

## LOOK AT MY STRIPES 2 CORINTHIANS 10:1-12:13

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with Ra McLaughlin

In this section of 2 Corinthians, false apostles had opposed Paul in Corinth. He hoped that by writing against these false teachers now, he might prevent a major conflict when he arrived.

### BOLD ACTION TO COME (10:1-11)

**10:1.** Paul took this issue very seriously. He began with an **appeal**, saying, “**I, Paul.**” He used this kind of intense expression only three times in his epistles (compare Gal. 5:2; 1 Thess. 2:18), reserving it for the most serious topics. From the outset, it is evident that the challenge to his apostolic authority was a grave matter. Not only was Paul personally offended, but also the rejection of his authority was tantamount to a rejection of Christ (see Matt. 10:40; John 13:20; 1 Cor. 14:37).

Paul’s opponents had accused him of being “**timid**” **when face to face ... but “bold” when away.** Apparently, they asserted that he did not have an appropriately powerful presence to be an apostle (compare 1 Cor. 2:1-5). Paul sarcastically mocked this position as incompatible with Christianity.

He **appeal[ed]** to the church **by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.** The opponents had accused Paul of being **timid** (*tapeinos*), but Paul directed the Corinthians’ attention to Christ’s similar qualities of **meekness** (*prautetos*) and **gentleness** (*epieikeias*). In fact, Jesus had even described himself as *tapeinos* (Matt. 11:29). By beginning this section in this way, Paul pointed to the irony of his opponents accusing him of timidity. What they saw as a liability was actually evidence that Paul was like Christ, and therefore substantiated the legitimacy of his apostleship.

**10:2.** Paul earnestly desired to remain meek toward the Corinthians. He went so far as to **beg** them not to make it necessary for him **to be bold** when he came to visit. He preferred to be gentle toward his spiritual children, and hoped that they would make this possible by not resisting his authority. Nevertheless, Paul realized that he would probably have to be **bold ... toward some people** because he did not expect everyone to accept his appeal. These people would need sharp rebuke and discipline because they wrongly evaluated Paul’s leadership **by the standards of this world.** This problem loomed large in the church at Corinth. Paul had addressed it before (1 Cor. 1:17-2:5; 3:18-21; 4:8-14), but apparently it was still an issue.

**10:3-5.** Paul responded by reminding the Corinthians that his ministry was wonderfully successful warfare. Previously, he had described his gospel ministry as a parade of victory in war (2:14-16), and he used similar military analogies elsewhere as well (2 Cor. 6:7; Eph. 6:11-17; Phil. 2:25; 1 Thess. 5:8; 1 Tim. 1:18; 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:3-4; 4:7; Philem. 1:2). His apostolic effort was a war he was sure to win.

Paul admitted that he and his company **live[d] in the world**, but insisted that they did not **wage war as the world does**. They did not to employ the intimidation, coercion, and violence normally associated with worldly authorities. Instead of employing **the weapons of the world**, Paul relied on **divine power** (compare 1 Cor. 1:17-2:16; 2 Cor. 4:7). These **weapons** appeared weak by worldly standards, but they were actually very powerful. The preaching of the Cross brought great displays of God's power in the lives of believers everywhere, including Corinth (1 Cor. 1:18,24; 2:4,5; 4:20; 2 Cor. 4:7). Consequently, Paul was certain that he was on a course **to demolish the strongholds** or fortifications of **arguments and every pretension** that anyone set up **against the knowledge of God**. As Paul traveled the world proclaiming the gospel of Christ, he encountered pretentious disbelief supported by clever arguments and powerful personalities. But through the apparently weak weapons of preaching Christ, Paul went about taking **captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ**.

**10:6.** Having established this broad portrait of his ministry, Paul directly addressed the Corinthian situation. As one who waged spiritual war, Paul would **be ready to punish every act of disobedience** when he arrived in Corinth. He made it clear that he would not come in gentleness toward those who opposed him. Paul did not intend to coerce or physically to punish his opponents – to do so would have been to rely on worldly weapons of war. Instead, he probably had in mind his divine power to authorize church discipline (1 Cor. 4:18-21; 5:3-5,13; 2 Cor. 2:6-10). Paul bore the responsibility to authorize the expulsion of false leaders, and would surely do so when he arrived in Corinth. Yet, he also made it clear that he would be careful in this regard, acting boldly only **once** the Corinthians' **obedience** was **complete**.

We cannot be certain precisely what Paul meant by this expression. Some interpreters believe referred to the collections for Jerusalem (8:1-9:15). Others suggest the rejection of the false apostles (11:13-15). In 2 Corinthians 2:9 Paul used a similar expression to describe the general faithfulness of the church. It seems likely, therefore, that he wrote of setting a broad range of issues in order before acting boldly against his opponents. Instead of harming the church by immediately casting out the false leaders and their followers, Paul intended to rescue as many as possible by stabilizing them in the ways of Christ first.

Despite his pastoral strategy, Paul presented a thinly veiled threat in these words. He had determined not to ignore those who challenged his apostleship. His opponents who accused him of timidity would be shocked to see his decisive discipline.

