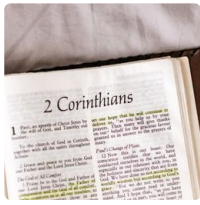


# OpenTheo

## 2 Corinthians 12 - 13



### 2 Corinthians - Steve Gregg

In his discussion of 2 Corinthians 12-13, Steve Gregg emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between true and false teachers and their claims. He argues that testing the legitimacy of apostles, prophets, and other teachers is crucial to discern whether their message is from God or the enemy. Gregg shows how Paul defends his own ministry and discusses his personal visions and revelations. He also reflects on the nature of suffering, the possibility of falling away from faith, and the need for edification rather than destruction in the Christian community.

### Transcript

Chapter 12, we have chapters 12 and 13 to cover. These are both relatively short chapters, which means covering them should not be difficult at all in this session. In chapters 10 and 11, Paul began doing something that he rarely does, if anything he never does anywhere else in his writings, and that is he becomes extremely defensive.

He's a little defensive in the opening chapters of Galatians also. He's facing criticism from people who say that his apostleship is possibly not legitimate. He does show himself defensive on some other occasions, but never so much as in these last chapters of 2 Corinthians.

You can tell that he's under a great strain from probably fear that his converts are going to be corrupted by those who are in their midst, undermining his authority, undermining his message. And apparently, unfortunately, the Corinthians tend to be accepting this bad stuff from them. Actually, he says so in chapter 11, verse 20.

He says, This is a reference to the teachers among them that are opposing Paul and their harsh manner, as opposed to Paul's gentle manner. But notice he says, They let these people get away with it. Also earlier in that chapter 11, in verses 3 and 4, he says, You may well put up with it.

So Paul's concerned that they are putting up with a great deal that they should not put up with. Now, it's not that we shouldn't be willing to turn the other cheek and be meek and so forth, but to tolerate false teachers, and especially those that were undermining

the apostolic authority of Paul, is something a church should not put up with. If you'll look over at the book of Revelation, in the church of Ephesus, chapter 2 of Revelation, Jesus has some words for them, and he commends them because they do not put up with false teachers.

He says to them in Revelation 2, 2, I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil, and you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars. Now that is a positive thing. That is something that Jesus commends them for.

They've tested those who claim to be apostles and are in fact shown to be liars, false apostles. I have known some people in some churches who got themselves in trouble because they tested the legitimacy of the claims of certain people who came to them. In this town, not many years ago, there was a church that had a couple of guys come through.

One said he was an apostle, one said he was a prophet, held a week of meetings, and there were a number of people in the church who said, I don't think so. I don't think these guys are an apostle and a prophet. Their teachings were questionable orthodoxy, and there was really nothing about them that substantiated their claim.

People who questioned this got in a bit of trouble with the pastor and with the elders who happened to receive these guys' ministries. I myself have gotten in a little trouble from time to time, questioning the apostolicity of some pastors' claims about themselves. But at least if you get in trouble for questioning whether a person who claims to be an apostle or a prophet or even a teacher, if you question whether they are a true or a false one, and you're discerning about it, you may have the criticism of the religious leaders who want to promote such false ministries, but you'll have the commendation of Christ.

Christ commends the church that has tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and find them liars. He says that's good. That's one of the positive things about you in this church.

Now there's a couple of other churches that we're not anywhere near as discerning. In Revelation chapter 2 and verse 14, Jesus says to the church of Pergamos, Revelation 2, 14, but I have a few things against you because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam. And he says also in verse 15, thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.

Repent, or I will come to you quickly and will fight against you. Now this church has some things favorable to it, but Christ was extremely upset for their tolerance of a couple of heretical teachings that were in the church, and he tells the church to repent of not being more discerning and of allowing these things to be. Likewise, the church of Thyatira in Revelation chapter 2, verse 20, Jesus says, nevertheless, I have a few things

against you because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and begal my servants to commit sexual immorality and so forth.

Now the point I'm making is that in Jesus' estimation, the testing of the claims of people who say they are teachers or apostles or prophets, to see whether they are so, whether they really are, is a legitimate thing to do, not only legitimate, commendable and necessary. Because if you don't distinguish between the true and the false messenger, you of course will not be able to know what to make of the message, whether it is a message from God or perhaps a deceptive message from the enemy. This is the problem the Corinthian church had.

They were not discerning. They were putting up with. That's what the church of Thyatira was doing, putting up with that woman Jezebel who said she was a prophetess.

This church in Corinth was putting up with teachers who brought another gospel, another spirit, another Jesus, who were harsh in their manner, unlike Paul and the true apostles. And this made Paul extremely concerned. He said he was afraid for them.

He specifically says he was afraid for them there in 2 Corinthians 11.3. So his fear for their safety, like the fear of a parent for a child who is falling in with the wrong company, and the parent feels like there is very little they can do at this stage because these are adult children. So Paul is in that position. He fears for his children in the faith.

And it leads him to do things and take an approach that he has never really done before. And that is to boast, to lay out his own credentials and why he is superior to his opponents in all spiritual categories, in every measure, every standard by which you can measure a man's ministry. Paul raises it up and says mine is superior to theirs.

Now this is so against Paul's grain because he's not a proud man. He doesn't like boasting. He exhibits extreme discomfort throughout the whole section.

And the discomfort is with himself. He's uncomfortable with the tack he is taking. It is against his grain.

It's against his nature. But he feels compelled. He has no other option but to do this.

And so in chapters 10 and 11 he begins to talk about his ministry and why his credentials ought to be believed. He refers to those who are accusing him and who are opposing him by a term that appears at least twice. It appears in chapter 11 verse 5 where in the New King James it's translated the most eminent apostles.

But the term in the Greek is super apostles. And without knowing that one might get the impression that Paul is comparing himself with the other apostles, that is people like James and John and Peter. But he's not.

When he says I consider in chapter 11 verse 5 that I'm not at all inferior to the most eminent apostles, he's not referring to his assessment of himself vis-a-vis the apostles in Jerusalem. He's referring to those false apostles in the church of Corinth who consider themselves the most eminent, more eminent than Paul who is also an apostle. He says these super apostles as they regard themselves to be, they're not ahead of me.

They're not better than me. I'm not a lick behind them. Even though, he'll say a little later in chapter 12, he repeats that he's not behind them in chapter 12 verse 11.

He says for I'm in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles though I am nothing. Paul is not saying I'm great and therefore I exceed them and excel above them. He says I am nothing but I'm still no worse than them because they're nothing to it or worse than nothing.

I am not behind them one bit even though I am nothing. So Paul is not proud but he's saying that in comparison with these proud and arrogant self-exalting false super apostles, he doesn't have anything to be embarrassed by the comparison. As a matter of fact, they do.

And in the 11th chapter, he particularly starts laying out some of the areas where he feels that his ministry shines above theirs. In chapter 11 and verse 22, he says are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Now in all those counts, they're equal. He's no better, no worse than them.

These are Jewish men. But then he gets to areas where it's not only where it's not a dead heat between them, but he's above them. He's better than they are.

He has more credentials than they do. In verse 23, are they ministers of Christ? I speak as a fool. And that I speak as a fool is just his registering his total discomfort with this whole manner of discourse of saying he's better than somebody else.

It's just not his way to do it. Are they ministers of Christ? I speak as a fool. I am more.

In labors, more abundant. In stripes, above measure. In prisons, more frequently.

That is more frequently than them. How many times have they gone to prison for their testimony? Probably not at all. These people are in it for the money.

They're in it for the prestige. They're not in it for the suffering. Paul is saying that what he has endured as a minister of Christ proves his sincerity above anything they can point to of a similar sort to prove theirs.

