

09. 2 Corinthians II-13



2 Corinthians 11:1-2

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to the Messiah.

Paul has just pointed out the foolishness of boasting in anyone but God (10:17), so he is not about to do that. However he does sense the need to counter the attacks being made against him by his opponents, lest the Corinthians, being persuaded by them in regard to Paul, will also be won over to another Jesus, another Spirit, another gospel (see Galatians 1:6-7). Paul is their father, and, having promised them to Christ, it is his responsibility to keep them pure till the day of their marriage.

2 Corinthians 11:3-4

But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to the Messiah. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough.

He likens the rival missionaries to the serpent who deceived Eve (Genesis 3:13). In Paul's day the serpent was interpreted as being Satan (see Wisdom 2:24). Paul is insinuating that they are doing the devil's work. He is afraid that they will be **led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to the Messiah.**

2 Corinthians 11:5-9

I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. I may be untrained in speech, but not in knowledge; certainly in every way and in all things we have made this evident to you. Did I commit a sin by humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I proclaimed God's good news to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for my needs were supplied by the friends who came from Macedonia. So I refrained and will continue to refrain from burdening you in any way.

Referring to the intruders sarcastically as 'super-apostles' (see also 12:11), Paul does not defend himself on the grounds of rhetorical ability. Rather, he challenges the Corinthians to remember his teaching. He is not lacking in the knowledge of 'God's good news'.

Paul returns to a topic that comes up again and again throughout his Corinthian correspondence: his determination not to accept material support from them. One reason for his insistence on this in Corinth may be the system of patronage that was prevalent there. To have accepted financial support may, in the minds of the well-off in Corinth, have put Paul in a position whereby they could 'boast' of 'owning' him. This he was absolutely determined to avoid. He worked at his own trade to pay his own way, and when he was in need, it was the Macedonians who helped him out. In no way has Paul burdened the Corinthians and he is resolved to keep it that way.

2 Corinthians 11:10-18

As the truth of Christ is in me, this boast of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! 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. For such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of the Messiah. And no wonder! Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his ministers also disguise themselves as ministers of righteousness. Their end will match their deeds. I repeat, let no one think that I am a fool; but if you do, then accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. What I am saying in regard to this boastful confidence, I am saying not with the Lord's authority, but as a fool; since many boast according to human standards, I will also boast.

Behind everything that Paul is saying here is the judgment that the gospel which these 'ministers' proclaim is not the 'message of the cross' (1 Corinthians 1:18). Whoever it is that they claim has authorised their mission, it is certainly not Jesus, for they are 'enemies of the cross of the Messiah' (Philippians 3:18). They are, indeed, 'ministers', carrying out a work given by another; but the other is Satan. The 'righteousness' which they proclaim is not from God, and to welcome it will not put one in the right relationship to God for it is not through Jesus. When it comes to the judgment, these pseudo-apostles will receive what they have earned.

2 Corinthians 11:19-21

For you gladly put up with fools, being wise yourselves! For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! But whatever anyone dares to boast of – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast of that.

Paul tries to wake the Corinthians up to ‘look at what is before your eyes’ (10:7). These self-acclaimed ‘super-apostles’ are making slaves of them. They are preying upon them, taking advantage of them, putting on airs, and insulting them. Paul cannot understand how the community can fall for such impostors.

As in all Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians, it is the depth of his love for them that comes across most powerfully. He loves them so intensely that he is not going to allow charlatans to win their affection by trickery, and turn them from 'sincere and pure devotion to the Messiah', the one to whom they are betrothed. Like God himself he holds them so dear to his heart that he will do anything to hold on to them. He is even willing to indulge in something that could appear to be personal boasting if that can help to bring them to their senses.

2 Corinthians 11:21-23

Whatever anyone dares to boast of — I am speaking as a fool — I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of the Messiah? I am talking like a mad-man — I am a better one.

