

Commentary
On
2 Corinthians

By Ned Berube

Introduction	4
Greeting	5
2 Corinthians 1:1-11	5
Paul's Change of Plans	10
2 Corinthians 1:12 – 2:4.....	10
Forgive the Sinner	14
2 Corinthians 2:5 -11	14
Triumph in Christ.....	16
2 Corinthians 2:12-17	16
Ministers of the New Covenant	18
2 Corinthians 3: 1-18	18
The Light of the Gospel.....	22
2 Corinthians 4:1-6	22
Treasure in Jars of Clay	25
2 Corinthians 4:7-18	25
Our Heavenly Dwelling.....	29
2 Corinthians 5:1-10	29
The Ministry of Reconciliation	31
2 Corinthians 5:11-6:13	31
The Temple of the Living God.....	38
2 Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1.....	38
Paul's Joy.....	40
2 Corinthians 7:2-16	40
Encouragement to Give Generously	43
2 Corinthians 8:1-15	43
Commendation of Titus	47
2 Corinthians 8:16-24	47
The Collection for Christians in Jerusalem	49
2 Corinthians 9:1-5	49
The Cheerful Giver.....	50
2 Corinthians 9:6-15	50
Paul Defends His Ministry	53
2 Corinthians 10:1-18	53
Paul and the False Apostles.....	57
2 Corinthians 11:1-15	57
Paul's Sufferings as an Apostle.....	60
2 Corinthians 11:16-33	60
Paul's Visions and His Thorn.....	63
2 Corinthians 12:1-10	63
Concern for the Corinthian Church.....	66
2 Corinthians 12:11-21	66
Final Warnings	69
2 Corinthians 13:1-10	69
Final Greetings.....	72
2 Corinthians 13:11-13	72

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Introduction

One of my study disciplines over the years has been to simply write commentaries on individual books of the Bible. I sensed a genuine constraint a few years ago to focus on 2nd Corinthians as a biblical and inspirational support for the increased extra-local serving that I had begun to do. It has been a remarkable personal blessing. But along the way, I had some inkling that this particular commentary needed to be put “out in the open” as an encouragement to leaders of God’s flock who are undoubtedly facing similar challenges to Paul’s as he relates to this beloved, but beleaguered Corinthian congregation.

I’ve used the English Standard Version (ESV) translation and the headings from the 2001 Crossway Bible’s edition of the ESV.

My approach is quite straightforward—to unpack the clearest sense of the text without launching into much application or preaching. There is certainly a place for that, but my goal was much more basic—to say with as much clarity what this letter was communicating.

In process, this man Paul grew enormously in my esteem. The tensions and challenges of his ministry responsibilities crawled off the pages again and again into my own soul. And though I chose to record none of those on paper, my hope is that a fresh look at this letter will produce the same holy effect within anyone who pursues the truths of God in this great apostolic letter.

Greeting

2 Corinthians 1:1-11

1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (ESV)

1:1-11 Overview

Paul must answer critics who claim that his multiple sufferings prove that he does not possess divine favor. The defense of his apostolic ministry is rooted in the triumph, glory and power of Christ who delights in the display of His glory through jars of clay (4:7) and thorns in the flesh (12:7).

- 1:1 So Paul begins his communication with the straightforward testimony that he is “an apostle of Christ Jesus” (1:1), a sent one proceeding from the Incarnation of the Son of God and His perfect life and utterly redemptive death, resurrection and ascension; but he is also sent by a particular heavenly intervention and commission (Acts 9:1-19; 26:12-18). Paul has been profoundly aware from the beginning that his life no longer belongs to himself or his own will but it has been entirely subsumed into “the will of God” (1:1) and service to “Christ Jesus” (1:1) (cf. Acts 27:23; Romans 1:6).

Paul refers to Timothy as “our brother” and no doubt Paul relates to him as a son (I Cor. 4:17; I Tim. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1) and part of the apostolic team (I Thess. 3:2). He undoubtedly wants the Corinthians to understand his own attachment to corporeity and to keep Timothy in their minds as a potential apostolic delegate. He calls them the “Church of God”, the Ekklesia—the called out ones, the extracted assembly who are in but not of the world. He includes them “with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia.” They must understand that their identity as the church of God in Corinth is linked to all of God’s people in the whole of Achaia and they also know their link to the church of God in Jerusalem (chapter 9).

The underlying reality is simply the unity of the faith that we share as those who belong to God, who have been purchased by the blood of His beloved Son. We must diligently guard this unity and corporeity because the prevalence of sin and satanic oppression is constantly working against this. Paul simply uses the phrasings “of Christ Jesus”, “the will of God” and “of God.” The source of all their existence is God and what He has done in Christ by His sovereign will. Everything in our lives is need, brokenness, chaos and sin and we should live our lives with that understanding. We have been rescued by a gracious God to whom we owe all of our lives and devotion. We are no longer free agents (as if

we ever were, as slaves of sin,) but submissive followers of One who is all-wise, all-loving and all-powerful.

- 1:2 Paul's opening blessing is standard but wonderful—the Father and Son have conspired to give grace and peace. These are able to be graciously distributed because of Christ's incarnation, perfect obedience, atoning sacrifice, resurrection, ascension and intercession.

Grace (Greek – charis) is both the unmerited favor of God and the equipping goodness of God to enable humans to live out the life of Christ. Paul's statement to the Romans is all-encompassing: "He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). God's heart to give us everything because of what He has done in Christ is the foundation of faith for every believer. This truth is what was challenged by Satan in his approach to Eve—the thought that God would not be gracious and good to His creatures but in fact would be deceitful and withholding.

Peace is not merely internal tranquility, but rather the blood-bought reconciliation between a holy God and a sinful humanity. The curtain in the temple has been rent in two and now all are invited into the very presence of a holy God.

God of All Comfort

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. 5 For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 6 If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. 7 Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. 8 For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. 10 He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. 11 You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many. (ESV)

- 1:3 Paul enters now into a paean of praise to God for His comfort and deliverance and wisdom and sovereignty. He identifies the Father in three ways
- the Father of our Lord
 - the Father of mercies
 - the God of all comfort

The relationship of Jesus with the Father as depicted in the gospels speaks volumes to us regarding the ideal for how God desires this relationship to unfold between us and Him and also among each other. Our Lord was entirely submissive to His Father and we are called into the same posture with the members of the Trinity. What we can continually depend on, because of the great sacrifice of Christ is divine mercy—the disposition of the Almighty to forgive condemned rebels and to invite them not only out of solitary confinement and Death Row, but into the very household of God as adopted sons and daughters. We have received mercy that is utterly meaningful.

1:4 Beyond that we are assured of an ongoing paternal comfort that will be mediated to us in whatever circumstance of life or psychological/spiritual distress that may befall us. Paul is quite clear that these divine comforts are not only to see us through our own trials but are meant to train us in the ways of the Father and Son, to become comforters ourselves who can mete out the grace and mercy and comfort we've received. This flow of divine life has always been in the heart of God. His intent was to make man in His image and to teach him how to live the same life that is lived

1:5 among the Trinity. Every trial and circumstance is a learning environment where we are to receive grace from God, be formed more deeply in His image and be ready to share that grace with others and thereby be yet more deeply formed in His image. The life of faith is one of reception and dispensation, receiving and giving so that God's glory can be more fully expressed in His creation.

The nature of human life in this world of rebellion brings us with great regularity into trials and circumstances that stretch the soul beyond its apparent limits; but it is here that we are to encounter the sovereign God who is so profoundly invested in the formation of His people. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus “learned obedience through what He suffered” (Heb. 5:8). Can it possibly be any other way for His servants? Of course, out of that suffering of obedience, Jesus “became the source of eternal salvation” (Heb. 5:9). We too, now, as “we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings” (1:5) become sources of grace and comfort to others as we receive from the Father's gracious resources of steadfast love and holy comfort.

What kind of sufferings ought we to expect? Paul unpacks this throughout the rest of the letter (6:4-10; 11:23-33; 12:7-10 and other places) and identifies calamities, imprisonments, sleepless nights, countless beatings, shipwrecks, persistent dangers and the daily pressure for all the churches among many others. His apostolic calling, similar to Christ's, was utterly foundational and extensive, and so their sufferings reflected the parameters of their ministry—deeper sufferings and deeper resources. Our sufferings might take the simple forms of difficult relationships or relatively minor physical and emotional afflictions—failures, reversals, betrayals, etc. We all face the trials of sin and selfishness, the Romans 7 challenge of entering into the victory of Christ over our own sinfulness. Facing ourselves is its own peculiar trial and finding God's grace

for ourselves through the help of the Holy Spirit is the way that we can help others into the same grace. Deeper trials and sufferings are meant for deeper resourcing and more extensive ministry and capacity to go into uncharted spiritual dimensions as Jesus and Paul did so significantly. So the abundance of sufferings are designed to relate us to the abundance of comfort and then the dispensation of that same comfort to others in their various afflictions.

Paul speaks to these believers as sharing in both his sufferings and comforts as they relate to him particularly in prayer. He teaches on a kind of mystical union that unfolds whether with them or absent. They live together in the same Lord and Paul is

forever pressing out that kind of corporeity that proceeds from the Trinity and he resists with great fervor the inevitable disintegration that takes place in the world that is so dominated by evil and forever seeks entrance in and among God's people. Paul's first letter to this church began with the correction for their divisions and the complete insanity of such behavior (I Cor. 1:10-17; 3:1-23). As these believers spiritually and practically connect with Paul, they receive the benefit of both his sufferings and comfortings. They participate with the very workings of a sovereign God who actively engages His beloved children within their sufferings so that they can be conformed to the image of His beloved Son (Rom. 8:29) and become sources of blessings for multitudes.

Paul now goes on to relate a particular situation in the province of Asia that He describes as an "affliction" that so burdened him and his team that they felt no strength and hit a wall of despair even regarding life. He may have been referring to the riot in Ephesus where the whole city was in an uproar and the situation seemed to escalate perilously. However, the town clerk was used by the sovereign God to project a reasonableness into the mob mentality and all of this was beneficial to Paul and his team. Paul's perspective, however, is that this incident revealed the sovereign nature of God's holy purposes to be at work as whatever circumstance

unfolds upon His servants: "But this was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (1:9). So then, indeed, God works for the good, His good pleasure and our good conformity to the image of Christ, in all difficulties and afflictions. To live by faith truly requires that we derive our identity, wisdom and strength from the eternal life resources of the Son of God Himself and the unlimited capacity that springs from His perfect life, atoning death and victorious resurrection. God teaches us to rely on Him because it is only in Him that we can overcome evil and bear fruit for God. God is not daunted by death or human frailty or deeply antagonistic foes and perilous circumstances. He raises the dead and overcomes every place where death has apparently prevailed.

Paul's confidence is in God's capacity to deliver "from such a deadly peril" and His steadfast love that will continue to deliver in the days to come. Life and mission with God is founded in His person and His promises that He has spoken and that He expects us to rely on. As Peter said, "Though you have not seen

Him, you love Him. Though you do not now see Him, you believe in Him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” (I Peter 1:8). Confidence in God is rooted in faith that enters into authentic personal relationship—the sinful with the Holy, the broken with the Whole, the temporal with the Eternal, the creature with the Creator. And this relationship is founded upon the reality that God enlivens and helps and equips and delivers. He is the One upon whom we must “set our hope” (1:10) because our life has been fully taken up in His life, death, resurrection, ascension, intercession, return—the Incarnation, Atonement, Resurrection, Enthronement, Spirit-empowered Gracious Promises and Help and Eternal Future—these things of Christ are both mine and my hope for the future. Literally everything in the life of a believer is rooted in these realities.

- 1:11 With all of this from God through Christ and through the Spirit, we are also linked to one another as fellow mediators of grace and help, especially through the mystery of prayer. Paul calls the Corinthians to this help of prayer with the understanding that God will hear their prayers, allow the apostolic team to continue to bear fruit and consequently engender praise and thanksgiving because help has come from heaven and produced blessing and life through the means of praying brethren. God chooses to dispense “blessing . . . through the prayers of many” (1:11). How humble of God to include His Body in the work of blessing, deliverance and thanksgiving that ultimately brings glory to God.

Paul's Change of Plans

2 Corinthians 1:12 – 2:4

12 For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. 13 For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and acknowledge and I hope you will fully acknowledge— 14 just as you did partially acknowledge us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.

15 Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. 16 I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. 17 Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? 18 As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. 19 For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. 20 For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. 21 And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, 22 and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

23 But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. 24 Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

2:1 For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. 2 For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? 3 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 felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. 4 For I wrote to you out of much affliction 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. (ESV)

1:12 Paul begins to address an implicit accusation against his integrity—that he had promised to come to Corinth and then didn't show. Perhaps some even blame him for their corporate problems much like Martha and Mary take Jesus to task for the death of Lazarus.

Paul appeals to his clear conscience and outward behavior in the world which is marked by “simplicity and godly sincerity” (1:12). There's no deceit in his approach, but neither is he omniscient and omnipotent like God. He's human, needing the “grace of God” (1:12) and operating by the grace of God. God doesn't need grace. He gives it. Everyone else needs grace and must learn to live by the humility of grace, the poorness of spirit that helps us live properly in the Kingdom of heaven. Paul's approach to life and mission is to always access

- this grace rather than live by “earthly wisdom” (1:12). He must mean a life posture that operates only by what can be seen or deduced from the seen and the merely rational. Paul would never dismiss reason as an obstacle, but lives by a Person and a grace that transcends reason without obliterating it. His appeal
- 1:13 to these Corinthians is that his letter was straightforward--no duplicity, no hidden agenda, no “playing” with them. The words and heart intent are plain—“we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and acknowledge” (1:13).
- 1:14 At the root of all of this communication is Jesus, the eternal Lord who will welcome us into eternal habitations “on the day of our Lord” (1:14). He gives us the kind of relationships by which we can “boast” of each other, or more precisely, take proper delight in each other and the kind of relationships that are eternal and rooted in the very core of the Triune God. We must properly acknowledge each other within this eternal context and not the temporal dimensions defined by earthly wisdom. We must acknowledge each other in Christ and see each other and hear each other within that framework of His grace and love. Otherwise we get lost within the limited range of earthly wisdom. In fact this is the problem generated by some of these Corinthians. They are projecting a disposition onto Paul that impugns his character and potentially nullifies his influence, but he points them to the day of the Lord where there will be a final “boast:” in Him and each other. While on this earth, we must practice this holy “acknowledgement” and give each other gracious space because of our relationship in Jesus.
- 1:15 Paul relates his deliberate intention to visit Corinth and his heart to impart to them “a second experience of grace.” Here is a servant of God who realizes what has been imparted to him via the Spirit and who understands that whatever he has been given is entirely a gift to be distributed to others. Paul genuinely believes that he can give something gracious from God to these believers. Certainly that is the reality for every believer – we are “gifted from the great gift of God, the Holy Spirit, the Helper/Paraclete who seeks to transform every believer from a deep cavern of need into a channel of help and blessing to increasing numbers of human beings. We can impart experiences of grace to others
- 1:16 through our presence and gifts. Paul explains his intentions to see them along the Macedonia-Judea itinerary but obviously it didn’t work out and now he defends the change of plans. It was not whimsical or vacillating nor was the decision based merely “according to the flesh” (1:17). That kind of thinking is
- 1:17 driven by external circumstances and favorable or unfavorable signs that paint a merely human scenario. Paul objects to being judged on that basis. His directions are received from God the Holy Spirit who always has a better view of any situation and can communicate that in a spiritual realm. Later on Paul tells them that “we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient but the things that are unseen are eternal” (4:18).
- 1:18 Paul’s thinking and decision-making are rooted in God who is faithful (1:18) who doesn’t change His mind at a whim, who follows through with all of His promises, who never lies but is utterly reliable. Paul roots his own communication and

1:19 planning in God, a legitimate claim given the transforming power of God to make us into His own image. Paul appeals to the Jesus of the gospel that he and Timothy and Silas have proclaimed—that as surely as that gospel message produced what it promised, Paul’s actions are “in Him” (1:19). Paul lives out of spiritual realities and a spiritual Person rather than only natural dynamics. He’s a spiritual man; he starts from God rather than his disconnected emotional inclinations. His emotions and thinking are under the constraint of the Holy Spirit.