In deaths, often from the Jews, five times I receive 40 stripes minus one. That is the traditional 39 lashes. Five times.

A man could be near death from one administration of 39 lashes with a cat of nine tails.

This treatment brought a man generally very close to death and some men didn't even survive it. Paul experienced it five times on different occasions.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Now that's one instance that we do read of in the book of Acts.

Most of these things we don't read of in the book of Acts. The stoning of Paul, of course, is mentioned in the book of Acts when he was in Lystra. I believe it's the 16th chapter of Acts.

It tells that story. Three times I was shipwrecked. Now all of these, of course, were prior to the writing of 2 Corinthians.

We read once in the book of Acts of Paul being shipwrecked, but that was after this time. That was much later in his ministry than the time that he wrote this epistle. So additional to the one time we read in the book of Acts of Paul enduring shipwreck, there were three additional times that happened earlier that are not mentioned in the book of Acts, which Paul refers to here.

A night and a day I've been in the deep. In journeys often, in perils in waters, in perils of robbers and so forth. We covered this yesterday and I won't cover it again today, except to say that he continues in the same vein when he comes to chapter 12.

He says in verse 1, it is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. Now, again, that's stating, you know, here I am boasting and it's probably not the right thing to do. It probably won't get the results I want.

You could easily just accuse me of being proud. Maybe this will even confirm to my opponents that I'm an arrogant man because I hear I'm boasting. I'm probably losing ground.

This is perhaps counterproductive. Doubtless not profitable for me to boast, but I will now come to visions and revelations of the Lord. Now he's been talking about the things he has suffered for the gospel sake.

He's now going to come to another category of qualification, namely the supernatural element in his ministry. He's going to talk about visions and revelations of the Lord. A little later in verse 12, he's going to talk about the signs and wonders, the miracles in his ministry.

So that additional to the things he suffers, he can appeal to the pure supernatural power and revelation that has characterized his ministry, which, of course, gives the fingerprints of God and of God's ordination of his ministry, which is credentials. Now, he says in verse two, I know a man in Christ. Who 14 years ago, whether in the body, I do not know, or whether out of the body, I do not know.

God knows such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man, whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know. God knows how he was caught up into paradise.

And heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such a one, I will boast, yet not of myself, I will not boast, except in my infirmities. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will speak the truth.

But I forbear, lest any should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me. I'm not going to boast of being anything more than what you see. I'm exactly what you see me to be.

Now, this man whom Paul says he knew 14 years ago, he talks as if it is somebody other than himself. But most scholars feel that he is talking about himself here. And basically, there are two opinions about this, and perhaps even among you.

There are some who would say Paul is speaking about himself and some would say, no, he's talking about somebody else. In favor of him talking about somebody other than himself, he specifically makes a distinction. He says, I'll boast about that man, but not about myself.

Which sounds like he's certainly talking about somebody else to say nothing of the fact that he's speaking in the third person. I know a man in Christ. I know a guy who this happened to him.

And the very language gives the impression that he is talking about somebody other than himself. But the arguments in favor of him talking about himself here are stronger, in my opinion. I personally believe he is talking about himself.

I believe he's doing it as sort of a sarcasm. It's not the first or the last time in this epistle that Paul resorts to sarcasm. He when he says, I robbed other churches so that I wouldn't have to be a burden to you, that's sarcastic.

When he says, I wronged you, I cheated you by not charging you money. That was also a sarcasm. And I believe he's a little sarcastic here.

I believe he's saying, OK, I'm going to come now to visions and revelations of the Lord. There's this guy. I won't identify him for you, but it happened about 14 years ago.

What I'm going to tell you about the guy had an experience that, well, I can't tell you what it was in the body or out of the body. Only God knows that. But he actually got caught right up into heaven and heard things that would be impossible and unlawful.

For him to repeat on Earth. Now, that's a pretty mighty revelation. A guy like that, you might say, would have some credentials.

A guy like that, you'd know, you know, that that man has heard from God and you'd want to have you'd want to listen to what he had to say. Even though much of what he knows, it would not be lawful for him to repeat, according to his own words here. But what he could repeat would be, of course, colored by that deep perception and that powerful revelation of the, you know, the heavenly things that he saw in that vision.

Now, I'll tell you why I think Paul's talking about himself. First of all. It makes no sense to give the story, if not about himself.

The whole context is he's defending his own ministry here. If he goes off on a tangent, you know, I had an interesting thing 14 years ago, I met a guy who went up into heaven. That's really cool.

He couldn't tell me what he saw. But back to me now. There's no sense in him bringing the story up if it's not part of his argument for his credentials.

In fact, he even says in verse one, he's now coming to visions and revelations of the Lord. That is to say, I've been giving you one line of defense of my ministry. I've been lining out one kind of credentials.

I've had now I'm going to come to another line of credentials, visions and revelations from the Lord. But he doesn't mention any of his visions or revelations, unless he is the man he's talking about. He announces in verse one that he's about to tell how visions and revelations in the Lord actually are a credential in his ministry.

Furthermore, in verse seven, which is after this discussion about this man versus his unless I should be exalted by measure by the abundance of the revelations. I, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, in other words, because of these mighty revelations I have had and because of the tendency to be exalted above what is due because of such revelations. God has had to keep me humble by giving me a thorn in the flesh, which we'll talk about separately in a moment.

But can you see that he introduces this story about this man with the suggestion that he's now going to go on and talk about his credentials in the area of the visions and dreams he's had visions and revelations he's had. And when he finishes telling this story about this man, he says, and so that I wouldn't get too proud about these great revelations. God had to give me a thorn in the flesh.

Now, between verse one and verse seven, he has said nothing about his experience of revelations and visions unless verses two through six are in fact talking about his own experience. Now, if it was so, and certainly the context would indicate he's telling us something about his himself. If it is so, why would he talk as if it was someone else? Well, Paul's already getting uncomfortable just talking about how he suffered more than others.

But nothing is more sacred than special revelations vouchsafed to a man. And for him to boast about these things and say, oh, I saw some wonderful things, I've had greater revelations than anybody else around. I have a feeling that would just be too distasteful to him.

It seems too inappropriate. After all, to avoid him being too boastful about such things, God's given him a thorn in the flesh, so he wants to be very careful not to. He wants them to know about this situation, but doesn't want to say it in such a way as to.

As to as to appear to be boasting about it, he's already said how uncomfortable he is in boasting. And therefore, as it's sort of to distance himself by one degree from boasting about this revelation, he says, I'll just tell you about somebody. Who had a revelation.

Now, it's interesting that twice he says this revelation was either an out of body or an in body experience. He doesn't know. Paul says, I don't know whether it was in the body or out of body, but God knows.

Now, Paul's talking about somebody else. Let's say a guy named Joe who had this revelation. Then you'd expect Paul to say, I don't know if this guy had it in the body or Joe would be able to tell you, but I don't know.

I mean, maybe the man who had the experience might be expected to know whether he was in the body or not. But I, Paul, a third party, having only heard about, I never got that information from him. But Paul says only God knows.

I don't know. Only God knows. He doesn't act as if there's someone else who might know who might be expected to know besides God and Paul.

And of course, the most obvious person who would be expected to know besides God and Paul would be the man himself. But Paul doesn't act like there is another man out there to know such a thing or to have such information. There's God and there's Paul.

And Paul doesn't know, but God does, whether it was in the body or out of the body. Paul does not really talk, although a little bit he does. He does not talk very much as if this really is a separate person from himself.

He's talking, I believe, about himself in a unique way. Not wishing to say, let me tell you about all the glorious revelations I have had. I've met people who do that, and it's an ugly thing.

