. The man I want you to take into account is not the one who

experienced an astonishing revelation then but the one you see now, in all his weakness', so no-one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say (verse 6)

In this passage Paul is responding to the new missionaries who are pointing, apparently, to ecstatic experiences as a demonstration of their claims over the Corinthians as against the place of Paul. By his reply Paul rejects accreditation by ecstasy. The simple fact is that Christ commissioned Paul to be their apostle, and the demonstration of that did not lie in the display of ecstatic power, but in the reality of weakness as lived out before the Corinthians.

Paul Barnett

It is not boasting per se that is foolish, but boasting in those things that are not true, do not edify others, or are irrelevant for establishing the point at hand; what counts is what others can observe concerning his words and deeds.

Scott Hafemann

- The thorn in his flesh (12:7–10)
 - Paul recognises that to brag about the awesomeness of his heavenly journey would simply be to exalt himself over the false apostles using their carnal criteria
 - To drive home this point, he immediately narrates an opposite experience that has kept him humble in spite of the remarkable spiritual privileges God has granted him
 - The presence of a thorn in the flesh was proof of his heavenly experience related in verse 1–7 for God gave him the thorn to keep him from getting proud

To the catalogue of weaknesses previously given, Paul now adds his most painful experience. It is not about the 'revelation' which caught him up (verse 2) that he will boast, but about the pain which brought him lowest of all, the thorn (verse 7). What was this thorn? The Greek word is skolops, which can mean either a 'stake' which pegged him to the ground or a 'splinter' (or thorn) which constantly irritated him... it conveys 'the notion of something sharp and painful which sticks deeply in the flesh and in the will of God defies extraction. The effect of its presence was to cripple Paul's enjoyment of life, and to frustrate his full efficiency by draining his energies.'

Paul Barnett

- Many suggestions have been made about the nature of this thorn, including recurring physical ailment (eye problem, malaria, etc.), a personal opponent (persecutions, enemies, etc.) and spiritual warfare (temptations, psychological struggles, demonic harassment (messenger of Satan), etc.)
- It is probably providential that Paul does not specify what this thorn is as our inclination may be to argue that Paul's teaching applies only to people who suffer an identical problem

Revelation brings elation; the ego is easily inflated by skin-tingling religious experiences. In matching the 'super-apostles' Paul speaks of being 'elated' (RSV; conceited, NIV) or 'up-lifted' (the Greek word could almost mean 'airborne') by the surpassingly great revelations (verse 7). God, however, brought the elated Paul down to earth and pinned him there with a 'thorn' (verse 7). Though it was a messenger of Satan, the thorn was given to Paul—that is, given by God (verse 7). By means of Satan's agency the sovereign God 'gave' Paul what was needful for him.