1:20 Paul refers to “all the promises of God,” all of the divine communication rooted in His own Person that is spoken for the good of man—all of these words are not merely divine utterances, but rather expressions that are both validated and rooted in Jesus. The Son of God given for man and risen from the dead and ascended on high is the Source of all blessings for all of mankind. Jesus is God’s “yes” to all of the real needs of broken sinners. God has spoken emphatically in Jesus and every promise God has made is confirmed and rooted right there. Paul spoke to the Romans similarly, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him give us all things” (Rom. 8:32). Here is the heart of God—to graciously bless undeserving humans out of an eternal and boundless Resource—the merits of Jesus’ atoning death and resurrection victory. Our response to this wonderful reality is to say “Amen” (1:20) and thereby to glorify God. God receives glory because it is all rooted in His work in Jesus. We produce nothing of good on our side of the equation. We are all need and He is all good and all resource. We can only receive by agreeing with what God has done for us in Jesus and letting His goodness flow into our lives to His glory and honor.

1:21 Paul continues to press his readers to the centrality of God by referring to His initiative to put people together in Christ. Paul has been “established” with the Corinthians in Christ who has also anointed them for this kind of relationship and service. Paul is arguing from God’s sovereign choice in Christ and via the gospel message that has produced this relationship. It is all of God, a God who has acted decisively in Christ so that He can justify the wholly unjust and bless unholy people with holy gifts that make them increasingly holy. His “seal” that He puts on us is the marking of God’s work and ownership. The giving of “his Spirit in our hearts” (1:22) is the greatest of all privileges. We are literally embraced into the Triune God through the Spirit and this “guarantees” (1:22) our place in the Person of God and the plans of God. We have been “anointed” (1:21) in this way and consequently owned and commissioned for all of the holy purposes of God.

1:23 Paul now proceeds to explain the “heart” reason why he didn’t get to Corinth. It wasn’t vacillation (1:17) but rather “to spare you” (1:23). He appeals to God to verify the truth of that statement. This is very important to Paul that the Corinthians respect him as a man of the Spirit rather than someone just moving by human whim. He is also careful to note that his authority is not rooted in pride or position but rather the incarnational servant disposition of Christ which is

- 1:24 to “work with you for your joy” (1:24). True joy unfolds when a human being cooperates with the authority of God’s Word, Spirit and the delegated human authorities that God uses to impart grace to others. Paul encourages them regarding how they are standing “firm in your faith” and in that light calls them on into right relationship with himself as part of that equation. They will have to trust God in and through Paul. Apart from that kind of confidence at each of those three levels, we are vulnerable to deception and disconnection. The best of spiritual authority is designed to help engender joy in the life of believers, not a heavy burden of fear or mere moralism.
- 2:1 Paul goes on to explain both the reason for his no-show in Corinth and the intent of his letter. It is probable that there was a very difficult pastoral letter written between 1 and 2 Corinthians in which Paul took a strong authoritative stance regarding certain people and untended moral departures among them. His very human desire is to enter into the joy of their mutual relationship rather than be a continuous source of pain. He is acting like a father whose hope is to deeply
- 2:2 enjoy the fellowship of his children, to delight in them and receive their delight, but what he must do is correct them and “inflict” a bit of helpful pain that would engender moral reformation. Apparently Paul wrote the painful letter with the hope that by the time he got there, he could enjoy them rather than spend the whole time correcting them in endless pastoral encounters. His great hope is
- 2:3 “that my joy would be the joy of you all” (2:3). He so desires to live at that highest level of intimate delight, but the painful corrections are a necessary part of getting there. Jesus speaks to his own beloved disciples in John 15:11, “These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full,” but preceding that heart cry are words about pruning, being cut off and obedience to commandments. True joy is only achieved when sin is confronted and pain is engaged but always with the hope of gracious restoration and joy. So Paul explains that though his letter was written in “much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, “it proceeded out of abundant love” (2:4) and ultimately with the hope of joyful fellowship.

Forgive the Sinner

2 Corinthians 2:5 -11

5 Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. 6 For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, 7 so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. 8 So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. 9 For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. 10 Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, 11 so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

- 2:5 Now Paul treats the particular sin and offender that he addressed in his previous letter. This is probably not the incestuous person of I Cor. 5:1-5. Rather, it is likely that there is a particular person who has defiled Paul with words and caused some disruption among the congregation. Paul tries to help them understand that this sin has more corporate dimensions than they might initially suspect. All of them have absorbed the “pain” (2:5) of this man’s offense against
- 2:6 Paul and they have in turn brought about the “punishment of the majority” (2:6), probably an excommunication from the fellowship. Apparently their action has had the desired effect of sorrow and the acknowledgment of sin, but the situation
- 2:7 remains unresolved, particularly in terms of fellowship. His concern is that the punishment can easily drift into the condition of being “overwhelmed by excessive sorrow” (2:7). The Corinthians have obeyed Paul’s apostolic authority by disciplining the offender—they have passed the “test” and been “obedient in
- 2:8-9 everything” (2:9) and now he calls them to further obedience “to reaffirm your love” (2:8) for the offender. The goal of discipline is never the discipline itself, but rather the restoration to fellowship and fruitfulness, whether to God or to His people or both. Now that there has been an appropriate sorrow, the real issue is forgiveness, the very core issue of the Incarnation and Atonement. God is merciful and seeks to forgive all sin. Repentance is central or God’s work in Christ is trivialized.
- 2:10 Paul presses this matter with apostolic authority: “. . . whom you forgive, I also forgive” (2:10) and it has all been “for your sake in the presence of Christ” (2:10). Why is it for their sake? It is because without that flow of real forgiveness of real sin, the whole foundation of the gospel and the mission is undermined. Of this we must be most confident—“that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (I Tim. 1:15). If forgiveness doesn’t flow among them freely, they will get trapped in complex swamps of offenses, hurts, divisions, negative attitudes that breed unbelief and the consequence of a corporate atmosphere that is for less than the gracious love that motivated God’s great giving up of His beloved Son to a horrific death. Paul forgives “in the presence of Christ (2:10) for Christ’s sake

2:11 certainly, but also for their sake, because not only will unforgiveness engender corporate disruption, but a very real susceptibility to evil activity from Satan's ranks. The evil one presses "his designs" unrelentingly and if we are not wise, we can find ourselves in tacit and ignorant cooperation. He is the accuser of the brethren, a liar and murderer from the beginning (John 8) and will always seek to outwit us in broken and unreconciled relationships whether with Christ, His leaders or His people.

Proper authority over a church and a proper and committed approach to reconciliation are so central to living out the life of Christ both individually and corporately. Satan bargains on our ignorance, our lack of attention to the central matters of love and mercy and justice. We easily get consumed with mint and dill and cumin (Matthew 23:23) and thereby lose all capacity to represent Christ and bear His fruit.

Triumph in Christ

2 Corinthians 2:12-17

12 When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, 13 my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

14 But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. 15 For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16 to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?

17 For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

- 2:12 Paul gives further explanation of his apostolic movements and heart motivations. On one hand he speaks of the fact that “a door was opened . . . in the Lord” (2:12) for him to do work in Troas. Even though one might suppose that to be divine guidance to stay in Troas, Paul states that “my spirit was not at rest” (2:13) because he didn’t find one of his protégés, Titus, there. So he leaves the open door at Troas to pursue a relational connection in Macedonia. Has he made an emotional mistake or is this the particular priority that ought to be adopted? Paul appears to be more shaped by the internal direction of the Holy Spirit rather than the missional opportunities that present themselves. Perhaps he felt that Troas and its needs could wait until he had secured this relationship with Titus. It may also be a testimony of the Holy Spirit’s priority of relationship over missional opportunity. One ought not to press that too far, but at least in this instance, the Holy Spirit moves Paul to find Titus rather than pursue the mission in Troas. This trip to Macedonia produced its own level of warfare (7:5 - “we were afflicted at every turn”) but they did find Titus and were comforted by that (7:6).
- 2:13 door at Troas to pursue a relational connection in Macedonia. Has he made an emotional mistake or is this the particular priority that ought to be adopted? Paul appears to be more shaped by the internal direction of the Holy Spirit rather than the missional opportunities that present themselves. Perhaps he felt that Troas and its needs could wait until he had secured this relationship with Titus. It may also be a testimony of the Holy Spirit’s priority of relationship over missional opportunity. One ought not to press that too far, but at least in this instance, the Holy Spirit moves Paul to find Titus rather than pursue the mission in Troas. This trip to Macedonia produced its own level of warfare (7:5 - “we were afflicted at every turn”) but they did find Titus and were comforted by that (7:6).
- 2:14 Paul then gives thanks to God and rejoices in the leadership of God through His triumph in Christ. We follow in His victory processional even though often it leads us into human difficulty and psychological stresses. All of our movements on this mission are in Christ, because of Christ, and worked together for good in His grace. It is God’s gracious intent to spread “the fragrance of knowledge of him everywhere” (2:14). This is our great calling – to give off the very “smell” of heaven that has come down to earth through the Incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. Now that we are in Him, we become His fragrant expressions to this world. Christ has secured us and now our lives are being transformed in Christ to be expressions of worship back to God—and we accomplish this in two spheres—“among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing” (2:15). We are God’s witnesses in both realms and in a third realm: “so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10).
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God has laid His hand upon a new covenant people who by their worship and obedience will give witness to each other, the lost and the realms of the spirit that Christ has triumphed and His reign has come and will be fulfilled completely and finally in the coming age. Paul describes this ministry as a kind of “odor” that reaches the olfactory senses of the perishing and presses them even further into rejection and death. There is a deep antipathy in the lost toward the gospel and its truth, toward the singularity of Jesus Christ and His supremacy in the universe. It engenders mockery, dismissal and sometimes violence, but to those who receive the grace to believe, it is the very fragrance of life that engenders yet more life and blessing the more one comes into the remarkable knowledge of the Son of God.

2:16 Paul considers the weakness of the human frame, including his own, when we properly consider this cosmic mission. He asks “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2:16). This is certainly not a work that we take up in our own strength, but as Paul has already stated, it is “Christ who always leads us.” This is His work, imbued by His Spirit, focused on His commission to go everywhere and proclaim the gospel and make disciples. As he will underline later, it is never a mission that is dependent on human capacity but rather we hear the words, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).

2:17 Paul distinguishes himself from charlatans who are like “peddlers of God’s Word”, those who humanly manipulate truth to gain personal advantage or to project a human mission rather than following the lead of Jesus. Rather he appeals to personal “sincerity” and divine commissioning and a life of faith in Christ working in him: “We speak in Christ,” not out of impure or self-centered motivations. Paul understands that Christ is everything and he and his team are entirely accountable “in the sight of God.”

Paul’s whole life and mission is simple—it is to follow God in the great triumph of Christ, to be led by His Spirit so that God can press out His fragrance through him to whomever He chooses and to the great purpose of glorifying His own name through him.

Ministers of the New Covenant

2 Corinthians 3: 1-18

3:1 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? 2 You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. 3 And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered 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.

4 Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. 5 Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, 6 who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

7 Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, 8 will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? 9 For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. 10 Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. 11 For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

12 Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, 13 not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. 14 But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. 15 Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. 16 But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

3:1 Paul continues to sort through the kind of place he holds with these people. The “peddlers of God’s Word” (2:17) were competing for their hearts. These false leaders had obviously used letters from other churches to commend themselves to the Corinthians and perhaps too, letters from them to other churches. The thought is absurd to Paul and his question is only rhetorical and perhaps even sarcastic, because as he unfolds in the next thought, the Corinthians themselves and their very existence as a church validate the kind of relationship that Paul should have with them. In his first letter to them Paul said, “I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (I Cor. 4:15). His preaching and pastoral interaction had brought this church to birth. Without him and his proclamation of

- Christ, they would not exist at all. He doesn't need any human letter of recommendation because their very existence testifies to his part in their origin.
- 3:2 This has produced a heart transformation and engendered a way of life that in itself is like a letter than can be "read by all." Paul's emphasis is on the internal
- 3:3 inscription of "the Spirit of the living God" on hearts rather than mere ink on a tablet. Anybody can do that and claim a kind of authority, but the transformation of the human heart is accomplished only through the gospel of Christ and the proclamation of a son of God and Spirit-gifted man. It is this living-God-ness to which Paul appeals. This lacks some of the human forms that the more carnal man might demand: letters of recommendation, self-promoting speeches, outrageous claims of ministry. Paul's appeal is to their lives that have been transformed by the Spirit.
- 3:4 It is this kind of "confidence" that Paul possesses (versus the human and unfounded confidence of false apostles). Paul's confidence is always "through Christ" and never through any other human means. He's not dependent upon human letters or human posturing, but rather the divine origin of his call and the divine anointing on his preaching and ministry of miracles that testify to his call. It is always Christ-centered—everything proceeding from God's magnificent and
- 3:5 all-encompassing work in Jesus. Paul is very explicit regarding this issue of sufficiency—none of it resides within the human soul apart from Christ. In fact, Jesus said it Himself: "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). Paul is unabashed about the sufficiency that he possesses in Jesus. It is a divine
- 3:6 "competency" that is based in the new covenant which is founded in the work of Christ and mediated by the Holy Spirit. This is not a covenant based on laws alone, even laws of God (that ultimately condemn the human), but rather based in God Himself, the living Spirit who makes alive on the ground of His own righteousness and what He can justly give to those who have faith in Jesus. The new covenant is rooted in "the living God" who makes alive rather than mere letters that "kill." Perhaps Paul is also obliquely referencing his living relationship with the Corinthians, his spiritually genetic connection to them as opposed to false apostles who base their claim in "letters" that are not rooted in an incarnational relationship. Paul's assertion is that real spiritual life proceeds from Spirit rather than letter. Mere words cannot form true spiritual relationship. There must be the dynamic of the Spirit that can breathe life into human need much like God breathed life into Adam's form and he became a living being. The new covenant is God's re-commitment to the human race to continually breathe life into us because of and through the life of Jesus.
- 3:7 Paul now contrasts the new covenant with the old and refers to the old as "the ministry of death." In what respect is it deadly? It is only that it ultimately could not produce life. It pointed to perfection but lacked the power to actually help one achieve it. In his great opus Paul makes this clear: "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to

the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:3-4). This ministry of death still comes with a profound display of glory through God’s glory being shown through the face of Moses. When leaving the tabernacle (Ex. 34:29-35), he had to veil his face so as to not overly dazzle the Israelites who saw him. This glory was mediated via “letters on stone,” indeed, the very words of God but not the Person of God as such. Given that much glory from stone, what can we expect from Spirit? Well, as Paul says, “even more glory” (3:8). In fact he says that the Spirit (“the ministry of righteousness”) must far exceed it (“the ministry of condemnation”) in glory (3:9). The vitality of Spirit contrasted with the deadness of stone is the primary image. The Spirit is designed to mediate the righteousness of God to a believer while the Law can do nothing more than describe the perfections of the holiness of God and condemn those who fall short of that standard. Even that action of condemnation has a great degree of glory because of the One upon whom it focuses. However, the glory of the new covenant that highlights the glorious reality of Christ’s perfect life, atoning death and victorious resurrection is so surpassingly laden with the glory of God that the Sinai glory “has come to have no glory at all” (3:10). The temporary nature of the Law covenant produced a level of glory, but the permanent nature of the New Covenant has “much more” glory and blessing. Paul is pressing all of this out to underscore his own calling as a “minister of a new covenant. . . of the Spirit” (3:3), rather than one who can only rehearse the condemnation of the Law. Whoever the competition is for the exercise of spiritual authority, Paul portrays to these Corinthians a new covenant heart relationship founded in the Spirit rather than a merely moralistic dimension that results in fear and condemnation and probably a domineering type of human authority.