**10:7a.** Having stated his intention to move decisively against his opponents, Paul declared his commitment to bold action from a different angle in 10:7-11. The sentence “**you are looking only on the surface of things**” may be translated either in the indicative (NIV; NASB), in the imperative (NIV margin; NRSV), or as an interrogative (NKJV). If the second option is correct, then Paul warned the Corinthians to look beyond his opponents’ superficial accusations and to evaluate the situation more carefully. If the first or third option is correct, then he exhorted the Corinthians to see what should be obvious. Whatever the case, Paul began another line of thought that would lead again to a commitment to bold action in his upcoming visit.

**10:7b.** What did the apostle want them to consider? He wanted them to examine the claim made by others that they **belong[ed] to Christ** (*Christou einai*, literally “to be of Christ”). This expression may have meant more than merely being a follower of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:12 Paul reported that one faction in the Corinthian church claimed to **follow Christ**, implying a special blessing or appointment by Christ, or a purer faith. Yet, Paul insisted that whatever special appointment others may have had, he and his company **belong[ed] to Christ just as much**.

**10:8.** Of course, such a claim sounded as if Paul boasted of being above others, just as his opponents did. So, he explained (**for**) that if he **boast[ed] somewhat freely ... he would not be ashamed of it**. Testing would vindicate Paul’s claim to special authority but would condemn his opponents (see 11:13-15).

Paul mentioned that the special authority he received from Christ was **for building ... up rather than pulling ... down**. Paul had argued in his earlier epistle that all spiritual gifts were for edification (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:26). Here he affirmed this as the purpose of his apostleship. By implication, Paul’s opponents used their gifts for the church’s destruction (1 Cor. 1:10-13; 3:1-15; 15:33). This positive service that Paul rendered to the church was one reason why he would **not be ashamed** when he visited.

**10:9.** The meaning of this verse is obscured by unusual Greek syntax. Different translations are possible: **I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters** (“lest I seem to terrify you by letters” [NKJV]). It is likely that Paul introduced an aside here which we may paraphrase in this manner: “Now, I never intended to frighten anyone unduly with my letters, despite what others may have said about them.” This understanding fits well with the verses that follow.

**10:10.** Paul explained (**for**) that **some** said his letters were **weighty and forceful**, but that they had nothing to fear because **in person he was unimpressive and his speaking amount[ed] to nothing** (compare 1 Cor. 2:1-5; 2 Cor. 11:6). Paul’s opponents relied on their clever speech laced with human authority. They diminished any threat Paul made in writing by assuming they would outtalk him in any confrontation.

**10:11.** In response to this false confidence, Paul wrote that **such people** needed to understand that **what** he had been in **letters**, he would also **be ... in actions** when he visited. Paul was fully confident that he would defeat his opponents.

### **LEGITIMATE BOASTING (10:12-18)**

On a number of occasions in this chapter the apostle responded to his opponents by boasting (10:8,13,15). Apparently, Paul understood that this tactic raised questions about his motivations and goals. After all, earlier he had forbidden his opponents from boasting (1 Cor. 1:29; 3:21; 4:7; 5:6). Paul explained himself by discussing the legitimacy of his boasting.

Negative particles of different sorts are scattered throughout this material (10:12-16,18). They reveal that Paul was contrasting his own actions with those of others, and denying false accusations made against him.

**10:12.** First, Paul mocked his opponents' tactics. In effect, he stated that he would not even **dare ... compare** himself to his opponents according to their preferred grounds of comparison. These words must have caught the readers' attention because they sounded as if Paul had conceded his inferiority. But the sarcasm of his statement becomes evident in the next sentence. **They measure themselves by themselves**, and thereby demonstrate that **they are not wise**. That is to say, they evaluate their importance in the church by human standards alone. In modern parlance, they had become "legends in their own minds." Their self-commendation was unacceptable (see 10:18). At this point Paul's readers understood why he did not want to be compared to them.

**10:13a.** By contrast, Paul said that he and his company would **not boast beyond proper limits** ("beyond our measure" NASB; "beyond limits" NRSV). They would not fall into the trap of self-aggrandizement. Instead, they would **confine** their **boasting** to what **God** had established as true for them. There was nothing wrong with Paul honestly acknowledging what God had done in his life. He was both telling the truth and doing it within **proper limits**.

**10:13b-15a.** Paul described the legitimate boundaries of his boasting as **the field God had assigned to** him and his company. Paul spoke of a **field**, (more literally, "a measured space"; compare "the measure of the sphere" NASB) which God had allotted to him. Elsewhere in the New Testament, this language describes God's calling and allotment of grace to each individual (Rom. 12:3; 1 Cor. 7:17; Eph. 4:7), and this may have been part of Paul's meaning here. But phrases like "**reaches even you**" and "**we did get as far as you**" indicate that Paul meant something even more specific here, something geographic. In fact, his language closely resembles the Old Testament's description of the allotment of the Promised Land to the families of Israel (Josh. 13:7; 14:5; 18:6). It is likely that he applied the Old Testament ideal of land inheritance to the

sphere of his ministry. Those territories to which he brought the gospel were in effect allotted to him as part of his inheritance in Christ (compare 1 Cor. 3:6-15; 9:2).