And I'm sure Paul was mature enough to realize that would be an ugly thing. And let me boast about the revelations God's given me. I mean, these things were so sacred.

These things were so personal and such privilege. He had received such privilege for him to in any way feel like he was boasting about it, taking personal credit for it, that he



would feel, I think, the fear of God itself would prevent him from doing that. And he wanted them to know that unlike these false apostles, he has had some genuine revelations from God of an impressive sort.

But in order to avoid the ugliness of just plain bragging about it, he couches it in this hypothetical case of a man I know. Paul's not the only one who speaks that way. There are other preachers and people who I've known to do such a thing.

Because many times for illustrative purposes, a preacher can't do any better than to use examples that he knows firsthand about his own life. How God worked in his life, answered his prayers, did something through him. How God gave some brilliant counsel through him to somebody else or something else.

I mean, these things happen. And many times there's value in repeating these things. But the preacher can hardly say, well, I told him and say this brilliant answer again without sounding like he's bragging.

And I've known other preachers to refer to somebody and not give any clue that it was themselves and tell stories that were about themselves, not out of embarrassment, but out of humility. I've had all of you read the book, *The Christian Secret of a Happy Life* by Hannah Whitehall Smith. I imagine some of you in reading it may have noticed that she talked about a lady.

Frequently she talks about a lady who was well schooled in this information, was talking to another lady and talked about the wise counsel that this unnamed lady gave to some other person. How many of you remember running across things and saying, I wonder if she's talking about herself? I'm sure she is in many cases. I mean, maybe not always, but it strikes me as just a way of saying, you know, she had an important conversation.

Her readers would benefit from knowing about this conversation. However, in that conversation, the the answer she gave him was so wise, so commendable that for her to talk about, I told her this might sound like she's bragging about it. And so she just kind of catches there was a lady who had this experience.

And it's true. It's not a lie. When Paul says, I knew a man 14 years ago, if it happened to be himself, he knew himself 14 years ago.

It's not a lie. It's just it's just not being too much of a bragger. And so I'm convinced that's what he is.

And when he says of such a one, I will boast in verse five. Yet of myself, I will not boast. I think that's a little bit sarcastic.

I think he's I think it's with a wink and a nod. You know, he says, I won't boast about myself. Only that guy, you know.

And, you know, I think he expects his readers to read between the lines. They knew him well. And anyway, there are two opinions.

Some people do think he's talking about somebody else, but there doesn't seem to be any reason why he would. What's the point? He doesn't convey any information of value that this man had revealed to him. I mean, if there is some if he knew a third party who had had this experience and that man had come back and said some tremendous things about what he'd heard and seen.

And Paul wanted the Corinthians know those tremendous things that this man had said. He might communicate them, but he doesn't communicate any content of the vision. He doesn't communicate anything that would enrich the readers.

Or that would be relevant to his purpose in writing at this point. If that is another individual, but if it's Paul himself, it is quite reasonable that it would appear at this time and that he would be, you know, stress his discomfort and his awkwardness in this way about boasting about it. Now, perhaps I should say something about the third heaven, because I'm asked frequently about this.

It says in verse three or actually verse two, such a one was caught up to the third heaven. Now, the Mormons believe in three heavens and no hell. They believe that there are three levels of heaven.

Good Mormons go to the top heaven and good people who are not Mormons go to the middle heaven and the worst people go to the lowest heaven. There's no hell in Mormonism. And and they would seek to support that notion somewhat by Paul's reference here to a third heaven.

Well, of course, we don't agree with the Mormon doctrine on this. And apart from this singular reference in Second Corinthians, 12 to there is no other reference in Scripture to a third heaven or for that matter, to a first or second or any numbers beyond that, fourth, fifth or sixth. There's no there's no numbered heavens in the Bible anywhere except here.

There's a reference to the third heaven. And of course, evangelical scholars throughout history have puzzled over what is meant by the third heaven. And it may be that the actual meaning of his words are still not known to us.

There is the normal argument that is given, and I guess I'll have to give it as one that I don't know a better one, is that heaven in the Bible is a term that is used of three different domains. The realm in which the birds fly is the heavens, the bird, the fowls flying in the heavens where the clouds are, the clouds in the heavens. You know, the Tower of Babel had its top in the heavens.

We're talking here not about anything beyond our our atmosphere, really. We're talking

about what is called in Genesis chapter one, the firmament. And remember, in Genesis one, God called the firmament heaven.

Now, what was the firmament? Well, the firmament was the the expanse between two gatherings of waters. There were the waters below the firmament and there were the waters above the firmament. And we don't have any trouble identifying the waters below the firmament because those would be the terrestrial waters on the earth, the oceans.

But what are the waters above the firmament? Well, either they are a reference to the clouds. Where there's a great volume of water stored up there in the clouds, or else some people believe there is actually a canopy around the earth surrounding the earth's atmosphere that was made up of dense water vapor. The arguments for this and against it are not profitable for us to discuss right now.

But the fact is that the waters above the firmament, by all accounts, are the waters of the upper atmosphere. Whether in the form of a vapor canopy or clouds as we now know them, the firmament is between the waters that are below it and the waters that are above it. So the atmosphere is essentially the firmament that God created on the second day, which he called heaven.

So in the Bible, it's not uncommon to find the term heaven used when speaking of what we would today call the atmosphere, the air around us. Going up into the heaven could be just going up in the air. That is one way in which the Bible uses the word heaven.

But there's another way, too. A second way in which heaven is spoken of is of the whole universe itself. Actually, before God created the firmament and even before he created light, it says in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

Now, the heavens in that case in Genesis 1 is certainly not the firmament, not the atmosphere of the earth. It is a reference to the universe, the starry heavens. We read later in Genesis 1 of God placing the sun and the moon and the stars in the firmament of the heavens.

This is a second firmament, a second heaven, which is the universe itself, not second chronologically because it was actually created before the first heavens. But in terms of proximity to man, the first heaven to man is the atmosphere around him. The second heaven is the universe in which the planets and stars reside.

And the third heaven would be yet something else. The Bible says in the Psalms God's throne is in the heaven. The Bible says that we wait for Jesus to return from heaven.

Now, while some people would equate heaven where Jesus is and where the angels are and where God is, John was caught up in the heaven, in the spirit, in Revelation. Some people would equate that with the universe out there and some have tried to say that heaven is out behind a dark black hole or something, somewhere. There's much more

likelihood that that heaven, the third heaven as it were, is a spiritual domain.

Not located anywhere in particular, but in a different dimension, spiritual dimension. God lives in heaven. But Paul said in Acts 17 to the people of Mars Hill, concerning God, that he's not far from any of us.

In him we live and move and have our being. Jesus is in heaven, but he's in us too. Heaven, in this third sense of the word, is a spiritual place.

So that Paul could be caught there without necessarily leaving his body. And without his body leaving the earth. Certainly when he says whether in the body or out of the body, I don't know.

He's not suggesting that one of the possibilities is he was caught up in outer space in his body. He's saying that whether this all happened internally, right here in my terrestrial body, whether I had this experience merely as a psycho-spiritual revelation that happened to me, and it was so vivid that I couldn't tell if I'd left my body or not. The suggestion here is that the third heaven is a spiritual dimension.

And that God, who is spirit, and the angels who are spirits, and the spirits of just men made perfect, who have gone on to be with the Lord, they dwell in heaven. But that doesn't have to be very far from here. In him we live and move and have our being.

So the third heaven would be a reference in this case to the spiritual heavens. The third use of that term in the Bible is of the spiritual heavens. First and second heavens being merely the atmosphere and the universe respectively.

Now, another thing, he refers to this third heaven as paradise. Because he says at the end of verse two, such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And in verse four he says how he was caught up into paradise.