Paul's words give us a clearer picture of his opponents. They are boasting of being true representatives of the Hebrew race, the religion of Israel and the faith of Abraham. The implication is that Paul is defective in this regard, an accusation he dismisses. Paul has already accused them of being ministers of Satan (11:14-15). Since they claim to be ministers of Jesus, Paul states that he has greater grounds for the claim and goes on to list what he has been through in the course of his ministry.

2 Corinthians 11:23-25

with far greater labours (see 6:5 and 11:27), far more imprisonments (see 2 Corinthians 6:5), with countless floggings (see 6:5), and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning (Acts 14:19).

The following are mentioned only here

2 Corinthians 11:25-27

Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.

2 Corinthians 11:28-29

And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant?

There is plenty of evidence in Paul's Corinthian correspondence of the anxiety which he felt towards the community there. Other churches that gave him grounds for concern were those of Galatia. We can be sure that his written word contains only a very small amount of what he speaks of here as 'daily pressure'. Verse twenty-nine reminds us that his concern was not just with the communities and their perseverance in faith, it was also with individual members whom he had grown to love, and whose sufferings he felt.

2 Corinthians 11:30-33

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus (may he be blessed forever!) knows that I do not lie. In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, ³³but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.

Paul is only really at home 'boasting' about his weaknesses, for, as he has said again and again in his letters to the Corinthians, it is these, more than anything else, that reveal the 'power of the Messiah' (12:9). He begins by describing the humiliating way he had to escape from Damascus. Luke also mentions this incident: 'The Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night so that they might kill him; but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket' (Acts 9:23-25).

2 Corinthians 12:1

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions (ὄπτασία) and revelations (ἀποκαλύψεις) of the Lord.

Though this is the only time that Paul uses the word ‘**vision**’, he has already written to the Corinthians: ‘Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?’ (1Corinthians 9:1). In his letter to the Galatians he referred to a ‘**revelation**’ through which he received the gospel which he proclaims (see Galatians 1:12). He also spoke of going up to Jerusalem ‘in response to a revelation’ (Galatians 2:2). In an earlier letter to the Corinthians he used the word ‘revelation’ in reference to divine communications received in prayer (see 1Corinthians 14:6,26).

2 Corinthians 12:2-4

I know a person in the Messiah 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. And I know that such a person — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows — was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.

Here he speaks of an experience which he had about the year 42, during the period when he was working somewhere in the province of Syria-Cilicia, before his call to Antioch. It was obviously an exceptional experience for Paul or he would have chosen a more recent example. Some writings contemporary with Paul speak of five or seven heavens, others of **three**. Paul is emphasising that he was taken right into the presence of God.

2 Corinthians 12:5-7

On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. 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, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations.

He is obviously reluctant to mention this experience and does so only because his opponents are boasting of having such experiences. The key point here is to notice that Paul is using it as an example of something that had nothing to do with any achievement on his part. Furthermore, he is presenting it in such a way as to make the point that experiences such as this do not authenticate apostolic commission. If they need to make an assessment of Paul in comparison with the rival missionaries, he would prefer them to remember the 'ordinary' experiences which they shared when he was among them.

2 Corinthians 12:7-9

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness'.

There is much speculation about the ‘**thorn in the flesh**’ of which Paul speaks here. A number of things are clear. First, it is something which he associates with ‘**Satan**’ – an experience, therefore, which, in itself, is destructive of life rather than nurturing of it. Secondly, it is a **humiliating** experience. Thirdly, it is **chronic**: he has prayed to be free of it, but it continues to pester him. He may be referring to a chronic physical condition that hampers his apostolic work. If this is true, his extensive travelling alone is all the more credit to his energetic commitment to the commission given him by Christ, without even taking into account the hardships which he has listed earlier in the chapter. It is more likely that he is referring to the abuse and opposition which is constantly following him and trying to undermine his work. In an earlier letter he spoke of being reviled, persecuted and slandered (see 1Corinthians 4:12), and there is plenty of evidence in this present letter of the opposition which continues to hound him.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of the Messiah may dwell in me.°Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of the Messiah; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