Most importantly for this discussion, Paul's ministry was a **field that reach[ed] even to** Corinth. Paul had every right to boast about the Corinthians (7:4,11,14) because they were part of his allotment. This was not to imply that he did not share this allotment with fellow-laborers (e.g. Apollos [Acts 19:1; 1 Cor. 3:6]; Timothy [Acts 8:15; 1 Cor. 4:17; 2 Cor. 1:19]; Silas [Acts 8:15; 2 Cor. 1:19]; Titus [2 Cor. 7:6-7; 8:6,16,23; 12:18]), only to affirm that his ministry did reach/include Corinth. Paul admitted that his boasting would have gone **too far** if he **had not come to** Corinth. But he **did get as far as** Corinth **with the gospel**. Paul and his company did not **go beyond ... limits** because they were did not boast **of work done by others**. Unlike his opponents' boasting, Paul's was perfectly acceptable.

**10:15b.** Paul continued defining the limits of his boasting by admitting and then qualifying his **hope** for the future. He wanted the Corinthians' **faith to grow** so that his **area of activity** ("sphere of action" NRSV) might **greatly expand**. That is to say, **so that** he could **preach the gospel in regions beyond** Corinth. Paul hoped that once the Corinthian church was stabilized, he and his company could use Corinth as a launching pad for more distant gospel ministry. As much as Paul traveled and moved from place to place, his many epistles demonstrate that he knew the importance of strengthening the churches he had already established.

**10:16.** Paul wanted to move further into new lands because he did not want to violate the same principle by which he criticized others. He had no desire **to boast about work already done** in **territory** assigned to another. He refused to take credit for another's work.

**10:17.** To sum up his outlook, Paul summarized the teaching of Jeremiah 9:23-24 (compare 1 Cor. 1:31) which warns against boasting in one's own wisdom or abilities. All boasting and confidence should be in knowing God, who is supreme over all. Paul encapsulated Jeremiah's perspective by simply saying that boasting should be **in the Lord**. In other words, all confidence, pride, and boasting should be in the light of what God has done. Believers often accomplish much, just as Paul had, but they should always take pleasure in these accomplishments with a full awareness that they are merely humble servants of the Lord.

**10:18.** Paul explained (**for**) himself pointedly as he closed this section. In an ultimate sense, we are not **approved** because we **commend** ourselves. Paul's opponents had a measure of approval from themselves and others, but that false approval would amount to nothing in the end. Those who follow Christ should seek to be those **whom the Lord commends**. That was Paul's desire for himself and his hope for the Corinthians.

## GODLY JEALOUSY (11:1-6)

Desiring to protect the church from error, Paul continued to resist those leaders in Corinth who opposed his authority.

**11:1.** Paul expressed discomfort at having to defend himself by asking his readers to **put up with a little ... foolishness**, and by acknowledging that they had **already** been **doing that** by reading this far. Now, however, Paul explained why he insisted that the Corinthians remain loyal to him: he wanted to protect them.

**11:2a.** Paul described his desire to protect the Corinthians from error as **a godly jealousy**. This terminology sounds like an oxymoron to most Christians today. Even in Paul's own vocabulary, "jealousy" (*zelos*) or being "jealous" (*ze/oo*) is often forbidden as sin (Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 3:3; 13:4; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:20). But here Paul spoke of **jealousy** which was **godly** (literally "of or from God"). In fact, the Scriptures teach that even God is jealous in the sense that he desires loyalty from those who belong to him (Exod. 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; 29:20; 32:16,21; Josh. 24:19; 1 Kgs. 14:22; Ps. 79:5; Ezek. 36:5,6; 39:25; Nah. 1:2; Zeph. 1:18; Zech. 1:14; 8:2). In the preceding section, Paul had made it clear that he believed God had given him the ministry in Corinth (10:8,13). In this sense, Paul expressed his own desire to have an intimate relationship of loyalty between himself and the Corinthian church.

**11:2b.** He explained that he **promised** the church **to one husband, to Christ**. Paul constructed a complex analogy in these words. Elsewhere he called the church "the bride of Christ" (Eph. 5:25-27), drawing on Hosea's prophecies of Israel as the bride of God (Hos. 1:1-3:5; see also Jer. 31:32). When Paul brought the Corinthian church into relationship with Christ through the gospel, they became Christ's bride. In this passage, Paul described himself as the father who had **promised** his daughter in marriage to Christ (compare Paul's other paternal metaphors for his relationship with the church 1 Cor. 4:14; 2 Cor. 6:13; 2 Cor. 12:14). One aspect of this **promise** was the presentation of the church at Corinth **as a pure virgin to Christ**, the presentation of the bride to the husband on the wedding day. The New Testament describes the day of Christ's return as a great wedding banquet (Rev. 19:7-9). Paul was jealous for the church because as their father he had promised to present the church as a pure virgin when Christ returned in glory.