3:12 Paul grounds his boldness in the hope that he possesses because of the revealed glory of the new covenant. He needs no veil like Moses but rather, because of the glorious invitation of the new covenant reality, he can let it all out and, in fact, seeks to let out the brilliance of this truth and the power of this Spirit. What was the purpose of the veil? Was it merely to shield the Israelites from its brilliance, to save their eyes? Paul says that its purpose was to prevent them

3:13 from becoming too enamored of a glory that “was being brought to an end” (3:13). Having brought up the Israelites, Paul feels compelled to extend the veil image onto the hearts of the Israelites. They’re unable to perceive the truth of the new covenant and particularly when the old (Moses and the Law) was being

3:14 read. Their “minds were hardened” (3:14) and they were transfixed by the glory of the old, despite Moses’ attempt to rightly shield it from them. Even up to that time, Paul says that the “same veil remains unlifted.” They seek to make the old glory sufficient or current. But how can it be? If God has come in the flesh and rose from the dead to be able to justify sinners, it is beyond the pale to think that mere words (even divine words) could somehow represent anything close to the glory of the Incarnation. So if the Israelites persist in pursuing the sufficiency of the first covenant and former glory, then that “veil” defines their existence because as Paul states conclusively, “only through Christ is it taken away” (3:14). One must hear and believe the gospel for the light of the new covenant glory to

3:15 penetrate and transform the human heart. The great goodness is that this new covenant continues to be proclaimed and “when one turns to the Lord, the veil is
3:16 removed” (3:16). It is no longer predicated on circumcision and a perfect obedience to the Law but rather an act of faith in what God has done in Jesus and the confidence of grace that this Reality will be incarnated within me. When
3:17 the veil is removed, there is no longer condemnation but rather freedom—the very ministry of the Spirit whose location anywhere in the realm of faith produces freedom. It is the freedom to become all that God has ordained for me and to do all that He has called me to do. When the Spirit penetrates the veil of human
3:18 sinfulness, He gives the capacity to behold “the glory of the Lord” (3:18) with an unveiled face. We are able to come into direct spiritual contact with our Savior and within that spiritual “beholding [of] the glory of the Lord” there is a transformation into that “same image” in a progressive way—“from one degree of glory to another” (3:18). This is God’s methodology—to bring us into direct spiritual contact with Himself through the work of Christ and within that sphere of His glorious resurrection Presence we are shaped by His Image—we are refashioned according to a glorious new promise of God—to be all that we need because of Jesus’ perfect work and the Spirit’s real power to change the human heart from its dark enslavement to sin and bring us to the glorious freedom and transformation of the Spirit. As Paul concludes, all this is “from the Lord who is the Spirit”. The very identity of the Spirit is wrapped up in the work of the Lord, taking all of His glorious merit and pressing it to all who come to Him and have the face-veil removed. It is the great joy and privilege of the believer to have been ushered into the Presence of God to behold His glory, to be transformed by it and to be equipped with His Word and Spirit to do the entire mission to which we have been called.

The Light of the Gospel

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

4:1 Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. 2 But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. 3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. 4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5 For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

- 4:1 Paul has been rehearsing the foundation of personal ministry with the Corinthians. It is rooted in the Spirit of the new covenant enacted by the blood of Christ. It is rooted in the sufficiency and competency of God (3:5-6) and it is designed to communicate a surpassing glory that is mediated through the sufferings and comforts of Christ (1:5). God has chosen to share His ministry with men, but this is only possible because of His mercy. No man can ever achieve the place of deserving His favor or confidence. Ministry is entirely rooted in the "mercy of God" (4:1) and the sovereign choice of grace that both humbles and glorifies the receiver and ultimately reserves glory for God alone. The mercy of God is the very core of Paul's capacity to endure—his ministry is not founded in his personality or his human giftings and disposition. It is "only through Christ" (3:14) that the veil of ignorance is removed and the revelation and capacity to serve is imparted. It is the sheer mercy of God and that deeply encourages Paul and presses him on into increasing service. It is through relationship of sovereign choice and mercy that motivates Paul to renounce "disgraceful and underhanded ways" that are undoubtedly being exercised by the "superapostles."
- 4:2 Paul describes these ways as a kind of "cunning," an impure disposition that seeks to manipulate for unholy purposes, and the disposition "to tamper with God's word," that is, to interpret in such a way that personal advantage is gained over the hearers. This approach can be nothing but abhorrent to Paul who understands so thoroughly how this ministry of the gospel is rooted in the very Person of God who has come so humbly in the Incarnation and died so fearsomely in the Atonement and rose so powerfully in the Resurrection and reigns so gloriously in the Ascension and will return so magnificently at His second coming and Reign. To tamper with these realities is indeed the very last thing Paul would abide; rather he ascribes to a pattern of "the open statement of the truth" (4:2). He is so convinced of the power and merit of the gospel message, the Spirit who infuses it and the Person who presides over it that he understands this calling to properly and forthrightly state it and let its weight

press into the human soul apart from any human manipulation and deceitful practice. Paul commends this approach “to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (4:2). His conscience is bound to this pattern and he seeks to form the consciences of others in the same way. God watches our hearts and we must exercise great care or suffer consequences from a God who jealously watches over His beloved flock.

- 4:3 Continuing on this metaphor of “veiling,” Paul speaks of the condition of “those who are perishing” (4:3). The general condition and accountable state of man is outlined in Romans 1:18ff—he has rejected the plain invitation of the Creator and chosen his own way to his inevitable demise. Beyond that moral choice, he has
- 4:4 fallen prey to “the god of this world” who blinds his spiritual perception and cancels his capacity to understand the gospel and be saved. Paul refers to the gospel as “the glory of Christ”, that is, the full expression of His incarnation, atoning death, resurrection and ascension that results in the salvation of the world. The gospel is a message from God that is more than a pronouncement—it is the glorious description and prescription of what God has done in His obedient Son so that He can justly forgive every sinful human. It is entirely glorious and entirely rooted in Christ. This Christ is the “image of God” so that we understand that the Father and Son are completely in union both in character and mission. Jesus has come and told us that if we have seen Him we have seen the Father. He fully submitted to and obeyed the Father’s will even to a crushing death on the cross. Jesus fully drank the Father’s cup of suffering for the sake of a lost humanity.
- 4:5 Paul rightly affirms that his proclamation is not about himself or his authority, per se, (as it was by contrast with those who were intruding on the Corinthian believers), but rather it is “Jesus Christ as Lord.” Here is the real authority of God, rooted in God rather than a human being marred by sin and brokenness. Paul understands that any authority he possesses is derived from Another and his posture is one of a servant to the Corinthians “for Jesus’ sake.” Paul knows who he is and is quite secure in his servant authority derived from the Lordship of Jesus. The heart of the proclamation must be Jesus, not human authority. Derived human authority for the sake of Jesus is crucial if the process of discipleship, the remaking of humans into the image of the Son, is to be effective. The other pole of dismissing all human authority as extraneous easily leads to a kind of Gnostic hyper-individualism that leads one off the cliff as surely as a wrong-headed submission to false human authority.
- 4:6 To emphasize the enormity of this gospel proclamation, Paul draws the Corinthians back to the very first recorded words of God in the Bible in Genesis 1:3, “Let light shine out of darkness” or “Let there be light.” The gospel of God’s glory comes from the same God who uttered these first creative words. Paul no doubt remembers that blazing light that struck him down as he journeyed to Damascus and the voice from heaven that questioned his unholy mission. That light blinded him for a time, but the inner light of the gospel began to overcome

the “veil” of his ignorance and ultimately transform him into God’s premier apostle to the Gentiles and premier human author of New Covenant theology. This “light of the knowledge of the glory of God” shines in the heart, into the soul where God not only illuminates our darkness, but recreates a new life in us that reflects His Son, is empowered by His Spirit and sent on His ongoing mission on the earth. Properly perceived, this is the most enthralling of all realities—to be chosen by God for salvation and sanctification and commissioning to His eternal service and all of this occurs because of Jesus and as Paul makes plain, it is all “in the face of Jesus Christ.” Here, undoubtedly, he is contrasting Moses’ shining face that must be veiled (3:13) and the surpassing glory of Jesus’ sacrifice that shines from His very Person, His face that is unveiled and communicates the justice of God, the love of God, the mercy of God, the glory of God, the mission of God and, in fact, all that we need to know about God and His eternal purposes and our privileged place in it all.

Treasure in Jars of Clay

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So death is at work in us, but life in you.

13 Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, "I believed, and so I spoke," we also believe, and so we also speak, 14 knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. 15 For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

16 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

4:7 The glorious reality of God shining in and through the heart of a believer is now set in proper context by Paul. This profound "treasure" has been deposited in "jars of clay." The same God who sent His Son to be born in an animal shelter and raised in obscurity is equally unabashed in His condescension to live within broken humanity—our clayness filled with His glory. Paul explains the divine rationale for this apparent relational inequity—"to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." This is not a problem of insecurity or arrogance in the nature of God. Rather it is the design of the Creator that all of His creatures find their true joy and fulfillment in properly honoring their Creator rather than obsessively pursuing their own self interests. As Paul shared with them in his first letter, God is determined "that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1Cor. 1:29). How can a broken creature hold anything over a perfect, eternal Creator? Beyond absurdity, it is grossly inappropriate. Our happiness is rooted in our Creator and the exaltation of His glory. Our glory is derived from Him as is our life and capacity for good. We are made in His image and likeness and made to live in union with Him as Trinity and to live out of that union with God—exalting faith and obedience. But, indeed, the vessels are clay rather than some precious metal or bejeweled arrangement. Simple clay inhabited by profound Glory—redeemed creatures infused with a glorious Creator and Redeemer. When Christ is exalted and honored within and through one of these

clay jars, then not only is God's surpassing power revealed, but the very design of the creature's existence is fulfilled.

- 4:8-9 Paul then goes on to describe the clay route of the creaturely jars and the way that the Creator chooses to reveal His surpassing power. The Creator allows His beloved clay jars to experience afflictions, perplexities, persecutions and abuse (i.e. struck down). His surpassing power is demonstrated in the way He subverts final evil or its victory—"not crushed . . . not driven to despair. . . not forsaken . . . not destroyed." There can be no mistaking that these clay jars are more than clay. Yet there is something within that rude exterior that points beyond the clay jar. This is how God has chosen to reveal Himself—a manger, the obscurity of Nazareth, rejection, crucifixion and the humility of indwelling former enemies still bearing the marks of their brokenness and sin. It is the same way the Father revealed Himself through the Son—not by external attraction but by glory expressed through simplicity, humility and His humanity and ultimately through the "foolishness" of the cross preached as the means of salvation.

God allows His clay jars to go through great difficulty but not utter demise. One might argue that the martyrs of the faith, like Stephen, indeed suffered crushing defeat but it was rather a means of entrance into glory and a way that God's radiance shone through his clayness (Acts 6:15- "And gazing at him all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel"). Human distress and difficulty are part of the divine process of revealing His glory. The "clay jars" must accept this reality and look for God in and through whatever circumstances come to us. So these perplexities and afflictions are all come to the believer from the sovereign hand of God with sufficient grace to avoid the natural responses of utter despair or cynical resignation.

- 4:10 In fact Paul goes on to describe the normal posture of a Christian leader—"always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (4:10). The very teachings of Jesus are rooted in this truth: ". . . unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies . . ." (John 12:24); "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own . . . life, he cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:26); "whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Lk. 9:24); ". . . whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt. 10:39). Manifesting the life of Jesus entails the virtual expression of His grace through us via the indwelling Holy Spirit—but this holy expression is only possible as one denies the willfulness of the self and by faith chooses to obey the will of Another. In that transaction of faith there is a release of grace and power that is the very life of Jesus being expressed from our lives. It is the death of Jesus that frees me from the dominance of sin and it is the resurrection of Jesus and the indwelling of His Spirit that releases grace to others. The "death of Jesus" began in fact with His incarnation and the humbling of His divinity into a human form. He said that His food was to do the will of Him who sent Him. His death was daily to His own will and yet, of course, it was His Father's will that defined Him. His literal death on the cross was the amazing culmination of a life lived fully for Another and His will.

Paul has adopted the same posture of faith and obedience. He knows that for the life of Jesus to be expressed through him, he must embrace both the merits of His complete sacrifice and the daily “death” to his own will, consciously seeking His will and purpose.

- 4:11 He even goes so far as to say that this dying is a sovereign design: “we . . . are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake.” God is doing the “giving over to death,” the death that brings me to the end of my resources and presses me to rely upon the power of God. This very much harkens back to the first chapter of this letter (1:8-11) where Paul speaks of being “so utterly burdened beyond our strength” so that they would “not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.” In fact he did experience the resurrection power of Christ in that very difficult situation. The life of Jesus came through. His mission was forwarded. His glory was exalted. His gospel bore fruit. His grace was released. For the sake of Jesus and His mission, God will allow the unfolding of externally challenging events and circumstances so that God can be seen and manifested through them. Consequently Paul confidently affirms that the death that works in
- 4:12 him and his leadership team is a means of life coming to those for whom they are caring. Life comes to every believer only through the death of Jesus and now that same spiritual reality of the incarnation unfolds through leaders to believers and through believers to other believers. Life always comes out of death in the economy of God’s Kingdom and the life of faith.
- 4:13-15 Paul identifies this posture as the “spirit of faith.” He references Ps. 116:10. Most of the psalm is a remarkable example of exactly what Paul has been writing in this 4th chapter. The psalmist speaks of the “snares of death” and “pangs of Sheol encompassing him” and suffering “distress and anguish.” But the Lord delivers him from “death . . . tears. . . stumbling” so that he can offer “sacrifices of thanksgiving.” Paul believes in this same God, in His word and in the resurrection power of Christ that triumphs over all death. Paul’s mission to proclaim the gospel is born from and maintained by the real faith he possesses that God has given him this ministry. He believes and so he speaks and continues to speak despite serious opposition and reversals. This faith is rooted in “knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also,” whether that is the overcoming power through all human circumstances or the power that overcomes real death so that we arrive “into his presence.” He wrote to the Philippians that living was Christ and dying was gain. He lives with the expectation that life will involve carrying the death of Jesus in his body, but that physical death will entail the arrival into profound open relationship with Jesus in eternity. This mission is designed so that “grace extends to more and more people” and by consequence it increases “thanksgiving to the glory of God.” It is this ultimate goal (the glory of God) that so transfixes Paul’s heart and impels him forward into whatever sovereign design that God has ordained. Faithful suffering always produces glory to God and to those who suffer in faith with Him. This extension of grace through suffering is mysterious and foolish to the natural man, but it is at the very core of the nature of a God who would glorify Himself by

sending His beloved eternal Son to a remarkably humiliating and gruesome death so that grace could be justly given and rebels against Him could be redeemed from lives of futility and be restored to the original intent and image—to glorify God through many thanksgivings for His loving provision.

4:16-18 Because he sees all of this with such clarity (the eyes of faith), he is not swayed by external afflictions and difficulties. He does not “lose heart” because he understands the sovereign dynamics of the God he serves. By the eye of faith he sees the inner workings of the Spirit over and against the outward “wasting away.” Through every apparently wasting affliction, God is at work by His Spirit, renewing that which will last forever. In fact he refers to all his afflictions as “slight” and “momentary.” Here is the eye of faith triumphing over every temptation and misperception with the understanding that through every circumstance God is adding to “an eternal weight of glory” on Paul’s behalf. His theology is deeply shaped by the rewards of this eternal Kingdom versus the temporal seductions of “things that are seen,” whether persecutions or earthly “trinkets,” his heart and mind are focused on this truth—“the things that are unseen are eternal” (4:18). Paul’s sight of eternity frees him from being led by the temporal and consequently, like Jesus, he is able to live fruitfully and effectively during the years allotted to him on earth. Even at the end of his earthly stay he sees clearly the eternal parameters. He shares with Timothy (2Tim. 4:6ff) regarding:

- the time of my departure
- finishing the race
- the award of a laid up crown of righteousness
- the Day of His appearing and those who have loved it
- Demas in love with this present world
- the Lord bringing him safely to His eternal Kingdom

This sight of an eternal Kingdom constantly provides the perspective that Paul must maintain if he is to fulfill the particular call that “the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it” (2 Tim. 4:17). Paul is not duped by the transiency of “things that are seen” but rather he is deeply compelled by the eternal calling and workings and ultimate purpose of an eternal God who still is at work on the earth.