Paul Barnett

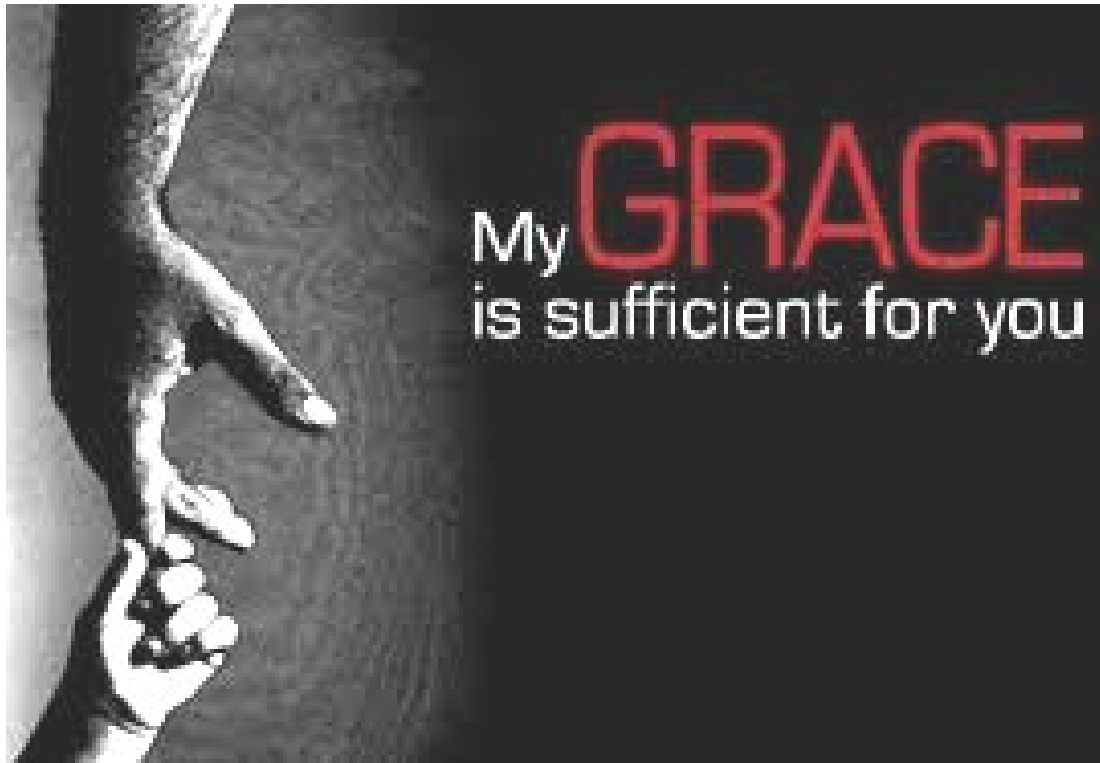
- Paul sees this thorn as both the work of Satan and work of God
- It is something sent by Satan to wound, limit and defeat Paul
- But it is also from God, given by Him for Paul's benefit, to keep him from becoming conceited or insufferably arrogant
- As Fausset said, "How dangerous must self-exaltation be, when even the apostle required so much restraint"

God often uses the devil to accomplish His purposes (see Job; 1 Cor 5:5). Although Satan and God work at cross purposes, they can both desire the same event to occur while hoping to accomplish antithetical results. Satan wanted to see Jesus crucified, as did God the Father (Isa 53:10; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28), but for a different reason. The same is true on the case of Job. What Satan had hoped would destroy Job (or at least provoke him to blasphemy), God used to strengthen him.

Sam Storms

- The thorn was a burden to Paul and brought much pain
- Like Jesus in Gethsemane, whom we are told in the Gospels, prayed three times but was not delivered, Paul prayed three times (verse 8) but also to no avail
- God's answer to Paul's prayer was not, at first, what Paul wanted to hear

- But it was God's answer nonetheless, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness" (verse 9a)
- This verse is the climax of Paul's teaching in 2 Corinthians about how we should understand and respond to suffering
- It's been called the signature motto for the whole letter and for Paul's entire apostolic life



The messengers of Satan are not always overthrown here and now by prevailing prayer, though they will be overthrown ultimately; neither is it necessarily the will of God that his children 'triumph' in this life in terms of body healing or spiritual power.

Paul Barnett

The end that Paul wanted was relief from the thorns, and he simply assumed that the means would be the thorn's removal. But God granted the ends by another means: He gave relief from the thorn, not by removing it, but by adding more grace, sufficient grace. The Lord promised Paul that in the distress caused by this messenger from Satan, he would always find that divine grace afforded him a sufficient supply to enable him to bear up as a Christian.

DA Carson

In the Christian life, we get many of our blessings through transformation, not substitution. When Paul prayed three times for the removal of his pain, he was asking God for a substitution: "Give me health instead of sickness, deliverance instead of pain and weakness." Sometimes God does meet the need by substitution; but other times He meets the need by transformation. He does not remove the affliction, but He gives us His grace so that the affliction works for us and not against us.

Warren Wiersbe

- So after three serious sessions of prayer, Paul comes to grip with the wisdom of Jesus' response
- Far from begrudgingly acceding to what he cannot change, he writes,
- "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (verses 9b-10)

The deepest need that you and I have in weakness and adversity is not quick relief, but the well-grounded confidence that what is happening to us is part of the greatest purpose in the universe - the glorification of the grace and power of His Son - the grace and power that bore Him to the cross and kept Him there until the work of love was done. That's what God is building into our lives. That is the meaning of weakness, insults, hardships, persecution and calamity.

John Piper

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

"There are lessons in life that cannot be learned without thorns."

"Our limitations and handicaps are often the key to our usefulness."