Obviously paradise and the third heaven are used interchangeably here. Now paradise is not a term that's used very often in the Bible. Its first application appears to be to the Garden of Eden.

The word paradise is a Persian word, it's not a Hebrew word. It came into the Hebrew language from the Persian. And it means a pleasure park or a beautiful park or garden.

And of course it legitimately applied to the Garden of Eden. But it is also used in other ways. Obviously he's not referring to the Garden of Eden here.

He's talking about the third heaven, he's talking about some spiritual dimension. We also know that when Jesus died on the cross, he said to the thief who repented next to him, today you will be with me in paradise. It is believed by most that Jesus, when he died, and that thief who died with him, did not go directly to what we call heaven.

They went rather to the place that Jesus himself referred to elsewhere as Abraham's bosom. The place where the beggar went when he died, as opposed to where the rich man, Lazarus, Lazarus the beggar and the rich man went to another place. Lazarus and the rich man's story is in Luke 16, verses 19 to the end of the chapter.

And there seems to have been a place that was not identified with what we today call heaven, but was a spiritual place that some people went, including probably Jesus when he died, and the man on the cross next to him, and the Lazarus of the parable and of the story, and also Abraham was there. And who knows who else? Probably all the saints who had died in the Old Testament times before Jesus were there. And whether this place, paradise, is now transported to the third heaven, ever since Jesus ascended, and therefore Paul could speak of it as going to heaven and to paradise, or whether paradise is just being used in a generic sense, the way that we use it today.

I mean, we use the word paradise all the time. If you go to Hawaii, you're likely to say, well, this is a tropical paradise. When I went to Honduras, the porters had gotten there before me, and I said, how do you like it down here? They said, it's a paradise.

You know, you go to some other place that's a beautiful place, and most likely somewhere in the promotional literature, the travel brochures, they call it a paradise. Now, this is not dishonest, because paradise is not a formal name for a place. It is more of an adjective than anything else.

It is more of a description of a kind of place. And it may well have served that same purpose in the Bible. When applied to the Garden of Eden, it's very much applied the way that we apply it when we speak of some tropical island.

When it's applied to Abraham's bosom or to the third heaven, these may not be identical places, but they might both be legitimately called paradise for the same reason. So that we'd be saying that paradise is not a proper name for a location, but rather, as it is in our own use today, more of a descriptive label for any number of places that would fit the description. And that may be how we're to understand it.

Paul's caught into third heaven. He's caught into paradise. He heard inexpressible words, which is not lawful for a man to utter.

That is fascinating to me. I mean, what would it be that he would hear that God would not permit him to repeat? Well, one thing we can be sure of, that God wouldn't waste words, and therefore by telling Paul or this man up in heaven things that he couldn't repeat to anyone else, it was against God's command to do so. It was for his own benefit.

God needn't say anything to him at all if he didn't want it repeated, but apparently he wanted Paul to hear it, but he didn't want everybody to hear it. He didn't want Paul to repeat it. Now that's surprising, and we don't know exactly why it is.

In the book of Revelation, in chapter 10, John, in one of his visions, heard the voice of seven thunders speak, and he was about to write it down, and he was told, don't write that down. Seal that up. Don't write what the seven thunders speak.

So, I mean, Paul apparently had a similar experience. He heard things that he would love to share, just not at liberty to do it. Why? Well, we don't know.

We know that Jesus in the upper room with the disciples in John 16, 12, said, I have many things to say to you, but you're not yet able to bear them. But when the Holy Spirit comes, he'll teach you all things, and he'll go on from where I have left off. It's possible that the things that Paul heard in the third heaven were things not so much unlawful to be uttered because they were, because God doesn't want any people to know them.

Obviously, he wanted Paul to know them. But perhaps most Christians in Paul's time, maybe most Christians now, would not be able to bear them. Just like Jesus didn't say everything he knew, and couldn't, because they couldn't bear it.

It's possible that Paul and maybe a few others were able to tolerate or understand or grasp this information and benefit from it. But the average Christian couldn't, so God just said, don't tell anyone about this. Remember when Jesus and the disciples came down from the Mount of Transfiguration where Peter, James, and John had seen Jesus glorified, they'd seen Moses and Elijah, tremendous stuff.

I'm sure they wanted to run home and tell their wives all about it. But Jesus said, don't tell anyone about this vision until after the Son of Man is risen from the dead. He forbade them for a period of time.

Afterwards, he allowed it to be said. So it's possible that whatever Paul heard, he was simply not permitted to repeat at that particular time, either in his life or maybe in history. Maybe there's something there to be known by the church later on.

I don't know. I won't worry about it. Paul doesn't bother to tell us the content of the Revelation, only the experience that was had.

And as I say, that's one of the very things that makes it unlikely that he's talking about somebody else. It seems to be no value in bringing it up otherwise. Now, he says, for though I might desire to boast in verse six, I will not be a fool, for I will speak the truth.

But I forbear lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears me to be. And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

And he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in

weakness. Therefore, most gladly, I will rather boast in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. Now, there was some thing in Paul's life that he here describes as a thorn in his flesh. It's a strange kind of thing that he talks about because on one hand, it says it was given to him.

It doesn't say it was sent against him by God. It was given to him as if it were God's doing. God gave it to him as a gift.

But at the same time, it's a messenger from Satan sent to buffet him or to afflict him. Now, this indicates at one level that Satan, who seeks to hurt Christians, I mean, this dovetails well with what we know from other scriptures that Satan can't do that unless God permits it. That even when an evil spirit comes against Saul in the Old Testament, it is an evil spirit from the Lord.

When there's a lying prophet in the mouth of Ahab's prophets, it is a lying spirit from the Lord. And why? Because Micaiah the prophet tells us the lying spirit had to get God's permission to go and be active in this way. It's not that God is somehow in league with the evil spirits.

It's that the evil spirits can do no harm to one of God's people without getting God's permission. And so when they come to man, they come from the presence of the Lord. Because that's the last stop before doing what they want to do.

They have to get God's permission there. Now, it would appear that once God has given permission, it is as if God actively approved. Satan said to God, if you allow me to afflict Job, then he'll curse you to your face.

God knew this wasn't true. He said, go ahead and try it. And he permitted Satan to afflict Job.

But from Job's point of view, he said, the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. He didn't say the Lord gave and the devil took away. He said the Lord gave and the Lord took away.

And in this, he spoke rightly. But how could this be so? We know it was the devil that did it. Well, biblically, whenever the devil does anything against one of God's people, the Lord is behind it as well.

It reflects an actual decision on the part of God to permit the devil to afflict for some higher purpose, which will benefit both the kingdom of God and the individual who is suffering temporarily. But later, as Paul said, it works for us an eternal weight of glory when we are afflicted. Now, the big question that has raged over this issue of the thorn

in the flesh that Paul had was some believe that the thorn was a form of sickness.

Paul doesn't specifically say that this thorn was a form of sickness. And yet, it seems that most Christians throughout history have believed that Paul is referring to some physical condition of sickness in his body, a thorn in his body, in his flesh. Of course, it's not a literal thorn.

He could have gotten that out easy enough without praying about it. But he's talking about some other thing that afflicts him, which he figuratively refers to as a thorn in his flesh. Now, there doesn't seem to be any serious reason to rule out that this is referring to a sickness, except there are some who find it inconceivable that Paul would be sick.

For one thing, we know that Paul was a tremendous healing minister. He did tremendous miracles. He not only healed all kinds of sicknesses, he also even raised the dead and cast out stubborn demons.

