



## 2 Corinthians - Chapter Twelve

### III 2 Corinthians 10:1-13:10 - Paul's Appeal to the Rebellious Minority in Corinth (continues)

#### Summary of Chapter Twelve

Paul brings his argument to a climax in this chapter with regard to the boasting of his opponents. They had clearly claimed to have some form of spiritual experiences that had impressed the Corinthians. Paul had been gradually building up to an experience of his own that would surpass anything they could have claimed - being snatched up into heaven! Yet Paul makes it clear that it has nothing to do with his strength but weakness, and takes it upon himself to show how even the most exalted spiritual experiences are to be understood within the framework of the Gospel.

Paul then puts in a final appeal to the Corinthians to remember how Paul had so clearly demonstrated his apostolic credentials through the work he had done with them, calling on them to realise that he was more than equal to his opponents. They are to disengage from any gossip or idle speculation about Paul that was clearly being rumoured by his opponents. He wants those who are not supportive of him to consider the implications for his third visit to them for he did not want to come to discipline them but to build them up.

This letter has the sure touch of someone who prays for his people, loves them unreservedly, and remains personally open to them, involved with them, vulnerable before them.

#### III.d 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 - Paul's Visions and Revelations

Because his opponents boast in their spiritual experiences as well as in their ethnic identity, Paul is also forced to boast, however foolishly, in his own visions and revelations. But then in vv.7-10 he returns one last time to boasting in his weakness, revealing the presence of a 'thorn in the flesh' as the appropriate means for glorifying God's grace and power in his life and ministry. In vv.9-10 he clearly states the principle behind this aspect of his self-commendation, something he has addressed several times in the letter; Paul's earthly weaknesses, not his revelations, are to be the platform for demonstrating the Lord's power and grace.

<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. <sup>2</sup> I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. <sup>3</sup> And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows – <sup>4</sup> was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

## 2 Corinthians 12:1-4

Although Paul knows nothing is to be gained by it from the perspective of their faith, he continues with his boasting as a way of countering the claims of his opponents, ensuring the Corinthians fully grasp that what Paul tells them is reality, unlike the hype of others. He knows that such boasting cannot equip, direct or instruct the church, but it was necessary to force them to face the facts.

Visions and revelations of the Lord were something that was promised with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost when Peter quoted the prophet Joel: <<*Then afterwards I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions*>> (Joel 2:28).

The distinction between a vision and a revelation is not immediately obvious. The Greek term *optasia* denotes that which is seen. *Apokalypsis* or revelation, on the other hand, is a broader term that applies to all forms of divine disclosure and can involve the whole range of senses, e.g. sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch.

It is strange that Paul puts what he recounts in vv.1-10 in the category of visions and revelations. It is not actually a vision, since he heard inexpressible things rather than just seeing them. Nor is it a revelatory event in any explicit sense. It comes closest to an ecstasy, that is, a transportation out of one's normal, mundane sphere of existence into the supramundane realm of the divine, i.e. caught up to the third heaven. So perhaps it is best to understand visions and revelations as a catchall phrase for a wide range of supramundane experiences. Whatever Paul experienced, it was decidedly of the Lord.

I know a person in Christ. Paul's hesitancy to boast of his experience is reflected in his use of the third person, as if it had happened to someone else. This statement also shows that Paul's experience of heaven occurred after his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road since he was in Christ.

The term caught up has more of a sense of being 'snatched up'. Luke uses it with regard to the Spirit's physically seizing Philip and transporting him to another geographical location: <<*When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea*>> (Acts 8:39-40); while in eschatological contexts it denotes a mighty operation of God, as in: <<*Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever*>> (1 Thessalonians 4:17), <<*And she gave birth to a*>> (Revelation 12:2).  
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son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne>> (Revelation 12:5).

The third heaven may refer to the highest realm of God's dwelling: <<But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!>> (1 Kings 8:27), <<But who is able to build him a house, since heaven, even highest heaven, cannot contain him? Who am I to build a house for him, except as a place to make offerings before him?>> (2 Chronicles 2:6), <<And Ezra said: 'You are the Lord, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. To all of them you give life, and the host of heaven worships you>> (Nehemiah 9:6), and: <<Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!>> (Psalm 148:4); although, according to the Talmud, the universe is made of seven heavens. This phrase does not imply belief in a simplistic multi-story universe but reflects a commonsense distinction between:

1. The atmosphere where birds can be seen to fly.
2. The higher area where the sun, moon and stars can be seen.
3. The unseen realm where God dwells.