If we have been wondering what the point of this long section of ‘boasting’ is, it becomes clear here. He is ‘content’ to experience these ‘weaknesses’, and these ‘insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities’. He suffers them because of the commission given him by Christ, and in order to be more conformed to the pattern of his crucified and risen Lord. As he has said to them on numerous occasions, it is in our weaknesses born with patience and with love that the ‘power of Christ’ is revealed (see 2:14-16 and 4:7). So long as the ‘power’ (Spirit) of Jesus continues to ‘dwell’ in him, so long as Jesus continues to surround him with his ‘grace’, Paul is content.

2 Corinthians 12:11-13

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. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works. How have you been worse off than the other churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!

Extraordinary happening must be tested. What are the 'signs of a true apostle'? Most important are the ways in which true apostles manifest that they are instruments of the redeeming love of God as revealed in Jesus' gift of himself on the cross. Of supreme importance is faithful love, maintained under pressure, and bearing fruit in the wonderful life of the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 12:14

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.

The most straightforward way of reading 'this third time' is to understand it as referring to Paul's initial eighteen month stay from 50 to 52, his brief 'painful' visit from Ephesus in 54 or 55, and the visit he is intending to make before the winter of 56 (see 13:1-2).

As their father (10:14; 11:2; see 1 Corinthians 3:2; 4:15), it is Paul's responsibility to do all he can to meet their needs. He is not asking them to meet his, except, of course, his need for their love.

2 Corinthians 12:15

I will most gladly spend and be spent for you. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?

Verse fifteen expresses how well he has learned from Jesus the art of loving (see 5:14). They should not doubt that he loves them (see 11:11). We recall his words in his previous letter: ‘I wrote 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’ (2Corinthians 2:4). ‘You excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you’ (2Corinthians 8:7).

2 Corinthians 12:16-18

Let it be assumed that I did not burden you. Nevertheless (you say) since I was crafty, I took you in by deceit. Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? 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?

Paul appeals to their own experience of him as well as of those, especially Titus, who were acting for him. He could be referring to Titus's first visit to Corinth to begin organising the collection (see 8:6), or to Titus's follow up visit (see 8:6,16-17).

2 Corinthians 12:19-21

Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves before you? We are speaking in the Messiah before God. Everything we do, **beloved**, is for the sake of building you up. 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. 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

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians letter also speaks of quarrelling (1:11; 3:3), jealousy (**1:3**), conceit (4:6,18-19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4), and disorder (14:33). In it Paul had to give strong warnings also about sexual immorality (see 5:11; 6:9). As he will mention in 13:2, challenging their behaviour was one of the things he had to do on his previous visit.

2 Corinthians 13:1-6

This is the third time I am coming to you. ‘Any charge must be sustained by the evidence of two or three witnesses’ (Deuteronomy 9:15). I warned those who sinned previously and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that when I come again, I will not be lenient — since you desire proof that the Messiah is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful in you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God. Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus the Messiah is in you? — unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test! I hope that you will find out that we have not failed.

2 Corinthians 13:7-10

But we pray to God that you may not do anything wrong — not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. For we rejoice when we are weak and you are strong. This is what we pray for, that you may be restored. 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 (see Jeremiah 1:10).

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and **the God of love** and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord **Jesus** the Messiah, the love of **God**, and the communion of the **Holy Spirit** be with all of you.

Paul's fatherly care for the Corinthians finds a beautiful conclusion. Nowhere else in his writings does he speak of God so simply as '**the God of love**'; and nowhere else do we find such a rich final sentence. He prays that they will enjoy that '**communion of the Holy Spirit**' which has its source in God's love and which is the grace offered to them by the risen Jesus. It is the communion which Jesus himself enjoys and to which he invites us all.