**11:3.** As determined as he was to fulfill this promise, Paul was also **afraid** that the Corinthians might be **led astray from ... sincere and pure devotion to Christ**. Prior to Christ's return, the church is betrothed to him, but the possibility of infidelity and annulment still exist. Paul's responsibility was to help the church remain **sincere and pure** in its **devotion** so that the marriage would eventually be consummated. Once again, Paul drew from the prophecies of Hosea who spoke of Israel's apostasy as sexual infidelity (Hos. 2:2-13). This analogy was appropriate in the days of Hosea because many Israelites expressed their apostasy by joining fertility rituals. In a similar way, the Corinthians were tempted by the immoral practices of Corinthian culture (1

Cor. 6:13-20; 8:4-13; 10:6-14).

**11:4.** To explain (**for**) why he was afraid, Paul described how the Corinthians turned from the true gospel. They had a history of accepting **easily enough** those who preached a different **Jesus**, who brought a **different spirit** or a **different gospel**. It is difficult to know exactly what Paul meant by a different **Jesus**. “Jesus” (Joshua) was a common enough name in Jewish communities of his day. Perhaps he meant that some preached about Jesus without accurate information about his life, death, and resurrection (1 Cor 15:1-3). In 1 Corinthians 12:2-3 Paul described the work of the Spirit of God, and indicated that only the Holy Spirit could lead a person to confess Jesus as Lord. A **different spirit**, one other than the Holy Spirit, could not lead a person to this confession (compare 1 Cor. 2:14). A **different gospel** would be any doctrine of salvation that was out of accord with Paul’s message of justification by faith (Gal 1:6-7). In all events, Paul wrote with Godly jealousy and emphasized the fact that the Corinthians were ready to receive beliefs contrary to those which Paul had taught them. The consequences of such apostasy were severe (Heb. 10:26-31), so he was afraid for them.

**11:5.** The ease with which the Corinthians turned from Paul alerted him to the reality that they considered him **inferior** to the false teachers. He insisted, however, that he was **not in the least inferior** to them. In biting sarcasm he called these false teachers “**super-apostles**” (“super-apostles” NRSV). Of course, Paul did not actually consider these people his superiors, but mocked them for their grand claims. In so doing, he rebuked the Corinthians for succumbing to their ploys.

**11:6.** Paul admitted that he was **not a trained speaker** (see also 1 Cor. 1:17; 2:1), implying that the so-called “super-apostles” were trained speakers (compare Paul’s opponents in 1 Cor. 1:17-25; 4:18-20). One of their favorite criticisms of Paul seems to have been that he was not very impressive in presence or speech (2 Cor. 10:10). Even so, Paul was not an inadequate apostle because he had **knowledge** of the true gospel. Paul warned the Corinthians against the pretense knowledge can create (1 Cor. 8:1), but here he had in mind a positive knowledge of the truth without the associated problems (2 Cor. 4:6; 10:5). Toe to toe, Paul would fail as an orator. In many respects, his writing also lacked sophistication and talent. Yet, as a student of the Scriptures and the recipient of special revelation, Paul was no one’s inferior.

The Corinthians should not have doubted Paul’s insight into truth. He had **made this perfectly clear ... in every way**. He had taught the Corinthians, written to them about complex theological issues, and led them into the mysteries of God. His great knowledge in the Christian faith that he had demonstrated time and again eclipsed his less impressive qualities.

## FREE SERVICE (11:7-11)

From Paul's words in this section, it would appear that someone in the church had mistaken Paul's refusal to take money as an indication that he considered himself inferior to others. Apparently, the "super-apostles" were well paid for their efforts, but Paul offered only free service in Corinth.

**11:7.** Paul began his response to this misunderstanding with a rhetorical question. He asked if it were **sin** not to accept money. Of course, it was not. Had it been wrong for Paul **to lower himself in order to elevate** the Corinthians? Of course not. The opposite conclusion should have been drawn. Moreover, Paul had already addressed this specific issue in an earlier letter (1 Cor. 9:1-27). It should have been abundantly evident that Paul chose this practice out of strength and not weakness.

**11:8-9.** To draw a contrast, Paul informed the Corinthians that he had **robbed other churches ... to serve** them. The Greek term translated "**robbed**" (*sulao*) connotes stripping fallen enemies in battle. Paul felt as if he had imposed upon other churches in order not to take money from the Corinthian church. While he had ministered in Corinth, the churches of Macedonia had sent Paul support (Acts 18:5; Phil. 4:15,16). From other comments he made, it would appear that economic conditions were terrible in Macedonia at the time (8:1-2). Corinth, however, was by comparison a busy center of international commerce. Its citizens were relatively rich. The church at Corinth had at least a goodly number of wealthy members (1 Cor. 11:21-22; 2 Cor. 8:14). Even so, when Paul had **needed something** while in Corinth, **brothers who came from Macedonia** had **supplied** his needs.

**11:10.** After reflecting on how his sacrifices for the Corinthians had been turned against him, Paul swore (**as surely as the truth of Christ is in me**) that **nobody in ... Achaia** would **stop his boasting**. His upcoming visit was going to be confrontational, but Paul was increasingly confident that all accusations would be proven wrong. No matter what anyone said about him, Paul swore to continue defending himself.