This third area is equated with Paradise, Greek *paradeisos*, a Persian loan-word used in the Septuagint to refer to the Garden of Eden: <<And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches>> (Genesis 2:8-10), <<Lot looked about him, and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah>> (Genesis 13:10), <<For the Lord will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song>> (Isaiah 51:3), <<You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, carnelian, chrysolite, and moonstone, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, turquoise, and emerald; and worked in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared>> (Ezekiel 28:13), and: <<The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it, nor the fir trees equal its boughs; the plane trees were as nothing compared with its branches; no tree in the garden of God was like it in beauty. I made it beautiful with its mass of branches, the envy of all the trees of Eden that were in the garden of God>> (Ezekiel 31:8-9); whereas in the NT it refers to a place of blessedness where God dwells: <<He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise'>> (Luke 23:43), and: <<Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God>>

(Revelation 2:7). Both terms would be recognised by Jewish readers as references to the realm of God's direct presence.

Fourteen years ago was sometime between AD42-44, around Tarsus or Antioch, prior to his first missionary journey. This period of history is enclosed within two Scriptures concerning Paul's movements: <<*He spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus*>> (Acts 9:29-30), and: <<*Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they associated with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'*>> (Acts 11:25-26); refer to the comments on Acts 11:27-30 for ancient calculation of years. There is no other known record of this vision.

Around 50 years after Paul's experience the apostle John had a similar encounter in which he received the Revelation of Jesus: <<*After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this'*>> (Revelation 4:1).

Other known visions of heaven recorded in Scripture include Daniel: <<*As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him*>> (Daniel 7:13), and Stephen: <<*But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God*>> (Acts 7:55). In addition, there was Peter's vision showing that all people should be considered 'clean' (Acts 10:9-16), and Paul's vision of a man from Macedonia calling him to go to them to share the Gospel (Acts 16:9).

Whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. For the Greek and Gnostic alike it was the soul freed from the body that was able to soar to heaven. Ecstatic experiences of this sort often entailed a loss of sense perception and voluntary control, so that Paul may genuinely have not known whether he was physically transported to heaven or not. God alone holds this knowledge, and to Paul's way of thinking it mattered very little what he knew as long as God knows. What mattered to Paul was what he heard.

Things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. There are clearly some things that Paul was allowed to hear and see that God did not want him to reveal. It was the same for John: <<*And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down'*>> (Revelation 10:4). Both men could be relied upon for their integrity and confidentiality.

<sup>5</sup> On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup> But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, <sup>7</sup> even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.

## 2 Corinthians 12:5-7

On behalf of such a one I will boast. The distinction between the narrator and the individual in question is maintained. Paul can boast if he looks at himself dispassionately. But when he considers himself personally, he can commend only what his rivals would consider weaknesses.

The term fool denotes a lack of sense or reason. Although Paul plays the fool, what he says is by no means foolish. And if he chose to boast in something other than his weaknesses, he would not be making a fool of himself, as the Corinthian intruders were. Why not? Because, unlike his rivals who had an exaggerated opinion of themselves that had little or no foundation in reality, he would be speaking the truth. So Paul could legitimately boast, but he refrains from doing so for two key reasons:

1. That no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me. He would have no one think more of him than is warranted by what he does or says. Paul wants the Corinthians' judgment of him to be based on what they themselves have witnessed and not any fictitious claims that he makes about himself.
2. He refrains because of the surpassingly great revelations that he experienced, i.e. the exceptional character of the revelations. So extraordinary were the revelations that others would be tempted to think highly of him if he were to share the details, so he refrains from saying any more.