I mean, almost everything that Jesus did miraculously, with reference to relief of the sick and of the demon-possessed, Paul himself also did. And therefore, it seems incongruous that a man who could relieve the sicknesses of others and even raise the dead and cast out demons could not be rid of a messenger of Satan that was sent to buffet him and be healed of a sickness that he had. So some simply won't allow this to be there.

They just don't think that's a possibility that Paul could be sick. He had tremendous healing anointing in his ministry. And therefore, it just doesn't make sense that he would himself suffer sickness from which he could not be healed, could not get relief.

There is another reason that some people object. There are some whose theology teaches that Christians never need to be sick. And that Paul, of course, being a very enlightened Christian, would certainly be aware of this and therefore would never allow himself to be sick.

This is the view, of course, that healing of sicknesses is a feature of the atonement. One of the benefits that Jesus acquired for us when he died, according to some, is the healing of our sicknesses. And that just as his death acquired our forgiveness of sins, he also acquired our healing.

And for that reason, and Paul would certainly be aware of this, we needn't ever experience a deficiency in the forgiveness of sins or of healing. These things are both ours because of what Christ has done, both available on the same basis, namely faith and confession. And therefore, Paul would as surely be able to be rid of a sickness in his life as any Christian would, and especially Paul, as he could get rid of unforgiven sin in his life.

I mean, any Christian can be forgiven of sin instantaneously by simply confessing to God. Likewise, they say, any Christian can be healed of sickness by the same way. And



therefore, if somebody says, Paul was sick and he couldn't get well, that is a tremendous challenge to the validity of this doctrine.

And so there are those, especially those of the Word of Faith, who hold this doctrine that healing is for all Christians and no Christian needs to ever be sick and it would never be God's will for a man to be sick. They would say, well, Paul here is not describing a sickness. Paul is describing some other kind of affliction that is not organic, not a biological sickness, because Jesus died for those.

And if one would ask, well, then what is he describing? They have a ready answer. They say, well, he himself says it's a messenger from Satan. Could this not be a human, false teacher or opponent of Paul that is giving him trouble? We know, for example, that when Paul traveled, there were people from the Jerusalem church and from other places that followed him around to make trouble for him and stirred up the crowds to cause riots and get him kicked out of town.

Is it not possible that this messenger of Satan might be a human messenger of Satan, just as Paul is a human messenger of Christ? The suggestion is not in itself unlikely. And there is something of a biblical precedent for speaking of bad people as thorns in one's side or in one's eyes from earlier passages of Scripture. Let me show you a couple of examples.

In Numbers chapter 33 and verse 55, the Jews are warned that if they do not drive out the Canaanites when they conquer the land, that these people would continue to be a problem to them. And Moses says in verse 55, Numbers 33, 55, But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall be that those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell. Now, these are obviously human beings he's talking about, Canaanites who have failed to be driven out of the land.

If they leave them there, those that they leave in the land will be thorns in their side. Also, in Joshua chapter 23, similarly, Joshua chapter 23 and verse 13, Joshua in his farewell address to the Hebrews says, Know for certain that the Lord your God will no longer drive out these nations from before you, but they shall be snares and traps to you and scourges on your sides and thorns in your eyes until you perish from this good land, which the Lord your God has given you. Now, here the imagery is switched around from in Numbers.

In Numbers, it says irritants to your eyes and thorns in your sides. Here it says scourges in your sides and thorns in your eyes. That's pretty painful sounding imagery.

But in both cases, the thorns are the Canaanites, the people who would give trouble to the Jews because they were left alive instead of being driven out of the land. And some have said, well, because of this, perhaps we should understand that the thorn that Paul

is talking about is a human irritant, a human person, a messenger of Satan who gives him serious trouble. And this is the standard approach that the Word of Faith people would take on this.

And like I say, there's nothing innately improbable about the scenario. And there's even some scriptural references that might incline to think that that is there is at least a precedent in the Bible for using the figure of thorns to be of irritating people. Now, that is possible.

And I would not say there's no possibility at all that Paul is talking about persons. But let me raise additional considerations here. Paul says in verse 8, 2 Corinthians 12, concerning this thing, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

Now, this is a thing and it is an it. It seems that Paul understood and expected his reason. He's talking about a person.

First of all, he might have even named the person. He does so elsewhere. In First Timothy, chapter one, he names Hymenaeus and Alexander as false teachers that he's had to kick out of the church.

He refers to Alexander the coppersmith as the one who's done him much harm and Timothy is to beware of him because he's withstood our words. Paul is not against the policy of naming his opponents so that his readers can beware of them, too. Know who they are.

If Paul is talking about a particular person or maybe group of people, it seems like he might name who they are so that the Corinthians would beware of them. But even if it be argued, he wouldn't necessarily name them. He probably wouldn't call them it and thing.

He would probably say about this man, about this group, I've asked that they or he might be taken out of my life. But that would be the natural way to speak if Paul was thinking about personal problems with personal people. And yet he says, considering this thing, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

So that argues a little bit at least, maybe a lot, against the idea that he's talking about some human adversaries. There's more, though. Because he says, when he pleaded with the Lord about this, the Lord said, my grace is sufficient for you.

My strength is made perfect in weakness. He says, therefore, verse 9, most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities. Now, this thought of the flesh is no doubt equivalent with what he calls his infirmities.

And what Jesus refers to as Paul's weakness in verse 9. Jesus says, my strength is made perfect in your weakness. In other words, I'm not going to take away this thorn because your weakness is advantageous. Now, weakness could mean vulnerability to critics and

vulnerability to persecutors and so forth.

But that's not the most natural way of understanding it. Weakness and infirmity usually are used of sicknesses. As a matter of fact, I would turn your attention back to Matthew, chapter 8. This is an incident from the ministry of Jesus.

And it says in verses 16 and 17, when evening had come, they brought to him many who were demon possessed and he cast out the spirits with the word and healed all who were sick, that it might be fulfilled, which was spoken by Isaiah, the prophet saying, he himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses. Interestingly enough, the word of faith people love to quote this verse because they believe that it proves that Jesus took on the cross or on the whipping post our sicknesses on himself so that we don't have to bear them, we can be well. But it's to the disadvantage of the word of faith people to admit that the word infirmities here refers to sicknesses.

He took our infirmities. He bore our sicknesses. In the Hebrew parallelism, that means sicknesses and infirmities are being used as interchangeable, identical terms.

That's the same Greek word that Paul speaks of when he says, I now rejoice in my infirmity, in my weakness, which he almost certainly is identifying with his thorn in his flesh. Now, furthermore, as I say, if somebody wants to argue that this thorn in the flesh cannot be a sickness for the simple reason that Paul could not be sick, Paul, the great anointed Christian, well-schooled in Christian doctrine and well-knowledgeable about the benefits of Christ's atonement, and full of faith himself, and a man who could heal many others, it's just impossible that Paul could conceivably be sick. If this is the reason for rejecting the apparent meaning of the passage of him being sick here, I would simply try to bring some perspective by pointing out that many people in the New Testament are known to have been sick.

In 1 Timothy chapter 5, and verse 23, 1 Timothy 5, verse 23, Paul says to Timothy, No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities. Same word, sicknesses, stomach problems. Timothy, now Timothy was with Paul in much of his travels.

He certainly knew the healing power of God. He certainly knew the doctrine of the atonement. And so did Paul, who was here counseling him.

Timothy is suffering from frequent infirmities, frequent sicknesses. And Paul is actually recommending a medicinal treatment. Take some wine for it, that'll help.

Now what this tells us is two things. One, it was not unheard of for powerfully anointed Christians, men of great faith and power, to experience frequent sicknesses. It tells us secondly that the solution when a Christian got sick was not always just confess your healing, brother, or else Paul could have said that.