**11:11.** Anticipating a negative response from his readers, Paul raised the question he expected them to ask. Did he insist on this course of action **because** he did **not love** the Corinthians? Was he causing them this pain because he was callous toward them? Not at all. In the spirit of an oath he swore, "**God knows I do.**" Apparently, some in the church questioned whether Paul's love was genuine because he did not accept the "super-apostles" who were so important to the Corinthian believers. Paul insisted in the strongest terms that he deeply loved the church.

## THE CERTAIN OUTCOME (11:12-15)

Paul revealed his firm convictions concerning the outcome of his upcoming confrontation with those who challenged his authority.

**11:12.** Paul intended to **keep on** boasting about his work in Corinth in order to discredit his opponents who sought to be **equal with him in the things they boast[ed] about**. Paul had already made it clear that he did not think these men were truly his superiors. Now he declared his intent to **cut the ground from under** them in the confrontation soon to come.

**11:13-14.** Why was he so strongly determined? Paul explained (**for**) that these so-called **super-apostles** (11:5) were actually **false apostles**. They were **deceitful** and only **masquerading as apostles of Christ**. Of course, those who followed these **false apostles** would have insisted that Paul was wrong. So, he countered their anticipated objection by noting that the false apostles' deceit was **no wonder**. After all, even **Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light**.

The name "Satan" appears frequently in the Old and New Testaments (1 Chr. 21:1; Job 1:6-9,12; 2:1-7; Zech. 3:1-2; Matt. 4:10; 12:26; 16:23; Mark 1:13; 3:23,26; 4:15; 8:33; Luke 10:18; 11:18; 13:16; 22:3,31; John 13:27; Acts 5:3; 26:18; Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 5:5; 7:5; 2 Cor. 2:11; 12:7; 1 Thess. 2:18; 2 Thess. 2:9; 1 Tim. 1:20; 5:15; Rev. 2:9,13,24; 3:9; 12:9; 20:2,7), but nowhere else is Satan described as **an angel of light**. Apparently, Paul drew upon pseudepigraphal literature for this view (*Life of Adam and Eve* 9:1; *Apocalypse of Moses* 17:1), though it is consistent with Satan's typical deceit (Acts 5:3; 2 Thess. 2:9; Rev. 12:9).

**11:15.** Paul accused the **false apostles** of being **servants** of Satan and of imitating his tactics. They **masquerade[d] as servants of righteousness** (compare Rev. 2:9; 3:9). The work of these false apostles led many into unrighteousness, as opposed to Paul's apostolic "ministry of righteousness" (2 Cor. 3:9).

With firm conviction Paul asserted that these false apostles would ultimately receive **what their actions deserve[d]**. Although this statement carried serious overtones of final judgment, Paul also had in mind that these opponents would be exposed before the church and removed from their positions when he arrived. God would judge them in righteousness.

### **BOASTING LIKE A FOOL (11:16-21a)**

Paul prepared the way for dealing with his opponents by taking on their strategy of boasting. His words both supported his own position and sarcastically uncovered the true nature of his opponents' attacks.

**11:16-18.** He began by **repeat[ing]** the beginning of his treatment of this subject (see 11:1), insisting that **no one take him for a fool**. Paul's earlier discussion of foolishness and wisdom demonstrated how seriously he took this charge (1 Cor. 1:18-2:16; 3:18-21). He did not believe himself truly to be a fool, but he knew that following

divine wisdom made him appear foolish to many. For this reason, he asked the Corinthians to show him the same patience they would show a fool (**receive me just as you would a fool**).

Of course, Paul preferred that they not think of him as a fool, but because at least some did, he was going to take a moment to act as one by doing **a little boasting**. He cautioned his readers to remember that his boasting was not **as the Lord would** do, but **as a fool**. Yet, he determined that he **too** would **boast** because so many others were **boasting in the way the world does**. It was time to fight fire with fire.

**11:19-20.** Paul believed this tactic would succeed because he was convinced that the Corinthians were undiscerning. He sarcastically suggested that they were **wise**, but their so-called “wisdom” meant that they **put up with fools and anyone who enslave[d], ... exploit[ed], ... took advantage of them, ... push[ed] himself forward, ... or slap[ed] them in the face**. These descriptions sum up how Paul characterized the efforts of the false apostles. On the surface, they probably had credible ministries; they masqueraded as blessings to the church (11:13). Yet, their false teaching actually made their ministries abusive. Paul spoke this way to encourage the Corinthians to come to their senses. They had acted foolishly by accepting these false apostles as their leaders.

**11:21a.** By contrast, Paul and his company **were too weak for that**. That is to say, they had no stomach for such deceptive activities. Paul could not but serve sincerely. The Corinthians would have been wise to receive him instead of the others.

### **POINT - COUNTERPOINT (11:21b-12:10)**

Paul adopted arguments with which he did not agree in this section — the arguments of his opponents. He adopted their perspective to prove that they failed to prove themselves superior even when they set their own standards.