Do you agree with these statements?

What is your **"thorn in the flesh"**?

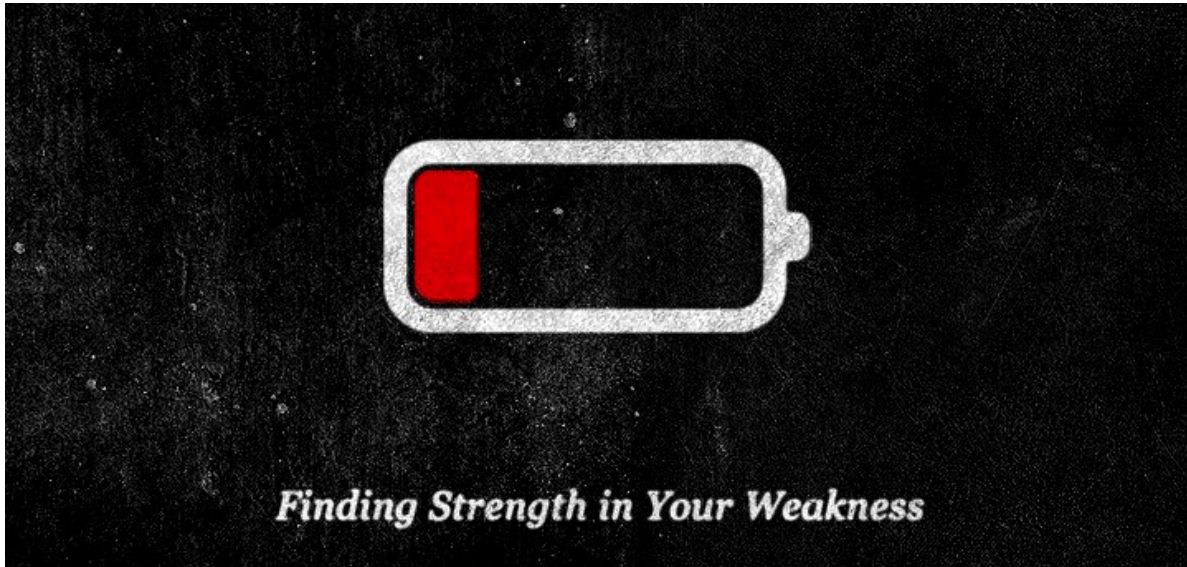
Have you been in situations where:

- the one thing you have most wanted to be rid of, God wants you to have?

- the thing you think has kept you from ministry was actually the key to your ministry?

- you have to ask God to use your thorn to manifest His grace and power, to His glory and for your good?

*Paul's entire biography can be summed up in eight words,
"When I am weak, then I am strong!" (2 Cor 12:10)*



- Epilogue to the fool's speech (12:11-13)
 - Paul closes his fool's speech by reiterating that it is the Corinthians who drove him to boasting and he has become a fool as a result (verse 11)
 - The need to match his opponents in their boast should not have been necessary in the first place
 - The Corinthians should have recognized Paul as of equal standing with the super apostles
 - To the charge that he is inferior to these super apostles, Paul reminds them that whatever marks or signs are required of an apostle, he had them all (verse 12)
 - And to the charge that as a result of his ministry the Corinthians are actually worse off than before (verse 13), Paul has this say, in sarcasm,

Evidently, my refusal to take your money, my determination to work hard for your sakes is interpreted by you as proof that I regard you as less important and less valuable than other churches. Incredible! This can only be due to your warped triumphalistic view of leadership. Forgive me this terrible injustice!

Sam Storms

PAUL'S FINAL WARNINGS & GREETINGS (12:14 - 13:14)

1. Final Defence and Appeal to the Rebellious (12:14 – 13:10)

- In final preparation for his 3rd visit
 - Paul commends his apostleship one last time (12:14-21)
 - And calls the rebellious to test the genuineness of their professed faith (13:1-10)

- I will not be a burden to you (12:14-21)
 - The subject is now money, that is, payment for Paul's ministry
 - Paul mentions again that his refusal to burden the Corinthians financially is a loving act of a spiritual parent for his children (verses 14-15)

I seek not what is yours but you (12:14)... as we relate to those whom God has entrusted to our care, let us ever and always ask, "Am I seeking them, their souls, their greatest good, their deepest delight in God and greatest joy in Jesus? Or do I see them as a burden, an inconvenience, a mere rung on the ladder for my personal ascent to higher acclaim, recognition and prosperity?"