Our Heavenly Dwelling

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

5:1 For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. 2 For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, 3 if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. 4 For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 5 He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

6 So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, 7 for we walk by faith, not by sight. 8 Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. 10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

- 5:1 Paul proceeds to unpack some of the dimensions of this eternal destiny and initially makes a contrast between an earthly tent and an eternal home. Paul is a tentmaker and knows that it is never designed as a permanent domicile but rather a temporary accommodation and a nomadic necessity. This is the core of Paul's understanding—his present "housing situation" is only temporary, it may be "destroyed" but subsequently we inherit "a building from God. . . eternal in the heavens." Paul is quite sure of this and consequently is not terribly invested in the tent. In fact it is the temporary nature of this earthly tent that engenders a kind of longing, even a groaning, for the permanence of our heavenly dwelling, a resurrection body and eternal reality that will eclipse all things temporal. Because he is indwelt by the eternal Spirit of God and because he is tuned to His Person, he is drawn repeatedly to the end of the race and the goal for which he gives and risks his life in the face of seemingly continuous opposition. This
- 5:2 internal groaning is the Spirit Himself keeping Paul focused and free to engage the present mission with a holy abandon. It is this heavenly dwelling that is our ultimate clothing that keeps us from the comparative nakedness of the merely earthly and temporal. The great burden of the temporal tent consists in the
- 5:3 demands and afflictions of this mortality—sin and death and the consequences they produce. On this earth we are engaged in a particular war that presses us beyond ourselves and into the sufficiency of God's grace. Our expectation is that "we would be further clothed" and that the eternal life of God will swallow up all of the mortal contingencies of this present existence. We are presently being
- 5:4 prepared by the Spirit "for this very thing", i.e., the full clothing and permanence of eternal existence with the Triune God. The gift of the Spirit is both a "guarantee" and an active Preparer who helps us to see, get ready, and persevere along this earthly path toward further clothing and the eternal swallowing up of the mortal. Paul admonished the Philippians to "work out your

own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). God is always at work through His Spirit to empower us for this earthly Mission and to make us ready, even with holy groaning, for our permanent habitation.

- 5:6 Consequently with these eternal realities in place and rooted to divine promises, Paul can say that “we are always of good courage.” This courage is driven by the sight of “the things that are unseen” (4:18). He knows that some day in a very real future he will be “at home with the Lord” although his present home is “in the body.” Someday we will see Jesus face to face but for now we must attend to the internal promptings and groanings of His Spirit, the “walk by faith”
- 5:7 that presses every believer to attentiveness to the Word and Spirit by which we are to relate to God. His people are also directly a part of the provision that God gives to bring us to His immortal blessing. It will never be “by sight” in this mortal, earthly tent. We must learn the ways of faith (Gal. 2:20) and the walk of the Spirit (Gal. 5:25) that equips us to worship, perceive and obey an eternal Spirit Father who is always at work in us for His own eternal purposes. The
- 5:8 natural predilection of the Spirit within us is to finally “be at home with the Lord” but until that day arrives, our faith in Christ provides us with all the courage we need to continue in the face of very challenging, visible and temporary realities—relational reversals, physical sicknesses, spiritual opponents and persecutions, profound disappointments—all of which require a persevering sight of an eternal Kingdom and home and swallowing up of all mortal contingencies.
- 5:9 What is central to all of this is “our aim to please him” which is so reflective of Christ’s own disposition to the Father—“And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him” (Jn. 8:29). Jesus’ entire existence was an expression of how to live in an earthly tent and fully please the Father. Even as He approached the horror of the final days in His earthly tent, Jesus gave perfect expression to pleasing His unseen Father: “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name” (Jn.12:27-28). His final struggle is in Gethsemane where He dies to His mortal agony and yields to the Father’s will. Paul is aimed in that same direction. Whatever unfolds from the eternal will of God is what he embraces and what the Spirit gives courage to embrace. The specific spiritual reality that looms before
- 5:10 everyone is “the judgment seat of Christ” where everyone will give account for the way that each used time, resources and energy while in their earthly tent. That awesome and real face to face with the Author of Life and the King of Kings awaits all of God’s people. It is meant to powerfully motivate us to use our time and resources to please the One who has called us by His own grace and mercy. We all will “receive what is due” and something of eternal import is due to each one of us. That great event will occur and that eventuality was meant to keep us properly aimed at pleasing Him first.

The Ministry of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:11-6:13

11 Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. 12 We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. 13 For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. 14 For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; 15 and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

6:1 Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.
2 For he says,

“In a favorable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. 3 We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, 4 but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, 5 beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; 6 by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; 7 by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; 8 through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; 9 as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; 10 as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

11 We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. 12 You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. 13 In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

- 5:11 This view of eternity and accountability is meant to engender a proper “fear of the Lord” regarding our own heart and obedience. Further we are impelled, like Paul, to “persuade others.” Eternity and its accountabilities loom as an ultimate reality for every human being and it is part of the calling of a Christian to be winsomely persuasive in our relationships with others—both believers and non-believers. Paul’s reference to the identity and calling of the apostolic team (“what we are”) must be a reference to the question marks raised by false apostles in 1:17. Paul and his team are “known to God” primarily, not to men or not based on human ordination. Of course, anyone can make the same claim (cf 2:17) but Paul presses the Corinthians with the evidence of their very existence (3:1-3) as the testimony of his calling from God. He appeals to their “conscience”, the witness in their inner soul that affirms the divine origin and goodness of this relationship. If this apostolic relationship becomes disjointed, then the church will come under a siege of oppression and a spiritual vulnerability that will threaten fruitfulness and ultimately their very existence. Paul is jealous for them to be spiritually
- 5:12 focused on “what is in the heart” rather than the “outward appearance” that is the ground of comparison of Paul’s opponents. Paul wants the Corinthians to be confident in his place in their lives (“to boast about us”) so that they will be able to withstand the critique of the opponents. Again the issue is the heart versus mere outward appearances. This is challenging pastoral work, to shape the perceptions of a people who are being bombarded by deceiving elements.
- 5:13 Sometimes this calling will project a look of being “beside ourselves,” looking foolish, even a bit weird according to human standards. But Paul says it “is for God.” The foolishness of the gospel, the incredible controversy of the cross as God’s path of salvation, can strain every believer into a kind of humility that points to God and His ways rather than a neat package of ideas and principles that do not rightly reflect the Incarnation. The callings of God may project us into situations in which we will appear beside ourselves for the gospel, but in fact they lead to an outworking of God’s eternal plan. In fact, Paul asserts that they are “in our right mind,” that is, genuinely proclaiming the truth of God to the Corinthians even if it appears foolish to the unspiritual. The very ministries of Christ and Paul affirm this. Jesus’ own family thought he was out of his mind (Mk. 3:21, 31). Paul had to deal with Festus and Agrippa (Acts 26:24-28), but he knew who he was before God and the calling he held.
- 5:14 His testimony is grounded in the “love of Christ” rather than the mere reason of man or the compulsion of outward circumstances. Here is the great conclusion that proceeds from the love of God demonstrated in the death of Jesus—that “one has died for all.” If this is true, it properly eclipses every other truth. It encompasses all men and women and children everywhere and calls them to account because the one who has died is no ordinary creature, but the very Creator Himself—the Son of God. His death was no ordinary death, but rather one of extreme suffering and humiliation and consequence. It was a death died for everyone. Paul’s corollary is “therefore all have died.” In other words, everyone is dead in their sin and separated from God, but this one death is a death for all that is offered to all. We can receive a death to sin as ours. But

- 5:15 there's more. The purpose of this dying is to deliver us from a life lived for ourselves. This is the core of the sin problem—man dismissing God as the center of the universe and the center of his own life or seeking to use God as an additive to his life. This death of Christ calls everyone to an entire submission and surrender of will, heart and destiny. Anything less is insulting and deceived. We are called to “live . . . for him,” to recognize His supremacy as Creator and Redeemer and Lord and King and wisely put aside and put to death the demands of the sin nature—that one should serve one's own interests first and foremost, that my thoughts, my will, my hopes should have preeminence over the mind and will and purposes of God. Jesus was raised from the dead to reign as Lord over all and to give resurrection life to all who would receive His sacrifice as their own and His will as their own. This is the truth that makes Paul seem beside himself. It is the truth that eclipses every other truth and every human testimony—the Creator and Lord of the universe has died a death for the sake of every one of His creatures. He has been raised from the dead to give life to every dead person who will believe and learn to live life out of relationship with God.
- 5:16 Given this remarkable truth and all-encompassing reality, Paul's posture toward every human being is shaped by how they relate to that particular truth. To view someone “according to the flesh” means that the judgment is based on external features rather than the work of the Spirit in the heart. Everyone's disposition toward Christ was once only “according to the flesh” whether one believed He was a sort of misguided guru or a mere human being. In fact, He is the “Author of Life” (Acts 3:15), the Savior and Redeemer of the world, the King of all Kings and Lord of all Lords, the very Son of God. That truth changes everything for everybody. It is how one relates to this truth that will determine eternal destinies. So the identity of Christ and the clear parameters of the gospel become the lens through which Paul relates to everyone.
- 5:17 It is the possibility of becoming a new creation in Christ that utterly motivates Paul's thoughts and plans. Faith in the finished work of Christ produces an internal change—a new birth, a new creation of the Holy Spirit that changes everything. There has taken place a literal transfer of citizenship from the evaporating dynamic of this world to the eternal blessing and coordinates of the Kingdom of heaven which is already present transcendentally in this world. The “new has come,” a new creation made alive by the Holy Spirit into a new kingdom. Jesus told Martha at the tomb of her brother that he (Jesus) was “the Resurrection and the Life,” that His very life overcame the effects of death in the soul first and ultimately in the body at the resurrection of the dead. This new life overcame the effects of death in the soul first and ultimately in the body at the resurrection of the dead. This new life and new mission and a new way of looking at anyone and anything is driven by the revelation of 5:14 “we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died (to). . . live for him who for their sake died and was raised.” This “new” reality is stacked up against every competing reality and calls for response—true or not? If true, what

response will a human make in the face of such profound sacrifice and such awesome consequences?

- 5:18 All of this truth and newness “is from God.” He is the Generator of all of this including the depth of Christ’s sacrifice that produced a reconciliation to God. The very nature of God is to create goodness and where there is “badness” He is on His own mission to restore and to re-create His goodness into His creation. But before that can take place, there must be a “reconciliation” between the Creator and His creatures. To some of His creatures He commits “the ministry of reconciliation.” God has come in Christ to reconcile man to Himself and He honors His now reconciled creatures by using them to administrate this reconciliation with other creatures. God has done the whole business of reconciliation “through Christ . . . to himself.” It is a completed work, utterly sufficient but He has committed the linking dynamic that moves an unreconciled sinner from their state of hopeless disconnection to a place of reception by faith in the finished work of Christ to those He has previously reconciled. Can there be a higher, nobler purpose on this earth than this? If God truly is Creator of all things and Christ truly is Redeemer of all men, then to be connected to this God through the Holy Spirit and to be doing this work of reconciling others to this ultimate reality is without question the worthiest activity to be done. This is all
- 5:19 initiated and completed in Christ. God sent His Son into the world, for the world so that human beings could enjoy the profound fellowship and deep joy of relationship with such a One as God, the Father of all and His beloved Son and all-creative Spirit. The Father did everything He had to do to reconcile the world to Himself. He did it all in Jesus. He made Jesus the perfect offering, the spotless Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus provide an all-encompassing, divinely satisfying reality that allows sinful humans to relate graciously to a holy God. Because of His radical and complete work in Jesus, the Father can righteously turn away from holy wrath toward sinners and not count “their trespasses against them.” Beyond that wonderful truth, God’s grace goes miles further by “entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” Here is the grace of God made so incredible—former criminals are not only pardoned but are enlisted to the very work of God that extends from His work in Christ. We are now to be proclaimers by word and life and deeds and community in the same way that Jesus revealed the Father. Now with the indwelling help and the Holy Spirit we continue the Missio Dei, the very
- 5:20 mission of God on earth. Paul, in fact, calls God’s people “presbeuomen” or those who work as ambassadors, representing Someone else who has authority. The wonder of it all is this—God has decided to continue to make “his appeal through us,” as amazing as that may seem. It is the very glory of His grace and the depth of His reconciliation—former blasphemers and enemies become proclaiming servants with a message from God Himself and backed up by the very work of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit to confirm every word. Jesus was God’s Word made flesh as well as God’s Lamb sacrificed for sin. Now we become the “fleshly” communicators of God’s Word along with the power of the Holy Spirit. God makes His appeal to the world through us. Paul

puts out a general appeal for that message to be heeded and lived out among the Corinthians. He freshly calls them to a reconciled life. The best way to understand his pastoral imploring on behalf of Christ to “be reconciled to God” is to see it similarly to justification and sanctification. If sanctification is a continual application of our justification, going deeper and further into Christ, then our reconciliation is an ongoing working out of going yet deeper into the grace of God. In this way our message becomes yet more incarnate and more precisely expressive of His great love.

- 5:21 Paul presses this love out to the Corinthians by giving them one of the most radical descriptions of the divine cost for effecting this reconciliation. God made His incarnate and beloved Son to be incarnate sin. He remained the spotless Lamb of God, but like the innocent Passover lamb or the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement, Jesus, the innocent victim, becomes the depository of all of the sin of the whole world for all of time. God “made him to be sin,” this is, while hanging on the cross, Jesus’ body was the object of God’s holy wrath toward all sin. It was Jesus alone who could bear this awful reality. He was divine, human, sinless, loving, perfectly obedient at every level. No one else would suffice. As Isaiah so awfully proclaims, “Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief” (Is. 53:10). All of this is not done in some cold, unemotional way. This is an eternal Father and Son and Spirit conspiring to love humans out of their path of rebellion and death into the very life of God effected by the very death of God for them. Jesus becomes sin so that “we might become the righteousness of God.” Here is the heart of the message of reconciliation—God has effected righteousness for all those who believe that what He has done in Christ is actually for them. They are to accept Christ as their sin-bearer and to accept the resurrected Christ as their new life founded in God’s righteousness. It is “in him,” by faith, that we become God’s children, made righteous by God’s holy actions in His beloved Son. It is all “for our sake.” How great is this love and this holy mystery!
- 6:1 It is a co-laboring activity, the Divine inhabiting the human for this great mission. The ongoing “appeal” is to be fully reconciled, to accept the great work of God in Christ and to avoid squandering it. It is possible to receive the grace of God and then allow the enemies of grace to engulf one’s worship and relationships and thereby sabotage the mission of God. Paul is jealous for their fruitfulness in this mission but also completely aware of the multitude of ways that this is opposed.
- 6:2 Paul makes an appeal to Isaiah 49:8 to enjoin these Corinthians to an immediate response. God has always spoken this way and continues to speak regarding the faith responses of His people. He says, “I have helped you, now respond to my help with obedience and covenant faithfulness.” And do it now. This is Paul’s pastoral advice—“Get with it now; put aside the distractions and issues that obfuscate the central issue of God’s holy mission that continues among them and through them. Paul’s own posture is one of innocence regarding any attempt to use them for his own selfish purposes (like the false apostles) or to
- 6:3

6:4 prevent them in any way from their growth and progress in the Lord. He's careful about the ministry integrity that is part of his stewardship in Christ. He is first and foremost a servant of God and the proof of that is seen in the gifts and sufferings that he and his leadership team have gone through. Paul lists one item after another that commends his calling to the Corinthians so that ultimately they will not only change their disposition toward him but finally come to a place where they acknowledge that he is part of a divine relationship and mission with them. He is truly a servant of God as the following list will attest and if they reject him they will be rejecting a piece of God's grace for them. Further, they will be left unprotected and vulnerable to false apostles.