#### **Paul’s Ethnic Qualifications (11:21B-22)**

Paul compared his ethnic qualifications to those of his opponents.

**11:21b.** Paul continued to speak as a fool, believing he could outstrip his opponents on their own terms. In this regard, he followed the wisdom of Proverbs 26:5 and answered the fool according to his folly.

**11:22.** He began by saying that he had a comparable ethnic background (**So am I**) to his opponents. He was a **Hebrew** (compare Phil. 3:5), a term that distinguished him from Hellenized Jews. He was an **Israelite** and a descendent of Abraham. As such, Paul was the natural expected heir of the grace of God promised to the patriarch Abraham. He was not adopted into Abraham’s family as Gentile believers were (Rom. 4:9-16; Eph. 2:11-19). From Paul’s point of view, neither Jew nor Gentile was superior

in Christ (Rom. 3:9; 10:12; Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-16; Col. 3:11). In the outlooks of his opponents, however, it seemed to matter. So, Paul responded that he passed even their ethnic criterion.

### **Paul's Extraordinary Service to Christ (11:23-33)**

Paul compared his service to Christ to that of his opponents.

**11:23-27.** Paul raised the category of extraordinary service to Christ. His opponents must have claimed to be special **servants of Christ**, but Paul claimed to be even more of a servant than they were (compare 6:4-10). He remarked that he was **out of his mind** to talk this way, but for the sake of rescuing the Corinthian church from the false apostles, he continued. Even according to the standards of these false apostles, Paul's claims exceeded any they made in this regard. To be sure, the false apostles probably suffered for their convictions, but Paul suffered even more (**I am more**). He listed a series of events that we may categorize as external sufferings. Some of these events are corroborated in other biblical passages; others are only mentioned here:

- Worked harder
- Prison more frequently
- Flogged more severely
- Exposed to death many times
- 39 lashes, five times
- Beaten with rods, three times
- Shipwrecked, three times
- Day and night in open sea
- Constantly moving
- Endangered at rivers
- Endangered by bandits
- Endangered by fellow Jews
- Endangered by Gentiles
- Endangered in cities
- Endangered in the countryside
- Endangered at sea
- Endangered by false brothers
- Enduring sleepless nights
- Enduring hunger and thirst
- Enduring cold and nakedness

**11:28-29.** In addition to these external sufferings, Paul's extraordinary service also included inward difficulties. Paul had in mind particularly the turmoil he experienced out of concern **for all the churches** as their true apostle, noting his empathy with other believers. When others were **weak**, then he was also **weak**. When they fell **into sin**, then he **inwardly burn**[ed]. The Greek term translated **burn** in this passage (purou) can refer to a number of emotions ("intense concern" NASB; "I am indignant" NRSV). Both Paul's letters to the Corinthians demonstrate the consternation

he felt for the many churches (**all the churches**) to whom he ministered.

**11:30-33.** Closing his discussion of his extraordinary service, Paul shifted to what he must have considered more appropriate boasting (compare 11:16). He stated that since he had to **boast**, he also wanted to **boast of the things that show[ed] his weakness**. Insofar as this boasting reflected his weakness, he departed from the style and standards of his opponents at this point. Yet, insofar as he continued to boast for the purpose of demonstrating his extraordinary service, in this section Paul continued to attack his opponents on their own grounds. Boasting about **weakness** suited him better because it exalted God as the source of his strength (Pss. 20:7; 34:2; Jer. 9:24; 1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17; Gal. 6:14).

Paul introduced this appropriate boasting with an oath formula acknowledging **God** as the one who **is to be praised forever**. Paul swore that **God** knew **that** he was **not lying**, and then proceeded to describe the time he barely escaped from Damascus with his life (Acts 9:23-25). This event demonstrated his devoted service to Christ, but also made it clear that God cared for him and deserved all the praise.

### **Paul's Visions and Revelations (12:1-10)**

Paul compared his extraordinary experiences of visions and revelations to those of his opponents.

**12:1.** Paul felt it was wise also to boast about his **visions and revelations from the Lord**. This implies that his opponents claimed special knowledge and revelations from God. Here Paul challenged their claims to superior apostleship by reporting his extraordinary visions, which certainly surpassed any the false apostles claimed to have had.

**12:2a.** From the grammar of this passage, it is difficult to know for certain if Paul spoke of himself or of someone else. At first, it appears that Paul spoke of someone else: **I know a man in Christ** (compare: **I will boast about a man like that, but not myself except in my weaknesses** [12:5]). It is possible that this first impression is correct. Paul may have referred to another man's heavenly experience to counter his opponents' claims to supreme revelatory experiences. In this view, his argument was that the false apostles were not superior because an even more extraordinary event happened to someone else.

Many interpreters believe, however, that Paul referred to himself in this passage, albeit in an unusual way. In favor of this more likely view is the fact that later Paul spoke of God keeping him humble **because of these surpassingly great revelations** which he had (12:7). Moreover, this whole section of the letter is designed to demonstrate that the false apostles were not superior to Paul (compare 11:16-33), not just that they were not superior to others. Also, this particular passage is introduced as Paul's own boasting (12:1). In this outlook, Paul spoke of himself in the third person out of modesty.