Paul said take some wine, it's the best medicine they had available in those days. Take some medicine for that. Treat it medicinally.

So we know without any question that Timothy, one of Paul's closest companions, was a sick man. Frequent sicknesses. Furthermore, there's another companion of Paul's named Trophimus, who traveled with him.

And in 2 Timothy 4, in verse 20, 2 Timothy 4, 20, Paul said, Erastus stayed in Corinth, but Trophimus I have left in Meletus sick. One of Paul's companions. Paul was with him.

The guy got too sick to keep traveling. Why didn't Paul just heal him? Why didn't the guy just confess his healing? Why did Paul have to leave him there sick? Certainly Paul indicates not just that he left him there and he coincidentally was sick as well, but he left him there because he was sick. He couldn't travel anymore with Paul.

Now if that sort of ruins the plan, if Trophimus was supposed to travel further with Paul, but had to be left behind sick, it seems like Paul would have done everything in his power to alleviate the man's sickness and make it possible for him to continue the journey, but he was unable to do so apparently. Paul's companions, Timothy and Trophimus, were known to be sick at times and Paul was not able to alleviate that by simply waving a hand over it. Another companion of Paul's was Epaphroditus.

He also was sick. In Philippians chapter 2 and verse 25 and following, Philippians 2, 25 says, Yet I considered it necessary to send you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, but your messenger, and the one who ministered to my need, since he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. For indeed he was sick, almost to death.

But God had mercy on him, and not on him only, but on me also, lest I should have had sorrow upon sorrow. Now Epaphroditus was sick. The church was worried about him.

They had reason to be. Even Paul was a bit worried for him. But finally the guy got well.

It doesn't indicate that it was by a miracle, but just by the mercy of God. God didn't take him at that time. He got better.

And it was a great relief to Paul. Paul indicated that he was in danger of experiencing sorrow upon sorrow if this man had died. It does not sound as if Paul had had, during the man's sickness, any assurance that the man would get well.

But he was glad to report that the man is well now. But he was sick and nearly died. How could anyone who is in Paul's presence nearly die of sickness when Paul can simply give a hanky or an apron and everyone gets well? Well, obviously when Paul sent out hankys and aprons, people got well, but it says specifically in that one case where that happened, in Acts 19, 11, and 12, that these were special miracles wrought by the hands

of Paul.

It uses that word, special miracles were wrought by Paul there, so that aprons and handkerchiefs were taken from his body. That means that even Paul couldn't do that all the time. It was a special thing God did.

It was special miracles. Now, in addition to knowing from Scripture that Timothy, Trophimus, and Epaphroditus were all men who were capable of getting sick, and at times could not be healed by the normal ways that Paul healed people typically, there's additional information that Paul himself was sick. Not just here in 2 Corinthians 12, but also in Galatians 4. Paul is reminding the Galatians of his earlier arrival among them when he first came to them.

And he says in verse 13, Galatians 4, 13, you know that because of physical infirmity, there's that word again, I rejoice in my infirmities, he calls it specifically physical infirmity. There's hardly any way to misunderstand that physical infirmity is sickness. I preached the gospel to you at the first, that Paul preached initially because of his infirmity in the body.

I'm not sure exactly why. Some people think that his travel plans were called for him going somewhere other than Galatia initially, but because of sickness he had to change his travel plans and ended up going to Galatia instead. But he says, and my trial, which was in my flesh, he's referring to his physical infirmity, his sickness, you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.

What then was the blessing you enjoyed? For I bear you witness that if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me. Now, that is either a hyperbole that has nothing to do with the nature of his illness, or else he's saying my problem that you observed was in my eyes. I have eye problems.

If you could have helped by plucking out your eyes and donating them, you would have done so. And that is not a hyperbole, perhaps, that if they could have, they would have. If you could donate your eye and guarantee that he'd have no more problems, then you'd be glad to do that in some cases.

You might do that for your child or for your parents or something like that. Of course, you can't transplant eyeballs. You can transplant corneas and things like that, but not the whole eyeball.

But his very wording there has led many to believe that Paul is suffering, or was suffering, from time to time, with problems of his eyes of some sort, some oriental eye disease, possibly coupled with malaria or something. We don't know, and we don't need to speculate. All I can say is this.

There is no reasonable cause to say that Paul's thorn in the flesh was not a sickness. He

refers to it as a weakness, as an infirmity. In fact, he even seems to contrast it with such things as persecutions.

When you come to verse 10, he says, Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, and in addition to that, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake, for when I am weak, then I am strong. So infirmities is one kind of thing he suffered. Persecutions, reproaches, distresses for Christ's sake, those are another set of things he suffers.

Needs is another. Poverty. So it's as if he lists several different things that he endures as a Christian.

Among them would be persecutions, but also needs, that is poverty. Also infirmities, that would be sickness, in contrast to the other categories. So Paul's thorn in the flesh is almost certainly a reference to a sickness of some kind.

And there's no biblical reason in the world to even question whether Paul could be sick. Of course he was sick. Many people got sick.

Many of Paul's friends got sick. Yes, Paul was able to heal many people. But that was God's mercy, he said, when that happened.

It was not a given. Mercy is something you don't deserve and you can't demand. It happens when God bestows it, only then.

Now, there is of course an important message that we've passed over entirely in verses 7 through 10. In this whole discussion of whether Paul was sick or not, that's not even the most important issue. It's just that it's become the most controversial issue and required so much discussion to settle the controversy if we can.

The real message of verses 7 through 10 is that because of the great revelations Paul has had, which he is inclined to call upon as evidence that he is a true apostle, he is also, by the same benefits that he has received of personal revelation, made vulnerable to pride. And people who have superior spiritual experiences are not altogether invulnerable to the temptation to be proud of their superior privileges they've had. And so Paul says, in order to avoid that, God has afflicted me.

He's allowed a messenger of Satan to come against me. He's given me this thorn in my flesh. It's an infirmity.

It bothers me immensely. I've prayed three times that he would make it go away and he won't. But he has not left me without comfort.

He has said, no, my grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in your weakness. And because of that revelation he got from Christ, he says, okay, I'll rejoice in

my weakness. I'll rejoice in my infirmity.

If these things make the strength of Christ more evident in me, then bring it on. I'll take the weakness in order that I can be strong in another sense. If I'm physically weak, then that simply gives a... that's a broken vessel, and the treasure that's in the vessel can flow out more readily without obstruction from the vessel itself.

If I'm weak, if I'm limp, then God can act through me without any kind of resistance from my strong personality or my strong self. So if I'm weakened in any way, it is for the benefit of God's purposes because I cannot trust in myself. He's been saying this all the way through 2 Corinthians until now.

Earlier he says we are pressed above measure, beyond our strength, so that we would learn not to trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead. He says this again and again. This is just another way of saying it.

He applies it to a particular case. His sickness. His sickness is another example of how God has weakened him so that the life of Jesus... Remember in chapter 4, that we are bearing about in our body the dying of the Lord Jesus so that the life of Jesus will be manifest in us.

Or our outward man is perishing, he said in chapter 4, verse 16, but the inner man is being renewed day by day. There is a strength, a spiritual strength that is God's strength that is released when our strength is set aside. While we are strong, it interferes with God's power being manifest in us.

When we are weakened, it gives God more freedom. For one reason, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, God doesn't choose many great and noble and strong and wonderful people because he doesn't want any flesh to glory in his sight. He wants the excellency of the power to be of God, not of man.

And so God uses broken and weak vessels because then it's very clear where the power is coming from and Paul welcomes that. Now, God said, My grace is sufficient for you and that grace is identified with his power here. You need strength? I'll give you the grace that is the strength and it will be sufficient.