Paul relates an all encompassing "every way" scenario that ought to convince these difficult Corinthians:

- by great endurance—the testimony of his three missionary journeys demonstrate this.
 - in afflictions—not only did he go through them but found God's grace to rejoice (as in the Philippian jail) and carry on with God's mission.
 - hardships—at multiple levels—physically, spiritually, missionally, circumstantially. The shipwreck of Acts 27 is one small feature of a life marked by apparent reversals.
 - calamities—in many breakdowns, Paul found God to be steadfast in His help.
- 6:5
- beatings—one beating might be scarringly memorable for anyone, but Paul had probably lost count. He had gotten beaten up numerous times for the sake of God's mission.
 - imprisonments
 - riots—Phillipi and Jerusalem being the most notable
 - labors –extended seasons in Antioch (1 yr. Acts 11:26), Ephesus (2 yrs. Acts 19:10) and Corinth (1 ½ yrs. Acts 18:11)
 - sleepless nights
 - hunger
- 6:6
- by purity – in the midst of many temptations, Paul kept his heart pure because he knew he was a servant of God
 - by knowledge—Paul had a particular revelation of the gospel that was utterly compelling.
 - by patience—a pastoral and necessary grace
 - by kindness—a pastoral and necessary grace
 - by the Holy Spirit—the gift and revelation of the Spirit confirmed to Paul repeatedly his calling and place in God's mission
 - by genuine love—with which he had loved the Corinthians
- 6:7
- by truthful speech—even though it regularly made him seem insane (Acts 26:24-25)

- by the power of God—demonstrated repeatedly through his ministry
- with the weapons of righteousness—the full equipment of God’s grace and power to do the work

6:8

- through honor and dishonor—Paul’s only gauge was God’s honor
- through slander and praise—Paul’s only focus was God’s praise
- as imposters yet true—no doubt, the false apostles accused them of being imposters

6:9

- as unknown yet well known—they didn’t have a lot of early fame but even demons knew Paul—Acts 19:15
- as dying but living—Paul and his team face physical death often but clearly they had died daily to their own will and like Jesus (Jn. 4:34) found life
- as punished but not killed—God had prevented physical death but allowed punishment so as to deepen their own awareness of sin and fellowship of His suffering

6:10

- As sorrowful yet always rejoicing—they had found the grace to groan with the human condition but rejoice in the power of the gospel and the great hope of eternal life and habitations
- As poor yet making many rich—Paul’s riches were certainly not of this world. He freely dispensed the priceless riches of the gospel to the dead and truly impoverished.
- As having nothing yet possessing everything—Paul’s commendation is that he is attached to the Source of all life and love and true riches. Being poor in this world’s riches was utterly inconsequential.

6:11-13 Here is the reason for this testimony of his journey and values—Paul wants full relationship with the Corinthians. His heart is wide open and his speech is free and without manipulation. They have become restricted in their affections because they have been polluted by the words and attitudes of spiritual interlopers. He speaks to them like a father looking for an appropriate response from beloved children—“widen your hearts.” They have become terribly restrained in their love for him. They have come to suspect him and detach themselves from his gifts and relationship. Paul is out to retrieve them from the edges of danger.

The Temple of the Living God

2 Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1

14 Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? 15 What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? 16 What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,

“I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.

17 Therefore go out from their midst,
and be separate from them, says the Lord,
and touch no unclean thing;

then I will welcome you,
18 and I will be a father to you,
and you shall be sons and daughters to me,
says the Lord Almighty.”

7:1 Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

- 6:14 Part of the danger that grips Paul has to do with the way that the Corinthians relate to the deeply broken culture that they inhabit. They must not link up inappropriately with those who do not share their deepest values. When Jesus prayed for His disciples, He addressed this very issue: “I have given them your word and the world has hated them because they are not of the world just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one” (Jn. 17:14-15). It is this “of-ness” that concerns Paul and, of course, the resulting vulnerability to the evil one. What are the ways that we become “unequally yoked?” Does he mean a business partnership or marriages or friendships? Perhaps it is all the above and more. Christ has no
- 6:15 relationship with evil (Belial) and calls us to the same purity of heart, to keep unstained from the world by accepting our calling as “the temple of the living
- 6:16 God.” God lives in the midst of His people and calls His people to identify with Himself at every turn. Our “portion” is Christ Himself and we are to be careful not to pollute that portion, but to treat it/Him as holy and of great worth and as sensitive to our choices of connecting to other people or practices.

Paul goes on to quote Scriptures from Leviticus (26:12) and Isaiah (52:11) that underline God’s heart for a holy people, a people identified with His character and values and perceptions of truth and worth. He calls His people to take radical and deliberate actions regarding relationships and practices that are antagonistic to His Presence and character. Be properly separated, especially in

heart, and be careful about unclean things—attitudes, practices, relationships, involvements, etc. This posture is what allows God to “welcome” us and be the kind of Father that He desires. Uncleaness clogs and obstructs and ultimately deadens this relationship with God.

7:1 Paul calls these believers once again to the great promises (1:19-22) of God that are His guarantees of covenant faithfulness. Given the greatness of these promises, we are exhorted by the Apostle to cooperate with God’s initiative and adopt a path of continuous cleansing from all kinds of defilements, whether physical or emotional or spiritual—to work hard at maintaining proper distance from evil and unholy alliances. This of course cannot mean avoiding people of this world, but rather reverencing Christ in our hearts as we reach out to the world around us. This is how we are to grow in holiness or to bring it “to completion in the fear of God.” It is how we show respect to the Person of God and maintain personal closeness.

Paul's Joy

2 Corinthians 7:2-16

2 Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. 3 I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. 4 I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy.

5 For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. 6 But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, 7 and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more. 8 For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. 9 As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.

10 For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. 11 For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. 12 So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. 13 Therefore we are comforted.

And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. 14 For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. 15 And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him with fear and trembling. 16 I rejoice, because I have perfect confidence in you.

7:2 In this deeply relational portion of the letter, Paul is clearly seeking to re-establish and reaffirm the foundation of his place with these Corinthians and give them some perspective on his own internal workings and the way that Titus' visit to them proved helpful to Paul.

7:3 He first seeks to clear this name and the innocence of his whole apostolic team that undoubtedly included Titus, Silas and Timothy (Acts 18:5) and perhaps Aquila and Priscilla. There has been no wrong doing or corruption or human trickery. This team has been morally responsible and faithful to the mission and the Corinthians and in fact, Paul has carried them in prayer—"You are in our hearts and die together and to live together." In a great gush of heartfelt emotion

- 7:4 Paul speaks of them with “great pride” and of being filled with comfort and “overflowing with joy.” Clearly his relationship with this church where he spent 18 months (Acts 18:11) on his second missionary journey, is of great value to him and he is so delighted to be in a place of reinforcing fellowship with them. He and his team have experienced a great deal of affliction and endured, but it is the persevering quality of his relationship with the Corinthians that makes it worthwhile.
- 7:5 Paul describes his journey after leaving Corinth and travelling through Troas into Macedonia as very challenging physically and psychologically. He relates his battle with fear no doubt exacerbated by the “fighting without” but this had become a very common experience for Paul—opposition and pain and a variety of battles and reversals. Like so many of David’s psalms, Paul is able to testify of God’s sovereign grace that was mediated to him in this particular difficulty by “the coming of Titus.” Paul understands this as comfort from God Himself on a “downcast” son. It is clear that God allows “downcastness” to create a proper reliance on His grace that triumphs when all human energy expires (2 Cor. 1:8-10). The comfort that Titus brought was multiplied when he also brought news of
- 7:6 the healthy exchange he shared with the Corinthians and the report of their “longing . . . mourning . . . and zeal” for Paul. He’s had to fight through so many issues with these folk including the intrusion of false apostles and the multiple
- 7:7 divine internal wranglings that occupied his first letter.
- 7:8 Paul then refers back to his “grieving” letter where he rebuked the church for their posture toward the man living with his father’s wife (1Cor. 5:1). It was a difficult issue to raise because it put the relationship at risk or at least in a tenuous place. Paul sent the letter knowing it would be painful and though
- 7:9 regretting the infliction, he was able to finally rejoice because it produced the desired effect —“godly grief”—that led to repentance. Consequently the relationship suffered “no loss.” This, of course, was Paul’s hope—to be able to exercise appropriate apostolic discipline without the loss of relationship. The fact that this occurred has produced a very positive sense of blessing.
- 7:10 Paul, the teacher, now takes this opportunity to expound on the difference between godly and worldly grief. The former has the healthy effect of producing true repentance “that leads to salvation” and bypasses regret. Godly grief is a heart sorrow mixed with grace that transforms and engenders more of the life of Christ. Conversely, worldly grief produces death—emotionally, spiritually, relationally and perhaps in extreme cases, physically. Sorrow that is not rightly
- 7:11 routed through the Spirit of God is deadly. The further evidence of the salubrious effect of their “godly grief” is their “earnestness” and “eagerness” to maintain a good relationship with Paul. These folk went to great lengths to clear themselves from any stigma that may have unfolded because of the charges pressed to them. They took great pains to get down to their innocence from wrongdoing. In fact Paul now proclaims that the whole episode was a kind of divine crucible to

- 7:12 test and prove to the Corinthians that “in the sight of God” their relationship with Paul and the apostolic team was earnest and vibrant and, in fact, in good order. Paul believes that God used this to re-solidify what may have been an eroding relationship. God, indeed, works all things together for the good of those whom He has called.
- 7:13 The result for Paul is divine comfort. These people are still joined to him and to the Lord. Added to this comfort is the joy of how they refreshed the spirit of Titus. As an apostolic delegate he could have been abused if their disposition toward Paul was unhealthy. But refreshment and goodness were the fruit that came from them and Paul was able to rejoice. In fact, Paul had boasted about the
- 7:14 Corinthians to Titus and now Paul is able to affirm the truth of those boastings. They proved it to Paul’s great joy and Titus’ comfort and new affection for these
- 7:15 same folk that Paul loves. Titus has reported to Paul that the Corinthians were a very obedient lot exhibited in large part by the way that they received Titus—“with fear and trembling”—or as if he bore the weight of Paul’s authority as his representative. Even further it perhaps spoke to Paul of the way that they received God’s authority vested in the apostle and mediated through his representative. This too becomes a sign of health and a point of rejoicing.
- 7:16 The end result for Paul is “perfect confidence” in these Corinthians. They have responded well to the test of relationship and aggressively restored their name and their place in Paul’s heart. It’s all been worth it. Rejoicing is in order as it is clear that God has had His way.

Encouragement to Give Generously

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

8:1 We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3 For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— 5 and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. 6 Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. 7 But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

8 I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. 10 And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. 11 So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. 12 For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. 13 For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness 14 your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. 15 As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”

8:1 Now Paul turns his attention to a rather long discourse on how to give generously to the needs of the other parts of the Body of Christ. In particular, the churches of Achaia and Macedonia have taken on a charitable mission project to connect to the poor in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:26). Paul is seeking to enlist the Corinthians in the same project and he does so by giving both anecdotal testimony and teaching and pastoral exhortation.

Paul refers to this movement of generosity as an act of God’s grace. It is a divine gift that God is imparting to help these churches become conformed to the Image of God, to fulfill His heart to have all His people work together in such a way as to answer the prayer of Jesus in John 17 and to demonstrate to the world that Christ indeed is Lord and Savior. The very evidence of that is the grace of unity and love reflected in a people who have overcome the power of sin, Satan and self absorption to come together and portray God’s image to a watching world. Paul perceives God at work in this particular circumstance. He sees beyond the human need into a divine strategy to make His people one, even internationally, and to make them more like Himself, particularly in the realm of generosity that

arises out of poverty. The Incarnation is the clearest example of this as Paul will get to in 2 Cor. 8:9.

- 8:2 Paul describes this grace as occurring in an atmosphere of affliction and poverty rather than a set of ideal conditions that most folk would demand as a foundation for “generosity” – i.e., all of my needs are met, the coffers are full and I am emotionally well positioned. Rather, the Macedonian churches have undergone “severe” testing likely both in spiritual and physical expressions. They have been pressed to the edges but by reliance on God’s grace (cf. 2 Cor. 1:9) they have not only overcome but have tapped into the very joy of Jesus who lived an impoverished earthly existence but found great joy in pouring Himself out for the Father and His people and the mission of God. He speaks of this joy twice only hours before His horrific death and mere minutes before the agony of Gethsemane (John 15:11 and 17:13). Here was the greatest platform for generosity born of affliction and poverty. Joy is at the very heart of this giving. Jesus understands the worth of the Father, the privilege in serving Him and the joy of this deepest human fulfillment. The Macedonian church, in this way, has been corporately conformed to the image of God.
- 8:3 This “wealth of generosity” (8:2) was an act of free will rather than some obligatory service elicited from them by threat or bribe or guilt. They embraced this service of generosity in a true spirit of faith and love that pressed them ever beyond what one might consider to be proper. They entered into a “Kingdom realm” where God lives—a kind of walking on water that can only occur when one has been engaged by the Spirit and called to follow into spiritual territory that requires divine assistance. It is, in fact, the reality of living in the Spirit and by the Spirit—the realm of faith and the very life of God. Real poverty is the reverse—the parable of the rich fool who appears to have every earthly advantage but is not rich toward God (Luke 12:13ff). Going beyond one’s “means” makes perfect sense if the promises of God are true and the promise of “I will add all things unto you” (Mt. 6:33) is current. If these things are true, then there can be no ultimate loss in investing into the Kingdom of God. “Beyond their means” is really a more normal posture for living in God’s Kingdom.
- 8:4 In fact, these Macedonians begged “earnestly for the favor” or privilege of partnering in this project. They truly perceived God at work in this and consequently saw privilege for outstripping sacrifice and cost. To Paul’s surprise, they demonstrated the kind of maturity by which they “gave themselves first to the Lord.”
- 8:5 In other words they acknowledged that their resources and their very lives belonged to the Lord and were at His disposal. They belonged to Christ and His people and His mission. Their gifts, both spiritual and financial, were ready to be distributed at the behest of a real Lord who could do whatever He chose. This first giving to the Lord is a crucial piece of what it means to give oneself to His people simply because His people will fail at various levels because of their brokenness and humanness. But God never fails and redeems even the failures of His people within the Body of Christ. But it always requires a

posture of faith in a perfect, loving and sovereign Lord who is forever tuned to the execution of His will and most pointedly within the life of His people.

- 8:6-7 Paul now references this “act of grace” two times in the next verses, once as a mission that has begun and ought to be completed and secondly as a type of anointing similar to the gifts that he enumerates in I Corinthians 12. Giving to the poor is a primary Christian discipline especially among the brethren. Paul alerts the Corinthians that he is putting the press on Titus to get this done and not lose the momentum that was initiated when this need was first presented. Paul wants them to excel in all of the practices of spirituality both as individuals and a body of believers in Christ. He includes earnestness and love. Excelling in earnestness is a call to maintain the fires of devotion to Christ, His people and His mission. It begins with our “first love” for the Son of God Himself and out of that personal devotion, we can count on the Holy Spirit empowering us into deeper revelation and intimacy with Jesus and all He embraces.
- 8:8 Paul wants these Corinthians to match other Christian bodies that have engaged this project. He wants their zeal or earnestness to meet the others. He’s looking for a united effort of all of the churches rather than taking an autocratic stance that merely demands their obedience. He wants them to be like Jesus—the model of genuine love. It is Jesus that he references as their paragon in this matter of earnest love and sacrifice. Paul roots their giving in the very nature of the Incarnation. Jesus literally embraced a divine impoverishment, walking away from the riches and privileges of His divine supremacy to live and die and rise among creatures who merited no such love. This is the great expression of the heart of God—to empty heaven of its greatest riches to fill the deep poverty of sin-defined and earth-bound creatures and thereby to free them from a destiny of destruction and prepare them for an eternity of blessing. This magnificent outpouring of grace from God is what must always be celebrated at the Lord’s table, preached about from the Lord’s Word and proclaimed to a still impoverished world in our evangelical mission that is a continuation of the Incarnation.
- 8:9
- 8:10 Paul presses his thinking to them yet again. He gives “my judgment” and that is the pastoral thought that their execution of this project serves to benefit them. It furthers their conformity to the earnest self-giving of the Son of God. A year previous they “started” this pattern of putting aside resources and were clearly engaged by the Spirit to “desire” such a path. It is this holy desire that is so much on the heart of the apostle. He also cares much about their commitment to
- 8:11 “finish doing it as well.” It is not merely a good start that bears the fruit of the Spirit but the completion of a divinely inspired initiative. This is often difficult. Once the initial fervor diminishes, it is easy to drop the ball and be sidelined by other things. Paul is simply providing the outside perspective of the big picture that is easily lost in the local arena. Finishing well is a mark of the divine nature most clearly exhibited in the determination of Jesus to go to Jerusalem and through Gethsemane and the cross, into the resurrection and the ascension.