**12:2b-3.** In all events, the point of the passage is clear: the false apostles have no claim to superior revelation because Paul (or another) had received such an extraordinary revelation. He had been **caught up to the third heaven**. Rabbinical sources speak of “seven heavens”; so it is difficult to know for certain the background and precise meaning of the **third heaven**. If Paul operated with a sevenfold view of heaven, he acknowledged that he had not reached what the Old Testament called “the highest heavens” (Deut. 10:14; 1 Kgs. 8:27; 2 Chr. 2:6; 6:18; Neh. 9:6), the place where God himself dwells. Nevertheless, “**third heaven**” indicated that the experience was astounding. The trance was so intense that Paul did not even know if he had been **in the body**.

**12:4.** Paul described this level of heaven as **paradise**, the place which the dead in Christ enter (Luke 23:43; Rev. 2:7). While there, Paul heard **inexpressible things**, words from angels and God which **man is not permitted to tell**. It is likely that Paul’s opponents spoke freely about their supposedly heavenly revelation, much like the apostle John was instructed to do when he received the revelation of the Apocalypse (Rev. 1:11). But Paul made the supremacy of his heavenly experience plain by saying that he was **not permitted** to convey what he heard there. By this means, Paul argued that his authority over the church at Corinth was far beyond any authority claimed by the false apostles. His revelation was greater than any revelation his opponents considered it lawful to describe.

**12:5-6.** With a touch of irony, Paul insisted that he would **not boast** of himself **except about his weaknesses**. He admitted that to do otherwise would still be **speaking the truth**, but he resisted exalting himself too far because he did not want anyone to **think more of him than was warranted**. Paul knew that Christians tend to exalt heroes beyond reality, and that the Corinthians might go beyond what he actually said or did. So, he turned quickly to speak of his weaknesses.

**12:7.** Paul was tempted to become **conceited** in light of his **surpassingly great revelations**. To keep that from happening, God sent him **a thorn in his flesh**. This expression is similar to the Old Testament terminology “thorn in the side” in the Septuagint (Num. 33:55; Ezek. 28:24; Hos. 2:6), where it was a metaphorical description of trouble inflicted by God. It is difficult to know precisely what the apostle had in mind. He also called it **a messenger of Satan** that brought him **torment**, but said nothing else. Endless suggestions have been made, but three proposals are more than feasible: 1) Paul had a physical ailment (compare Gal. 4:14), perhaps an eye disease (compare Gal. 4:15) or a speech impediment (compare 10:10; 11:6); 2) Paul spoke of continuing opponents in the churches (see 11:13-15); 3) Paul pointed to some troubling demonic activity, perhaps some severe temptation (compare “to keep me from exalting myself” NASB). None of these suggestions is certain.

**12:8-9a.** Despite this uncertainty, Paul’s main idea is clear. He asked God **three times** to remove this thorn from his life, but God told him that divine **grace was sufficient for him**. The tense of the expression “**he said**” may also be translated “he

has said” (NASB), indicating that Paul saw God’s statement as more than simply directed toward his situation. God wanted Paul to find comfort and security in the **grace** he had received in Christ, the same thing God desires for all believers. In fact, in this particular case, God’s denial of Paul’s request turned out to be to Paul’s greater good because it was to God’s greater glory. God told Paul that divine **power is made perfect in weakness**. Throughout Scriptures, God delights in displaying his power in situations where human strength is ineffectual (Judg. 6:14-16; 7:1-25; 1 Sam.14:6-15; 17:1-54). When God’s people are weak, then God’s strength becomes evident.

**12:9b.** As a result (**therefore**), Paul determined that he would **boast all the more gladly about his weakness**. He ceased from complaint and petition, **so that Christ’s power** might **rest on** him. The terminology translated **rest** (*episkenoō*) may be translated “to tabernacle” or “pitch a tent.” It is likely that Paul drew upon Old Testament imagery of the glory of God coming upon the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-38). If so, he learned that taking delight in his thorn actually brought the astonishing powerful blessing of God upon his life.

**12:10.** From this understanding of his weakness (**that is why**; “therefore” NASB, NRSV), Paul concluded that he would **delight in weaknesses** rather than to abhor them. **Insults, hardships, persecutions, and difficulties** were paradoxically causes for joy because (**for**) in these times of weakness, Paul was **strong** in the power of God.

### **A POINTED CONCLUSION (12:11-13)**

Paul closed his discussion of his opponents by directly confronting the Corinthian congregation.

**12:11-12.** He admitted that he had **made a fool of** himself by taking on the strategy of his opponents in boasting as he had. Yet, he insisted that the Corinthians had driven him **to it**. How was this so? He **ought to have been commended** by the congregation. They already knew him and his ministry. He was not **in the least inferior to the “super-apostles”** and they knew this. Of course, Paul was aware that he was **nothing** in himself, apart from the grace of God. Yet, the Corinthians should have remembered his **signs, wonders and miracles** which **mark an apostle**. Paul had performed miracles in many places as he had proclaimed the gospel of Christ, but in Corinth he had done these things **with great perseverance**. Time and again, he demonstrated the divine authorization of his ministry before the Corinthians.