A thorn was given to me, by God, who is sovereign over all things, in the flesh, a messenger of Satan. The nature of this thorn or messenger is much disputed. The most frequently proposed possibilities include:

1. Paul's inner psychological struggles, such as grief over his earlier persecution of the church, or sorrow over Israel's unbelief, or continuing temptations.
2. Paul's opponents, both those in Corinth and some of the Jews, who continued to persecute him, an image reflected in the OT: <<***But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides; they shall trouble you in the land where you are settling***>> (Numbers 33:55), and: <<***The house of Israel shall no longer find a pricking brier or a piercing thorn among all their neighbours who have treated them with contempt. And they shall know that I am the Lord God***>> (Ezekiel 28:24), where thorns refer to Israel's enemies.
3. Some kind of physical affliction, possibly poor eyesight, less than fluent speaking ability, malaria fever or severe migraine headaches. The link to poor eyesight comes from his health issues in Galatia about which he commented: <<***What has become of the goodwill you felt? For I testify***>>

*that, had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me>> (Galatians 4:15).*

4. Some kind of demonic harassment, hence a messenger of Satan.

Most commentators cautiously prefer some form of the third view, since thorn in the flesh would seem to suggest a physical condition.

A messenger of Satan does not have to refer to a person but can be a sign or even an inanimate object that points to some form of affliction. So where does Satan fit into the picture? If he is not the prime mover, what exactly is his role? Elsewhere in 2 Corinthians Satan plays a fairly prominent role. He schemes against the church (2:11), he is called the god of this world (4:4), he is able to masquerade as an angel of light (11:14), and uses his servants to great effect in the church (11:15). Here he is portrayed as God's instrument in preparing Paul for effective service. This is not to say that he becomes a willing instrument for good. Satan intends the thorn for Paul's undoing. But God, who has ultimate control over the situation and Satan, intends it for Paul's good. The good is described negatively: to keep me from being too elated, arrogant or conceited.

<sup>8</sup> Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me,

#### 2 Corinthians 12:8

Three times indicates that Paul has now finished praying for the thorn's removal, having received his answer from Christ (v.9). This is perhaps reminiscent of Jesus' threefold prayer that his Father would spare him from his fate as recorded in Mark 14:32-41.

**In the bible three signifies completion or perfection, and unity. It is also the number of Persons in the Trinity.**

<sup>9</sup> but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. <sup>10</sup> Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

#### 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Paul says that God's grace is sufficient, in the present tense, underscoring the ever-present availability and sufficiency of God's grace, for Paul and for every believer, regardless of how critical one's circumstances may be: *<<What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For* New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised 2Corinthian12-6

*your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord>> (Romans 8:31-39).*

This answer to Paul’s prayer is a great indication that God often answers prayers in ways that a person may not have expected or even hoped for. When someone prays for healing, for example, and it doesn’t come, they can still hold on to the fact that God is all sufficient in and of himself.

For power is made perfect in weakness. Paul was not allowed to speak about his heavenly revelations (vv.4-6), but he quotes Christ’s declaration: my grace is sufficient, to underscore that his earthly weaknesses, and not his revelations, would be the platform for perfecting and demonstrating the Lord’s power. This is the main point of vv.1-13 and the foundation of Paul’s self-defence throughout this letter.

The power of Christ may dwell in me. Power, Greek *dynamis*, denotes the inherent capacity of someone to carry out something. Paul is probably thinking of the power that raised Christ from the dead rather than Christ’s power. This divine strength, Paul says, is made perfect in weakness.

Weakness does not signify timidity or lack of resolve. Nor does it refer to humility or self-abasement. It is, rather, Paul’s term for the frailties of human existence and the adversities of the Gospel ministry, as the reference to insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties in v.10 makes clear.

I am content. Despite the list of circumstances that he so often faced in his life of service, Paul had learned that placing his hope and trust in God brought sufficiency: <<*I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation*>> (Philippians 4:12b NIV).

For whenever I am weak, then I am strong. Paul’s life and work meant that he faced so many trials and tribulations that he often reached a point of realising that only God could save him: <<*The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen*>> (2 Timothy 4:18). This knowledge then turned his human weakness into strength through faith. King David had learned this same trust in God through many adversities: <<*But you, O Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head*>> (Psalm 3:3).

### III.e 2 Corinthians 12:11-13:10 - Paul’s final defence and appeal to the rebellious

In final preparation for his third visit (12:14 and 13:1), Paul commends his apostleship one last time (12:11-21), and calls the rebellious to test the genuineness of their professed faith (13:1-10).