Jesus finished well and that grace of His Spirit continues to abide in His people to help them to follow through with all of the initiatives of His Spirit.

- 8:12 On a more practical level, Paul makes clear that he does not want to call folk to a hyper-spiritual place of making “faith” promises out of mere emotion and unrelated to their present resources. He’s not appealing for what they do not possess but rather he calls them to sacrifice “according to what a person has.” Be faithful and sacrificial with what you have and with the commitments you’ve
- 8:13 made. The issue is not for creating a financial imbalance but as an international people of God, Paul appeals for “fairness,” a kind of understanding that at
- 8:14 different seasons one part of the body of Christ may be in severe need and another in a place of relative abundance. This fairness principle presupposes an organic unity and mutual commitment of all God’s people within and beyond he local congregation. Fairness is the recognition that we are all one in Christ and the very way that we rally to one another is an expression of Christ to each other and to a watching world. It is a fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer in John 17 “that they may become perfectly one so that the world may know that you sent me.”
- 8:15 Paul punctuates this principle by referencing Exodus 16:18, the miracle of the manna and the resulting miracle of the gatherers discovering that enough had been gathered no matter how much or little they had done. This second miracle appears to be the action of a Sovereign Lord who is covenantally committed to supply for His people and does so even in the face of their over- and under-gathering. God evens it out and Paul is calling these Corinthians to co-labor with this same God who provided 40 years of manna to His people. The lesson is plain—the fairness principle is part of the nature of God’s present call to His people to avoid the disaster of trying to make their own heaven on earth and miss the present mission of God.

Commendation of Titus

2 Corinthians 8:16-24

16 But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you.

17 For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord.

18 With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel.

19 And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will.

20 We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us,

21 for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man.

22 And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you.

23 As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ.

24 So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men.

8:16 Paul continues his careful explanation to the Corinthians regarding how he is handling this gift of money. Titus, as Paul's co-laborer, has also been inspired by God both in caring for God's people and helping in the collection of the love gift. Paul will send Titus to Corinth and it clearly is no burden to Titus who possesses

8:17 "earnest care" for these folk and will come "of his own accord." Beyond that, Paul also mentions the "famous" brother who will accompany Titus. Perhaps this

8:18 is Apollos, but that doesn't matter. Preaching is a prominent gifting in the church—it draws people to God and His Word. Some are better at it than others. Paul apparently had no great gift here but excelled in more theological teaching and miracles—a remarkable combination. Paul goes on to outline the purpose

and integrity of this mission. The "brother" travelling with the team was

8:19 "appointed by the churches," thereby rooting the mission in the authority of the larger Body of Christ that is linked together via Paul's apostolic anointing and the kind of love that has impelled brethren to give sacrificially even across ethnic and national borders. Paul refers to it as an "act of grace," an outward expression of generosity and goodness that is a powerful expression of the gospel, undoubtedly an expression of Jesus' prayer in John 17 that all of His people would be one and would exhibit that oneness in acts of grace that showed the sacrificial nature of God and would finally exhibit both "the glory of the Lord Himself" and the "good will" of His servants who are made in His image and are now displaying that Image in their gracious service. Paul highlights their careful

8:20 approach partially to avoid any suspicion regarding their hearts but also to demonstrate the positive spirituality of their mission—"we aim at what is

8:21 honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man." Paul understands the importance of each side of that equation. Our heads must be in heaven and our feet planted squarely on the earth. Every leader of God's people faces the same creative tension—doing the right thing with the right heart, paying

attention to the Word of God, the Spirit of God and the heart of man. This must be intentional work, “taking pains” as it states in the NASB. God’s leaders must gain skill here, both in hearing direction from the Lord and in properly translating it to God’s people.

- 8:22 Paul now refers to yet another anonymous brother who has been “tested and found earnest in many matters.” Again, the integrity of this mission is of major significance to Paul and he stacks the deck, as it were, with folk that he can fully affirm. This brother also is one who has “great confidence” in the Corinthians. Consequently their reception of this brother ought to be without any
- 8:23 apprehension. Again, Paul affirms Titus as both his “partner and fellow worker”—an affirmation of his complete confidence in Titus. He identifies the whole team as workers “for your benefit” and as “messengers of the churches.” They are carrying on the shepherding work of Christ to His people. Paul names the churches as “the glory of Christ.” What a magnificent designation for an oft-times rag tag bunch who behave in such contrary ways to the life of Christ. But this remains the heart of Jesus toward his blood-bought brethren and especially when they engage in such honorable activities as this collection for the poor. They all the more reflect His glory.
- 8:24 Paul’s closing exhortation to this section calls the Corinthians to “give proof” of their commitment of love and the words of affirmation extended by Paul to others, especially the members of this mission team. We all must be called on to excellence especially in the realm of sacrificial love which is the very heart of the Incarnation—God has come to man and poured out His riches for their eternal benefit. We are called on the same path to reflect the image of God and His continuing gracious work on the earth.

The Collection for Christians in Jerusalem

2 Corinthians 9:1-5

9:1 Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, 2 for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them. 3 But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. 4 Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident. 5 So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction.

- 9:1 Paul makes the reality of his boasting about the Corinthians a central issue. Apparently he wants them to uphold the reputation that has accrued to them and to which he has contributed. He now does a bit of over-communication so as to establish real clarity in any matter having to do with finances and spiritual leadership. This “ministry for the saints” speaks of the kind of foot-washing dynamic that Jesus modeled at the Last Supper. This type is of the more big-picture, corporate, cross-cultural variety but it is, nonetheless, an expression of the love of Christ exhibited among His people. It is the kind of love that alerts a watching world that disciples of Jesus are living among them. The ready and
- 9:2 zealous love of these Greeks has been a source of inspiration to the Macedonians and of course to their participation in this work. Paul makes no apologies for highlighting the obedience and zeal of one church to stir up and call on another group. He’s overseeing the people of God on a large scale and seeking to cooperate with God’s heart for a people who love each other sacrificially and who carry on the incarnation of Christ in the world. Paul has
- 9:3 been boasting about these Greeks for some time now and presses them to be faithful to his words about them especially as this ministry team arrives to process their giving and complete the work that had initiated from them. Paul is
- 9:4 not interested in being humiliated nor is he wanting the humiliation that would be ascribed to the Corinthians if they reneged on their commitment to this work. Jesus led a life of both public and private integrity and He expects and equips His people to do the same. We live our lives before a watching world and also before one another. We must steer clear of scandal on one hand and erosion of
- 9:5 primary commitments on the other. Paul is simply being very careful and up-front regarding the handling of this money and the heart disposition of the givers. It must not be seen as “exaction” but rather as a “willing gift.” It must closely reflect the grand truth that Paul outlined in the previous section regarding the grace of Christ, “that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Our giving and living together must be rooted in this incarnational reality. Jesus has cut the path and invites us onto it with a heart to continue to display His grace.

The Cheerful Giver

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

6 The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. 9 As it is written,

“He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. 12 For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. 13 By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, 14 while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. 15 Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

- 9:6 Now Paul takes on a distinctly pastoral and didactic position. He is so interested in the spiritual improvement of this flock and he zeroes in on that part of our nature that seeks to sustain a relationship with the minimum of sacrifice. That is not the “point.” Rather the call of Christ is to “sow bountifully.” This is true conformity to the Image of God who emptied heaven to us in the Incarnation so that we could enjoy His riches. Bountiful sowing in faith is so much at the heart of God’s call to His people. The temptation is to always withhold and wait for “safe” exchanges, where I am sure that I will get a return of my investments.
- 9:7 This is mere natural reason minus faith. God calls us to give with the confidence that He is always acting as our covenant partner and is utterly faithful to His own people and to His promises. Each believer is charged to make up his or her own mind as to how much to give to arrive there without a sense of “reluctance” or “compulsion” but rather a “cheerful” abandon that properly recognizes God’s own delight when His people behave like Him. So Paul is enjoining a happy decisiveness in this matter of releasing one’s finances. One thinks of Abram generously inviting Lot to choose whatever he wanted (Gen. 13) and subsequently receiving far more than could be imagined from a very happy God and covenant partner. All of this giving is an expression of the very heart of God and it is vitally incumbent on His people to learn His ways of generosity. Paul rehearses the great capacity of God “to make all grace abound to you” and proceeds to detail that announcement with the most superlative language. Grace from God abounds to us resulting in “all sufficiency in all things at all times.” This
- 9:8

is a statement of amazing dimensions considering the fact that God and all His resources are at the center of it. This is clearly one of the largest and all encompassing promises in the Bible. The stated purpose for such sufficiency is the divine empowerment to "abound in every good work. Paul tells the Ephesians that ". . . we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). God has always meant to express Himself to the rest of His creation through a people who reflect both the loving relationships and creative works of the Triune God. It is our attachment to His sufficiency that makes it possible to engage in and abound in "every good work."

- 9:9 To support the great promise, Paul quotes another from Ps. 112:9. It speaks of the free and generous hand and heart of God to all those in need. His great righteousness overflows into an abundant distribution of His resources, especially to His covenant partners. Because He is God and is immutable, these kinds of commitments "endure forever" with His righteousness. God delights in distribution, free and abundant and consequently our great unlearning must be in the madness of self provision. This is the core of unbelief—simply not trusting God to be the kind of God He reveals Himself to be and trying to make our own
- 9:10 way in the world He created. But Paul is not done yet with his description of the divine heart. God is the author of bread and seed to make that bread and the principle of garden-making (Gen. 2) or sowing with the anticipation of fruit. God made all of this and He expects that His redeemed children will glorify Him by trusting Him to be the kind of God that He has revealed Himself to be by His Spirit in His Word. What kind of seed does God intend to multiply to His servants? Of course, Paul's intention is to encourage the Corinthians to give financially, to be a blessing to their Jewish brethren and "increase the harvest of your righteousness" in the sight of God and men. Jesus spoke similarly in Matt. 6:20: ". . . lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. . . ." This divinely supplied seed must speak beyond mere money. It must include all of the resources given to us from God including spiritual gifts, time, heart occupation, relationships, physical energy and words. These were all meant to be spent sacrificially as seeds from heaven sown through our very lives to the blessing of God, His people and His mission to His broken world. The promise is that we "will be
- 9:11 enriched in every way" for expressions of generosity. Why? Because this is the very Image of God—giving abundantly, pouring out Himself, even to the extent of the impoverishment of Christ. God is seeking always to make us like Himself—generous, giving, enriching and blessing. The result of the Corinthian generosity to the Jews will be the production of "thanksgiving to God." That kind of praise will not only glorify the greatness of God but also engender fresh faith
- 9:12 for the recipients. The "ministry of this service" goes beyond merely supplying human need but overflows into "many thanksgivings to God." People will worship God more confidently and deeply. They will love God with more of their hearts and will see His glory displayed among His people in their unity and sacrifice.

- 9:13 Paul sees the Corinthian “submission” to apostolic authority and sacrificial giving as an extension of their “confession of the gospel of Christ.” Here is a simple work that must eventually issue from an individual or church—generous
- 9:14 self-giving for the benefit of others. The response back will undoubtedly be the longing and prayers of the recipients as they see and experience the “grace of God” from the donors. Giving begets praise and faith and greater desire to trust God, work for God and be like God.
- 9:15 As Paul opines about all of this he finally breaks out into worship. His apostolic encouragement erupts into words of pure delight in the transcendent greatness: “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” --it is beyond words, ideas or imaginations. It seems that in the midst of calling folk to give to others generously, Paul has been surprised and even divinely hijacked into another dimension altogether. This is not merely a work of mercy but a very window into the beauty of God and His ways.

Paul Defends His Ministry

2 Corinthians 10:1-18

10:1 I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!— 2 I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. 3 For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. 4 For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. 5 We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, 6 being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

7 Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. 8 For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed. 9 I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. 10 For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account." 11 Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present. 12 Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.

13 But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. 14 For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. 15 We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, 16 so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence. 17 "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." 18 For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

10:1 Paul abruptly shifts focus from the call to generosity akin to God's, to the very serious business of true apostolic authority. Evidently, the false apostles have accused Paul of being two-faced—weak and bumbling in his speaking when present but bold and brash when away. He begins his defense with an appeal to the character of Jesus, His "meekness and gentleness." Certainly this is best displayed in His self-emptying route of obedience to the cross of ultimate sacrifice. Christ simultaneously bore complete authority and entire humility and obedience. It is at the very nexus of our salvation. So Paul does not back off from the accusation of weakness but properly turns it toward a right understanding both of true authority and Christ's own humble disposition. Jesus, of course, also demonstrated a very bold authority in both His words and works—His cleansing of the Temple, His rebuke of the Pharisees, His chastisements to

His own disciples, His pronouncements of sins forgiven and in multiplied other ways. He was always completely in charge and completely submissive to His Father's will. Even when He stood before Pilate, He exhibited complete authority. As He said to His disciples, "I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father" (Jn. 10:17-18). Jesus knew who He was, who He was related to, and what His mission was. Consequently He was never pushed around by people or circumstances or threats or bribes. He was able to pursue His mission from the Father to the very end of securing our salvation. He did it with sustained humility and authority.

- 10:2 With some real passion and authority Paul opens his heart to these beloved Corinthians. His intention has never been to use his authority to push God's people around but he is totally prepared to "show boldness" to these false apostles who are accusing him and his team of "walking according to the flesh." However he doesn't want to use that same posture toward God's flock. He will, if he must, but he would much rather appeal to the relationship that they share together in Christ. This accusation of "walking according to the flesh" probably reflects the false apostles' own commentary on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians where he authoritatively corrects multiple sins and excesses within this church.
- 10:3 Paul clarifies this matter of flesh and spirit by framing it in battle terminology. Yes indeed, he states, "we walk in the flesh," that is, in the body of flesh, but his life in the spirit is one of "waging war." Paul is entirely aware of the realm of the spirit where a constant fight is unfolding for human souls and for the mission of God on earth. The nature of this battle demands a spiritual understanding that goes beyond mere human reasonings and perceptions. It calls for "weapons" that go far beyond whatever can be generated from mere fleshy energy and reasoning. In fact, nothing less than "divine power" will do to "destroy strongholds." These he defines as "arguments" and "opinion raised against the knowledge of God." Paul is speaking of spiritual revelation and power that cuts through the thicket of human thinking that opposes and contradicts God's Word and His authority. Even in this letter, undoubtedly, Paul is counting on that divine power to overcome the false ideas and harmful influences exerted upon the Corinthians by the false apostles. This power is resident in the Spirit of Christ and mediated through His leaders that He has called and chosen to feed and protect His flock. It is a power that cuts through deception and unbelief and rebellion to reveal Christ and His truth and mission. Paul knows that he possesses this powerful weaponry and uses it to "take every thought captive to obey Christ." Obedience to Jesus Christ is the central issue and if any thinking strays from that place or opposes that Person, Paul is aiming to capture it and bring it into a submissive posture. Paul is preeminently a servant of Jesus and understands his apostolic and pastoral calling to serve Jesus and His people and His mission with complete devotion and with every weapon endued by His Spirit. That also means that, when necessary, he will "punish every disobedience" whether among the Corinthians or even these false
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apostles. Again, like a kind father, he is not predisposed to punishment but rather to appeal for obedience, but when necessary, like a good father, he will exert a proper authority to punish misdeeds so that a right and healthy obedience is regained. The “complete” obedience of each Corinthian believer to Paul’s spiritual authority and to the truth of the gospel will foster the whole process. Paul is certainly not about to back down to the veiled threats or critiques of false leaders. He reaffirms his intent to exercise appropriate authority as called for by varying circumstances.