You will not get relief in the sense of removal from the circumstance that you're in, but you will get strengthened within it by my grace. And we need to add some dimensions to our perception of what the Bible means by grace. As I said in an earlier lecture in this series, we tend to think of grace as merely God's unmerited favor, but Paul uses it in many other ways than that, including the strengthening that God gives us in trials to endure them graciously or gracefully.

How can you endure things gracefully? Well, you have to be full of grace. How can you be graceful if you're not full of grace? And to endure trials, everyone endures trials,

Christian or not, with or without grace, but God gives the grace for us to endure them Christianly, to endure them graciously or gracefully. The grace of God is a dynamic of enablement that God gives in addition to the other uses of grace that the Bible speaks of.

This is a case, and there are others, where God gives the grace to help in time of need, as the book of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 4. In Hebrews 4, verse 16 says, Let us come boldly to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Grace doesn't just forgive. Grace helps.

Grace strengthens. Grace enables. And that is something I'd like to go off on a longer tangent on, but we're going to run out of time if I try to do that.

Verse 11, I have become a fool in boasting. You have compelled me, for I ought to have been commended by you. In other words, you've made me embarrass myself by commending myself, a policy I always steer away from.

And I wouldn't have had to do this if you had done your duty. When someone came and criticized me, you knew better. You could have stood up for me, but you didn't.

And now you've made me have to do this embarrassing exercise of boasting and so forth. I've made a fool of myself doing this because you didn't do what you should have done. I should have been commended by you.

For in nothing I was behind the most eminent apostles. That's the super apostles. Though I am nothing.

Truly, the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance in signs and wonders and mighty deeds. Now, that perseverance has to do with all those trials and sufferings he endured, mentioned at the end of chapter 11. And then the signs and wonders and mighty deeds are, of course, self-explanatory, his miracles that are done, and possibly including the other supernatural aspects, including the visions and revelations he's had.

His ministry then, his apostleship, he says, is confirmed by what he has persevered through and the power and supernatural character of his ministry. He calls these things, these miracles, the signs of an apostle, which indicates that it was principally the apostles who operated in these kinds of miracles. There were others like Stephen and Philip who did, but it was principally an apostolic credential that God gave them signs and wonders, mighty deeds.

He calls those signs of an apostle, signs of an apostle. Verse 13, for what is it in which you were inferior to the other churches except that I myself was not burdensome to you? He means financially. He says, how did I treat you differently than any other churches I go to? The main thing is I just didn't take any offerings from you.



I didn't let you give me any money. And then he says, forgive me this wrong. I'm sorry.

I showed favoritism to the other churches by letting them give me money. Forgive me for not giving you the same privilege. He's sarcastic again.

You know, I mean, he's upset with these people because they've been listening to people criticizing Paul. One of the criticisms is even based on the fact that Paul didn't take money from them. They say, well, he robbed other churches to do that.

As he pointed out earlier, that's what some have suggested. Now, for the third time, I am ready to come to you and I will not be burdensome to you, for I do not seek yours, but you. You know, when he says I will not be burdensome, he still means I'm not going to take money from you this time either, didn't that time? I'm not going to do it this time.

I'm not looking for what belongs to you. I'm not looking for your money. I want you.

I want your loyalty. I want your stability. I want you to be saved.

I'm not after money like these guys are. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. Now, that statement shouldn't be taken too far because Paul elsewhere says that adult children should care for their needy parents.

But what he's saying is, it's obvious that children, little children, don't support their parents. The parents support the children. And because of that, Paul, as a parent coming in, doesn't expect them to support him.

He's not asking for that from them. I and I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls, though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved. But be that as it may, I did not burden you.

Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you with guile. That again is no doubt a sarcastic reflection of what he's been accused of by his critics. Did I take advantage of you by any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus and sent our brother with him.

Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in the same spirit? Did we not walk in the same steps? These are all rhetorical questions. The obvious answer is implied by the question. The fact is that Titus did not take advantage of him.

Titus did behave among them exactly as Paul acted among them. Paul has not, in other words, taken advantage of them, either personally or by any of his messengers. Again, do you think that we excuse ourselves to you? We speak before God in Christ, but we do all things, beloved, for your edification.

For I fear lest when I come I shall not find you such as I wish, and that I shall be found by you such as you do not wish. Lest there be contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbiting, whisperings, conceits, tumults, tumults would be riots. And

lest when I come again my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and licentiousness which they have practiced.

Now these are apparently things that he is now aware of are happening among some in the church. There's a long list. Contention, jealousies, backbiting, conceit, probably mostly among the false teachers.

But there were also some who, because the false teachers were not really holding up the standard Paul held, there were some in the church who have sinned and not repented of their fornication, licentiousness, which they practiced. Now Paul, when he was in charge, didn't allow that stuff to go on. In chapter 5 of 1 Corinthians he said, kick out that fornicator.

But apparently the new leaders are of a different sort. And he says, the reason I'm writing to you is because I'm coming to you. And I could picture an ugly situation when I arrive if you don't change.

I will find you to be the kind of people that I don't want you to be, and you will find me to be the kind of visitor that you wouldn't like to have. He says that, I fear, lest when I come I shall not find you such as I wish, and I shall not be found by you such as you wish. I'll be coming with a rod.

I'll be coming to discipline. And he says that in the opening verses of the next chapter. Chapter 13, this will be the third time I'm coming to you.

By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established. So he's going to be there a third time to really establish things. I have told you before and foretell you as if I were present the second time.

And now being absent I write to you, or to those who have sinned before, and to all the rest that if I come again I will not spare. They've accused him of being waiting in his letters and weak and mamby-pamby in his personal appearance. He says, well that's not the way it'll be this time.

If I come and you're not straightened up. I will not spare anyone. Since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you but mighty in you.

For though he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but we shall live with him by the power of God toward you. The same dichotomy he keeps bringing up.

Personal weakness at one level in the flesh, but in the spirit power. Jesus himself seemed physically weak when he died. People taunted him and said, you know, he saved others, let him save himself if he's the Christ.

But he didn't do it. He seemed weak, he seemed powerless. And yet of course his resurrection demonstrates that he was anything other than powerless.

He was the most powerful being on earth at the time. And is now the most authoritative being in heaven. He is not lacking in power, though he did appear weak to the public eye.

So Paul says, same thing with his messengers. We seem weak. We are outwardly weak.

But there is the power of God that we exhibit toward you in our ministry. Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith that is still Christians. Still Christians? Prove yourselves.

Do you not know yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you? Unless indeed you are disqualified. The word disqualified there actually is the word reprobate. It means literally disapproved.

Now the word reprobate in Christian theology, at least since the time of Calvin and probably before that, was used in contrast and as an opposite to the word elect. In Calvin's writings and in the writings of Calvinists, all people fall into two categories. They are either elect or reprobate.

That God has either chosen them to be saved or they are chosen to be lost, really. And so the ones who end up in heaven are the elect. The ones who never were elect, they live their lives without any real opportunity to be saved because God didn't even want them to be saved because they weren't really elect according to Calvinism.

They are the reprobate. In other words, in this world around us, of living people, there are two categories. The elect, they may not be saved yet but they will be.

And the reprobate, who never will be saved. Some of them might appear to be saved for a while but they will prove not to be by falling away. And they are the reprobate.

Now this is how the word reprobate has come to be used in Calvinistic theology. And that would work in this passage because Paul says that if you are not in the faith then you reprobate. If Christ isn't in you, then you are reprobate.

Christ is in fact in you unless you are reprobate. Now that's no problem to the Calvinist doctrine there but we do have a problem when we see the same word appearing in 1 Corinthians 9. Because in 1 Corinthians 9, verse 27, Paul says, But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become reprobate. Now that's the word he uses, same word, reprobate.