### III.e.i 2 Corinthians 12:11-21 - Paul's Concern for the Corinthian Church

Paul makes it clear that he is more than equal to his opponents with a sound defence of his record in Corinth, again addressing their key claim against Paul that he could not be a true apostle because he would not accept financial aid. This is an issue that clearly rankled with the Corinthians and Paul once again reiterates that it because he loves them that he refuses their support.

It appears that rumours were being spread that Paul was actually asking them to make a collection for the poor in Jerusalem so that he could take the money from them for his personal support and yet maintain his claim not to take money from them. Paul refutes this claim.

Paul also warns the minority to ensure they have amended their sinful ways ahead of his third visit to them so that they could have mutual benefit from the time they would spend together; a time where Paul could be of service to them.

<sup>11</sup> I have been a fool! You forced me to it. Indeed you should have been the ones commending me, for I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing.

#### 2 Corinthians 12:11

The term super-apostles was used by Paul sarcastically before and was discussed in the comments made on 2 Corinthians 11:5-6. Paul does not call them apostles; this was probably a term they used about themselves, or perhaps claimed they had apostolic authority given to them by the true apostles in Jerusalem.

You forced me to it. The reaction of the Corinthians meant that Paul had to respond in a way that was alien to him but which was necessary in order for him to make them see the truth. The disappointment for Paul was that they should have been the ones commending Paul, rather than forcing him to make his own defence against the false claims.

Even though I am nothing. Paul was the 'least of the apostles', having persecuted the church: <<*Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God*>> (1 Corinthians 15:8-9), and a self-confessed sinner: <<*The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost*>> (1 Timothy 1:15), therefore he owes everything to the grace and call of God in his life: <<*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them – though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me*>> (1 Corinthians 15:10), and: <<*Such is the confidence that we have through Christ towards God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*>> (2 Corinthians 3:4-6).

<sup>12</sup> The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works.

## 2 Corinthians 12:12

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience is a reference to the work of the Spirit through Paul's ministry as seen in the conversion and gifting of the Corinthians: *<<Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts>>* (2 Corinthians 3:1-3), and seen too in Paul's Christ-like behaviour, characterised by his endurance in adversity by the power of God (10:1-12:10).

Signs and wonders and mighty works. A threefold description of miraculous acts that accompanied and accredited the ministry of an apostle: *<<For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ>>* (Romans 15:18-19), and: *<<You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so much for nothing? – if it really was for nothing. Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?>>* (Galatians 3:1-5).

This triad ties God's saving work under the new covenant to the signs and wonders at the exodus, thus showing the continuity within redemptive history: *<<So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; after that he will let you go>>* (Exodus 3:20), *<<none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice>>* (Numbers 14:22), *<<Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?>>* (Deuteronomy 4:34), *<<for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed>>* (Joshua 24:17), and: *<<He led them out, having performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years>>* (Acts 7:36). These signs are well summarised in Psalm 105:27-36.

Jesus warned the people that they should look to more than just the signs and wonders: *<<Then Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe'>>* (John 4:48), and: *<<Then they said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.' So they said to him, 'What sign are*

*you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?'*>> (John 6:28-30).

<sup>13</sup> How have you been worse off than the other churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!

### 2 Corinthians 12:13

How have you been worse off than the other churches. Paul established all his churches with the truth of the Gospel. This is all sufficient and none would be disadvantaged in any way.

I myself did not burden you. With a kind of playful irony, Paul says that the only wrong he did the Corinthians was not asking them for money. However, his tone could be sincere if he considered that by not taking money from them, and thus opening himself up to doubts over his apostolic authority, he was bringing doubts on the validity of the Corinthian churches authenticity. If this were the case then he could genuinely state forgive me this wrong! Refer to 2 Corinthians 11:9b-14 and the associated comments for the reason why Paul did not wish to receive financial aid from the church in Corinth.

<sup>14</sup> Here I am, ready to come to you this third time. And I will not be a burden, because I do not want what is yours but you; for children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children. <sup>15</sup> I will most gladly spend and be spent for you. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?