I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls (12:15)... There's no doubt that Paul was frustrated by the Corinthians' failure to reciprocate his love for them. They tested the limits of his patience and pressed him to the brink of despair. But his compassion never waned. His devotion never faltered... All his energy, whatever money he possessed, even his very life, Paul gladly and with profound delight devotes to the goal of bringing them to maturity in faith.

Sam Storms

- He rejects the idea that he used the collection by his co-workers to craftily take money from them (verses 16-18)
- He is not merely writing in self-defence but writes before God and for their sake (verse 19)
- Paul then alerts them for a possible tense encounter in his next visit

Twice the apostle expresses fear. He is afraid that, because they will not be as he wants them to be nor he what they want him to be, there will be quarrelling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder (verse 20). Paul, it seems,

anticipates that the third visit, like the second, would prove to be painful. He also fears that because many continue unrepentant of gross sexual offences he will be grieved for them (verse 21).

Paul Barnett

- Examine & test yourselves! (13:1-10)
 - Paul issues the Corinthians a further warning prior to his final visit
 - If the rebellious minority still chooses not to repent of their disobedience, he will be fully justified in punishing these recalcitrant as severely as necessary (verses 1-2)

The centrality of Christ's crucifixion regularly requires living in ways the world considers weak, but Jesus' resurrection gives believers great power as well, including the authority and responsibility to discipline the wayward in their midst (verses 1-4).

Craig Blomberg

- Paul also issues a call for the Corinthians to examine themselves to see if they really are Christians and whether they have the Spirit of Christ in them (verse 5)
- “You have been examining me,” wrote Paul, “but why don't you take time to examine yourselves?”
- Paul made it clear that he did not want the Corinthians to fail the test just to prove that he was right
- Nor did he want them to live godly lives just so he could boast about them
- He did not mind being despised and criticized for their sakes, so long as they were obeying the Lord
- He was not concerned about his own reputation, for the Lord knew his heart; but he was concerned about their Christian character

Our prayer is for your perfection (13:9b)... Paul's constant, burning prayer is for the Corinthians' perfection, i.e., their restoration to Christian values, their achievement of some degree of real maturity, their abandonment of the false gospel, their rejection of the false apostles, their pursuit of Christian character... Paul's attitude is not at all retaliatory and cheap. He still desires above all the spiritual well-being of his converts. Of no interest to him at all are questions of personal gain, financial reward, security, promotion or personal reputation.

DA Carson

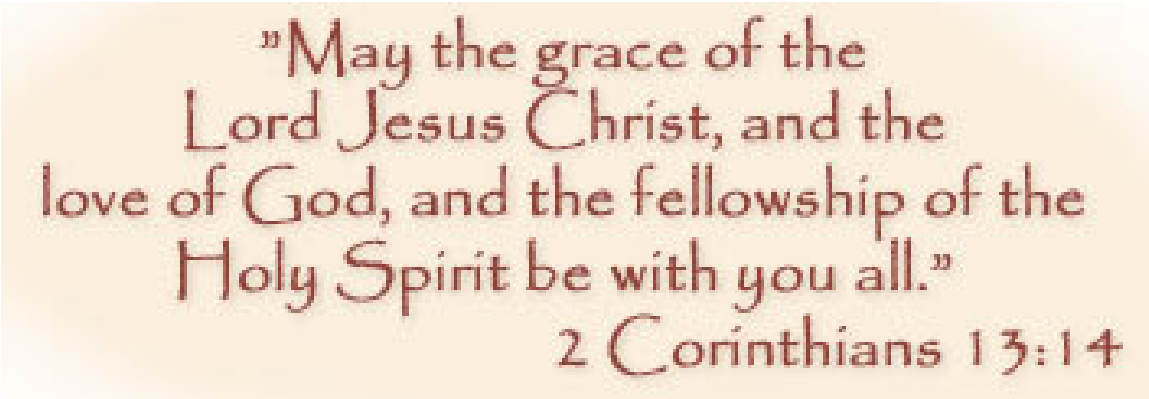
2. Closing Greetings (13:11 – 13:14)

- Paul expands the common conventions of ancient letter closings in order to highlight the important themes he has covered and to sum up the emphases of the letter
 - Aim for perfection/Christian maturity: abandon triumphalism and one-upmanship
 - Listen to my appeal: obey my apostolic exhortation
 - Be of one mind: foster unity
 - Live in peace

The entire letter presupposes major relationship difficulties within the community, creating the need for the present word of encouragement. Believers are caught up in spiritual warfare, both within their own lives and for the hearts and minds of unbelievers; they are not to be at war with one another.