Now if a person doesn't have Jesus in them, Paul says they are reprobate. In 2 Corinthians 13, 5, Christ is in you unless you are reprobate. So either you have Christ in

you and you are not reprobate or you don't have Christ in you and you are reprobate, says Paul.

But now he says of himself that though he has been faithful to God up to a point, been a faithful preacher, yet there is the danger that he seeks to avoid. He seeks it with great effort, buffeting his body, disciplining his body, like a runner in a race in training, abstaining from things and so forth so that he might win the prize. He is going to great lengths to avoid something.

What is he trying to avoid? Becoming reprobate. He says, lest, after I preach to others, I myself should become reprobate. Disqualified, the New King James says.

That's 1 Corinthians 9, verse 27. So Paul, I don't think anyone would ever doubt that Paul had reason for assurance of his salvation, and yet he also feared that if he would let down his guard, if he would cease to run the good race, if he would give up the fight, if he would surrender to the forces that opposed him, he would end up, like many others, reprobate. There is no easy way to understand that statement of Paul otherwise than this.

So reprobation is something that a Christian might fall into, according to Paul. In fact, he might even be writing this with a mind to the Christians in Corinth who had once been faithful, but now because of the influence of the false teachers and so forth, some of them might in fact have become reprobate. And that's why they should examine themselves and see if they are in the faith or not.

See if they really are Christians. Now, the Christian life is not supposed to be one of self-obsession, you know, sitting around contemplating our navel and trying to find the deep things of self. But there are times when it is necessary to take a look and do a check-up and say, am I still walking with Jesus? Am I still on fire forward? After all, the church in Ephesus left their first love.

The church of Laodicea had become lukewarm. Am I above that possibility of becoming lukewarm or leaving my first love? And I think you ought to do a spiritual inventory once in a while in your life and make sure. Like Paul said, examine yourselves.

Don't spend your whole life examining yourself. But from time to time, especially when there might be reason to question it, you need to say, am I still serving the Lord? Do I still love the Lord like I used to? Am I still the person I was when I first became a Christian? Or have I just fallen back into worldly patterns or adjusted to self-centered gratification and kept my religion intact? I maintain a Christian out front, but I'm still living for myself really when it gets down to it day by day. I'm not really in the faith.

I'm not really a follower of Jesus. I'm not really dead to self. I'm not really taking my cross up.

Paul urges us to examine once in a while. He says in verse 6, But I trust that you will know that we are not reprobates or disqualified. Now that's interesting because Paul makes it clear, I am not a reprobate.

But in 1 Corinthians, he fears that he might become a reprobate. So he knows he's not now a reprobate, but he fears that if he lets his guard down, he might become a reprobate. Which makes it very clear that a person who is today not a reprobate might be a reprobate tomorrow.

And that means that there are not some select group of people pre-selected who are all guaranteed reprobate and another group that are guaranteed elect. Reprobate and elect, you decide. Will you fall into that category of those who are elect or into that who are reprobate? Now I pray to God that you do no evil.

Not that we should appear approved, but that you should do what is honorable. Though we may seem to be reprobates. Now what he's saying is, I hope that whatever people may think of us, that you may be a good example.

And it's not even that I want you to be a good example because it will reflect well on my ministry since you are my fruit. You are my converts. Of course, that makes me want you to do well, but that's not my real reason for not wanting you to do evil.

It's not because of how it will reflect on me. Because even if I'm badly reflected on, even if I appear to be a reprobate, I want you to do well. I want you to have an honorable walk with God.

For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth. I'm not sure exactly what he's addressing there. I like the statement in itself, that Christians cannot legitimately go against truth.

And sometimes a loyalty to something other than truth will cause us to compromise truth in order to sustain a loyalty to something else, to somebody's reputation. We'd rather not see the bad news about them or us. And the truth would be unflattering, but we'd prefer to defend or to hide, to stay acceptable in certain people's sight.

Even this is true of theological truth. It's possible for a person to become so loyal to his denomination or to his theological system, that he's no longer seeking truth so much as he's seeking to bolster the system. Even if the truth may, at times, certain things in scripture may challenge the system.

It's the system, the paradigm that is maintained at all costs, not truth that is pursued at all costs. That is not the attitude of the apostles. They can do nothing against truth.

They can only promote truth, whatever that may be. For we are glad when you are weak, when we are weak, excuse me, and you are strong. And this also we pray, that you may

be made complete or perfect or mature.

Now, when we are weak and you're strong, that pleases us well, Paul says. He began this epistle by saying that because of the things he was going through, he experienced comfort from God. This comfort came to him because, in fact, he was weak.

He was facing crises that were above his strength to handle. And he says, in chapter 1, in verse 4, that God comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble by the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. So, our affliction ends up in our being comforted and the net result is someone else gets a benefit too.

We are able to comfort them. And he says, in chapter 1, verse 6, now, if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or, if we are comforted, it's for your consolation and salvation.

So, Paul says, whether we get afflicted or comforted, it's all for your benefit. And we're glad to see you benefit. We may be weak, we may be afflicted, but if you are made strong, that is our reward.

We're glad to see it. Verse 10, 2 Corinthians 13, 10, Therefore I write these things being absent, lest, being present, I should use sharpness. Again, he's trying to clear the way ahead of his arrival with this letter.

So, I try to sweep out the trouble spots, so that when he comes, he won't have to be harsh. He won't have to keep his threat that he will not spare. He doesn't want to use sharpness.

According to the authority which the Lord has given me for your edification and not for destruction. Now, that's almost become a refrain, because he used the exact same words in chapter 10, which began this section. In verse 8, he said, For even if I should boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave us for edification and not for your destruction.

And now he makes that same point about the authority which the Lord has given me for your edification and not for destruction. I mean, that's more than a coincidence of identical language. He's repeating himself on purpose.

But he wants them to get this through their head, that the authority he is claiming for himself, and that he is insisting that they recognize, is not something that is going to hurt them. It's not something that he's going to use to exploit them. He's just going to build them up to edify them.

Finally, brethren, farewell. Become complete or be perfect or mature. Be of good

comfort.

Be of one mind. Live in peace. And the God of peace, of love and peace, will be with you.

You want the God of love and peace to be with you? Well, Paul indicates that will happen if you are of one mind and live in peace with people. Greet one another with a holy kiss. And all the saints greet you.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. This closing verse of 2 Corinthians is one of the few in the Bible where we find the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit mentioned together in some linkage.

The Bible doesn't anywhere give a real clear passage explaining the Trinity. And this is not an exception. This does not explain the Trinity either.

You don't find in this verse a statement, the Trinity are the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, three persons, one God. We may know that to be true, but this verse doesn't teach that very clearly. It may be the truth, the Trinitarian truth, may be that which underlies Paul's thinking and informs his language.

But here he simply refers to Jesus and the Father and the Holy Spirit separately as each having some contribution to make to the well-being of the church. It's the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now elsewhere he can talk about the grace of God the Father.

But here he's thinking particularly of the grace of the Lord. Where has he mentioned that before? Back in chapter 8 of this epistle, in verse 8 he says, I'm sorry, chapter 8, verse 9. He says, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that so He is rich, for your sakes He became poor. And he says, May that same spirit of grace be in you.

And the love of God. The love of God is a common theme in Paul's writings. Can't go off on it now.

And the communion or the fellowship or the oneness of the Holy Spirit be with you all. He's concerned about unity here. He says be of one mind in verse 11.

And he's concerned about the unity or the communion of the Holy Spirit being with them all. That was a bigger concern in 1 Corinthians. It was eclipsed by larger concerns in this epistle.