### 2 Corinthians 12:14-15

Here I am, ready to come to you this third time. On his first visit Paul had planted the church at Corinth, staying with them for 18 months as recorded in Acts 18:1-18. His second visit was the 'painful visit' that prompted the severe letter and Titus' visit to them that is referred to in 2 Corinthians 2:1 and in the series introduction on the website.

Paul mentions one last time his refusal to burden the Corinthians financially as the loving act of a spiritual parent for his children: <<*I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel*>> (1 Corinthians 4:14-15), since acting this way embodies his message and life as an apostle: <<*For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence*>> (2 Corinthians 2:17), which calls into question the claims of Paul's opponents: <<*And what I do I will also continue to do, in order to deny an opportunity to those who want an opportunity to be recognised as our equals in what they boast about*>> (2 Corinthians 11:12).

I do not want what is yours but you. Paul desired nothing from the Corinthians other than: <<*to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified*>> (1 Corinthians 2:2b).

Children ought not to lay up for their parents. In the culture of Paul's day it was accepted that a father would financially support his children, investing in them and their future. Had Paul taken financial aid from the Corinthians while he was their spiritual father he would see it as failing in his duty. Paul has the younger child in view here. Adult children do indeed have a responsibility to support their parents. In fact, Paul says elsewhere that they are obligated to provide for any relative in need, and not just their parents: *<<And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever>>* (1 Timothy 5:8).

Be spent for you. Paul's commitment to the church in Corinth went beyond any financial commitment. He was willing to expend all his energy, time, affection, reputation, health, and indeed his life for them.

If I love you more, am I to be loved less? All Paul is asking in exchange for his giving is their continuing love for him.

<sup>16</sup> Let it be assumed that I did not burden you. Nevertheless (you say) since I was crafty, I took you in by deceit. <sup>17</sup> Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? <sup>18</sup> I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Titus did not take advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves with the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?

### 2 Corinthians 12:16-18

Crafty, deceit, take advantage. Paul emphatically rejects the idea that he used the collection for the poor in Jerusalem as a duplicitous way to take money from the Corinthians, since there is no evidence for such a charge. All of those who worked with Paul were men of unimpeachable integrity, something Titus had recently proved to them.

Such rumours and gossip have always been divisive in the church, just as they were in the OT, where a gossip could be described as: *<<one who sows discord in a family>>* (Proverbs 6:19b). Even rumours that are later found to be untrue will always leave an indelible stain on the character and reputation of the individual and the church.

Paul would have been extremely disappointed that the Corinthians should even contemplate such a rumour for Paul had made it clear that he wanted the collection to be completed before his arrival and that he would get the Corinthians to appoint men to transport the funds to Jerusalem, with Paul travelling only if it proved necessary for him to do so: *<<And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me>>* (1 Corinthians 16:3-4).

I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. The language here has led some commentators to believe this section of the letter to be a different document to the main body, as earlier Paul had said he would be sending Titus

with two unnamed brothers, see 2 Corinthians 8:16-24. However, most believe this refers to Titus' recent visit and an unnamed travelling companion.

Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? Paul's response is phrased in the form of a question that expects a negative response. His confidence is based on a shared understanding about the envoy in Greco-Roman society. The envoy so closely represented the interests and actions of the sender that to see the envoy was, in effect, to see the one who sent him. And to judge the envoy was to judge the one who sent him. So if none of Paul's emissaries exploited the Corinthians, it is a sure thing that he is not out to exploit them either. Titus was one such trustworthy envoy who had only recently proved his value and integrity to the church.

Did we not take the same steps? 'Steps' is the Greek *peripateo* and is used by Paul to describe the Christian walk. Paul is comparing his own integrity with that of Titus who had recently behaved impeccably towards the Corinthians and clearly won their support and affection.

Paul shows that the proper way of handling the attacks he received is neither to respond in kind nor to protect oneself by erecting a wall of steel. Paul remains deeply vulnerable throughout this whole process, and has responded to attack with patient argument, biblical exposition, explanation of circumstances, direct personal appeal, and a fair amount of humour and irony.

<sup>19</sup> Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves before you? We are speaking in Christ before God. Everything we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up.