**12:13.** Only in one way had Paul treated the Corinthians as **inferior to other churches**. He had **never** been a **burden to** them. With the sarcasm characteristic of this section, he noted that he had not required them to support him for his services (1 Cor. 9:1-27; 2 Cor. 11:7-9). In reality, this was no insult at all, but an honor he bestowed on them, gracious treatment for their spiritual benefit. His only offense, therefore, was to honor them more than he honored other churches. So, he concluded

by sarcastically asking them to **forgive** his kindness toward them.

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

### **A. Paradise (12:4)**

The Greek word *paradeisos*, here translated paradise, appears only three times in the New Testament (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 2:7). In Luke and Revelation it refers to a heavenly place where believers go when they die. In the 2 Corinthians passage, it seems to identify this same place, although Paul was allowed a vision/visit prior to his death.

Interestingly, while *paradeisos* appears many times in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament), it never appears to refer to a heavenly location. Almost always it simply translates *gan* or *ganah*, Hebrew words for garden (Eden (Gen. 2:8,9,10,15,16; 3:1,2,3,8,10,23,24; 13:10; Num. 24:6; 2 Chr. 33:20; Eccl. 2:5; Isa. 1:30; Jer. 36:5; Ezek. 28:13; 31:8-9; Joel 2:3). Frequently, the garden is specifically the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:8,9,10,15,16; 3:1,2,3,8,10,23,24; 13:10; Ezek. 28:13; 31:8-9; Joel 2:3). In Isaiah 51:3, it translates the Hebrew word *eden* (Eden), while *gan* is merely implied. On two occasions, the Greek word *paradeisos* translates the Hebrew word *pardes* (Neh. 2:8; Sol. 4:13;), both of which come from the Persian *pairi-daeza*. *Pardes* is fairly synonymous with *gan/ganah*, and is often translated “orchard” or “forest.”

Thus, in the Septuagint, the Greek term *paradeisos* is the common word for “garden.” The Old Testament also teaches that the restoration of the kingdom of God will constitute a re-creation and restoration of the Garden of Eden for believers (Joel 2:3; Isa. 51:3). By the time of the New Testament, the restoration of the kingdom, with its newly created/re-created heaven and earth (2 Pet. 3:10-13; Rev. 21:1-5), had come to be so identified with the restoration of the Garden of Eden that heaven itself had come to be known as “garden” or “paradise.”

### **B. Three times I pleaded with the Lord (12:8)**

Scripture encourages us to petition God for our needs and desires (Matt. 7:7-11; Luke 11:9-13; Phil. 4:6; Jas. 4:2; 1 John 5:14-15), and even to ask God repeatedly when he does not answer according to our desires. For example, God blessed Jacob when Jacob refused to release the “man” he wrestled at Peniel (Gen. 32:24-30). Similarly, Paul prayed three times that the thorn would be taken from his flesh. At the same time, Scripture always assumes that faithful believers will accept clear negative responses from God and rest in the sufficiency of divine grace. That is, they should accept his clear answers that certainly deny their requests, as when David accepted the death of his son (2 Sam. 12:22-23) or when Paul accepted God’s explicit answer to him in these verses. In both these examples, God left no room to grant David’s and Paul’s requests, and as righteous men David and Paul honored rather than resented God for his decisions.

## ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do the different parts of this large section of text relate to one another? What is the broad outline of Paul's argument? What was Paul trying to accomplish by this argument, and why? How do the passages that precede and follow affect your understanding of this passage?
2. Specifically what were Paul's weapons with which he fought spiritual battles? What does it mean to "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ"?
3. What kind of battle was Paul fighting in the argument of 10:1-12:10? What weapons did he use? How would you classify these weapons?
4. Describe and contrast legitimate boasting and foolish boasting, and give examples of each. When is it acceptable to boast foolishly?
5. What was Paul trying to protect in this text? What was at stake? How did the stakes affect the arguments Paul was willing to employ?
6. Describe Paul's tone in this section of the letter. How would you have felt if Paul had spoken to you this way? What would his words have implied to you about the nature of your own faith in Christ? Would his arguments have won you to his side?
7. Why did Paul go into such detail in describing his life and service to Christ? How does your Christian experience compare to Paul's? What effect has your Christian experience had on your relationship with Christ, and on your service to him? Name some ways you currently serve Christ, and suggest ways in which you might serve him more. What would greater service to Christ cost you in terms of time, money, family, friends, health, etc.?
8. What does this text have to say about authority within the church? How did Paul establish his authority in this text? How did he employ his authority in this text?
9. How do you suppose the Corinthian church came to be so influenced by false apostles? Give examples of other false leaders/teachers that have led the church astray throughout history. How are the effects of these leaders/teachers still being felt? How can modern Christians and the modern church protect themselves from false leaders/teachers?
10. Why is authority such an important issue when dealing with false leaders/teachers? Where does authority ultimately reside? How can modern believers trust that what they are taught is true?