- 10:7 Paul continues to press this issue by a simple pragmatic appeal to the nature of the situation: “what is before your eyes.” If in fact they are quite sure that they belong to Christ, they ought to have at least the same confidence regarding the apostolic team. After all, the very beginnings of this Corinthian church emerged from the seeds of the gospel preached by this apostolic team. Paul has been
- 10:8 accused of boasting about his authority but even here he will not be cowed. He knows exactly why he bears this authority. It is a holy charge from Christ Himself to build up the people of God. Without clear and proper authority the flock languishes, drifts and becomes vulnerable to lurking evil predators. No, Paul is “not ashamed” of his authority, nor of the way he has been exercising it. The
- 10:9 purpose of the very authoritative first letter was not to intimidate but rather to protect, rectify and ultimately to build up the flock. Paul has been accused of
- 10:10 dropping weighty dictums on the people when he’s away but being a bit of a wimp when present. He’s been characterized as a weak presence and a “no account” communicator. He’s being dismissed by his critics purely on external grounds. Even if he were rather sickly physically and not the best public speaker, it doesn’t follow at all that he lacks authority or the capacity to minister in the fullness of God’s calling to him. Every believer must learn the same lesson regarding divine calling and natural giftings. If we are called to serve in any particular venue, we must do so in obedience and even apparent weakness, trusting that God will bring to pass all of His intentions through a called and yielded vessel. As if to punctuate his very clear authority, he warns his critics
- 10:11 and everyone else that he is quite ready to follow through with every issue he has raised when away. This is no emotionally weak push-over that they’re dealing with. Paul will do whatever is necessary to feed, build and protect the flock. They will experience no gap between his authority from afar and when
- 10:12 near. Paul wants to make it very clear that he is not in any way trying to compete with his critics or measure himself against them. He knows Who has called him and what He has called him to do. Comparison with one another is “without understanding” because it inevitably uses oneself as a starting point rather than God. When that occurs, there can be no healthy outcome. It typically runs either to pride or despair or deception. Our starting point for any kind of measuring must be Christ Himself and the grace and mercy that flow from His great salvation. Any other kind of measuring is absurd and detrimental.
- 10:13 Paul rightly tells them how to “boast” and how to “measure.” Everyone is assigned an “area of influence” and that is shaped by “limits” that are “God

assigned.” This is the appropriate starting point: God’s assignments and areas of influences and limits. This can never be about us and our great gifts and accomplishments. We are all derivatives from the Great Initiative and we can never fall into the trap of thinking that anything at any time is a result of our goodness. We are servants with limits and assignments, creatures rather than Creators and redeemed humans, not Eternal Gods.

- 10:14 One of Paul’s “assignments” was Corinth. They were the “first to come all the way” to them with the gospel of Christ. It was on the second missionary journey and through a dream (Acts 16). Paul’s apostolic team was invited onto the Aegean peninsula and ultimately down to Corinth where Paul spent 18 months teaching them the Word of God. This was no overextension predicated on self-initiative and competition with anyone else. Paul was the first to reach them and upon that divine starting point he invested significant time and effort into
- 10:15 establishing this church firmly in the truth and Spirit of God. Paul’s boast is certainly not in the “labors of others.” He knows full well what he has done in Corinth and who initiated his labor. No comparisons with others. He is also unwilling to cede these Corinthians to any false apostles who claim “the anointing.” Paul is hoping for increase in faith and discipleship among this flock and he is acting as if, indeed, he is the overseer of this flock. In a very up front way, Paul even expresses his hope that his “area of influence” would be “greatly enlarged.” He’s fearless in his posture. He knows exactly who he is and he is
- 10:16 not about to be intimidated by mere deceived humans. Paul is viewing Corinth as a gospel base for ministry to be launched in an ever widening circle of influence. He wants the gospel to be spread “in lands beyond you.” He sees no limits but genuinely believes that God has called him to preach to Gentiles everywhere and not to get caught up in human measurements and comparisons that will not only cause the mission to stagnate but also undermine whatever work has been planted. Paul is not interested in a comparison with another’s “area of influence.” His plate is more than full. He’s aiming at divine fruitfulness and he aims to get there.
- 10:17 He veritably shouts it out “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord,” echoing and paraphrasing the cry of Jeremiah in 9:23-24. Here is the great starting point, the One from whom all things proceed and to whom all things will give account.
- 10:18 Ultimately it will be the Lord’s commendation that will finally sort out all measurements and give approvals to those who have been faithful to their assignments and their work within their designated areas of influence.

Paul and the False Apostles

2 Corinthians 11:1-15

11:1 I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! 2 For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. 3 But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. 4 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 if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. 5 Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. 6 Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things.

7 Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge? 8 I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. 9 And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. 10 As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. 11 And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

12 And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. 13 For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. 15 So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

- 11:1 Paul continues to move toward the Corinthian believers with a fresh perspective on his "foolishness." He has been subjected to severe criticism that has lampooned him anywhere from a control freak to a bumbling idiot. So he adopts the posture of a fool and begs for their forbearance. No doubt there is a tongue firmly pressed against a cheek here but Paul has no trouble arguing from this vantage point. In his first letter he had plainly stated that the message of the cross was "folly" (1 Cor. 1:18) (Greek- morologia) but also "the power of God." Apparently, God Himself is not nervous about identification with what appears to be foolish to the people of this world. Paul certainly wants to win these believers to appropriate spiritual perceptions. So, as a "fool," he begs their forbearance.
- 11:2 He then portrays himself as a marriage broker, a go-between who is seeking a "pure virgin" as a bride for Christ, the heavenly bridegroom. Paul is infused with a "divine jealousy," a kind of grace from God that pursues the bride into a deeper and deeper purity, to make her perfect for her "wedding" to the Son. Paul pursues these Corinthians because there is a future reality that far outstrips the present struggles. Beyond that there is a present warfare that is not unlike the very first human temptation. Paul lets them know that they are vulnerable to the
- 11:3

- same Satanic intrusion that Eve felt. His “cunning” brought Eve to disaster and Paul is warning these believers that unless they are alert to “a sincere and pure devotion to Christ,” they too can fall prey to the serpent’s subtle penetration of one’s thoughts. Of course, a significant issue is the matter of the spiritual authority to whom they yield. Paul is laboring to connect them rightly to Jesus and working against false apostles with quite different motives and goals. He chastises them for their spiritual naiveté, their foolish openness to “a different spirit” and “a different gospel” and “another Jesus.” Of course, all of these first century churches are at the front end of mature theological wisdom and practical spiritual maturity. Apparently they’re not so aware of the great treasure that has been deposited to them through Paul’s original visit and his eighteen months of instruction and leadership. They have been worked over by a team of “super-apostles” perhaps not so unlike the Galatian invasion. They’ve heard proclamations that carry a different kind of weight and project an attractive difference. But Paul asserts his identity and place among these people. He’s “not in the least inferior” to any of these hyped-up spiritual invaders. Paul is now fighting back against their deceptive tactics. He readily admits to their probable critique that Paul was “unskilled in speaking.” He admits it but doesn’t consider that to be a primary detriment to his exercise of authority over their life together. Rather it is Paul’s massive advantage in “knowledge,” the clarity of the revelation of the person of Christ, the gospel that proceeds from Him and the heavenly vision that guides his life. That kind of “knowledge” is foreign to these super-apostles. Perhaps they display a bit more external flash through more polished oratory, but if it doesn’t proceed from Truth, it is mere externality that cannot save the human soul or transform a sinful heart. Paul protests that this kind of skill in “knowledge,” revelatory truth and its proper application has been “made. . . plain. . . in all things.” He’s calling them back to a realization and remembrance of that impartation to the Corinthians and to rightly measure that against the weakness of the super-apostles.
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- 11:7 Paul further presses the comparison by referencing his very serious commitment to present the gospel and provide pastoral oversight without any charge. He frames it as a humbling “sin” to make the contrast stark and to hopefully penetrate their error in judgment. Preaching the gospel “free of charge” was undoubtedly an incarnational choice of Paul to underscore the greatness of God’s free gift of grace in Jesus. It was Jesus who exhorted those who had freely received to also freely give. Of course, this was no sin at all but rather an act of righteousness. In fact, Paul had received help from other churches so that he could carry on his missionary work. He describes it as “robbing,” again, to put this entire matter into stark contrast—this has been the farthest thing from criminal or sinful activity; rather it is entirely reflective of the gracious hand of God reaching out to a bankrupt and shattered world with an offer of grace and mercy.
- 11:8
- 11:9 Paul’s personal needs were taken care of by “the brothers who came from Macedonia.” He had taken a stance to completely avoid any “burden” of financial

- expectation from the Corinthians perhaps because they were a rather impoverished lot and further because of his own personal conviction to present
- 11:10 the gospel free. Paul is determined to maintain this approach. He roots it in the reality that “the truth of Christ” is in him and encourages him to be like Jesus in the free outpouring of his life. He calls it “this boasting of mine” and refuses to have it be “silenced” by the fact of a church paying him fees for the work he does.
- 11:11 This refusal is not something born out of pride or arrogance but rather a genuine love for these children of God. He has a paternal heart toward them (I Cor 4:14-16) and his approach is clearly defined by that reality.
- 11:12 Paul is most unwilling to let these false apostles critique him and describe their ministry as anything close to his. He is intentionally seeking to “undermine” their claims of apostolic equivalency. He offers no soft verbiage—they are “false
- 11:13 apostles, deceitful workmen,” charlatans, who should not be given the time of day and, in fact, ought to be exposed and denounced. Paul even upgrades his
- 11:14 condemnation by identifying these interlopers as servants of Satan. It is akin to the kind of exchange Jesus had with the Pharisees in John 8. He disabuses them of the notion that they are either children of Abraham or children of God as they claimed and he names Satan as their true father. It is this authoritative boldness that must be present and exercised when the forces of darkness seek to intrude upon the flock of God. Paul registers no surprise at the behavior of the
- 11:15 false apostles. They are nothing more than disguised angels of light and must be given no space in which to do their evil operations. Eventually they will get what is their due. God will not be mocked.

Paul's Sufferings as an Apostle

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

16 I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. 17 What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not with the Lord's authority but as a fool. 18 Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. 19 For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! 20 For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. 21 To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. 22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. 23 Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. 24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. 32 At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, 33 but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

- 11:16 To further underscore his position, Paul engages in a parody with the Corinthians. He will take the role of a “fool” so that he can “boast a little.” He wants to accurately describe the life realities of a true apostle. He doesn’t even
- 11:17 pretend to claim the Lord’s authority, although that is exactly how he wants them to hear his litany of sufferings and sacrifices that more accurately define the true apostle of Jesus. In his postured foolishness, he is really speaking with “confidence” and with apostolic instruction that will ultimately be protective to the flock. So Paul carries on with his “foolish” boasting. Others boast according to
- 11:18 “the flesh” or natural dimensions but Paul is now aiming to dismantle the deceitful foundations of the false apostles by sharing a litany of what it has cost him to walk out the ministry of apostleship given to him by Christ. He chides the
- 11:19 Corinthians for “gladly” bearing with fools and gently lets them get an objective lens on their own stupidity. Although this is a serious pastoral matter, Paul is choosing a “back door” approach to engage change of heart rather than an authoritative pronouncement to “cease and desist” from further contact with these

- 11:20 false apostles. His approach, however, does not prevent him from being very specific about the things the Corinthians have endured from these fakers. They have
1. made slaves of you
 2. devoured you
 3. taken advantage of you
 4. put on airs
 5. struck you in the face.

Apparently, the Corinthians have gone limp in the hands of these charlatans and consequently a serious compromising of corporate integrity and gospel freedom has occurred. Paul, tongue in cheek, upbraids his shamefulness and weakness for not acting likewise in his own leadership. To underline his own “foolishness” and to compete with them in “boasting” Paul unfolds the path of sacrifice that has defined his years of service to Jesus. He lays out his spiritual pedigree and sacrifice as an overlay on the intruders:

- 11:22 *they are both Hebrews, Israelites, and offspring of Abraham
11:23 *they claim to be servants of Christ, but “talking like a madman,”
he claims to be a better one for the following reasons:
- far greater labors
 - far more imprisonments
 - countless beatings
 - often near death

Apparently, for Paul, a better servant of Christ is one who has suffered for the call in a significant way. When Jesus spoke to Ananias of Damascus regarding Saul of Tarsus and his mission, He framed it in this way: “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and Kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:15-16). Jesus was identifying a very real weight of suffering with the calling and mission of Saul/Paul’s apostleship. Paul rightly translates that same view in his evaluation of the false apostles. This calling and mission has cost Paul dearly—far more than any of these interlopers.

- 11:24 He goes on with his litany:
- 5 times receiving the 39 lashes from the Jews
- 11:25
- 3 times beaten with rods
 - once stoned
 - 3 times shipwrecked, including a full day adrift at sea
- 11:26
- frequent journeys
 - frequent dangers from rivers, robbers, Jews, Gentiles
 - urban dangers, rural dangers, sea dangers
 - danger from false brethren
- 11:27
- toil and hardship
 - sleepless nights
 - hunger and thirst, often without food
 - cold and exposure

11:28 -daily pressures and anxieties of all the churches

Paul's entire life, calling and mission are defined by Christ and a very real participation in His incarnational sufferings for the sake of the mission. It has been marked by severe opposition, danger at every turn and an unrelenting expenditure of hard work both on a physical and spiritual level. It's highly unlikely that these false apostles match up to anything near what Paul has just described.

11:29 This, then, is Paul's "weakness" and how he chooses to answer his detractors. Of course it is no weakness at all if one sees the underlying spiritual realities. Jesus' words come to mind—losing your life is the route to finding it, self-denial is the path to finding one's identity, death is the doorway to resurrection. Here is true spirituality and authority as opposed to the illegal means used by the false apostles. But when people are caused to fall, Paul is rightfully indignant. Christ has paid the full price and His true servants continue to sacrifice for the salvation of souls. When that is attacked, the shepherd will never think lightly of it.

11:30 Paul's boasting will be of a different order—it will be centered on his weaknesses which he understands to be God's opportunities to glorify Himself by regularly adding His strength, wisdom and deliverance to His chosen ones. Paul appeals

11:31 to the "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" for the truth of his statements. Paul knows this God and is very familiar with His ways that are often so counter-intuitive to the human mind. To punctuate that Paul references yet another

11:32 incident of humiliation and weakness that the sovereign God allowed to unfold on His chosen vessel. Paul was being hounded by the governor of Damascus and was relegated to a ride in a basket through the wall of the city to avoid

11:33 imprisonment and possibly death. Yet Paul understands that it is these very dynamics by which God chooses to glorify Himself.

So his boasting is not in the same competitive arena as the false apostles. He is in an entirely different zone which is undoubtedly completely unfamiliar to his opponents.