Paul Barnett

- The letter ends with this famous benediction (verse 14)



”May the grace of the
Lord Jesus Christ, and the
love of God, and the fellowship of the
Holy Spirit be with you all.”
2 Corinthians 13:14

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

In reflecting on what in the letter of 2nd Corinthians had exerted the greatest impact on his life, Sam Storms listed four things, of which the second is this,

I've been repeatedly challenged by Paul's response to the arrogant triumphalism so rampant in Corinth. This isn't to say Paul didn't believe in victory for the Christian, but it was victory over sin, pride and envy, victory over self-reliance (2 Cor 1:8-9), and triumph over despair (2 Cor 4:1). It was the sort of "winning" that magnified the treasure of the gospel and the power of God, not the "jars of clay" in whom it had been placed (2 Cor 4:7).

Storms explained triumphalism as follows:

It has in view, among other things, an over-realised eschatology in which the blessings of the age to come are presumptuously claimed as a spiritual entitlement in the present day. Along with this are an aversion to suffering as something beneath the dignity of a Christian, an expectation of success more as the world defines the term than does the church...

What is your understanding of the "victorious Christian life"? Does it tend towards triumphalism? Discuss how Paul's teaching in 2nd Corinthians can re-shape your view of what it means to live the Christian life victoriously.

Main Sources:

Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988)

DA Carson, *A Model of Christian Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10-13* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984)

Sam Storms, *A Sincere & Pure Devotion to Christ: 100 Daily Meditations on 2 Corinthians, Vol. II (2 Cor 7-13)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010)

Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996)

KNOW THE WORD

Questions for Reflection/Discussions for 2 Corinthians 10-13

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

What criteria do you apply when thinking about whether or not a person's ministry is powerful?

What is the problem with some of today's so-called "powerful" preachers and ministers?

For Reflection/Discussion

In his book *A Model of Christian Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10-13*, DA Carson writes,

We would have no knowledge of the extent of Paul's labors, privations, and beatings were it not for the fact that, in the providence of God, Paul is forced to write this parody in order to save the Corinthian church; for it is quite clear the apostle would not easily have offered such information. His agony over the matter is our great gain. It is very humbling to become intimately acquainted with a servant of Christ like Paul. But we will not be honoring him, nor worshipping the Lord he loves, if we do not reflect a little further on the appropriate application of our own lives of so moving and candid a self-portrayal.

1. Christians ought to be greatly ashamed of boasting about strengths, skills, victories, training, successes and productivity in their lives as if, on the one hand, we either earned those things or deserved them, or as if, on the other, such things make us intrinsically more acceptable to the Lord Jesus Christ.

What do we have but what we have received? And if we received it as a gracious gift from God, how dare we boast about it (1 Cor 4:7)? Does not the most elementary grasp of the gospel assure us that we are accepted by God solely by the merits of Christ Jesus the Redeemer? Why then so much boasting? Is our love of man's applause stronger than our love for Christ?

2. Christians ought to be quick to admit to their weaknesses, because rightly handled our weaknesses will serve to extol Christ's strength and therefore bring glory to Him.

I know a Christian leader who openly advises his colleagues never to admit their weaknesses. To do so, he says, might give opponents an advantage. Christian this leader may be; but in this respect he thinks like a pagan.

Sam Storms, in his book *A Sincere and Pure Devotion to Christ: 100 Daily Meditations on 2 Corinthians* writes,

Paul provides us with his spiritual CV in 2 Cor 11:21-33 and it's nothing short of shocking... **what about our spiritual CV?** When it comes to listing our qualifications as servants of Christ (2 Cor 11:23), would the document look any different from the one we submitted to our most recent employer?

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