

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 47

II Corinthians – Part Three

I. BACKGROUND

As we have worked through First and Second Corinthians, we have glimpsed through the window of the first years in one of history's earliest community churches. From the letters themselves, as well as the historical accounts in Acts, we have pieced together a picture of internal strife, misguided practices, poor theology, weak leadership, self-righteousness, and other issues of sin. Yet, Paul started both of these letters (two among a number of letters he sent to the Corinthians) with words of comfort and affirmation.

In First Corinthians, Paul spoke to this fractured, errant church as “the church of God in Corinth...those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy” (1 Cor. 1:2). Similarly in Second Corinthians, Paul wrote of the church as “dear friends” and the “temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:16; 7:1). We have seen Paul speak over and over of his love for the Corinthians, his care for their well being, and his conviction that God was at work in their midst.

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.

II. THE TEXT

A. *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.¹

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 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

¹ We should remember that the old Greek used in ancient times did not have punctuation functioning like our quotation marks.

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 orator² 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.³ 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,

² At the time, Greek culture produced a specific training and job occupation of "Orator." Lawyers, teachers, and politicians were all trained as "Orators."

³ 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").

devout Jew, leader of his people, comfortable Pharisee living in Jerusalem in the good graces of his government and faith?

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.

B. 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,⁴ 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 segway 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). 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.

C. 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

⁴ See the lesson on Acts and Galatians for a discussion of those texts.

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.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. We Have Battles.
2. We have Potent Weapons in Christ.
3. Satan deceives.
4. God Works in Our Weakness.
5. Embrace God in Life.