Paul's Visions and His Thorn

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

12:1 I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 I know a man 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. 3 And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 4 and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. 5 On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. 6 Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. 7 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

- 12:1 Continuing on in his “foolish boasting” posture, Paul goes beyond his credentials of suffering into “visions and revelations” of the Lord. In essence, he’s “upping the ante” with these false apostles. Paul’s very beginnings in the faith were rooted in remarkable spiritual impartations. He unfolds one of them, speaking of himself in the third person. The event occurred 14 years prior to this letter and it’s cloaked in spiritual mystery—the third heaven (how many are there? Or is this merely a euphemism for the highest heaven?) and in or out of body (can the body actually be transported into a purely spiritual realm?) Paul gives no answers to these questions but forwards all inquiries of that sort to God, as he says, “God knows.” He repeats the very spiritual nature of this event another time, this time calling the third heaven “paradise” and reiterating that only God knows with any exactitude the nature of this occurrence. To further the mystery,
- 12:2 himself in the third person. The event occurred 14 years prior to this letter and it’s cloaked in spiritual mystery—the third heaven (how many are there? Or is this merely a euphemism for the highest heaven?) and in or out of body (can the body actually be transported into a purely spiritual realm?) Paul gives no answers to these questions but forwards all inquiries of that sort to God, as he says, “God knows.” He repeats the very spiritual nature of this event another time, this time calling the third heaven “paradise” and reiterating that only God knows with any exactitude the nature of this occurrence. To further the mystery,
- 12:3 Paul tells the Corinthians that he heard things in paradise “that cannot be told, which man may not utter.” Of course, anybody can make similar claims. But Paul’s boastings are not so attached to that claim. His real “boasting” is in his weakness,” in his further credentials of suffering. Here is the great contrast with the super apostles—they boast of their strengths, but Paul is much more focused on his “weaknesses” and sufferings because he clearly believes that those carry more weight regarding true apostleship. It is much closer to the incarnational ministry of Christ. He really could legitimately boast about his apostolic accomplishments and he “would not be a fool” doing it but he really doesn’t want to be evaluated on his self-proclamations of authority à la the super apostles.
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- 12:5 Paul tells the Corinthians that he heard things in paradise “that cannot be told, which man may not utter.” Of course, anybody can make similar claims. But Paul’s boastings are not so attached to that claim. His real “boasting” is in his weakness,” in his further credentials of suffering. Here is the great contrast with the super apostles—they boast of their strengths, but Paul is much more focused on his “weaknesses” and sufferings because he clearly believes that those carry more weight regarding true apostleship. It is much closer to the incarnational ministry of Christ. He really could legitimately boast about his apostolic accomplishments and he “would not be a fool” doing it but he really doesn’t want to be evaluated on his self-proclamations of authority à la the super apostles.
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12:7 Rather, he wants to be taken as is, for the reality of his calling from Christ and the mark of suffering that has distinguished his years of ministry. In fact, God has already taken a pre-emptive action to insure this disposition. Given the “surpassing greatness of the revelations “that Paul has known, God decides to temper the natural leaning toward spiritual pride and over-elation by allowing a “thorn” to continuously bother Paul. He describes it as “a messenger of Satan” but it is entirely unclear regarding the exact nature of the thorn. It is clear, however, that it is a protective move by God in the face of a devastating spiritual pride that could have easily knocked Paul off course. Paul naturally pleads for relief from this affliction. At least initially he doesn’t discern the divine purpose for the thorn. Apparently after the third plea, God speaks definitely to him and says two very important truths that go beyond the intensity of this particular affliction. They are:

1. The grace of God in Christ is entirely sufficient for any and every circumstance that we may encounter. This grace of Christ is rooted in his victorious death, resurrection and ascension that are far above all principalities and powers. God is unthreatened and undaunted by any foes and He is entirely disposed to help His people on the mission that He has ordained on the earth.
2. The power of God is made yet more powerful in the context of human weakness vs. human strength. This may seem entirely counter-intuitive to the human mind but in God’s economy this is where He is most glorified. Given Paul’s very prominent place in this mission, it is all the more necessary that he is humanly “weakened” so that attention is not inappropriately given to him.

12:10 Given these two great truths, Paul is compelled to “boast all the more gladly” in his weaknesses. He understands what God is doing and why He’s doing it in His particular way. This is the divine means to His divine power and if that’s the chosen path then, so be it. His pleas for deliverance must be shifted to prayers of humble submission to this divine process however uncomfortable it may be to the flesh. Paul is ultimately desirous that his life is defined by and imbued with the power of Christ even at the cost of his own physical comfort. Of course, this was the very disposition of Christ Himself who embraced the Father’s will to the point of complete impoverishment (2 Cor. 8:9) so that undeserving sinners could be made rich by His incredible grace. So Paul gladly yields to this divine conduit of power. He loves Jesus and is utterly devoted to Him and His people and His mission. He realizes that his life and body and future are entirely at the disposal of the Son of God who is free to use Paul however He wishes to accomplish His purposes. Paul understands all these outwardly negative dynamics as God’s means of releasing power—“weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities”—all of these are useful in the hands of his sovereign Lord to move His mission forward through this yielded vessel. The apparent contradiction doesn’t hold in the realm of spiritual truth—weakness is no liability but rather a means to the end of expressing divine power. Paul gets it and fully embraces

it—something that the super apostles would avoid at all costs and undoubtedly mock.

Concern for the Corinthian Church

2 Corinthians 12:11-21

11 I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. 12 The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. 13 For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!

14 Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. 15 I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? 16 But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. 17 Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? 18 I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?

19 Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved. 20 For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. 21 I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.

12:11 Finally, almost playfully, Paul admits, “I have been a fool!” He “blames” the Corinthians (“You forced me to do it”) but without doubt, Paul has simply and appropriately been re-asserting his apostolic mandate to protect this flock of Christ from the harmful intrusions of the “super-apostles.” He is quite clear about two comparisons in this verse:

1. that he is “not at all inferior” to any of these so-called super-apostles even though he’s been taking the role of a “weak fool” in the face of their challenge
2. that he is “nothing,” as it were, in himself—and so are these super-apostles. His authority comes from the call of Christ and that particular anointing on his life. That means everything.

12:12 Paul makes reference to the “signs of a true apostle.” He brings them back to the 18 months that he labored among them (Acts 18:11) and the reality of “signs and wonders and mighty works.” It is likely true that his opponents merely “talked a good game” and exhibited no authoritative power that would be one of the signs of an apostle of Christ. Jesus confronted His Jewish opponents in a similar way: “If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me, but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know

- and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:37-38). Both Jesus and Paul claimed that their authority was validated by the power of God being externally expressed through their lives and ministries. Again, playing the “fool,” Paul chastises the Corinthians for their immature spiritual discernment of his sacrificial labors among them. Could it be that they were “less favored” than other churches Paul planted because he didn’t draw any financial help from them? Of course it was yet one more expression of sacrificial apostolic grace that was undoubtedly absent among the interlopers. In fact, Paul has poured himself out completely to the church and deserves none of the critique and insult that accompanies their questioning of his calling and relationship to them in Christ. Again, tongue in cheek, Paul says, “Forgive me this wrong!” Hopefully by this point, they are seeing this all in the proper spiritual light.
- 12:13
- 12:14 He announces his third visit to Corinth and his ongoing intention to “not be a burden” to them. He assumes the place of a “parent,” a theme that he put forward in his first letter to them: “I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ though the gospel” (I Cor. 4:15). He communicates the parental obligation to give sacrificially to the children. He is fully embracing the
- 12:15 incarnational disposition of Christ that lavishly and unhesitatingly “spends” oneself for the welfare of his beloved children. Paul’s expenditure is a loving commitment meant for nothing but their good and their progress in the faith. He has loved these folks dearly, yet somehow their response has not been commensurate, a particular state known by many a parent especially when their children plow through the turbulent teen years. Paul has been nothing but faithful
- 12:16 and sacrificial and yet is accused of being “crafty” and deceitful, ideas probably planted by the intruders regarding Paul’s character and motives. Deserving gratitude and loving responses, Paul must endure this painful insult and be the adult who absorbs bad behavior and works to reform the responses into a better place. He continues on with four questions regarding not just his behavior but
- 12:17 the untarnished conduct of the people that he sent to Corinth in his name. They were all above reproach. Not one of them took any material, emotional or spiritual advantage of the Corinthians. Titus didn’t do any wrong. The brother
- 12:18 with him was flawless. Everybody acted out of “the same spirit” of sacrifice and grace, everyone taking “the same steps” of diligent care and parental spending on behalf of children. There is literally no ground to any accusation—Paul and each of his delegates have acted in clear unison and it has been nothing but blessing.
- 12:19 Now Paul explains to the Corinthians openly and pastorally what he has been aiming at with them in this lengthy letter. It is not primarily a self-defense maneuver, but rather a “speaking in Christ” and it has all been done “in the sight of God.” Here is the true weight of concern that compels Paul to write—these Corinthians belong to Jesus and Paul has been commissioned not only to establish churches in Jesus’ name, but to continue to oversee them and keep

heading them into fruitful expressions of the Body of Christ. Everything that Paul did in the initial days together up to the very moment of the writing of this letter has been for their “upbuilding.” Nothing has been done as a self-serving action. Paul and his delegates have been utterly loving, parental and self-expending.

- 12:20 But now as a concerned parent, Paul bares his heart and shares some fears that have dogged him—that the same issues that occasioned his first letter still prevail among them—“quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit and disorder.” Of course, his great hope is that they are growing up into the maturity of Christ. Yet, they remain susceptible to intrusions from within and without. Paul’s concern that they “may find me not as you wish” could spring from the way they might inappropriately compare him with the “super apostles” or from the stance of correction that he may have to adopt to rectify a very disordered congregation. Either way, it is not a pleasant prospect but one which Paul will undoubtedly embrace as the one responsible for the welfare of this flock. His more explicit concern is that they have not yet “repented” of the sexual
- 12:21 sins that he addressed earlier and that will call him into a humble disposition where he will come among them and “mourn over many.” This would not be his first choice by any means but it is clear that Paul will do whatever is necessary for the health of this flock of Christ and that no personal sacrifice is ever out of bounds.

Final Warnings

2 Corinthians 13:1-10

13:1 This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 2 I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them— 3 since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. 4 For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

5 Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! 6 I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test. 7 But we pray to God that you may not do 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. 8 For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. 9 For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for. 10 For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

- 13:1 Paul's concerns about the behavior of the Corinthians now proceed beyond a mere internal state to the posture of a prosecutor who is looking for witnesses and is going to call everyone into account. Perhaps a parent returning home to misbehaving children is a better analogy but, no matter, Paul wants these folk to take him seriously, straighten up and validate any accusation with real witnesses of the wrongdoing. He is going to come again (for the "third time") and he wants them to get hold of what this will mean for all of them—charges, evidence and
- 13:2 witnesses. He repeats the warnings about those who refuse to amend their lives—"I will not spare them." Can this be the love of Christ? What merit is there in this unveiled threat? Yet, in fact, it is an expression of the fatherhood of God through His chosen apostle. If there is no consequence to sin and bad behavior, the very integrity of the mission of God among and through His people is at risk. Paul is not unwilling to be the "heavy" in this situation. He understands the stakes and unlike the "super apostles" he doesn't angle with the Corinthians for their emotional support. He is taking responsibility and bearing the weight of authority and genuine care and love for the condition of this flock of God.
- 13:3 Although his apostolic authority as a messenger of Christ has been challenged by his opponents, he reasserts the fact that "Christ is speaking in me" and indeed speaking through him for the safety and benefit of His flock. Even though Paul has been accused of "weak" speaking, he has already demonstrated a powerful and formative authoritative presence both in the 18 months he originally spent with them and in the very directive first letter that he sent them. Apostolic authority is never dependent on oratorical skills. It has to do with divine calling and the experiences of suffering that both prepare and validate the work of an

- apostle. The work of the Spirit of Christ among the Corinthians has been evident. They have seen the miraculous and have “felt” the authority of Christ through Paul. This power and authority are grounded in the “weakness” of the crucifixion of Christ which of course is followed by the power of the raising of Christ from the dead. This weakness/power combination is rooted in the very nature of the Incarnation when Christ emptied Himself of prior privilege and power to take on human weakness as the second Adam and walk the human race out of darkness and back into full fellowship with the Father. Paul’s calling and determination to “deal” with this flock is not a human power play but a calling to take on the “weakness” of Christ’s incarnation, to represent Him who emptied Himself to serve others, indeed, to wash their feet and lay down His life. Here is the root of power and authority and Paul knows that he “will live with him [Christ] by the power of God.”
- 13:4
- 13:5 Paul is quite sure of who he is in Christ and how Christ exercises His authority through him. It is the Corinthians who are deficient in their understanding of their own identity in Christ and Paul’s place of delegated authority among them. Their perception of authority became skewed toward a worldly model of mere talkers who did not originate from divine calling. Paul now calls this flock to self examination regarding the presence of Jesus Christ in them. How does this test work? How would one know whether they passed or failed? Although not stated explicitly, the real issue is going to be humble submission to the Lord Himself, indeed, but His authority mediated through His Word and His Body; in this case, it is the apostolic authority of Paul that has been commissioned by Jesus to the Corinthians. The test of whether or not they are in the faith is rooted in whether or not they will receive delegated apostolic authority. Anyone can say that they are submissive to Jesus but if they don’t take on those whom He sends, their “faith” is merely something rooted in their own minds and determined by self-will.
- 13:6 Paul and his companions, of course, have passed this test. The super-apostles have failed miserably and it remains for the Corinthians to see the very real differences that have been exhibited. They must recognize these basic parameters if there is to be a healthy ongoing relationship. Paul even prays that they get this right even though outward appearances may indicate some kind of failure on the apostolic team’s part, whatever that may be. There really has been no failure. Paul is deeply desirous of their orthopractic clarity in this matter of proper connection to the right authority else they will continue on in an enervating vulnerability to fast talkers and self promoters. Paul is utterly given to the truth, both in Spirit and objective word. This is the primary guide of His life and the very core of the call of God on his life. Everything hinges on the truth. If in the process of God mediating His grace and authority through the “weakness” of His servants, others are made strong, then; hallelujah, “we are glad.” Paul is stating that their strengthening in Christ is the very nature of why Christ has called him in the first place. All of this is for their restoration to Paul, right spiritual authority and by connection to these, to Christ Himself. Paul wants to get this all straight
- 13:7
- 13:8
- 13:9
- 13:10 now—through this letter—so that his coming doesn’t have to be a difficult, heavy affair of confrontation and witnesses and disciplinary actions. He’ll do it if he

must but what father delights in that responsibility. Authority is always meant for “building up,” strengthening the people of God and encouraging the mission of God. It must also be used for redirecting errant paths and correcting false notions and breaking up dangerous relationships. It is never meant for “tearing down” per se but always for the health and progress of the Body of Christ.

Final Greetings

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

11 Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. 12 Greet one another with a holy kiss. 13 All the saints greet you.

14 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

13:11 Somewhat paradoxically, Paul begins his final thoughts with a call to “rejoice.” With all the talk of warnings and tests and real authority, one might suspect Paul to be in a rather dark mood. But he’s not. He’s a great believer in the strength and authority of Jesus and in His power to overcome all obstacles and difficulties. Everyone can have hope and joy because Jesus is in this picture and is at work to bring His will to pass through the presence of His Spirit and His Word and His multi-gifted Body. So we can start from a place of rejoicing rather than some gloomy prospect of hard discipline. Yet Paul does want them to take a clear aim at “restoration” with himself and all “at risk” relationships. Further he presses them toward mutual relationships of comfort, agreement and peace. He wants them to clean up the mess that has developed among them in Corinth whether directly from the super-apostles or because of their own poor responses to them. The result of their acts of love and faith and obedience will be a much more tangible and formative presence of the “God of love and peace” with them. This is what Paul deeply yearns for—God in Christ by the Spirit ruling and reigning among His people who live in faith and obedience to His call to love His broken world. One way to foster love and unity is to intentionally bless one another and

13:12 in this suggestion, to do it with “a holy kiss.” Paul expands their perception of love and unity by offering the greeting of “all the saints.”

13:13 Finally, Paul blesses his beloved Corinthians with a great triune benediction:

- the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
- the love of God
- the fellowship of the Holy Spirit

This great mystery of the nature of God is pronounced in three marvelous divine realities. God has come to give us grace and love and fellowship. It all begins with Him and He has taken the great initiative in creating mankind, redeeming them and restoring them to Himself and by Himself.

It is these truths that are superimposed on this entire letter. It is these truths that inflame the heart of Paul and compel him to his passionate and humble appeals throughout this letter. It is all about God and His worthiness and grace and His desire to live graciously among His own people. It is at the heart of why Paul

would go to these lengths to call back a people into a right place with himself and more importantly with the God who has loved them and called them in Christ.