## 2 Corinthians 12:19

Defending ourselves before you. Paul wants to make it clear that his defence is not to be seen as if he were being put on trial by the church in Corinth, for the apostles' only judge is God: <<***But 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***>> (1 Corinthians 4:3). The Corinthian opponents cared a great deal about what people thought of them, and so they fashioned their preaching to appeal to their audience. Paul, however, cared only about God's opinion, which was wholly determined by whether he spoke as Christ's representative or as his own advocate.

Paul's self-defence is fundamentally for the Corinthians' sake, not his own, refer to the comments made on 2 Corinthians 10:8, and is pleasing to God, for he has been speaking in Christ before God.

Everything we do, beloved, is for the sake of building you up can almost be seen as Paul's mission statement. First he comes and proclaims the Gospel, then when it has been received he wants nothing more than to see the converts grow in their Christian walk. The church is built on the foundation of Jesus: <<***In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord***>> (Ephesians 2:21).

The authority Paul received as Christ's representative was intended for constructive, not destructive purposes, although not everyone always sees it

that way, especially where discipline is involved. Growth toward spiritual maturity is not always an easy process for the church. Just as correction is a necessary, if somewhat painful, part of growing up for children, so also it serves as a required part of the maturing process for the church. Yet the church rarely looks on correction in this way.

<sup>20</sup> For I fear that when I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish; I fear that there may perhaps be quarrelling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.

### 2 Corinthians 12:20

Find you not as I wish. Paul realises that not all of the church was repentant after receiving his severe letter. In addition, Paul knows that in churches people often commit to change but evidence of that change can often be lacking. He expects there will still be unrepentant and rebellious individuals, anchored in their sinful lifestyles, all of which will indicate that they are not, in fact, genuine believers: <<*Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realise that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless, indeed, you fail to pass the test!*>> (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Find me not as you wish. If the Corinthians are not repentant, Paul will be called upon to exercise God's judgment rather than continuing to wait patiently for their repentance as in the past: <<*But I call on God as witness against me: it was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth. I do not mean to imply that we lord it over your faith; rather, we are workers with you for your joy, because you stand firm in the faith. So I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? And I wrote as I did, so that when I came, I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice; for I am confident about all of you, that my joy would be the joy of all of you. For I wrote to you out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you*>> (2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4).

The eight vices listed typify a community fractured by envy, conceit and selfish ambition. The initial four: quarrelling, jealousy, anger, selfishness are also found in Galatians 5:20.

Quarrelling is about fighting over pride of position in church, as was seen even within Jesus' closest disciples: <<*Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest*>> (Mark 9:33-34). Jealousy over the possessions or status of others is often the cause of such quarrelling that often leads to anger.

The word translated selfishness most likely refers to a self-seeking mindset that views everything from a 'what's in it for me' perspective. In the NT it is commonly linked with envy for what others have: <<*But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such*

*wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind>> (James 3:14-16).*

The next two vices are closely related. Slander is something that is spoken publicly, while gossip is something that is whispered behind the back. Both can be and often are devastating to the life of the church.

The Greek word translated conceit, *physiosis*, means to be 'inflated with a sense of one's own importance'. It is a problem that crops up repeatedly in 1 Corinthians.

Disorder renders a term that normally denotes a public disturbance. It occurs in 2 Corinthians 6:5 in a list of troubles accompanying Paul's missionary labours. However, here it likely refers to congregational disturbances of the sort implied in 1 Corinthians Chapter 14 and 1 Timothy Chapter 2.

<sup>21</sup> I fear that when I come again, my God may humble me before you, and that I may have to mourn over many who previously sinned and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and licentiousness that they have practised.

### 2 Corinthians 12:21

God may humble Paul before the Corinthians by using him as an instrument of their excommunication, which will mean Paul may have to mourn over the rebellious. There is no joy in judgement for an apostle, who under the new covenant is called primarily to build up the church: <<*Now, even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it*>> (2 Corinthians 10:8), and: <<*So I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down*>> (2 Corinthians 13:10).

Impurity, sexual immorality, and licentiousness. There is nothing in the letter that prepares the reader for this charge against those who previously sinned and have not repented. Paul had dealt with these issues in 1 Corinthians but it seems that some had not changed their ways.